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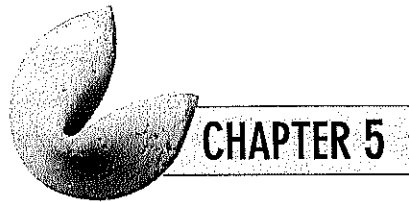
The Fortune Cookie Chronicles

Adventures in
the World of
Chinese Food

Jennifer 8. Lee



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CHAPTER 5

The Long March of General Tso

I have traveled thousands of miles, from New York to the Hunan city of Changsha, to pay homage to one of the most prominent Chinese figures known in America.

Undoubtedly, the most famous man to emerge from Hunan, a rural province largely analogous to Arkansas in America, is Chairman Mao Zedong, the megalomaniac Communist leader who led the careening nation through wars and revolutions. His name reverberates with sacred reverence in Hunan. China's aspiring politicians pay visits to his childhood home, sometimes secretly. My driver has Mao's face as his cell phone background.

But rivaling Chairman Mao's stature in the United States is another man, one who plays a more familiar role in our day-to-day lives, a man whose name passes through the lips of thousands of Americans every week. He is the great scholar-warrior Zuo Zongtang, a crusher of rebellions against the imperial Qing court, an elder statesman who held modern Chinese territory together. Outside China, however, he is less often recognized in

history books than in cookbooks. Born in 1812 about fifty miles north of Changsha in the small village of Jietoupu, he is also known as General Zuo or, more famously, General Tso. The Chinese respect the general as a vicious and gifted military leader, the equivalent of American Civil War general William Tecumseh Sherman. But millions of Americans know him only for the chicken dish named in his honor. He is the General Tso of General Tso's chicken. Tso Tsungtang—the more modern spelling is Zuo Zongtang—may have died in 1885, but his name lives forever in small towns and big cities across the United States, spoken, even if mispronounced, more often than Chairman Mao's. ("Tso" is commonly said like "So" but is actually properly pronounced halfway between "Zuoh" and "Juoh," something like "Jaw.")

What I discover: in America, General Tso, like Colonel Sanders, is known for chicken, not war. In China, he is known for war, not chicken.

General Tso's chicken is probably the most popular Chinese chef's special in America. What's there not to like? Succulent, crispy fried chicken is drenched in a tangy, spicy sauce and sautéed with garlic, ginger, and chili peppers until it bursts with flavor. Each bite is a rapturous gastronomic journey, beginning with a pleasant crunch that gives way to the tender dark meat, all while your tongue experiences the simultaneous ecstasy of sweetness paired with the kick from the chili peppers.

In my travels, I have encountered chicken belonging to General Gau, General Chau, General Tao, General Tsuo, General Joe, General So, General Chow, and just plain old "General." Then there was my personal favorite, in Wichita, Kansas: General T (perhaps a cousin of Mr.?). The general goes undercover at the United States Naval Academy dining hall, which serves "Admiral Tso's Chicken."

You can taste the general's chicken in all-you-can-eat \$4.95 supper buffets along interstate highways, at urban takeouts with

bulletproof windows, and in white-tablecloth establishments that have received starred reviews in the *New York Times*. You can sample variations where the sauce is brown and runny, red and syrupy, or yellow and sweet like honey. There are renditions with short squat pieces, long thin pieces, dark meat, white meat, and mysteriously reconstituted mystery meat. There are versions akin to McDonald's Chicken McNuggets, with more bread coating than meat, and others where you cannot tell where the chicken ends and the dough begins.

Hunan Province is famed for producing fiery leaders and spicy dishes. Hunanese locals brag that their cooking—based on simmering, stewing, and steaming—is one of the eight great regional cuisines of China. What the other seven are, few could tell me. (It turns out that China's eight great regional cuisines, like the Ten Commandments and the nine Supreme Court justices, are something that everyone knows the number of, but few can readily name.)

What I found was unsettling. Unlike kung pao chicken, which nearly every self-respecting Chinese chef can make, a request for General Tso's chicken left many cooks, waitresses, and restaurant owners scratching their heads.

The refrain was consistent: "We don't have General Tso's chicken here" or "We've never heard of it." Even after I showed them pictures of the dish on my digital camera, they would frown and look at me blankly, then helpfully suggest another chicken dish, often the local specialty, mala or kung pao. One waitress at a three-hundred-year-old restaurant pressed me to try another dish associated with a famous Hunan personage: "This is what Mao Zedong and his circle ate when they used to come here."

But nothing they offered ever resembled our crispy General Tso's, nor his American cousins: sesame chicken, lemon chicken, sweet-and-sour chicken. In fact, any batter-dipped,

stir-fried chicken dish was hard to come by in this urban corner of Hunan.

I set out to find the general's ancestral village in rural Hunan. Perhaps there people would know the story behind the chicken. Hunan may be poor and inland, but it prides itself on having produced a disproportionately high number of warriors, revolutionaries, and political leaders. Aside from Mao Zedong and the general, its august roster includes Liu Shaoqi, once Mao's presumed successor, and Hu Yaobang, the popular Communist leader whose death triggered the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests.

When you ask locals why they have so many newsworthy leaders, they almost universally echo a line used by Mao. It has to do with the spicy food, they say; a lifetime of eating the cuisine generates a revolutionary temperament in the people here.

Our general, the son of peasant farmers, looked to be an early washout after he thrice failed the competitive imperial examinations. He returned to a quiet life in his ancestral home in rural Hunan. But like many men whose fates are caught up in history, his life changed forever with the outbreak of war—in his case, a rebellion led by a Chinese convert who believed himself the younger son of Jesus Christ. The self-declared New Messiah, Hong Xiuquan, and his Taiping Rebellion established the Heavenly Kingdom, which at its peak covered most of southern and central China. Its government abolished private property and gave women equal rights.

Tso, whose political career started when he was thirty-eight, drove the heavenly rebels out of Hunan and continued his ruthless campaign toward the coast. By 1864, he, together with his military mentor, Zeng Guofan, had dethroned the Taiping king and quashed the rebellion at the Third Battle of Nanking, in which some one hundred thousand people were killed. After it was all said and done, the Taiping Rebellion had consumed over

twenty million lives, making it the bloodiest civil war in human history. In exchange for his service, our general was rewarded with a promotion to earl and went on to quash rebellions in China's west.

That was the story of General Tso's long march across China. But how did his long march across America come to pass? Perhaps, I thought, those in his village would know.

The journey to the general's birthplace turned out to be a more difficult ordeal than my driver and I had planned on. We knew the name of the town and the direction from Changsha, but my driver never consulted a map. Automobile travel in rural China involves dodging mangy dogs, farmers pulling carts, young motorcyclists, and plump chickens, creating the overall sensation of a live video game—Grand Theft Auto: Rural China. Stopping at red lights is apparently optional. Driving in the countryside also involves a great deal of honking. The sonorous rumbling horns of trucks, the high-pitched beeps of scooters, and the tenor tones of sedans come together in a shrill arpeggio. Honking in America is a punitive action; in China, it's considered a courtesy.

We were soon lost. We stopped to ask an old man with a missing tooth for directions. He gestured wildly and then jumped into the car with us, explaining that he was from near where the general had been born, where hundreds of members of the general's family still lived, where they had their own area called Zuojiaduan, or "Zuo family section." He commanded us to take a right onto a suspicious-looking dusty dirt path that seemed to lead nowhere, but then made a T-shaped intersection with a paved road. The old man got out, waved good-bye, and pointed in the direction opposite from where he was heading.

Shortly thereafter, we passed a billboard that said, "Xiangyin. A famous Qing Dynasty county and home to Zuo Zongtang." In the corner was a picture of a refined and bearded Chinese man

who was obviously General Tso. I studied his likeness. It was nice, as they say, to finally put a face to a name.

Outside a restaurant a sign advertised high-quality dog meat, a claim substantiated by a photograph of two doe-eyed puppies. Inside I inquired about the general's chicken. The waitress gave me a confused look. I showed her the picture of the dish on my digital camera. She shook her head. "It doesn't look like chicken," she said. If I wanted chicken, she offered, she could kill a fresh one for less than two American dollars. She gestured toward the back. Whichever chicken you pick, she said. But it would take too long to pluck all the feathers, delaying my hunt for the general's roots; we opted for some vegetables and a pork dish instead.

The restaurant's owner gave us a hand-drawn map. The route led us down a dirt road flanked by rice paddies and to the old home—an abandoned building that had been converted into a school, then abandoned again.

In the rice paddies near the house, I encountered two men from the general's family, Zuo Kuanxun and Zuo Ziwei, Zuo family members some five generations removed from the general. I asked them about General Tso's chicken.

They had never seen the dish. "No one here eats this," said Zuo Kuanxun, a faded sixty-six-year-old farmer. Zuo Ziwei shrugged as well.

There were chickens everywhere. Black ones. Brown ones. Speckled ones. Wandering around the backyards. Tussling with puppies. Climbing up compost piles. Crossing the road. These were clearly the original free-range chickens—not the pathetic, debeaked, de-clawed, force-fed ones of the American agro-industrial complex. But despite the widespread presence of live poultry, there was no General Tso's chicken to be found.

Zuo Kuanxun invited us into his home, a century-old stone structure with wooden doors, dirt floors, and hand-pumped

well water. Except for his telephone, which he'd gotten ten years ago to keep in contact with his children, his home was probably not too different from residences during the general's time. He handed us freshly washed apples. After I'd finished mine, I looked around for a place to put the core.

Toss it on the floor, he said. I hesitated.

"Don't worry, I'll sweep it later."

Onto the dirt floor went the apple core.

I offered him a fortune cookie in return. He examined it. And put on the polite smile and averted eyes of Chinese nonenthusiasm.

No one seemed to know whether the general had had a fondness for chicken. They did note that he probably didn't cook it himself. "He had servants to cook and clean for him," Zuo Ziwei pointed out.

"They must have used his name to do business," Zuo Kuanxun said. It didn't surprise him that Americans know the general's name. "He's famous all over the world!" he said. "He was very talented. A lot of people respected and admired him."

I didn't have the heart to tell him that in the United States we respected him only for his chicken—which in the end may not even be his.

Zuo Kuanxun said he'd once raised chickens but now focuses on pigs—the preferred meat in Chinese cooking. He didn't, however, raise only pigs. When I'd walked in, I'd noticed two energetic brown dogs wandering around with some chickens. Occasionally, they yelped outside as we talked inside. Our conversation wandered onto the topic of his dogs.

"Dog tastes good. It's good for you," he said.

I mumbled something about how in the United States we don't eat dogs because we have sentimental attachments to them as pets. He nodded. "Those dogs are made for pets. They look good. These dogs are raised for eating."

I pictured how Americans would react to General Tso's puppy on their take-out menus.

The general's childhood home, later converted to a school, had long been abandoned. It looked like any other sad building in rural areas across the world, only this one had riling Chinese slogans like "Seek Knowledge!" scrawled in gigantic red writing across the front.

"They want to develop it into a tourist destination, but there is no money," Zuo Kuanxun said, standing at the building's gate.

Over tea the same day, a young official named Jiang Wei told me about the big dreams they had for the general's home, if only they could find some capital. "We don't have the money, but we are hoping to attract tourism and to sell some General Tso-branded goods," he said. "We want to build some industry around him. We want to make it big."

Sitting in an open courtyard in front of the village hall, he gestured expansively. One could relive the General Tso experience. "You could buy the things he liked to eat. You could buy the things he liked to use," he said. "You could sell the liquor he liked to drink." He flicked his cigarette and rattled off other product lines: "Clothes. Hats. His official robes. You could put on a set of his official robes and have your picture taken in them."

Truth be told, there was little else going for this town in China, so its boosters had seized upon the identity of the general as their means to economic salvation.

Suddenly Jiang Wei remembered the reason that I had traveled thousands of miles by plane, boat, bus, car, and foot to the little town of Jietoupu in the first place. His eyes lit up with an idea. "They could come here and eat true authentic General Tso's chicken!"

As we got up to leave, one of the women at the table with us stopped me and asked, "You said you were from the United States?"

"Yes."

"But you look Chinese!" she exclaimed, confused.

My question remained: Why had the general been able to conquer America with his chicken with greater ease and less bloodshed than he had conquered China? My host in Hunan was a classmate from my time at Beijing University. Wang Wei was beautiful in the way that women in classical Chinese paintings are beautiful, with large expressive eyes, flawless skin, and a slim, shapely figure. She had gone to Syracuse University for her master's degree, but then she'd returned to Hunan to marry her high school sweetheart.

When I asked her about the chicken dish, she laughed and burst into a tirade about why General Tso's chicken is the ultimate Chinese-American dish.

"It has broccoli. Americans *loove* broccoli. They add broccoli with everything." She continued: "Americans like chicken. You can go to a supermarket and you buy chicken breast, chicken legs, chicken drumsticks, chicken wings, boneless chicken. All different types of chicken," she said, gesturing to various parts of her body. "They don't do that with pigs, do they?" she challenged. "It's very American. It's all-American: very big pieces of chicken, fried and sweet."

For generations, Chinese immigrants and students have been warned not to be shocked by the Chinese food in American Chinese restaurants. Among those dishes most likely to confuse them is General Tso's chicken. Wei remembered her first impression of the dish when she encountered it in a restaurant in Syracuse: "Is it edible?"

Watch what the workers in American Chinese restaurants eat. In general, it is not what they are serving to the customers. It is, however, more representative of the Chinese diet. For instance,

you will often find a soup—and not egg drop, wonton, or sweet-and-sour. It will be thin and simple, usually with seafood, pork bones, or melon in it. There will be lots of dishes with single vegetables.

Periodically a fervor erupts over whether or not Chinese food is healthful. The Center for Science in the Public Interest shocked the Chinese-restaurant industry in 1993 when it published a study saying that many Chinese dishes, like kung pao chicken and egg rolls, were high in fat and sodium. But Chinese food, cooked in a Chinese style for Chinese taste buds, is actually relatively healthy: lots of vegetables and seafood and low in sodium, with few deep-fried ingredients. The problem is that most Americans prefer American-style Chinese food to the real thing.

How did General Tso's chicken come to be? It seemed America must have had a hand in it. Chinese food in China is a diverse lot, but once it came to the United States it developed a few central characteristics.

First of all: Chinese restaurants in America tend to shy away from anything that is recognizably animal. Mainstream Americans don't like to be reminded that the food on their plate once lived, breathed, swam, or walked. That means nothing with eyeballs. No appendages or extremities (no tongues, no feet, no claws, no ears). Secondly, opacity. That means nothing transparent or even semitransparent (this eliminates certain kinds of fungus and all jellyfish). There is also a limit to the textures Americans will allow in their mouths: nothing rubbery or oddly gelatinous (no tripe and, again, no jellyfish or sea cucumber). There is also an acceptable color palate. Nothing organic should be too black (no black seaweed or black mushrooms). Nothing made with flour should be too white (steamed white buns have the undone look of the Pillsbury Doughboy; toasty brown is better).

But perhaps most important in American eating is the idea

that what goes into the mouth should never come out. That is, there should be nothing where you have to chew on something and then spit out an inedible part. This means no chicken feet, no fish with bones, no shrimp with shells. Peanuts come shelled, and even watermelon is preferred seedless.

In China, however, the aftermath of most restaurant meals is a pile of bones, shells, and other detritus on the table at every place setting: the casualties of a personal battle between the diner and the items on the plate. In particular, much of the debris is due to the Chinese love of seafood, and the love of that seafood in its God-created entirety. Chinese buy their fish whole. When she was in America, my friend Wei bemoaned the difficulty of getting a whole fish. "They cut it up into these clean little pieces," she said. "If fish doesn't have bones, it's not tasty." And shrimp? My friends like to eat their shrimp with the eyes and tails still on. You can tell if a shrimp was cooked dead or alive by how the tail splits.

The meat nearest the bone is the most tender and most flavorful. So Chinese people like chicken feet and legs (lots of bones) and are confounded by Americans' preference for chicken breast (boneless and bland). Following the law that says something is worth only as much as someone is willing to pay for it, in China, the tender feet and legs are the most expensive part of the chicken; in America, they are almost worthless. This creates arbitrage opportunities to buy low and sell high. A Chinese customs official confided over dinner in Changsha one night that one of the biggest, most frequent illegal exports from the United States to China is chicken feet—along with pigs' ears, cows' stomach, and assorted other animal parts. International rings of organized smugglers bring the goods into Hong Kong, and then over the border on slow boats to China. "They wait until the middle of the night and sneak in," he explained to me. "It goes up during New Year's, when demand is greater."

Officials have intercepted as many as ten ships a night, each carrying tons of animal products. In two separate incidents in 2006, lumbering ships crashed into shore, strewing thousands of pounds of chicken and pork parts along the sandy beaches and rocky headlands.

Why do the Chinese mine so much of an animal's body? The original Chinese food philosophy is one designed for shortage and storage, as the food historian E. N. Anderson noted in *The Food of China*. Despite the opulent images of the country's emperors, much of China was traditionally poor, so everything on an animal was eaten: ears, feet, tongue, intestines, liver. Since refrigeration did not exist for much of Chinese culinary history, food had to be dried or pickled to make it through the winter. With cooking fuel scarce, stir-frying was a popular technique because it used little oil and consumed energy efficiently. Many of General Tso's family still burn dried branches for their woks, a device that, with its rounded bottom, evenly distributes high heat along its surface. In contrast, the Chinese historically had little use for baking, one of the least energy-efficient ways of cooking. American Chinese food developed under few such constraints. Refrigeration aided a fundamental shift in the American diet. Oil, necessary for deep-frying, was readily available. Refined sugar was easily accessible. Meat, much demanded and made plentiful by our agricultural-industrial complex, has become incredibly cheap by historical standards. Americans like chicken, sweetness, and deep-frying. These three desires converged in General Tso's chicken.

I finally found a promising lead in my hunt for the general's chicken in Changsha: Tang Keyuan, the general manager of the Xinchangfu Restaurant, who had been in the hospitality business for over two decades.

I first showed him a picture of corpulent pieces of General

Tso's chicken laid on a bed of broccoli. He squinted. "Is that oxtail?"

No, it's chicken, I said. It's a dish in America called General Tso's chicken—*Zuo Zong ji*—which is exceptionally famous.

His eyes lit up. "Ah! *Zuo Zongtang tuji!*" he said, using the long form of the translation of "General Tso's chicken." My heart skipped a beat. Finally, I'd found someone in Hunan who knew of the dish!

"But that is not how you make it," he sniffed. "It's totally different. The pieces are too big. You have to cut the pieces of chicken smaller.

"My brother knows how to make this dish," he added.

Where had he learned of it?

He thought. The dish had been introduced in Changsha by a Chef Peng in the 1990s. (The 1990s? I thought. That's more than a decade after the dish had already made the greatest-hits list in America.) Chef Peng had featured the dish when he opened up the Peng Yuan restaurant in Changsha's Great Wall Hotel. But the restaurant hadn't lasted.

Why had it closed down? I inquired.

"It didn't keep up with the market." He paused. "He didn't innovate enough."

Was Chef Peng even still alive?

Four men had helped redefine American cuisine in the early 1970s. Three of them were Chinese culinary greats who worked out of New York City; the fourth was Richard Nixon, whose historic state visit to China in 1972, the first since the Communists had taken over the mainland, sparked an instant frenzy for all things Chinese. Suddenly, Americans learned that there was much more to Chinese food than chop suey and chow mein. A Chinese restaurateur who has owned more than twenty restaurants in Louisiana told me, "Lines formed overnight."

The three China chefs had much in common. As youngsters, they were classically trained in kitchens in mainland China. When the Communists took over the mainland, they fled to Taiwan. After a few decades in Taiwan, they ventured to the United States. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, they began opening restaurants in New York City. Chef Peng opened Peng Yuan on the East Side. Chef T. T. Wang opened Hunam and the different Shun Lees. Wen Dah Tai, also known as Uncle Tai, joined forces with David Keh and opened Uncle Tai's Hunan Yuan on Third Avenue and Sixty-second Street. As they innovated and introduced new dishes, the American media fawned over them. But even though Henry Kissinger loved Peng Yuan, Chef Peng closed it down and moved back to Taiwan in the early 1980s. Owning a restaurant in America was too stressful.

Both Uncle Tai and Chef Wang had passed away. A friend helped me locate the number for Peng Yuan restaurant in Taipei. I called and held my breath. The woman who picked up the phone got the manager, Chuck Peng, Chef Peng's son. Yes, he said in mellifluous English, they served General Tso's chicken there. And yes, his father was still alive, though mostly retired. At that moment I had to taste that chicken.

I flew into Taipei on a Friday morning and made my way to the newest Peng Yuan, in the eastern part of the city—a sleek, modern restaurant on the fifth floor of a newly constructed high-rise. Chuck Peng joked, "If General Tso's chicken had been patented, my father would have prospered." He ordered a small plate of General Tso's chicken for me. A sweet-faced waitress arrived carrying the dish.

There it was! General Tso's chicken! In the flesh! Big chunks of chicken drenched in a rich, caramelized brown sauce, with chili peppers seductively tucked in between the pieces. It even had a sprig of decorative broccoli.

I took a breath. At last, the original General Tso's chicken.

Disappointment soon followed. First, the “broccoli” was not broccoli at all, but some kind of flimsy decorative herb that also happened to have florets. It was like looking behind stage scenery and realizing that the castles and trees were all flat.

I picked up a piece of chicken and examined it. The thick sauce had disguised the fact that the chicken still had the skin on it.

Skin?

I took a bite. The dominant flavor was soy sauce. That was followed by chopped garlic and a kick from spicy chili peppers. The chicken was appropriately chewy, but there was no crispy, fried-batter coating.

Where was the sweetness? The tanginess? Instead, it had a strong salty flavor.

It was good. And it was chicken. It just wasn't General Tso's. Or at least not the General Tso's I had come to know and love.

As we left the restaurant, I glanced at the menu. It listed the dish as “Geojeol Tso's chicken.” That may have been the most comforting and familiar part of the meal.

If this was the original General Tso's chicken, where had the sweetness and crispy coating come from?

The answer, perhaps, lay back at home: New York City. Over lunch at Shun Lee, which had survived past the glamorous 1970s Chinese-cuisine era, Michael Tong recalled a little friendly chicken-general rivalry between his partner, Chef Wang, and Chef Peng back when Hunan cuisine was becoming popular.

“I think there was a lot of so-called competition between the chefs,” said Michael.

Before Chef Wang opened Hunan in 1972, he and Michael had visited Hong Kong and Taiwan, where they'd been inspired by the General Tso's chicken dish at Chef Peng's restaurant in Taipei. (When Michael said that, I knew I was getting closer: this

was two decades before Peng had opened his restaurant in the Great Wall Hotel.) In response, Chef Wang had created his own general's chicken dish, but with an American twist, Michael told me. “Once you are serving the American public, you change the texture,” he said. The key, he added, was to crispy-coat things. Chef Wang used that concept on several dishes in that era, including Hunan beef and crispy sea bass. But ultimately it would be the chicken that would really capture America's popular imagination.

Chef Wang needed a name for his chicken dish. “We all wanted to use the name of a renowned general from Hunan in the Qing Dynasty,” said Michael. But one esteemed general was already taken. “The idea is that one guy used Zuo Zongtang. The other wanted to use another general, General Zeng Guofan.” The very same General Zeng who had been our General Tso's mentor.

So in this great man's honor, Chef Wang introduced General Ching's chicken—another Hunan chicken dish in tribute to a Qing Dynasty military leader. (How Zeng, also spelled Tseng, became Ching is another one of those mysteries of Chinese-English transliterations.)

Which means that today, according to Michael Tong, the dish we are eating is actually closer to General Ching's chicken.

So what happened to General Ching? Why was he vanquished by his former protégé and his chicken recipe stolen?

General Ching's chicken did conquer some territory beyond Hunan in the late 1970s, with a few scattered appearances on other restaurant menus, but he never seemed to establish a beachhead. Today his name is rarely mentioned. In contrast, General Tso's ubiquity is likely due to his embrace of modern technology: television. All great military men know that in the modern age, war is fought in the media as well on the battlefields.

In 1974, the local ABC news station in New York did a segment on Chef Peng's restaurant. Reporter Bob Lape, the Eyewit-

ness Gourmet, visited Chef Peng in his kitchen and taped the making of General Tso's chicken. After the segment ran, about fifteen hundred people wrote in and asked for the recipe, Mr. Lape remembered. "It was a serenade to the mouth. It's that kind of dish. It's a one-time instant love affair."

Television is perhaps how General Tso's name achieved recognition, but somewhere along the way General Ching's recipe became more popular. The name of one dish got merged with the recipe of another. Had the pupil conquered the master?

I finally met Chef Peng during an afternoon mah-jongg game in his apartment building in central Taipei. He was a tall, patrician man with white hair carefully combed in neat parallel lines. At eighty-eight, he was hard of hearing, so the conversation mostly consisted of me yelling into his ear in Mandarin. He spoke slowly and methodically, the way some elderly people do, as though operating in slow motion.

He recounted that he had created the original dish in perhaps 1955 or 1956, on the island of Taiwan, after the Nationalists had been ousted by the Communists. He had named it after the general because he had wanted to use a symbol of Hunan; the other great Hunan figure, Mao Zedong, was obviously *persona non grata*.

In carefully enunciated Mandarin, I told him that the dish known as General Tso's chicken was now perhaps the most popular Chinese dish in all of America. In fact, I had also seen his version in Korea, the Philippines, and the Dominican Republic.

His curiosity piqued, Chef Peng asked me if I had tried General Tso's chicken at his restaurant and if the versions in America were similar.

Unsure of how he would react, I hesitated before answering. "The American versions are sweet," I finally said.

"Sweet?" he asked, his eyes growing wide. He waved his hand.

"The dish can't be sweet. This isn't the taste of Hunan cuisine. The taste of Hunan cuisine is not sweet," he said emphatically.

I had brought numerous pictures of General Tso's chicken on my laptop, accumulated over months of travels across the States and beyond. I began to scroll through them, showing the rich range into which General Tso's chicken had evolved.

All of a sudden he pointed his finger at my screen accusingly. I looked. He was indicating the lush bed of green broccoli under the chicken. "This isn't right," he said. He was perplexed and asked, "What is that doing there?" His son and I explained that the single most popular vegetable in American Chinese cuisine is broccoli. He shook his head and said General Tso's chicken should just be served as is. It doesn't need to rest on a bed of broccoli.

He criticized the next picture because the chilies were red instead of black. But that was a minor crime compared to the travesties in some of the other versions he saw. One was clearly made of tasteless cubes of chicken breast, instead of the succulent dark leg meat. He shook his head when he saw the baby corn and carrots in a version from Dover, New Hampshire. He would never use baby corn, he said. He barely recognized the version that uses sesame seeds—one I had tried at a food court in the Minneapolis–St. Paul airport.

"What is that?" he asked when he saw the gooey brown chicken pieces decorated with pale flecks.

I pointed at the sign that read "General Tao's chicken."

He waved his hand again. "That's not right. This isn't authentic."

At the end, he spoke again. "Chinese cuisine took on an American influence in order to make a business out of it," he said. "If you give them real authentic Chinese cuisine, Americans can't accept it." As he left, he told me that this was all *moming-qimiao*. Nonsense.

Then he shuffled away.