

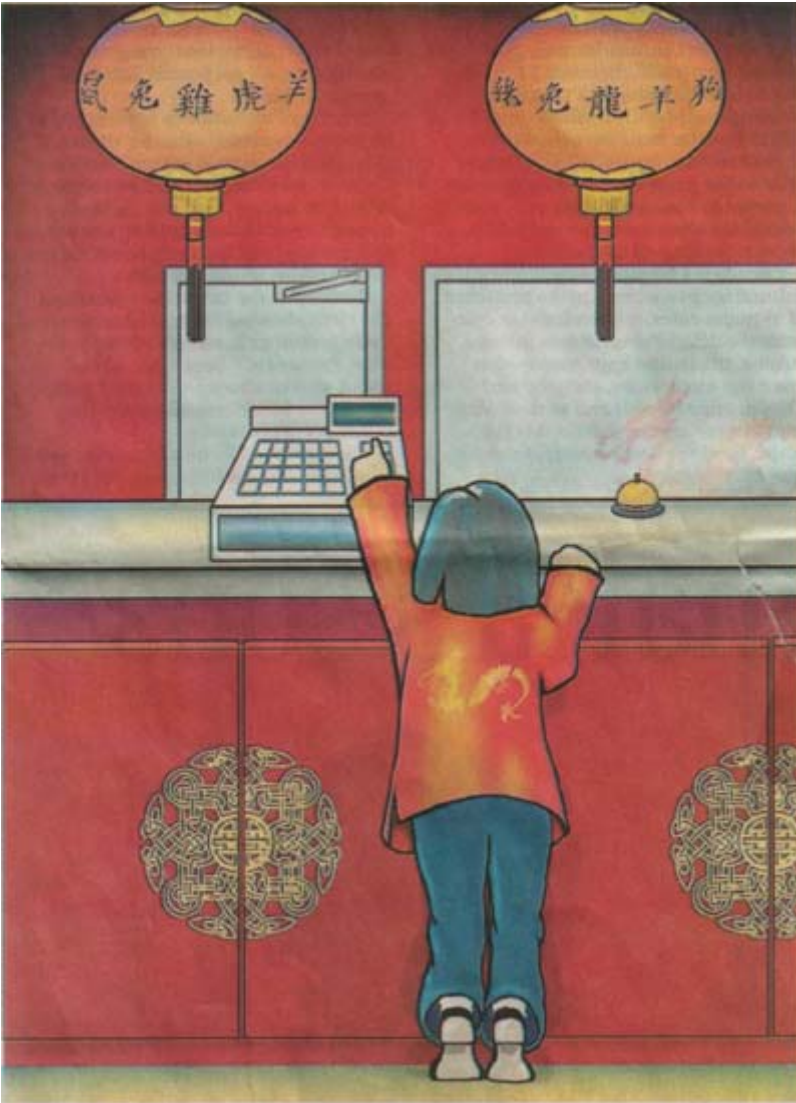
PRINT EDITION

Eat, drink mother, father

The restaurant became the battleground for clashes between a traditional Chinese mother and her rebelling Canadian-born daughter.

By LILY QUAN

Monday, November 18, 2002 – Page A20



My family home was not a house but a restaurant. My parents bought the restaurant in the late 1960s, a product of their immigrant dream to succeed in their adopted country. The restaurant was as much a part of my childhood as my dolls, my teachers and Mr. Dressup at 10:30 in the morning. I played, took naps and worked in it. But the restaurant has been sold and soon it too will belong in the past.

It was a Chinese-Canadian restaurant, a typical Mom-and-Pop shop. Upstairs were the kitchen and dining room. Downstairs were the storage area and washrooms. As a child, I used to play downstairs while my parents worked upstairs. Back then, the restaurant was a giant playground for me and my brothers. If ever I dared take my game upstairs, my grandmother would soon smack me down. That was work, and work was important.

I would be co-opted into the world of work at the age of 8. I was more than happy to work at the restaurant. This meant I was growing up, and I began tending the cash and doing small chores. Of course I was still a child, and there were limits to my type of help. I never quite understood why my father's wontons looked like plump little purses, and mine looked like limp noses. But I was happy to help my mother and father.

"Help your father and mother" -- this was the family mantra that would later make me cringe. For my mother and father, the restaurant was hardly a playground. It was their way of supporting their children in a foreign country where they arrived knowing not one word of English. The restaurant meant long hours, hard physical work and struggles with English-speaking customers. As I grew up, I sometimes resented

- [Front Page](#)
- [Report on Business](#)
- [National](#)
- [International](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Arts & Entertainment](#)
- [Editorials](#)
- [Columnists](#)
-  [Headline Index](#)

- Other Sections
- [Appointments](#)
- [Births & Deaths](#)
- [Books](#)
- [Classifieds](#)
- [Comment](#)
- [Education](#)
- [Environment](#)
- [Facts & Arguments](#)
- [Focus](#)
- [Health](#)
- [Obituaries](#)
- [Real Estate](#)
- [Review](#)
- [Science](#)
- [Style](#)
- [Technology](#)
- [Travel](#)
- [Wheels](#)
- Leisure
- [Cartoon](#)
- [Crosswords](#)
- [Food & Dining](#)
- [Golf](#)
- [Horoscopes](#)
- [Movies](#)
- [Online Personals](#)
- [TV Listings/News](#)
- Specials & Series
- [All Reports...](#)

the attention my parents gave to the restaurant. But I knew, as my parents drilled it into me, they were doing this sort of work so I wouldn't have to. Family time outside the restaurant was rare, and my parents enjoyed the Cantonese penchant for gambling.

I was the only kid in my Grade 4 class who knew what an exactor, triactor and daily-double were. Robin Platts was my favourite jockey.

The restaurant was the meeting place for relatives stopping by, the home of celebratory dinners at Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's (both Chinese and Western). While other kids might come home to peanut butter sandwiches and Chef Boyardee, I came home to Cantonese chow mein, barbecued spare ribs or chicken noodle soup. Not that I'm complaining. It was great. Anything I wanted was ready in 10 minutes or less. Soya sauce chicken wings? No problem. A few spring rolls to take home? Sure, just sit down and drink some soup first. I didn't realize until I moved out years later just how spoiled I was. I was standing in my apartment kitchen with a can of tomato paste in one hand and a clove of garlic in the other. I was all set to make a spaghetti sauce when I realized I was clueless about where to begin. I had no idea how to cook, but knew how to order really well.

Often, I had to drink Chinese medicinal soups that had been simmering on the stove all day. "Drink this, it's good for you," said my mother as introduction. I never knew what was in them, but was told it was good for the blood, stomach, liver or some other internal organ. Sometimes it was better if I didn't know the ingredients. Once, I came home from school and found a turtle lying in an empty drum in the kitchen. I went home excited about the prospect of a pet. The pet never materialized, but the soup we had for dinner that night was supposed to be particularly good for the blood.

As an adolescent, the restaurant became the battleground for clashes between me and my mother as my traditional Chinese mother struggled to deal with her rebelling Canadian-born daughter. The restaurant became a burden I resented. While I had to work for my parents, my friends went to work for Baskin Robbins, the CNE or the Kitchen Table: fun places. I often saw in mother's eyes, "What did I raise?" as we argued. I hated working at the restaurant and the phrase "help your mother and father" became a symbol of the authoritarian-fascist-dictatorial regime that I felt was my family household. It is dangerous to let a 17-year-old with a traditional Chinese mother become a student of Karl Marx. A little knowledge is a dangerous

Where to Find It

A quick guide to what's available on the site

Newspaper

[Advertise](#)

[Corrections](#)

[Customer Service](#)

[Help & Contact Us](#)

[Reprints](#)

[Subscriptions](#)

Web Site

[Advertise](#)

[E-Mail Newsletters](#)

[Free Headlines](#)

[Help & Contact Us](#)

[Make Us Home](#)

[Mobile new](#)

[Press Room](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Terms & Conditions](#)



thing, and this was like putting a monkey behind the wheel of a Mack truck.

But there were good times, too. Late at night, my mother and father would come home from work. My mother would go to her bedroom to relax with some Chinese newspapers. My father would sit in the living room and watch Chinese movies on video, I would go upstairs and chat with them for a while. I used to listen for the click of the door and the sound of two sets of footsteps walking the main hallway. It punctuated the end of day before I went to sleep, reassuring me the world was as it should be. In my early 20s, my mother was diagnosed with cancer and died two months later. After that, I would hear only one slow set of footsteps late at night. The world would no longer be as it should be.

As an adult, the restaurant has seen relatively little of me. I have gone forth in the world and forged my own identity, away from my family and the restaurant. Now the restaurant has been sold and will soon be no more. So I'll take my camera and head up soon to take final photos. (Relatives and long-time employees will comment on how tall/thin/fat/old/pretty/not-as-pretty I have become.) It's something I've been putting off. Even writing this has become a method of procrastination. But it's time I got going. There's someone to whom I have to say goodbye.

Lily Quan lives in Toronto.


[Return to Main Features Page](#)

[Subscribe to The Globe and Mail](#)

[Sign up for our daily e-mail News Update](#)

[Next Story](#)

 [E-mail this article](#)

 [Print this article](#)

▼ Advertisement

Are you as ready for their future as they are? Visit online for more information on [Registered Education Savings Plans](#) (RESPs)

7-Day Site Search

SEARCH