

“Nothing Remarkable”– Memories of Hop Shing

The decades-old Chinatown restaurant is gone, but not forgotten

By Shihao Feng

Every afternoon at 3 pm, a travel bus pulls up in front of 9 Chatham Square, where a Cantonese dim sum restaurant named “Hop Shing” had been since the 1970s. The bus picks up passengers bound for Atlantic City, where they will gamble for a day or two. For years, before they embarked, many of them would pick up some cheap dim sums from Hop Shing, but no more.

The Covid-19 pandemic has erased this New York tableau. Hop Shing closed in March 2020 following the NEW YORK State-mandated shutdown. While the casino bus is still loading at the same place, Hop Shing has become a crater: its big red sign is gone, leaving a façade with closed glass doors and plain wooden boards. Several discolored “rated on TripAdvisor” stickers remain near the door handles.



Figure 1 Hop Shing restaurant before its closure during the pandemic. Picture courtesy of @Bowery Boogie.

Passers-by may not be able to imagine that for 50 years, this place was a Chinatown “hot spot.”

Hop Shing was among several renowned restaurants in Chinatown that shut down during the pandemic. They complemented one another, but now all of them are gone. Chen, a former employee at Jing Fong, a shuttered dim sum outlet a few blocks away, recalled that “when we were open, many folks would come to Chinatown for a meal at Jing Fong. And when they leave, they might order some take-outs from Hop Shing. The economy in Chinatown was all driven by restaurants like these. The clustering effect was huge.”

Hop Shing Restaurant first filed its Certificate of Incorporation in 1976, according to public records. Ever since, the restaurant operated even as generations of immigrant residents grew up and moved on, as the neighborhood changed, and as the restaurant itself went through a corporate restructuring. Though the last manager of the restaurant, Chen Zhuojin, said he “doesn’t want to talk about the past anymore,” Hop Shing is remembered by the community.

From his residence near the Lower Manhattan end of Brooklyn Bridge, Ken Jacobs used to walk to Chatham Square through Park Row and sit at Hop Shing at a table with a view of the street. For five decades, Hop Shing was a close-by, inexpensive, and easy-to-drop-into place for Jacobs and his wife. He loved the atmosphere at the restaurant, where people usually shared the tables and talked to each other closely. even though he didn’t understand what they were saying, “I’d like to hear people speaking,” said Jacobs.

He used to bring a copy of The New York Times, sit through the breakfast hours, enjoy coffee and dim sums, and sometimes write at the table. Chinatown, he said, “was like a foreign country in the middle of New York.” Jacobs wandered around the city and found Hop Shing in the 1970s without being introduced to it by anybody. Describing himself as “very socially angry and politically critical” at a young age, he liked that Chinatown’s unique atmosphere did not involve his concerns. Hop Shing was a place where he could have company while keeping his own thoughts.

Jacobs was the rare “foreign” customer at Hop Shing during the 1970s. Most of the long-time customers of this restaurant at that time were Chinese immigrants across several generations.

Steve Yang was one of them. he came to the States from Malaysia in the 1980s and first settled down in Chinatown. He did not know anybody in this new country. Yang found an apartment to rent through the newspaper, then looked for jobs by walking into stores and restaurants where people put the recruitment advertisements on the door. He later took a waiter’s job outside Chinatown, but spent his one day-off per week hanging out in Chinatown, with Hop Shing a habitual choice of the restaurant. On a typical weekend morning, Yang would come over with his family by subway and have a relaxing breakfast at the restaurant, followed by some grocery shopping at Chinese supermarkets. “There was always a line if you want to dine in,” Yang said. The dish that he had to order every time was the stir-fried rice noodles with beef. “The smoke with aroma flowing from the kitchen smelled so delicious.”

After Coming from Hong Kong in 1977, Yimu was another frequent guest who witnessed the restaurant's early days. "Hop Shing was the place where I had breakfasts five days a week on the way from New Jersey to meet my clients in Queens," said Yimu. To avoid the heavy traffic at the rush hour, he needed to start his daily commute at six in the morning. But since most clients will only start the business at around eight, Manhattan Chinatown became a transition point, where he could have some breakfast to start his day. Yimu soon became a familiar face at Hop Shing. As one of the few Chinese customers who could speak fluent English back then, some waiters asked his help to read a letter, or solicited advice on some administrative issues. "I did my best to help out. We are outside of our home country, so to help each other is my privilege," said Yimu, "and after ten or twenty years, when the son or daughter of the guy have already grown up and their English is good, they don't need me anymore, but we're still friends."

Long before the era when New York began to embrace diversified Chinese cuisines— from Sichuan hot pot to Xi'an hand-pulled noodles— restaurants in Manhattan Chinatown were mainly run by Chinese immigrants from Guangdong province or Hongkong. Hop Shing was among the four or five oldest Chinese restaurants in Manhattan Chinatown, filling immigrants' cravings for hometown food. While Hop Shing offered its most remarkable dim sums for breakfast, nearby restaurants were famous for proper Cantonese dinner dishes or midnight snacks. These several Chinese restaurants provided the community with an ebullient daily life cycle in comfort food.

Compared to many other dim sum restaurants in Chinatown, former customers say, the portions at Hop Shing were larger and cheaper. Yimu's favorite dish Lo Mai Gai, the sticky rice and chicken filling in a wrap of lotus leaf, rose from \$2.25 to \$4.75, "but this change is over 30-40 years, so I can't complain," said Yimu. The signature dish of Hop Shing, roasted Char Siu bao (baked buns with pork) used to be around 80 cents and later rose to around \$1.10 each just before Hop Shing closed. A waitress who would not be identified worked at Hop Shing for about ten years from 2000 to 2010, and she said that the restaurant gave off a nostalgic 1980s vibe. "It's an old and not very fancy restaurant," she said, "we had six round tables, seven small square tables, and a dozen of old-style dim sum dishes that remained on the menu for many years."

At Hop Shing, ten years is not a very long term for chefs or waiters, as many workers remained with the restaurant for decades. This stability could explain a trait about Hop Shing that was mentioned by a number of customers — the flavor of dim sums surprisingly stayed the same through many years. Deng Weixiong, a former worker at Hop Shing said that's because Hop Shing kept its "original cast of chefs" for long periods. In recent years, "even the youngest dim sum chef at Hop Shing was around 60 years old and has been working there for decades," Deng said.

Ken Li, manager of Dim Sum Go Go, an operating contemporary dim sum restaurant located across the Chatham Square from Hop Shing, said that the average age of customers at Hop Shing could be over 60 years old, which reflects the profile of the surrounding residents. The scene of the restaurant seemed to be timelessly constant: "At Hop Shing, you will see the same person at the same place for five days a week with the same cup of tea and the same newspaper. It's like a tea house for elderly people."

“Everyone who lives in Chinatown must have tried their food,” said Li.

According to public records, the founding chairman of Hop Shing, C.Y. TSANG, ran the restaurant for about 40 years, following its founding in 1976. In 2010, the restaurant restructured the shareholders’ board and was passed on to a new chief, Cheuck Den Chan, who ran the restaurant until the pandemic. Deng Weixiong, the former worker, came to New York from Tai Shan, Guangdong in 2012 to unite with families who co-managed Hop Shing and stayed at the restaurant until 2020. The most memorable ambiance at Hop Ching, in Deng’s words, was “humane.” “I was happy to work in the relaxing and chill atmosphere at Hop Shing,” said Deng. It was never an issue if waiters would naturally chat with customers for a while. Another waitress at Hop Shing, remembered Hop Shing’s generous treatment of employees as well, “we can have dim sum as staff lunches or dinners. You can eat whatever you like. The boss treated everyone equally.”

“Hop” in Chinese cooperation, and “Shing” means honesty. Some former employees and customers say the name of the restaurant crystallizes the spirit of the restaurant—it brought the neighborhood together and its owners ran the business with integrity. “Hop Shing is a place that carried many memories. This place has a family-like bond.” In Deng’s memories, many guests who came to the restaurant at a young age grew up with it until they brought their own families back to the restaurant again. “Guests are also like family.”

The partner shareholders shifted from one cast to another, but they’re all somehow “related as relatives or friends.” Like Deng, most shareholders and more than half of the workers came from Tai Shan, the famous emigrant town in Guangdong, China which contributed to [nearly half of Americans of Chinese descent](#). A local saying goes like “there’re two Taishans, one in China, and the other one overseas,” a truism about the Chinese diaspora that dates to the late 19th century.

The affinity among workers may have created the family-oriented atmosphere at Hop Shing, but in Yimu’s opinion, it could also be one of the reasons for Hop Shing’s decline starting from the 2010s. “I think ever since 2010, the service is very different, let’s put it this way.” Yimu believes that after a restructuring of the board, the restaurant was not providing a “pro service” like it used to. “Sometimes you get in and sit down. Five minutes pass and nobody even cares about you.” Yimu started dropping by Hop Shing less frequently. “It was just not my type of restaurant for formal occasions.”

In February 2018, a driver tried to parallel park in Chatham Square but accidentally stepped on the gas pedal. The jeep jumped on the curb and then crashed inside Hop Shing. Hearing a huge clash, Deng rushed out to find the vehicle had smashed the restaurant’s façade and shattered its plate glass window. As the gas pipeline inside the restaurant started to spurt open flame, guests were urgently evacuated. “It was very lucky that almost no one was injured on that busy street,” said Deng. After the accident, Hop Shing closed for about three months for renovation to meet the fire safety standards.

Then the pandemic hit. Restaurants in Chinatown started to close down one after another. Hop Shing persisted until the “last moment” in March 2020 when the government finally commanded that all restaurants shut. “Hop Shing tried to do deliveries for less than two weeks and then totally shut down,” Deng said. Before the official closure of the restaurant, the shareholders summoned all the staff for the last gathering. The board then explained to waiters, chefs and staff who had been working at Hop Shing for years or decades that they had to close.

“The boss didn’t want the staff to go, and many staff didn’t want to give Hop Shing up as well,” Deng said, “but in general, people understood with sympathy that there wasn’t a better solution to it.”

The pandemic served as a catalyst for the dissolution of Hop Shing. With several things adding up, Deng said, the board thought it’s the time to close the restaurant. First off, the elderly board didn’t want to run the business amidst the risks of a pandemic, both health and business-wise. Meanwhile, the new generation of the American-born decedents of the owners didn’t want to take on the arduous restaurant business. “Plus the lease happened to be expiring at that time,” said Deng, and “the shareholders finally decided together to shut down Hop Shing.”

Many notable Chinatown restaurants shut down permanently for similar reasons during the pandemic. One of them was Jing Fong. Opened as early as 1978, Jing Fong was famous for its iconic dining room with the capacity to serve 200 people, but it ended up moving out of Chinatown in 2021 because the landlord wanted a higher lease. Former workers of Jing Fong are now [protesting against the landlord Jonathan Chu](#), who is also the biggest in Chinatown, arguing that the landlord is not defending the community benefit but instead soliciting real estate speculators to raise the land value.

Vincent Cao, who used to work in another Dim Sum restaurant in Chinatown that closed in 2008 during a time of rising rents, became a social worker at the Chinese Staff and Workers' Association and organized protests for restaurant workers. Cao thinks that if old restaurants are replaced by some non-Chinatown fine dining restaurants, the surrounding shops will turn to places that cater to the gentrified customers. The clustering, community-building effect brought by affordable local restaurants won’t exist any longer. And this will lead to the deterioration of the neighborhood, he fears.

“Chinatown won’t be destroyed overnight, but you see that it’s changing slowly. We’re afraid one day it’s gonna become like Chinatowns in Boston or D.C., where you don’t see Chinese immigrants at all,” said Cao.

“The core heritage of the community is people.” Cao said. “The gentrified community will have nothing to do with the original residents there.”

When Yimu heard that Hop Shing closed amid the pandemic, he said it took a while for him to realize that “they’re not coming back anymore.” he said, “It’s sad.”

Some former workers stayed in Chinatown and found work at other restaurants after the pandemic eased, while others decided not to go back to restaurant jobs. “Coronavirus shows me no future,” one former waitress said. “The waiter’s job is dangerous, given that you will contact too many people.”

On a sunny November afternoon in 2021, a group of tourists—a sign of recovery in the neighborhood— swarmed across Chatham Square while the tour guide passionately talked about food in Chinatown. Some passers-by stood in front of Hop Shing’s empty storefront and waited around. One photographer silently took pictures of the restaurant’s façade, where the wooden boards and the fire escape staircase formed random geometrical patterns, looking old-fashioned and decayed.

“Oh, I didn’t know it was a restaurant,” the photographer said, “I just felt that this is beautiful.”