

On the Menu

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On the Menu is an exhibition that narrates personal, familial, and communal stories of Chinese restaurants, the people who own and operate them, and the communities that exist because of them. Within this exhibition, Chinese restaurants exist as a literal and metaphorical marker of the connecting lines of displacement, migration, community, and gathering that define the conversation between the works of Snack Witch Joni Cheung, Kev Liang, and Xiao Han. *On the Menu* navigates the complexities of labour and community by exploring how Chinese restaurants are embedded into society as important gathering spaces while also existing partly due to historical and contemporary experiences of exclusion and displacement.

Small Towns: A Polarised Existence

There is a long interconnected history of Chinese restaurants and the rural prairies that exemplify a complicated reality within hierarchical understandings of labour and the experience of community. Chinese restaurants in small blue-collar towns are often the site of Chinese labour and White leisure. Built within the structure of restaurant culture is a need for subservience, service workers are under a level of control and power of the customer, and a customer has both a direct and indirect influence on the well-being of a service worker financially and otherwise. This structure to a degree adheres to the values of classicism and capitalist frameworks which rely on a similar power imbalance to disconnect and disenfranchise labourers. Chinese restaurants in small-town communities are the only or one of very few secular spaces where a community can gather. The work in this exhibition addresses how the families and workers that operate Chinese restaurants are not only conducting the labour of running a restaurant but also providing essential space for gathering that communities rely on for their prosperity and sometimes existence.

In Kev Liang's *Jiā yóu*, the distancing of white labour to the labour of the Chinese diaspora is referenced through a series of establishing shots of vast prairies with wheat fields or heavy farming machinery nodding to the agriculture industry often tied to and marked by the white labourer. In another shot we see the outside of their family restaurant, establishing the tie of the labour of Liang's family and the Chinese diaspora to the familiar setting in the prairie landscape, the small town Chinese restaurant. These shots introduce the nuanced relationships of labour hierarchies which are followed by later shots of intimate dialogue and footage of Liang's family inside the restaurant that challenge this hierarchy and labour as value. Liang offers a vulnerability in sharing familial dialogue and the relationship between them and their parents, contextualising Chinese restaurants as a space that exists as far more than exchanges between server and served but a space of familial memory and connection.

Community: A Radical Response

In the White settler context labour is weaponised as a tool to shield White settlers from how they have benefited from the systemic advantages of their whiteness. There is a value that is assigned to white settler labour that is used to both justify their deserving of leisure over others and absolve them from the responsibility of their privilege. Labour under capitalist structures is championed as a marker of value, diminishing values of community and unity. Capitalistic ideals are rampant in formulating structures of individuals in competition with each other over the value of their labour as opposed to ideologies that prioritise community living and growth. In any instance of community living, there is a common push and pull where community members are challenged with contrary experiences, a care that is required for community living can come with what feels like a cost of individual sacrifices under overarching capitalistic values that define a societal norm.

Snack Witch Joni Cheung begs the question of how community care can redefine how we value labour and how we understand communal knowledge and research. Cheung's work, *bring back as souvenirs*, is an invitation that challenges the push and pull towards and away from community building and community archive under capitalism and rigid definitions of knowledge keeping. Towels reference the physical labour associated with kitchen work. This type of work exemplifies the common power dynamics of restaurants referenced throughout the exhibition which categorise labour within a valued hierarchical understanding defined by capitalism and colonialism. However, Cheung's towels subvert this dynamic by inviting the community to utilise the towels in their kitchens. The labour of each community member is documented in the stains of the towels which Cheung responds to by hand washing the towels and hanging them to dry in

the gallery. Through this, Cheung and the participants, all become activated in the final display of the work. The power imbalance visualised through the towel is challenged. The towel documents a shared community labour and archive that connects each participant and Cheung, transcending the often ephemeral hierarchical barrier typically at play in conversation around labour. Instead, the work speaks to lines of connection and sharing which ultimately disrupts labour hierarchies that fuel individualism and disconnection.

OK Cafe & The Chin Family: The John Burger

The development of Chinese restaurants across rural Canada exists in part as a result of discriminatory immigration policy, acts of segregation and exclusions, and abusive labour standards that were both upheld by white Canadians and enacted by the Canadian government. Discriminatory policies such as the Chinese Immigration Act also referred to as the Head Tax, Exclusion Acts, and ongoing racism toward Chinese Canadians imposed several restrictions on both naturalised and Canadian-born Chinese people, restricting their rights to vote, own property, and limited employment and housing among other efforts of segregation and exclusion.¹ The effort to segregate Chinese Canadians from white Canadians is reflected today in the landscape of Canada. In larger centres, we see this with the existence of ‘Chinatowns’ which in part exist in response to Chinese people being banned from public spaces and being forced out of central locations; in small towns we see this same pattern in the history of Chinese restaurants.²

Common to these policies and social acts of exclusion, the landscape of the rural spaces changed and several Chinese restaurants across small towns opened. One of which was the OK Cafe in Rouleau, Saskatchewan which was owned and operated by John and Helen Chin and their family from the 1950s to 2005. Artist Xiao Han worked directly with the community of Rouleau and members of the Chin Family to archive the history and memory of the OK Cafe. Branching from the central gathering space of the restaurant, several portraits of former regulars of the cafe are documented. Twenty years after the restaurant closed, the community built by the Chin family continues to reverberate through this small town. Han’s work documents the experience of one particular community, one family, and one restaurant, but tells a more encompassing story about community and displacement. Handwritten recounts and memories shared by the community and the family are featured in a suitcase owned by John Chin, the same suitcase he used when first immigrating to Canada after leaving mainland China. In attending community events hosted by Han as research for this project, residents remarked that this had been one of the few times outside of weddings or funerals that they had been able to gather after the restaurant had closed. Community-oriented living defines the resilience of small prairie towns, this resilience was amplified by the OK Cafe and the Chin Family.

From the Curator:

As a white settler from rural Saskatchewan, my curatorial praxis is often rooted in considering my home communities and broader Saskatchewan audiences to think about what stories and themes feel relevant and important within a prairie lens. Rural communities are polarised and nuanced in a way that echoes issues and experiences facing and defining the prairies at large; they exemplify a strength of community-oriented organising integral to their continued existence while retaining values aligned with overarching systems of colonialism and Christian traditionalism. I came to this exhibition from a consideration of a prairie lens and began to look at my home community of Rouleau, Saskatchewan. Rouleau, like many rural communities across the prairies, housed a Chinese-owned and operated restaurant, the OK Cafe, from the 1950s to 2005. In the early stages of conceptualising this show, I was fortunate to connect with members of the Chin family who owned and operated the OK Cafe. They graciously shared memories and stories of growing up in the restaurant and Rouleau. The history and contemporary experience of Chinese restaurants and the families that own and operate them are woven into the fabric of rural living. Their stories are integral in shaping a prairie experience. The vehicle of Chinese restaurants within this exhibition exists to explore larger conceptual themes of gathering, exclusion, community building, and displacement; relevant to a picture of what the prairies are and have been.

1. Patrias, Carmela. “Race, Employment Discrimination, and State Complicity in Wartime Canada, 1939-1945.” *Labour / Le Travail* 59, (2007): 13. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25149753>.
2. Cao, Huhua, and Olivier Dehoorne. “Changing Territorial Strategies: Chinese Immigrants in Canada.” In *The China Challenge: Sino-Canadian Relations in the 21st Century*, edited by Huhua Cao and Vivienne Poy, 224-225. University of Ottawa Press, 2011. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1ch77rj.20>.