

# Chinese Restaurants Are Closing. That's a Good Thing, the Owners Say.

The share of Chinese restaurants has fallen in metro areas across the country in the last five years. Many owners are glad their children won't be taking over.

By Amelia Nierenberg and Quoc Trung Bui

Dec. 24, 2019

KINGSTON, N.Y. — More than 40 years after buying Eng's, a Chinese-American restaurant in the Hudson Valley, Tom Sit is reluctantly considering retirement.

For much of his life, Mr. Sit has worked here seven days a week, 12 hours a day. He cooks in the same kitchen where he worked as a young immigrant from China. He parks in the same lot where he'd take breaks and read his wife's letters, sent from Montreal while they courted by post in the late 1970s. He seats his regulars at the same tables where his three daughters did homework.

Two years ago, at the insistence of his wife, Faye Lee Sit, he started taking off one day a week. Still, it's not sustainable. He's 76, and they're going to be grandparents soon. Working 80 hours a week is just too hard. But his grown daughters, who have college degrees and well-paying jobs, don't intend to take over.



Tom Sit has cooked in the same kitchen for 45 years, making Chinese-American dishes and putting his own spin on the recipes. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

Across the country, owners of Chinese-American restaurants like Eng's are ready to retire but have no one to pass the business to. Their children, educated and raised in America, are pursuing professional careers that do not demand the same grueling labor as food service.

According to new data from the restaurant reviewing website Yelp, the share of Chinese restaurants in the top 20 metropolitan areas has been consistently falling. Five years ago, an average of 7.3 percent of all restaurants in these areas were Chinese, compared with 6.5 percent today. That reflects 1,200 fewer Chinese restaurants at a time when these 20 places added more than 15,000 restaurants over all.

Even in San Francisco, home to the oldest Chinatown in the United States, the share of Chinese restaurants shrank to 8.8 percent from 10 percent.

## Chinese restaurants are losing ground in metro areas around the country

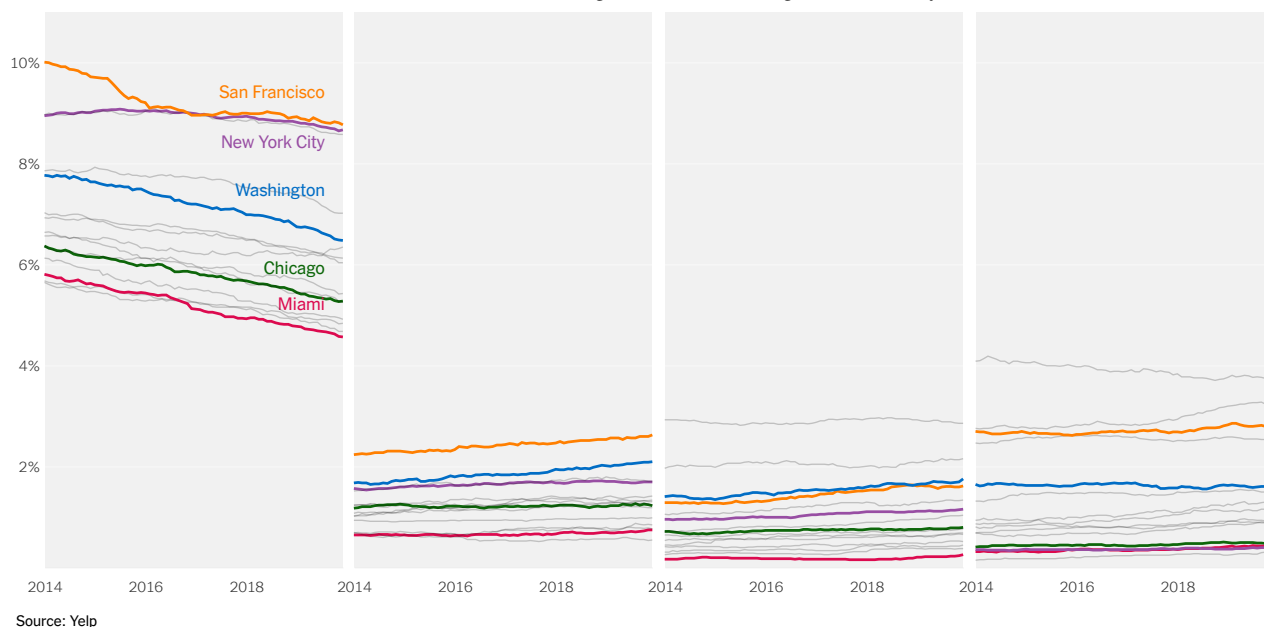
Share of restaurants in metro areas that are ...

Chinese

Indian

Korean

Vietnamese



It doesn't seem that interest in the cuisine has faltered. On Yelp, the average share of page views of Chinese restaurants hasn't declined, nor has the average rating.

And at the same time, the percentages of Indian, Korean and Vietnamese restaurants — many of which were also owned and operated by immigrants from Asian countries — are holding steady or increasing nationwide.

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The restaurant business has always been tough, and rising rents and delivery apps haven't helped. Tightening regulations on immigration and accounting have also made it harder for cash-based restaurants to do business.

But those are not Chinese-restaurant-specific factors, and do not explain the wave of closings. Instead, a big reason seems to be the economic mobility of the second generation.

"It's a success that these restaurants are closing," said Jennifer 8. Lee, a former New York Times journalist who wrote of the rise of Chinese restaurants in her book "The Fortune Cookie Chronicles" and produced a documentary, "The Search for General Tso." "These people came to cook so their children wouldn't have to, and now their children don't have to."

The retirements of the restaurant owners also reflect the history of Chinese immigration to the United States. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act halted what had been a steady rise in people coming from China. It was not revoked until 1943, and large-scale immigration resumed only after 1965, when other race-targeting quotas were abolished.

China's Cultural Revolution, an often violent social and political upheaval that started in 1966, prompted many young people to emigrate to the United States, a country that projected an image of freedom and economic possibility.

Eng's opened in 1927 in Kingston, N.Y. Here's how it looks now. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

Mr. Sit left Guangzhou, in southern China, in 1968. He hiked, climbed and swam his way to Hong Kong, filling his pants with pine cones as an improvised flotation device.

"There was just no future," he said. "The only way to get freedom and to get a good job was to go to Hong Kong."

In a family scrapbook, Mr. Sit pasted calendar entries with the dates he left Guangzhou and arrived in Hong Kong. He considers June 21, the day he climbed out of the sea, an unofficial birthday. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

In 1974, he immigrated to the United States and started working at Eng's, which opened in 1927. Although he had never worked in a restaurant, the heat from the woks was much less intense than what he experienced at a Hong Kong plastics factory where he had worked.

Unlike Mr. Sit, some immigrants had been chefs in China. They served Hunan and Cantonese foods on linen tablecloths to bejeweled, curious diners at places like Shun Lee Palace in New York.

“There was the golden age of Chinese cooking in America, starting in the late 1960s and early 1970s,” said Ed Schoenfeld, a restaurateur and chef who has worked in Chinese restaurants since the ’70s. “We started getting regional practitioners of fine regional cuisine to come to this country and do their thing.”

At Eng’s, they make their egg rolls thick and crisp, packed with celery instead of cabbage. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

Mostly, though, the newly minted chefs cooked quickly and cheaply. They adapted their method of cooking to American tastes, developing dishes like beef chow fun, fortune cookies and egg drop soup, often brought home in the signature takeout containers.

“They were not precious,” Ms. Lee said. “These people did not come to be chefs; they came to be immigrants, and cooking was the way they made a living.”

Other immigrant groups follow a similar pattern. With social mobility and inclusion in more mainstream parts of the economy, the children of immigrants are less likely than their parents to own their own businesses.

### More economically mobile immigrant children are less likely to be self-employed

Change in the self-employment rate between first- and second-generation immigrants



45th  
pctile.

50th  
pctile

55th  
pctile

60th  
pctile

65th  
pctile

Average income rank for boys from poor families

MORE ECONOMIC MOBILITY

Source: Analysis of Current Population Survey by Robert Fairlie, UC Santa Cruz, “Intergenerational Mobility of Immigrants Over Two Centuries,” Ran Abramitzky, Leah Boustan, Elisa Jacome and Santiago Perez.

“In some ways, the children are regaining the status of the first generation that they have lost while migrating,” said Jennifer Lee, a professor of sociology at Columbia University and co-author of “The Asian American Achievement Paradox.” (She is not related to Jennifer 8. Lee.) “The goal has never been to continue those businesses.”

When they do become entrepreneurs, these children tend to work in industries like tech or consulting, rather than in food service or nail salons.

### Most common fields for self-employed immigrants

In first generation

CHINA	INDIA	SOUTH KOREA	VIETNAM
1 Restaurants	Computer Services	Restaurants	Nail Salons
2 Construction	Trucking	Health	Beauty Salons
3 Computer Services	Grocery Stores	Education	Construction
4 Nail Salons	Consulting	Dry Cleaning	Restaurants
5 Consulting	Gasoline Stations	Insurance	Shoe Repair

In second generation

CHINA	INDIA	SOUTH KOREA	VIETNAM
1 Computer Services	Consulting	Consulting	Construction
2 Dentistry	Computer Services	Physicians	Beverage Mfg.
3 Arts	Insurance	Legal Services	Legal Services
4 Consulting	Real Estate	Admin. Support	Restaurants
5 Education	Landscaping	Travel	Real Estate

Source: Current Population Survey, 2015 through 2019

In the past decade, some members of the second generation have also chosen to take charge of family restaurants. Nom Wah Tea Parlor, a New York dim sum restaurant that opened in 1920, has stayed a family business: first run by the Choy family, then the Tangs.

Wilson Tang took over Nom Wah Tea Parlor from his uncle in 2011, and has since expanded to more locations. Colin Clark for The New York Times

The 41-year-old owner, Wilson Tang, left a career in finance to succeed his uncle in 2011. Initially, his parents balked at his decision.

"As immigrants, it's the only thing you can do; if it's not restaurants, it's a laundromat," Mr. Tang said. "For me to choose to go back to owning a restaurant? That was tough for them to accept."

Since then, Nom Wah has expanded: to another Manhattan location, to Philadelphia and to Shenzhen, China. On any given night, groups of guests wait for a table outside the Chinatown location for up to an hour, huddled in the bend of Doyers Street.

"I had this unique opportunity to preserve something that was from old New York," he said. "I still work extremely hard. But I also know how to use marketing tools, like the internet."

In a parallel effort, the team behind Junzi Kitchen, a fast-casual Chinese restaurant chain based in New York, recently raised \$5 million to research and buy places like Eng's, rebranding them with Junzi's modern take on the cuisine.

"They are still going to have their usual beloved Chinese takeout services, but we are providing an upgraded version of that," said Yong Zhao, the founder and chief executive.

But family-run Chinese restaurants are typically not being passed to the next generation. Some may close up shop, sell their businesses to other first-generation immigrants or move on and see their former storefronts become something else entirely.

Faye Lee Sit and Mr. Sit are both in their 70s and thinking about retirement, but don't want to trust just anyone with the restaurant. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

Mr. Sit has not yet found the right person to run the restaurant, and has no immediate plans to close. "To take over Eng's, you have to keep the heart in Eng's," he said. "You need to have a loyalty to the business, not just someone who thinks, 'I'll make one year, two years of money, I don't care.'"

Ms. Sit feels more ready to retire than her husband. Normally talkative, he can be evasive whenever the family tries to bring up a successor.

"They'll have to work hard," she said, her eyes sparkling as she teased her husband, "like Tom Sit. Maybe then he'll let them take over."

If he ever actually does hand Eng's to someone else, Mr. Sit will miss his customers, and miss running an operation.

But he is proud of what he built. He is proud that his daughters, American-born educated professionals, are working jobs they have chosen, jobs they love.

"I hoped they have a better life than me," he said. "A good life. And they do."