

# A Lauriat of Chinese-Filipino Dishes

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The publication of *My Angkong's Noodles* is a milestone in Chinese-Filipino culinary history.

Written by Clinton Huang Palanca (one of the most gifted Filipino writers of his generation and a talented cook himself), photographed by Neal Oshima, styled by Ginny Roces de Guzman, and published by Elizabeth Yu Gokongwei, this beautiful, lavishly illustrated book contains more than a hundred recipes for rice, noodle, seafood, pork, beef, chicken, and vegetable dishes, plus desserts, for everyday eating as well as festive occasions. Thoughtful essays by Mara Coson, the late Doreen Fernandez, Rafael Ongpin, and Jeffrey Yap leaven this cookbook, and sixteen recipe authors and five establishments (including Ling Nam, Mann Hann, and Hai Kang) contributed to the creative team endeavor.

“Angkong” in the title means “grandfather” in Hokkien or Minnanhua (literally, “the speech south of the Min River”), the lingua franca of the Chinese community in the Philippines and a topolect (nay, language) that is spoken by more than forty-six million people in China (mainly southern Fujian), Singapore, Malaysia (especially Melaka and Penang), Taiwan, and parts of Indonesia (including Medan in North Sumatra) and Thailand.

Although the kitchen is often assumed to be the domain of women, Palanca invokes his own father's love of cooking to show that the lived experience and history of the Chinese in the Philippines complicate this "tradition" and its stereotype of the "dutiful daughter-in-law."

For most of the nearly four centuries during which the Philippines was a colony of Spain, Chinese migrants were overwhelmingly male. They were either bachelors or married men who left their wives and children behind in Fujian. Some of these migrants founded their own families in the Philippines through marriage or informal unions involving Filipino women. It was not unusual for Chinese men—the more prosperous ones, at least—to have families in China as well as the Philippines.

These Chinese-Filipino unions in turn produced the so-called "mestizos," who were granted their own legal classification between 1760 and the 1880s, and from whose ranks descended some of the country's most illustrious (and some notorious) sons and daughters: Tomas Pinpin, Lorenzo Ruiz, Jose Rizal, Emilio Aguinaldo, Sergio Osmeña, Ferdinand Marcos, Jaime Cardinal Sin, and Corazon Cojuangco Aquino, to name a few. Only in the early twentieth century did sufficient numbers of Chinese women migrate to the Philippines, a trend that accelerated in the 1930s because of the chaos and devastation of the Sino-Japanese War but tapered off once China went Communist and Hong Kong replaced Amoy/Xiamen as the embarkation point of emigration for far smaller numbers of Chinese. In recent decades, new migrants (*xinqiao*) have kept the community institutions such as Chinese-language newspapers and organizations afloat, even as second- and third-generation Chinese Filipinos have integrated into Philippine society in the wake of the landmark relaxation of naturalization requirements in 1975.

As Doreen Fernandez pointed out, the word *pansit* that we now use to refer to the popular Filipino dish of noodles cooked with seafood, meat, or vegetables originated in the Hokkien word *pien sit*, meaning "something that is conveniently cooked: usually fried," proof enough that "fast food" cooked and peddled by Chinese men but thoroughly adapted

to Filipino taste and sensibility was already inventing its own tradition in colonial Manila and other urban areas.

Included in the cookbook are recipes for such Chinese-Filipino staples as *Han Zhi Be* (*lugaw* with cubes of sweet potato), *Kiam Peng* (savory rice with toppings of chicken, pork, Chinese sausage, and roasted peanuts), *Ma Tsang* (tetrahedral dragon-boat parcels of glutinous rice flavored with five-spice powder, packed with bits of pork belly, chestnuts, black mushrooms, and dried shrimp, and wrapped in bamboo leaf), *Ngo Hiong* (*kikiam*, seasoned pork encased sausage-like in crisp bean curd sheets), *Gulam* (short-rib beef stew), *Mi Sua Teng* (*Misua* Medley, featuring *patola* and fresh oysters), *O Ah Jien* (oyster cake), *Chai Tao Que* (radish cake), *Sai Zhi Tao* (Lion's Head meatballs, eaten with Chinese *pechay*), *Diong Kwei Teng* (medicinal black chicken soup, boiled with goji berries/*kam kee*, bamboo pith, and red dates), and *Lo Han Zhai* (vegetarian stir-fry with wood-ear fungus, *fa cai* vegetables, bamboo shoots, baby corn, snowpeas, and Chinese cabbage). For the more adventurous cooks planning a lauriat (from the Hokkien term, *lau-diat*, “merry-making”) banquet, there are recipes for *Po Pia* (Chinese lumpia), a simpler, more ecologically friendly version of the *Put Tiao Chiu* (Buddha Jumps Over the Wall, the original of which is made of melted sweet potato and taro, prepared over two days, and served in porcelain wine jars), and *Pao Hi Hiu Ko* (abalone with mushrooms).

These dishes have as their base the chicken stock (preferably home-made) that distinguishes the food culture of the Chinese from that of the Japanese, who normally use fish stock, and Koreans, who use seaweed. The coastal origins of Chinese-Filipino cuisine can be seen in the liberal use of oysters and seafood. While the Southeast Asian (*Nanyang*) influence is evident in the Philippine version of shrimp toasts (*He Pia*), Chinese cuisine has also been shaped by China's interaction with the Philippines. Sweet potato, a major supplement to the Fujianese diet, and chili pepper, without which Sichuan mala sauce is unimaginable, first entered mainland China from South America via Manila, a key port in the galleon trade.

At the same time, Chinese cooking has made a home for itself in the Philippines, with *siopao* and *siomai*, *maki* (made of pork shoulder, pork fat, and camote flour), fishballs (*Hi Wan*), boiled peanuts (*Sah To Tao*), *pata tim* (*Hong Ti Ka*, braised pork trotter), and *humba* (*Hong Ba*, roasted pork belly) becoming part of the Filipino repertoire. In turn, the Chinese-Filipino table has incorporated Pinoy favorites such as *pochero*, which used to be served by mestizos on Sundays, and the delicious Philippine mango. A number of dishes are mestizo in themselves: bean sprout and tofu cake (*Tao Hu Que*), beef and tripe curry (*Kali Guba Guto*), and chicken taro in coconut sauce (*Iya Chiu Kwei*). Others offer clever improvisations on old standbys: using Haw flakes, for example, for sweet and sour pork (*Cho Ba*).

Palanca rightly states that Cantonese cuisine has long set the benchmark for the globalization of Chinese food, owing to Cantonese immigration to America and to the rise of Hong Kong as one of the Four Dragon economies in East Asia and Guangdong province as a special economic zone in post-Maoist China in the 1980s and 1990s.

In the Philippines, the Cantonese who form a minority of the Chinese population had tended to cluster in the restaurant business, a fact that is borne out in Jose Rizal's second novel, *El filibusterismo* (1891), which includes a chapter in which "fourteen young men from the principal islands of the archipelago, from the pure indio (if there be pure ones) to the Peninsular Spaniard" decide to "celebrate" the defeat of their efforts to set up a Spanish-language school by throwing a party at the Panciteria Macanista de Buen Gusto. (Macanista is derived from the proper noun "Macao"; the Chinese in the Philippines still refer to Cantonese speakers as "Macao-a"—a reference to the port city from which Cantonese originally sailed in the early centuries of the Spanish era—much as they call people from India "Bombay-a," regardless of place of origin).

As shirtless Chinese waiters bring in the dishes for the four-course meal, the students laughingly dedicate the first course, soupy "*pancit langlang*"—made of "mushrooms, crabs or shrimp, egg noodles, *sotanghun*,

pieces of chicken, and I don't know what else," the student Makaraig helpfully explains to the sneaky, noncommittal Don Custodio. ("Langlang" in Tagalog means ingredient or spice, but "*Langlang*"/"*Lanlang*"/"Lannang" is also what the Hokkien call themselves, literally "our people"; the late historian William Henry Scott tells us that in the sixteenth century, Tagalog elders referred to pirates as "langlang"). The other three courses are: *lumpia de chino* made of pork, crab cake, and *pansit guisado*. One wall of the restaurant is festooned with this versicle, "Glory be to Custodio for his cleverness and pansit on earth to the youths of good will!" If the effort to nationalize Spanish, the colonial language, is doomed to failure, a form of "national" solidarity may yet be engendered among "ilustrados" of different ethnicities and backgrounds by the simple act of eating comfort food together. It is Rizal who tells us that while the pansit is supposed to have a "Chinese or Japanese" provenance, the kind that Filipinos eat is to be found only in the Philippines.

The relative invisibility of Fujianese cuisine owes something to the mercantile profile of its emigrants and to the rugged, mountainous terrain that kept the province isolated. Ironically, this isolation has ensured that Hokkien and the other Min languages would retain vestiges of Middle Chinese (and perhaps even Old Chinese), which accounts for why Hokkien reading of Tang poetry rhymes while Mandarin Chinese does not.

Viewed in terms of the *longue durée*, however, isolation is relative to some parts of Fujian but not to others. The Fujianese city of Quanzhou, where many of the ancestors of modern-day Chinese-Filipinos originate (Zhangzhou is the other major source of immigration to the Philippines in the early Spanish period), stands out for its long, cosmopolitan history and its cultural diversity as a contact zone between east and west and between near east and far east. Established in the 8th century as a port-city of Tang China, Quanzhou surpassed Guangdong to become the largest seaport in China during the Song (960–1279) and Yuan (1271–1368) Dynasties, serving as the starting point of the fabled maritime Silk Road, meriting mention by Marco Polo, and acting as a springboard for Kubilai Khan's attempted invasion of Java.

Fujian was noted in the Ming and Qing Dynasties for two important cultural achievements. The first is Fujian's singular success in providing the highest number—2,436—of people who attained the highest degree, *jinshi*, in the 276-year history of the imperial examination system that supplied the bulk of the empire's civil bureaucracy during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). The two counties of Putian near Fuzhou and Jinjiang in Quanzhou (Jinjiang happens to be the ancestral home-county of many Chinese-Filipino families) alone accounted for 493 and 368 *jinshi* degrees respectively, and had the largest and third largest number of *jinshi* degrees per capita in China. The reason for this scholastic success was that Fujian merchants could afford to hire tutors for their scions; indeed, there were Philippine Chinese like Lim Tua Co (of the Destileria Limtuaco), who attained *jinshi* status in the nineteenth century, and there was a Fujianese family that produced seven generations of *jinshi* over 200 years. The second achievement is Fujian's native son, Lin Shu (1852–1924), born in Fuzhou, who enjoyed a long, distinguished career in the late nineteenth century (late Qing [1644–1912] period) as China's foremost translator who introduced Western literature into China. Although Lin Shu did not know any foreign language, he worked with bilingual collaborators to translate more than 170 literary works, many of them novels in English and to a lesser extent French, into literary Chinese, and in so doing, helped modernize Chinese thought and culture.

The coastal cities of Xiamen, Zhangzhou, and Quanzhou have thrived historically on the remittances and investment of their sojourning sons in Southeast Asia and, now, in the Anglophone Pacific countries that include the U.S., Canada, and Australia. Neglected by the socialist government, which did not bother with infrastructure-building in the 1940s to 1970s, Fujian's Xiamen/Amoy was one of the first cities to be designated a special economic zone in 1980, followed by the capital city of Fuzhou in 1984. Close contact with Taiwan across the straits and major investment by the Hokkien diaspora since the economic reform and opening up of China in 1978 have made Fujian the ninth richest province in terms of GDP per capita in 2013.

For too long now, Chinese Filipinos have had to rely on their own family recipes, handed down from generation to generation, as well as popular Taiwanese author and television personality Fu Pei Mei's bestselling three-volume cookbooks and special cooking classes in Southeast Asia, for their comfort food. *My Angkong's Noodles* not only offers a lauriat of classic dishes from one of the oldest Chinatowns in the world, but also restores to Philippine and Southeast Asian history the Chinese Filipinos' place in it.

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