



Video Story Transcript

Exotic Food: The Legendary Origin of a Chinese American Dish

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Link to YouTube Video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bLdEQW2md4>

Note: The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, my name is Alton Takiyama-Chung. And this story, some people believe it's true. You choose, you decide for yourself.

Hi, my name is Ming Wah. 1850's or so, when Chinese began creating restaurants, yah, in America, Lo Fan, Westerners, white people thought, oh, Chinese food was exotic. So, I'm going to tell you this story, my restaurant friend told me about a famous Chinese American dish. Maybe true...hmm...maybe not. But, hey, good story.

I guess around 1850 Chinese can come into America in large numbers. See, in China this time is the revolution. Things, the whole country, was in ruins. Taiping Rebellion. People rising up against the government. There's no work. And then in the South-eastern part China, all around Toisan District and 'round Canton. Lots of rain, flooding. Oh, people cannot even grow food. People starving. No chance for good life in China. Then, they hear about Gam Saan, Gold Mountain, America. See, gold was discovered in a place called Sutter's Mill, California, 1848. People from all over the world come to America to get rich. In America, maybe chance for good life.

Whole families get together, pool money, buy one ticket, send one young man to America. One young man sail from Canton, China, cross Pacific Ocean, all the way to San Francisco, California. They hope maybe they find gold or get money. Send money back to China support the family. They think maybe work, three, maybe

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five years and then come back. Some people in California, some people found gold, got rich, went back to China. Most, um, not. 'Cause people, they had to deal with not only different culture but different language. And, also, Chinese had to pay special Foreign Miners Tax, four dollars a month. That's about as much gold as you normally find in a month! Oh! And on top of that, people get beaten. They get, they get robbed. They get, even sometimes, killed! Oh! Some give up, go back China. Me? I stay. I still got family back in China I gotta send money to.

So, in China at this time, also, got, ah, alien land laws in the United States so Chinese cannot own land. Cannot vote. And we cannot live just about any place we like. Could only live in places specially designated, away from the Lo Fan, away from the white people. But wherever they are allowed to live, that becomes Chinatown.

Chinese, they open up stores, they open up restaurants, they open up laundries. Me? I got a job in store. We sell vegetables and fruits from nearby farms. Me, I keep the best vegetables, the best fruit for my restaurant friend. He tell me, "Oh, you guys got bess foo, best fruit, best vegetables!" He takes all that good food. He chop 'em up. He serve to his best Chinese customers entertaining special guests. Lo Fan. They like coming to Chinese restaurant because the food is exotic but for them, all too spicy.

My restaurant friend tell me, one night, almost closing, all these Lo Fan come to his restaurant. They are hungry. They want something to eat. Oh! He's looking around. Almost no food left in the kitchen! All he has is leftover vegetables and leftover meat he wouldn't serve his best customers! Ah! Never mind. Chop them up, put 'em in the wok. Chop up the meat, put 'em inside. Stir 'em up. Make gravy and then no spice. No, nothing. Make 'em bland. Put 'em on a plate. Serve 'em to the Lo Fan. The Lo Fan eat. "Oh! This is good! Oh, OK!"
(Thumbs up.)

My friend look at them and go, "OK!" (Thumbs up.)

He go in the back, talk to all the cooks. The other cooks look at him, go, "OK." (Thumbs up.) They start laughing. I think they're still laughing.

See in the Toisan District, we call this dish tsap seui or leftovers. Now, white people, they cannot pronounce that so they call them Chop Suey.

Ha. My restaurant friend tell me, "You, you, you, come, come, come. You special friend. You, you, you eat free!"

I go, "Haha! OK!" (Thumbs up.) But me, never, ever order Chop Suey.