

## From the Goddess Guanyin to Señor Santo Niño: Chinese and Filipino Restaurant Religion in Canada

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### ABSTRACT

“Restaurant religion” describes the practice whereby Asian migrants throughout the diaspora display religious objects in their places of business. Many first generation migrants to Canada use the restaurant as a site to display their sense of belonging and religious freedom. Among the Chinese, religious displays were hidden from customers until after the repeal of the Chinese Immigration Act in 1947. For Filipinos, by contrast, religious displays from the beginning were out in the open. From the statues of the Goddess Guanyin to those of green and red-robed Señor Santo Niño restaurant religion tells of favoured deities, devotional practices and family connections. Restaurants provide homes away from home, recreating intimate dining spaces, offering familiar tastes and religious cultures. They became the focal points of Chinatowns and Manila towns throughout Canada. And while restaurant religion is only one aspect of a migrant’s spiritual life it signals the hunger for both faith and familial sustenance.

### KEYWORDS

Chinese religion, Filipino religion, devotion, foodways, Catholicism, ancestor worship, migration, Asian Canadian history

### Introduction

Most people who dine out have probably noticed religio-cultural décor common to Asian restaurants throughout Canada.<sup>1</sup> Filipino restaurants typically include a statue of the infant child Jesus, dressed in green brocade robes, who faces paying customers near the cash register. In a Chinese restaurant, Guanyin, the white-robed goddess of compassion, commonly appears among others in a shrine, near the bar, buffet, or shop entrance. Mary and Jesus are widely recognized as belonging to the Christian faith, but most Canadian diners will be unfamiliar with Guanyin. They might wonder, “What is the meaning of religious objects in an eating establishment?” In this article I examine the specific beliefs

1. Religious décor is also common in non-Asian restaurants, as for instance in Mexican eating establishments.

and customs that guide the practice of what I am calling “restaurant religion.” I investigate the related policies and patterns of migration and multiculturalism that have led to restaurant religion’s popularity in Canada and the intertwined significance of family, and religiosity in the Chinese and Filipino restaurant.

Allow me to begin this article with some stories of Chinese and Filipino restaurant religion.<sup>2</sup> These stories are backgrounded by pieces of legislation that limited the migration of Asians to Canada. Chinese and Filipinos came to Canada in waves of migration, the first of which was in the 1880s. Thousands of Chinese arrived as poor migrants contracted to work on the Canadian Pacific Railway. When the railway was completed in 1885, the Dominion of Canada tried to curtail migration by passing the Chinese Immigration Act. This act required Chinese to pay a head tax to enter Canada between 1885 and 1923 and then excluded them almost entirely between 1924 and 1947. The high cost of the early head tax meant that most Chinese men migrated alone, leaving behind wives and families for what was hoped was a temporary period of separation in Canada. However, the exclusionary policy implemented in 1924 meant that many married Chinese men in Canada were confined to life as bachelors, unable to bring over their wives and children to join them even when they had the resources to do so. For the Chinese men who operated restaurants in Canada, religion, relationships, and their businesses were essential to survive in a racist world.<sup>3</sup>

Over more than ten years, I interviewed more than three hundred people and conducted historical and archival research on Chinese Canadian restaurants in Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. Many research participants were born in the 1920s and had grown up with a father who owned and operated prairie Chinese restaurants. Piecing together the various strands of Chinese restaurant owner stories, and the place of altars and related religious practices in them, the narrative goes something like this: Beginning in 1895, Chinese “bachelors” who had laboured in laundries, groceries, and factories paid back the money they had borrowed to migrate and left Chinatowns in coastal British Columbia. They moved east to the Prairies, where they started to open restaurants, often called cafés. Buddhist and Daoist temples didn’t exist beyond Chinatowns, so bachelors prayed to gods and made offerings in private, knowing that it was wise to keep these rituals hidden from their Christian neighbours.

The composite Chinese man in this story has opened the Rex Café. Charlie Wu, who is part of one of the less prominent clans (and not a Lee or Wong) has moved to a rural area of Manitoba where there isn’t a café already. Wu’s Rex

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2. In this article I sample “narratives of everyday religion” to understand religious behaviours outside official religious settings; that is, churches in Canada and temples and home altars in China. (Tatom Ammerman, 2014, 9).
  3. Chinese restaurant owners in Saskatchewan, Ontario, and British Columbia for a period also had to contend with “An Act to Prevent the Employment of Female Labour in Certain Capacities, 1912, 2 Geo. V. c. 17,” which was in effect in various forms until 1969. According to this act, Asian men could not freely hire “white” female employees from 1912 to 1919, and between 1919 and 1969 could not do so without a licence.

Café is located on the main street of a thriving prairie town, a few blocks from the railway station. Chinese Canadian restaurants and businesses historically opened near the railway station and Chinatowns grew up around clusters of Chinese businesses in this area. Occasionally, Chinese bachelors who work in other local businesses gather in the café after hours for a meeting of the Chinese Nationalist League or the Chinese Freemasons, or to play fan tan, pai gow, chuck-a-luck, or mahjong. Regular diners include the local parish priest, pastor, politicians and businessmen. Charlie Wu, who is also the cook, serves standard Canadian fare such as steak, eggs, liver and onions, apple pie and coffee. The décor is plain. There are wooden benches and a lunch counter for people who stop by for a quick meal. The proprietor and several men from his village in China work in the restaurant from dawn to late at night. They sleep upstairs in the small apartment.

Each morning, Charlie Wu rises and comes down the stairs to the kitchen. In Canada, the kitchen is the place where food is stored, cleaned, cut, seasoned, assembled and finally cooked. But in China the kitchen had just been the site of the hearth. Since Charlie comes from Toisan, in China's south where it is very warm, his family's kitchen and hearth is usually located outside. Close to Charlie's family's kitchen is a shrine to the Kitchen God (also known as the Stove God). The Kitchen God in traditional China was a local god strongly connected to the hearth and its fire. A healthy blaze produced a fully cooked and delicious meal that helped children grow, and parents and grandparents remain strong. The hearth and its fire provided the stuff that made families stick together and thrive. Throughout the year, the family made offerings to this deity and he in turn took care of them. Southern Chinese customarily believed that each new year, the Kitchen God traveled to see the Jade Emperor, the ruler of the celestial realm, to report on the family's behavior throughout the year.

In Charlie's kitchen, away from the prying eyes of customers, he has set up his altar with article cutouts and wooden or porcelain statues of the Kitchen God, or plaques with the deity's name and also those of his grandmothers and grandfathers. He might also have three ceramic statues nearby of Fu, Lu, and Shou, the Chinese deities of happiness, prosperity, and longevity. Each morning he pays tribute to these deities and ancestors, bowing deeply and offering them lit incense, and perhaps saying a prayer for continued success in his business. He not only prays to the Kitchen God and other deities to provide for the needs of family. He sends remittances to family in China each month, and also saves money here for them, hoping that one day they will be able to join him. On the fifteenth of each month he makes more robust offerings, including bowls of rice, chicken, pork, and fish, apples and oranges, and cups of tea, set out at the end of the day. The bachelor doesn't let this special meal sit in front of the altar for more than half an hour before he and the other men who work with him eat it. It's one of only a few times in the year when they eat together and enjoy special Chinese pork and other dishes.

Our typical Filipino restaurant story is also framed by migration policies and experiences of racism. Orders in Council banning immigrants of any "Asiatic

race,” including Chinese and Filipinos, were enacted in 1923, amended in 1930 to include all non-“whites” originating from east of Greece, and repealed in 1956. The repeal of Order in Council 2115 in 1956 created a second wave of Filipino migration to Canada. In this period, numerous Filipinos who had initially wanted to settle in the United States ended up remaining in Canada, where they had come to renew their visas. The Temporary Foreign Worker programs beginning in 1973 became popular ways for Canadian companies to initially recruit low-skilled, low-waged seasonal farm and live-in care workers from select and often non-“white” racialized backgrounds. (Sharma 2006). Thus, many early Filipino migrants were women.

In this fictionalized account, pieced together from narratives collected during 90 interviews in fieldwork in more than 80 Filipino eating establishments in British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec between 2014 and 2016, our restaurant owner is female. Clarita Reyes came to Canada alone in the 1970s to work as a nanny. She left behind her two children and her husband in the Philippines and sent remittances to them each month. In her time off from her care-giving domestic role, she took a second job, resulting in long work hours, seven days a week. Occasionally she found time to attend the local Catholic church for mass. Otherwise, she prayed the rosary and kept a small statue of Santo Niño (the Holy Child or Infant Christ, a revered Catholic icon in the Philippines) hidden in the bedroom she shared with her employer’s children.

A handful of casual Filipino restaurants had opened in her large city, serving food cafeteria-style at turo-turo (“point-point”) counters, but the dishes were typically overcooked or sat too long in steam trays. These places remained in business a short time. The nanny felt ashamed of them and their version of Filipino food. Moreover, she loved to cook and her dream was to save enough money to open a restaurant of her own. After a decade apart from her children and husband and many meals eaten alone (she would eat only after the family for whom she worked had eaten), she had saved enough money and sponsored her husband and children to join her. A decade after that, she succeeded in opening a Filipino restaurant with her brother-in-law. She was no longer ashamed of Filipino food. She no longer ate meals alone.

She operates her restaurant in her city’s Manila Town neighbourhood, down the street from the large Catholic church frequented by hundreds of Filipinos each Saturday and Sunday, and in a building with other Filipino businesses. Customers are almost uniformly Catholic and newly arrived Filipinos who are more comfortable speaking Tagalog. Some gather here each week for Filipino breakfast business and political meetings. Diners come for uniquely Filipino dishes that remind them of home, like adobo chicken, crispy pata (pork knuckles), lumpiang shanghai (spring rolls), dinuguan (“chocolate” soup made from pork blood) and sizzling sisig, made from chopped-up parts of a pig’s head.

The restaurant decorations are modest, except for religious ones. The owner has chosen two doll-like Santo Niño figures to display on the counter near the entrance. Santo Niño was hugely popular in the Philippines as Shirley explains: “Santo Niño is a little child. I feel safe with him and he makes me want to be one

of his disciples. When I see his image in the church, he makes me want to cry. I have the feeling that he is always touching me, healing me.”

One is a tall, commanding statue of the child Jesus with long, wavy hair. He is majestically attired in a green robe with gold accents and a fur-trimmed green cloak. On each trip back to the Philippines, the owner has bought new statues and costumes for them. Beside the tall, regal Santo Niño is a smaller statue of the Child, gazing slightly upward with raised, outstretched arms. This is the welcoming Divino Niño, a twentieth-century image originating in Colombia and also popular in the Philippines. He wears a plain burgundy robe and a simpler crown. Together, the two figures represent the layers of Filipino religiosity: the otherworldly piety and the friendliness of the infant Christ.

Beside the cash register is a larger, green-robed Santo Niño of a type commonly called Santo Niño de la Suerte (suerte meaning “luck” in Spanish). This time, the figure’s garments are painted on. Nobody has gone out and purchased clothes to adorn him. He is draped in fake flowers, and strings of conch shells hang from his outstretched right hand. A bag of golden coins peeks out from the flowers. An elaborate green cross is affixed to the back of his head. Santo Niño de la Suerte is similar to depictions of the Holy Child as a benevolent pilgrim or traveller. But he is depicted with a bag of gold coins and is believed to bring wealth. This devotional object is positioned for financial good luck. Here, as Julius Bautista remarks, Santo Niño is “both an object of worship and a comrade in life’s struggle” (2010, 45). In the small food-preparation area, behind the counter, there is another statue, this time of Mother Mary. And behind the cash register, facing the paying customer, is a feng-shui mirror, as well as a Chinese good luck amulet, which hangs from a calendar in a display of *segurista*. Our restaurant owner feels assured in the presence of these devotional and religious objects, which reflect her Filipino and Chinese ancestry. She worshipfully asks the Santo Niños to intercede on her behalf to provide blessings and “prays the novena” in front of Mother Mary each morning and evening. She displays a print of Leonardo da Vinci’s painting *The Last Supper* in the restaurant, just as she did in her dining room back in the Philippines.

Both these composite stories of restaurant owners tell of migrants, one man and one woman, who came to Canada without their families through immigration policies that were intended to attract low-skilled ethnic labourers. Such foreigners were needed to do work that other Canadians didn’t want. Both stories tell of migrants stuck in labouring positions and their struggles to save money, build relationships with others from their community and then open their own food-based businesses.

Canadian legislation shaped migration policies that took away some migrants’ rights to own land, vote, enter licensed professions, and in some places, attend university (Marshall 2014). Legislation also institutionalized racism so that migrants were confined to life as low-waged labourers. Owning a restaurant offered Chinese and Filipinos an opportunity to enter the merchant class. Clarita made the Filipino comfort foods she loved and remembered from her youth, and she shared these with her customers.

Owning a restaurant also offered Clarita and others their own space in which to practise religion. In part, restaurant religion was a response to discriminatory legislation. First generation migrants used the restaurant as a site to display their sense of belonging and religious freedom in Canada. As a nanny, Clarita worked seven days a week and seldom had a day off to attend church. She didn't have a bedroom of her own. She had no place in which express her beliefs. When she opened her restaurant, she decorated it with religious objects that reminded her of home, and that made Filipino customers feel at ease, too. Clarita's religious objects brought blessings to her business, and reminded her to pray and be thankful for any blessings that she had. They reminded her that the Lord was always there as long as she had faith. They reminded her that God had a purpose for her especially in times of troubles, pain and heartache.

Eighty percent of Manitoba's Filipino restaurants had religious decorations. By contrast, only sixty percent of Filipino restaurants in other provinces in this study had decorations. Most Filipino restaurants opened beginning in the 1990s, in an era of multiculturalism and at a time when the Filipino population had reached a large enough size to support the business and share religious sentiments expressed in the restaurant. A Filipino restaurant provided food for mostly Filipinos but the earliest Chinese restaurant customers were seldom Chinese. Chinese restaurants didn't serve Chinese foods. Chinese food, rice, garlic, pork and perhaps tofu, was saved for the owner and others in the Chinese community. Chinese cafes opened before 1947, in an era when the Chinese Immigration Act restricted people's political and economic rights. The act had also led to the loss of other human rights, including the loss of religious freedom.

Missionaries routinely visited Chinese restaurants and laundries. They sympathized with Chinese bachelors who lived under a shadow of racism. They also tried to Christianize them. Many within the Chinese community (or many Chinese men) adopted Christian religious identities in public, but few actually converted to Christianity (Marshall 2011). Appearing to be Christian was a pragmatic tactic. They feared that if they admitted to not being Christian, and to believing in different gods, they would be ostracized. Their businesses would then suffer and they would be returned to the life of labourers. So they observed religious customs in secret. Altars were kept behind closed doors, and in locked closets and garages (Marshall 2011, 2014).

With Chinese Canadian participation in the Second World War and successful lobbying for the repeal of the Chinese Immigration Act in 1947, families began to be reunited between the 1950s to 1970s. With new human rights, Chinese began to explore religion freely. Altars that had been hidden away came into the open and became part of the restaurant décor. Bachelors who had lived their adult lives estranged from wives and children suddenly in old age had a chance at family life. Paralleling that of the Filipino immigrant experience, the solitary meals eaten quickly as a labourer when new to Canada had been replaced by the conviviality that came through being a merchant, owning a restaurant, and returning to the spiritually satisfying food customs shared with family. Restaurants provided homes away from home, recreating intimate din-

ing spaces, offering familiar tastes and religious cultures. They became the focal points of Chinatowns and Manila towns throughout Canada.

Chinese and Filipinos share similar food traditions. “Have you eaten?” is a common greeting in both cultures. Sharing a meal with family is a precious everyday activity. When parents and grandparents die, families continue to cook and share the deceased’s favourite foods with them, now as ancestors, on their birthdays. In the Philippines, more than 1,000 years of trade with China introduced Chinese cooking methods, utensils, and seasonings. Chinese intermarried with Filipinos and over the centuries became the Philippines’ restaurant and bakery proprietors (Besa and Dorotan 2014). Many other religio-cultural beliefs and customs became intertwined. For instance, long Filipino pancit noodles, like long Chinese noodles, are associated with longevity. In each country, round fruits, buns, and dumplings are popular holiday foods and offerings, as their round shape signifies fullness and peace.

In the Philippines and China, it is not unusual to see religious objects in stores, restaurants, or university cafeterias: religion in its myriad forms belongs in everyday life. Throughout the Filipino and Chinese cultural sphere, people adorn themselves with rosaries and religious pendants. As they go through their daily activities in their workplace, they may chant a prayer or turn the beads. Religious objects are part of home routines as well. They fill their homes with statues and photographs of favoured gods and make offerings of incense, flowers, and food at special times.

Efficacy (Mandarin: *ling*) is a dominant idea in Chinese religion. This idea shapes Chinese religious practice and the use of religious objects in restaurant and home altars. As I have explained elsewhere, “efficacy...refers to human efforts to meet practical needs and the responses by deities and ancestors to provide those needs (Marshall 2011, 3). Efficacy is also related to relationships that need to be cultivated with family members who are still living, ancestors who have died, and deities. Efficacy was sustained through religious practices. Chinese Canadians bowed before kitchen and other makeshift altars, offering incense and food and thereby maintaining good relationships with deities and ancestors. Religious practice not only pertained to these vertical relationships. By sending remittances home to family still in China, Chinese Canadian maintained horizontal ties to family.

In the Philippines context, people are motivated by *segurista*. This term, derived from the Spanish word *seguro* (meaning “safe,” “sure,” or “certain”), describes Filipino religious pragmatism. To ensure peace in the home or the success of a business, people display statues of Santo Niño or the Buddha as a form of *segurista*. Filipinos display images of saints and icons in various spaces, including cars, homes, backyards, and businesses. These objects are the focal points of a family’s daily religious life. People are especially drawn to them during periods of crisis—conflict, illness, death. When possible, Filipinos will have these spaces and their statues, figurines, and other religious objects blessed by a priest or pastor.<sup>4</sup>

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4. Blessings are commonly sought by Filipinos. A priest can be hired for a small dona-



Religious objects tell about favoured saints, embodied practices, and also divine and familial relationships that guide one's daily life (Mehta and Belk 2011). But what happens when a migrant isn't home for much of the day? A customary morning offering or prayer to ancestors or saints might be delayed because of the rush to get to work. Her religious habits, or in the language of Pierre Bourdieu, the way she inhabits her religiosity, will have to adjust to the new circumstances of life in Canada (1977, 72). After a long day on the job, getting dinner on the table, doing laundry and other chores might be more urgent than lighting a stick of incense or kneeling in prayer. Raoul adds, "Instead of praying first in the morning, thanking God for the blessing, for the gift of life, when you wake up the morning you have to open your iPhone for your messages here. It's not God first anymore. iPhone first, or iPad first, or Internet first. They have to find a job in the morning to put something on the table at night." For many busy migrants, a quick invocation while walking to or sitting on the bus to work might have to suffice for now. But if a migrant buys a business and becomes an entrepreneur, new opportunities present themselves.

Historically, many Chinese Canadians initially lived above the restaurants they owned. Before their families joined them in Canada and they needed a bigger suite, they had a short walk home. By creating an altar in the restaurant, the migrants were extending the traditional spaces of the household unit, where rituals were historically performed in agrarian life. They were using their place of business, at which they spent almost all their time, to host the spirits (Chau 2014, 495). This space is not a displaced sacred site. It is an extension of home. Kris Duran of Carman, Manitoba's D23: Dim Sum and Cocktails restaurant included his patron saint, Padre Pio, in the restaurant. This was his sacred space as his wife, Anne, was a nurse who worked in the hospital. Every evening Kris was reminded by the kitchen's white board message PRAY, HOPE AND NEVER WORRY. Kris adds: "that's the adage of Padre Pio so whenever we feel low or hopeless we are always reminded that always pray, have hope and never worry." When Anne wasn't working, the family ate meals in the restaurant.

Clusters of deities are fairly common today in Chinese and Filipino restaurants. They are part of the exotic décor, along with circular doors, unfamiliar bamboo plants, photographs, paintings, and murals of beautiful foreign landscapes. The presentation of the deities may be haphazard, with a few lined up alongside each other, or quite ornate and placed deliberately on a table or in an open box serving as an altar, filled with candles, flowers, and incense in front of the statues. The décor tells customers a little about the countries and cultures that the restaurant's owners, servers, and cooks left to come to Canada. And while the décor adds mystery, these religious objects are often confusing to outsiders who aren't familiar with their histories.

Canadians, in the main, don't expect to encounter the images of deities in places where they conduct business. More commonly, they expect to see sacred

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tion. New cars, new homes, backyards, grottos, altars and new businesses—from restaurants to groceries to offices—are blessed. The blessing purifies the space. It is a form of *segurista*.



objects in religious settings like churches, synagogues, or temples, and perhaps dangling from a car's rearview mirror in the church parking lot. The presence of sacred images in "secular space" can be interpreted as a sign that a newcomer is unfamiliar with or uninterested in conforming to Canadian customs.

Religious objects thereby are reminders of the policies and patterns of migration and multiculturalism. They are often part of what are commonly referred to as ethnic restaurants. Ethnic is a term used to describe a group of people who have similar physical traits, or speak similar languages, or eat similar kinds of foods. In Canada, ethnic is a term reserved for newcomers who are socially and economically outside of dominant Euro-Canadian society. As Laurier Turgeon and Madeleine Pastinelli remind us, "Groups in control are never ethnicities" (2002, 252).

The owners and operators of ethnic restaurants understand the distinctive space they occupy in the Canadian cultural mosaic. They have a long history of building relationships and establishing this place with the dominant society. Canada's provincial and federal multiculturalism laws (Bannerji 2000) were intended to integrate newcomers into a mosaic of cultures, not assimilate them into an American-style melting pot (Palmer 1976, 488–528). In this way, different ethnicities formed the colourful tiles of the mosaic. Canada's founding peoples, French and English European Canadians, were seen to be the group that brought the mosaic into existence.

Chinese and Filipinos who came to Canada recognized their position as ethnic minorities. They used tactics to draw on their received identity as ethnics. Décor, including religious objects, within this multicultural environment was sometimes used to play up ethnic stereotypes as a way to build upon known efficacious connections within the dominant society. People were drawn to Chinese restaurants because of the exotic altars and restaurant design. Religious objects were also often put in the restaurant because of a family member (usually a religious wife or grandmother) who insisted they be there. In this way, religious objects commonly reflected important familial relationships.

### Conclusion

Although Filipino and Chinese social histories and immigrant experiences are highly distinct, "restaurant religion" has played an important role in both. Restaurants provided both communities with venues where new migrants could express home-based devotional practices in semi-public settings. In the case of the Chinese community, most patrons of Chinese restaurants were Euro-Canadians, whereas Filipino restaurants largely catered to their own community members, that is, immigrants from the Philippines. In each case, the kitchen was at the heart of the restaurant narrative, providing cultural and religious continuity. Food that nourished and maintained social bonds was also deeply religiously meaningful. When Charlie and Clarita cooked food for their customers they drew on memories of home-cooked meals. Food wasn't just something they threw together: it was made with love, prayers, and offerings. It was made for the family table, and also for the deities and ancestors. The food through which

families bonded in the Philippines and China now helped migrants belong in Canada. Indeed, delicious food was the “stickiness” or glue that helped forge the social bonds among immigrants as they created Chinatowns, Manila towns, migrant churches, home-based devotional practices, and festivals here in Canada. Restaurant religion was only one aspect of a religious life but it was important as it signaled the migrant’s hunger for spiritual and familial sustenance.

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