

GASTRONOMICA

THE JOURNAL OF FOOD AND CULTURE

[Home](#)

[Subscribe](#)

[Contents](#)

[Vision](#)

[Sample](#)

[Advertise](#)

[Contribute](#)

[Media](#)

[FAQ](#)

[UC Press](#)

Read selected articles from past issues:

[Fall 2004 \(4:4\)](#)

[Summer 2004 \(4:3\)](#)

[Spring 2004 \(4:2\)](#)

[Winter 2004 \(4:1\)](#)

[Fall 2003 \(3:4\)](#)

[Summer 2003 \(3:3\)](#)

[Spring 2003 \(3:2\)](#)

[Winter 2003 \(3:1\)](#)

[Fall 2002 \(2:4\)](#)

[Summer 2002 \(2:3\)](#)

[Spring 2002 \(2:2\)](#)

[Winter 2002 \(2:1\)](#)

[Fall 2001 \(1:4\)](#)

[Summer 2001 \(1:3\)](#)

[Spring 2001 \(1:2\)](#)

[Winter 2001 \(1:1\)](#)

Late Night in the Lion's Den: Chinese Restaurant-Nightclubs in 1940s San Francisco

by Harley Spiller



In my collection of nearly ten thousand Chinese menus dating back to 1879 is one from the Lion's Den, a San Francisco restaurant and nightclub. This historical menu from the 1940s not only lists Chinese-American food and drink but also hints at an intriguing bygone era in its claim for the Lion's Den as "America's Only Under-Ground Chinese Nite Club Featuring an All-Chinese Floor Show."

The menu displays a pencil sketch of a wintry village scene with brick bridges arcing over a river and houses and steepled churches fading into the distance. In this otherwise distinctly Western landscape, the bridges recall the famous bridge over Xi Hu (West Lake), one of China's most fabled natural

settings in Zhe Jiang province near Shanghai. Shanghai, in fact, is the connection to the Lion's Den. For millennia this Chinese city boasted a diversity of peoples, foods, and cultures, and by the 1930s it was home to a rollicking nightlife that eclipsed that found in many European and American cities.¹ Upper-class Shanghai residents and visiting foreigners alike lived luxuriously among a Who's Who list of celebrities including Josephine Baker, Louis Armstrong, Marlene Dietrich, and Charlie Chaplin. Shanghai's lavish lifestyle lured Wallis Simpson, Noel Coward, and Bernard Shaw, who are said to have sipped gin, eaten imported Oxford marmalade, and listened to the world's greatest jazz.² The scene became so renowned that a theater in Havana, Cuba--another early twentieth--century party capital--was named The Shanghai. And Shanghai is the city that inspired the Chinese-American nightclub industry in the United States' own snazzy seaport, San Francisco.

By the time of the 1939 International Exhibition, which celebrated as one of its themes the exoticism of Asia, San Francisco already had one of the world's largest

Chinatowns (a Bank of America travelers' check advertisement for the Exhibition shows a well-heeled Western couple having a great time being transported there by a stereotypically Asian rickshaw driver). When the city became a favorite liberty port during World War II, Chinatown was flooded with servicemen looking for a daring night out on the town, including midwestern kids who had never seen a live Chinese person. Organized civilian tours of Chinatown were a hit among Caucasians in the 1940s, and Cab Calloway captured Shanghai's lively feel in the refrain to his famous ditty about Minnie the Moocher, whose friend Smokey "took her down to Chinatown . . . hidehidehidehi Whoah Hedehedhedehe A-hidehidehideho."

Chinatown's restaurants catered largely to Occidental tastes. In the late 1930s they began adding live entertainment to their bills of fare. One of the first restaurateurs to do so was Charlie Low, a gambler who owned the restaurant and cocktail lounge Chinese Village on Grant Avenue. On December 22, 1939, Low opened a swanky nightclub around the corner on the second floor of 373 Sutter Street.³ He called it Forbidden City, reportedly after the imperial court of China, but the sexy double entendre was clear. Low spared no expense, and when Forbidden City debuted, there was nothing like it in San Francisco, or anywhere else for that matter. It made quite a splash. Plush and roomy, the nightclub accommodated an eight-to-ten piece orchestra, performance space for a troupe of entertainers, and a large dance floor. Every night was a dazzling three-ring circus with singers, chorus lines, dance teams, and acrobats. There were no wild animals, but there was plenty of wildness documented by the photographers who snapped and sold pictures to the patrons. Revelers often included celebrities such as Bing Crosby and Bob Hope. One of the best surviving photos, snapped in 1942, is of then-actor Ronald Reagan with a stunning Jane Wyman at his side.

It wasn't long before competitors to Forbidden City sprang up. There was D.W. Low's Shanghai Low at 453 Grant Avenue, Lion's Den at 950 Grant, and Andy Wong's Sky Room on Grant Avenue at Pine ("Chinatown's Smartest Supper Club Featuring Andy Wong's All-Star Chinese Revue"). Kubla Khan and Shanghai Lil were nearby. Fong Wan, a famous Chinese herbalist in San Francisco, opened three spots: New Shanghai Terrace Bowl, Nanking Café, and Club Shanghai. Wan called his shows "the Chinese 'Folies-Bergere' of the Americas" and claimed that he spent more than two thousand dollars a week on the entertainment alone. By the mid-1940s there were numerous Chinese-American nightclubs in San Francisco, and competition among them often became overheated. Charlie Low touched off a feud when he accused Fong Wan of stealing acrobats. Wan went so far as to buy an empty building just so he could erect a huge neon sign redirecting patrons from Forbidden City to his club around the corner.⁴

There was also debate about who actually created the first Chinese-American nightclub. Lion's Den was part of the second wave of nightclubs and never laid claim to being first. The menu from D.W. Low's Shanghai Low recounts a history that predates Charlie Low's Forbidden City: Shanghai Low opened in 1913 and expanded several times until its popularity necessitated the building of the New Shanghai Café at 453 Grant Street in 1923 with hardwood floors and room for a high-class dance orchestra. Some said that Shanghai Low held the honor of being the first Chinese

restaurant-cum-nightclub, whereas Forbidden City introduced the Chinese-American bar and dinner floorshow. Others argued that Andy Wong's Sky Room was first because it was in the heart of Chinatown. Forbidden City was actually just on the outskirts, and critics claimed that it catered to whites afraid to go into Chinatown. In any event, Shanghai Low's "successful combination of the age-old cuisine of China with the sanitary methods of the present progressive age" (as billed on its menu) meant that it offered the most authentic Chinese menu of all.

While Harlem's Cotton Club on the East Coast was enjoying its heyday, San Francisco's Forbidden City became the nation's premier all-Chinese nightclub. It was featured in *Life*, *Look*, and *Pic* and advertised in magazines and newspapers. One advertisement depicts a silk-stockinged Asian temptress beckoning, "Come along with me please! I'll show you how to have fun-in Chinatown." Soon Forbidden City had gained an international reputation.

As a boy in the 1960s, every day on his way to school, filmmaker Arthur Dong passed by the Sutter Street building that had housed Forbidden City. By that time it was an adult movie theater, but no one had bothered to remove the placards picturing Forbidden City's stars from the outside displays. In 1989 Dong premiered his documentary *Forbidden City, U.S.A.*, a musical film that captured the club's swinging scene with clips, original recordings, and interviews with the performers.⁵ Dong's *Forbidden City, U.S.A.* and the fiftieth-year reunion he organized with the nightclub's former stars created quite a buzz.

One of the performers featured in the film was Nora Wong, now in her eighties and living in Hawaii.⁶ Wong (pictured below) began her career at twenty as a chorus-line dancer, but within a year she had earned the spotlight as the principal singer at Forbidden City. *San Francisco Social Life Night and Day*, a magazine similar to today's *Time Out* guides, featured a photo of the five-foot-three-and-one-half-inch 115-pound Chinese American, calling her a "song stylist . . . with large, lustrous brown eyes . . . who stirs listeners to the height of their emotional tempo . . . with a voice rich in melodramatic tones." When I first contacted Wong in 2001, she was happy to talk about the golden years of the Chinese-American nightclub.



Throughout the 1940s Wong worked a large club circuit, singing, dancing, and emceeing everywhere from Forbidden City to Kubla Kahn, from Andy Wong's Sky Room to the Lion's Den. Wong remembered Lion's Den as "a cave-like nightclub, you went downstairs in the basement. Upstairs was the main Chinese restaurant, Kuh Wah." (A restaurant still exists there today, the Golden Palace, owned by the same family.) "There was a small dance floor, a 'pigeon floor,' with a pit for three or four fellas who



could play music, a small orchestra," Wong recalled. "The patrons could dance on the pigeon floor if they cared. It was intimate, fun, everyone got into the act."

Nora Wong emceed the other acts, which included a Hawaiian knife and fire dance and a bubble dancer. Nora explained that a bubble dance was like the popular fan dance of the day, except that the scantily clad girl performed behind a big bubble instead of a fan. Three dinner seatings with three shows per night attracted a mixed group of tourists and Asians. "It was a real cute show," she said.

What about behind the scenes? Wong reported that there were no gangs, nothing illegal, "no ching-chong Charlie. It was very, very businesslike." The performers had a contract and were obligated to join the Actor's Guild and pay monthly dues. "Of course, they didn't do anything for you, a big gyp, but you had to do it," she recalled. The bosses were very strict, but the pay was good. It was such a novelty business that the performers had to play by the rules or not work at all.

When I pressed her about the social life of a performer, Wong relented. "Yes, there was always 'Johnny on the doorstep.' You say, 'no no no,' or 'busy busy.'" *Flower Drum Song*, the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical that opened on Broadway in 1958, parodied the entertainers' lifestyle with numbers such as "Grant Avenue," "Fan-tan Fanny," and "Chop Suey." But the real-life Asian entertainers of the 1940s lived more conventional lives than the musical portrayed. On stage there was rarely, if ever, full nudity, no seriously off-color humor, and no pidgin talk. And the Chinese nightclub shows seemed not to have played to racist or sexist stereotypes.⁷

The Asian nightclub stars were often compared to headlining Caucasians. There was a Chinese Sally Rand (Noel Toy Young),⁸ a Chinese Fred Astaire (Paul Wing), and a Chinese Sinatra (Larry Ching). In *Forbidden City, U.S.A.* Ching fondly recalls the opportunity presented at *Forbidden City* for dancers to "show the world their stuff"; Toy Yat Mar, who was known as the Chinese Sophie Tucker, comments that the barelegged dancing was disgraceful to older Chinese. Jadin Wong, perhaps the most celebrated of the Chinese showgirls, performed at *Forbidden City* and was also one of the original dancers at New York City's *China Doll* restaurant-nightclub.⁹ Wing and Toy was another hot act on the circuit. Dorothy Toy was eventually blacklisted because of her Japanese ancestry but today still teaches tap dancing to girls in Oakland, California. Tony Wing maintained a studio on Balboa Street in San Francisco until he passed away. Many of the entertainers made it into such Hollywood films as *Chop Chop*, *Singapore Sue*, *With Best Dishes*, and *Deviled Ham*.

The Chinese-American nightclub was a new spin on vaudeville, eye-popping entertainment that incorporated elements from both sides of the Pacific. The melding of artistic cultures may have shocked some Chinese and confused Occidentals, but the shows received sensational reviews. They drew crowds of Americans from all social strata, and not only because of the entertainment line-up. *Forbidden City* packed the house with one-dollar dinners, one dollar and fifty cents on a Saturday night. Much of the food wasn't authentic Chinese. But by promoting their dinner menus, the

nightclubs helped to popularize Chinese food in America. (Across the country even non-Chinese clubs, including the Cotton Club, The Stork Club, and the Hollywood Room, started serving their clientele "exotic" Chinese chop suey.)

The Lion's Den menu is typical of the restaurant offerings. It was printed in English with Chinese transliterations. One full page lists American dishes, including ten different sandwiches, Chicken a la King, steaks, chops, pies, cakes, and ice creams.

The Chinese dishes include

authentic-sounding soups such as *Yee Chee* (shark's fin), *Yeen Wo* (bird's nest), *Bow Yee* (abalone), *Gai Choy* (mustard green), and *Cho Goo Gung* (grass mushroom).

There are also mysterious items on the menu such as *don far*, which translates as "egg flower." Could this be a florid name for the common egg drop soup? And what about a salad of tomatoes, egg, pineapple, cottage cheese, anchovy, peppers, and celery called Shanghai Gesture? Perhaps, it was named after the John Colton play adapted for the silver screen by Josef von Sternberg and starring Walter Huston and Gene Tierney. The movie contains a fine Victor Mature cameo that evokes the sizzling tone of 1930s Shanghai.

The most unusual item on the menu, which is listed with the soups, is Fruit Wonton with Pickle Sauce (\$1.25 for one; \$2.40 for two). This dish appears on many menus from the period. I wonder whether it called for pickled Asian fruits, such as mango, or Western ones, such as pickled watermelon rind. Was it sweet and sour? When I asked Nora Wong to enlighten me, she had no recollection of this pickled-fruit and noodle oddity. It's possible that genuinely Chinese dishes were not frequently ordered at any of the Chinatown restaurants. However, Fong Wan's menu at Club Shanghai stipulated that the restaurant serve "other native dishes on request." And patrons at Forbidden City could eat sweet-and-sour spareribs with mixed pickles or, on a day's notice, *Kwa Law Op* (Pekin duck).

The nightclub with the most authentic Chinese menu was, by far, Shanghai Low. D.W. Low proudly claimed on a postcard from the period that "To visit our caf& eactue; is equal to a trip to China. Most of the principal Chinese dishes are given here, but there are many varieties not named that could be supplied if asked for. A real pretentious spread may be had for a trifling expense." The bilingual menu presents abundant variety. There are *soongs* (minced lettuce wraps), *Kwa Loo Op* (broiled duck and layer buns), fowl-stuffed winter melon, *Seen Leen Op Gong* (duck soup with bamboo shoots, lotus berries, mushrooms, and ham), and *Fo Gwa Yuk* (bitter squash fried with meat). *Dai Op Sam Me*, with whole duck or chicken, is offered three different ways. There are also chicken fritters and bean cakes fried with meat, squid, and even tripe. One of the most interesting categories is the steamed dishes, which include Beef with Yam Sauce, Pork with Pungent Salt Fish (a Chinese working-class favorite with rice and greens), and a dish that's not on any other Chinese menu in my collection, Sun-Dried Duck. Refreshing desserts include *Sarli* (sliced pears), *Youngto* (starfruit), *Tem Jare* (sugar cane), and *Kum Kwat*, known at the time as golden limes.

Drink offerings at Shanghai Low were equally bountiful, as they were at many restaurants of the era. Cola was rarely served, but patrons enjoyed lemon and lime

squashes and lemon- and limeades, sarsaparilla, and ginger ales, both Canada Dry and Belfast. Hot drinks included *long jang* (green tea, better known today as *long jing*) and *suisen*-"water fairy" tea (another mystery)-in addition to the standard brews of *oo long* and *soo hing* (jasmine).

At all of the restaurant-nightclubs, the cocktail was always a main course. The bar at Forbidden City, for example, was often four deep. Drinking at the Lion's Den must have been the bee's knees: there is more booze on the menu than any other item, including long lists of scotch, rye, bourbon, Irish whisky, and rum. Great bartenders of the period were able to recommend special cocktails to treat particular worries, just as traditional Chinese chefs cooked with the wellness of their diners foremost in mind. At the Sky Room the bartenders mixed house cocktails for forty-five cents-Dragon's Neck, Dragon's Tail, Dragon's Eye, and Dragon's Tooth, as well as one called Angel's Tits, made from white *crème de cacao*, cherry liqueur, and cream in chilled layers, topped with (of course) a maraschino cherry.

After the war and into the 1950s, the novelty of the Chinese restaurant-nightclub began to wear off. By the 1960s these legendary haunts had been replaced by discos, topless bars, Las Vegas, go-go girls, and television. Forbidden City was sold on December 15, 1962.¹⁰ Andy Wong's Sky Room, home to the *Wongettes* and once called "Chinatown's Gayest Nite Club," was the last to fold.

The phenomenon of 1940s Chinese restaurant-nightclubs is largely forgotten, but for some the era remains compelling. In 2003 the Museum of Chinese in the Americas mounted *Gotta Sing, Gotta Dance!*, an exhibition that illuminated many facets of the "chop suey circuit" and the Chinese contribution to American entertainment on the eve of World War II. In January 2003 the *New York Times* featured a story on nightclub dining, citing the popularity of clubs including the B.B. King Blues Club and Grill and Joe's Pub at the Public Theater.¹¹ It might also have mentioned New York's Lucky Cheng's, where transvestites serve pan-Asian food in a kitschy setting. But nothing can quite replace the 1940s Chinese-American restaurant-nightclub with its exotic cuisine and one-of-a-kind all-Chinese entertainment that brought together a diverse group of Americans to dine and dance the night away.g

An earlier version of this article appeared in *Flavor and Fortune* (vol. 9, no. 3, Fall 2002; www.flavorandfortune.com). Nora Wong hopes that this story will inspire readers to share memories of this golden age; I would like to hear from readers with anecdotes or answers to the questions raised in this article. I can be reached at inspector-collector@nyc.rr.com.

NOTES

I would like to thank Nora Wong, her much-missed husband Ed, and her daughter K. K.--this article would have been impossible to write without their help. I'm also grateful to Arthur Dong for his enthusiastic documentation and extremely gracious assistance. Thanks also to Florence Wong, Chris Ellis, Marya McQuirter, and Jackie Newman. Most of all, thanks to Martin Wong-we all miss you.

1. Even today Shanghai draws the eye of the elite media. Jean-Georges Vongerichten's Chinese restaurant, M on the Bund, is regularly featured in international society pages, as is the scene at 66, his Shanghai-style restaurant in Manhattan.
 2. Bradley Mayhew, *Shanghai* (Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet, 2001), 17.
 3. The building now houses a computer store and was renumbered 369.
 4. The famous incidents are documented on the Museum of the City of San Francisco's superb Web site, www.sfmuseum.org.
 5. Arthur Dong, *Forbidden City, U.S.A.* (Los Angeles: DeepFocus Productions, 1989), 16mm film, 56 min. *Forbidden City, U.S.A.* premiered at San Francisco's Palace of Fine Arts on November 15, 1989. It is now available on DVD through www.deepfocusproductions.com.
 6. Nora Wong's half-brother is the Chinese food television chef Martin Yan, and her nephew was the late Chinese-American painter Martin Wong, whose portrait of his aunt impelled this research.
 7. What the Chinese-American nightclub may or may not have done for the reputation of Chinese people in the United States is the subject of much debate in academic circles today.
 8. Noel Toy Young died earlier this year.
 9. Today Jadin Wong is a theatrical agent for some four hundred Asian Americans. She recently appeared in an ad for Levi's.
 10. The address is now home to a souvenir store. Forbidden City's Oriental Dolls Review stayed together and toured until 1972.
 11. Regina Schrambling, "The Music Cooks and the Food Sings," *New York Times*, 23 January 2002.
-

[Home](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Contents](#) | [Vision](#) | [Sample](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Contribute](#) | [Media](#) | [FAQ](#)

University of California Press Journals, 2000 Center St., Ste. 303, Berkeley, CA 94704-1223

Fax: 510-642-9917 email: gastronomica@ucpress.edu

© 2001 by the Regents of the University of California