

Kung Pao Turkey

by Marko Fong

It was my grandmother's idea of a joke, but I never realized she was joking when she repeated it every Thanksgiving. She would sit at the head table just before Uncle Leon would carve the bird and ask, "It's an American holiday. Shouldn't we be roasting an eagle and not a turkey?"

My grandfather would respond by telling us, "In China, we have Thanksgiving too, but they roast a dragon. It tastes better."

When I was seven, I told my grandmother, "I don't think they have turkeys in Turkey, Yin Yin."

She feigned astonishment, "So what do they eat for Thanksgiving there?"

"I don't think they have Thanksgiving either."

Somehow, this turned into the youngest grandchild explaining about Pilgrims, Squanto, blunderbusses, and Plymouth Rock. After the family applauded, my grandmother would reply, "Of course they were starving, why else would you eat something so dry and tasteless."

Uncle Nelson would then remind everyone that the Pequots welcomed the British when they arrived in the east, but when we Chinese came across the Pacific the Americans didn't return the favor. Every year, Uncle George would tell him, "Come on Nelson, if you think this country's so bad, put your money where your mouth is and go back and live in Red China."

"They had the Pequots to dinner then they wiped them out. You can look it up."

"Nelson, do you have to bring this up now. We're here to celebrate," Aunt Marilyn would step in while the other adults clucked agreement.

"Celebrate what?"

"This country's been good to us, it has its faults, but we have a hundred and seventy five people here and more than enough to eat

for all of them. We didn't have that in China. Can you pass the bok choy please?"

My grandparents never actually ate turkey or mashed potatoes. Usually, they took a small slice of dark meat and mixed it with rice and gravy for appearance sake, but they didn't even eat that. The women of the family roasted the thirty-one pound turkey every year to be little more than a centerpiece for the table. Instead, there would be a Chinese meal served alongside the traditional Thanksgiving fare.

By Saturday, the turkey would get recycled as jook, a rice porridge that traditionally was made with chicken. That was the only form in which my grandparents ate turkey. One year we dyed the mashed potatoes with food coloring and turned it into a kind of edible play-dough until Uncle Nelson's wife Priscilla caught us then started the custom of taking the family's American leftovers to the local soup kitchen.

For many years as well, the non-family guests outnumbered the actual family at Thanksgiving. There would be five or six tables set up in the living room and TV room on folding card tables for an interchangeable array of bachelor cousins and uncles who had no family of their own. According to my grandfather, Chinese Thanksgiving was a time when no one should be alone unless they wanted to be.

The bachelors would appear at the door with items like grease stained boxes of char sui bow and fried rice to add to the feast. Some would bring unopened cans of cranberry jelly (the one Thanksgiving item that matched Chinese taste), an occasional can of creamed corn, or already opened bottles of Old Crow and gin that smelled like rubbing alcohol. That too was their understanding of the custom and it wasn't always clear that they could afford to bring what they brought. My grandmother made a point in the kitchen of making sure that the bachelor guests left with more of the Chinese leftovers than whatever they had shared at the dinner.

We avoided the old men. For one, they liked to rub our heads when we walked by as if they never saw children and worse they

chewed with their mouths open and burped at the table. Unlike American households, we never prayed at Thanksgiving. We weren't Christian.

After my grandmother died, the Thanksgiving gatherings got smaller. One year, there was only a single table of old bachelors then they disappeared entirely. After the Cultural Revolution, Uncle Nelson stopped doing his People's History version of Thanksgiving and he began talking about buying computer stock, an interest he now shared with Uncle George. Uncle Nelson died the year of the Tienanmen Massacre.

For years, we kept gathering at my grandfather's house, but by then most of the families had a Thanksgiving of their own at their own homes away from Paperson. The one at my grandfather's house was strictly for my grandfather. The bok choy and the plates of Chinese spareribs fell out of the feast as well until the only Chinese item on the table was a big pot of white rice next to the mashed potatoes, stuffing, and gravy. Towards the end, my aunts stopped making turkey jook. It seemed that we grandchildren were eating all the turkey.

This year, we were saying grace at our own Thanksgiving when my daughter Tally asked why.

"It was the custom in your mom's family. We like carrying it on even though we don't go to church."

"Didn't they have Thanksgiving customs in your family too?"

"Well, a long time ago my grandparents would roast a turkey but not eat any of it."

"Who wouldn't eat turkey?"

"My grandfather thought it was too bland."

"That's so weird."

"They did the turkey to be more American."

"Then why didn't he eat it too?"

"Well, he used to tell us, You are what you eat."

I look around our Thanksgiving of just five close family members at a single table, sigh, then turn to Tally and say, "Does it ever occur

to you that if Thanksgiving is an American holiday we should be eating an eagle instead of a turkey?"

If only someone at the table would laugh.

