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Email Interview with Professor Jianhua Bai and his wife, owner of Hunan Gardens, Jean Wang

Jianhua Bai

Jean Wang

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Event: Email interview with Professor Jianhua Bai and his wife, owner of Hunan Gardens, Jean Wang.

Place: Over the internet, because of language barriers.

SS: When did you move to Knox County? What brought you here? Where did you come here from?

JB and JW: 1991, when Bai got his job from Kenyon's MLL dept. We came from northern part of China, one hour south of Beijing, the capital of China. We spent 8 years at Pittsburgh, PA where Bai did his graduate studies

SS: What were the most difficult aspects of coming into such a rural community? What are the most difficult aspects involving food and a rural community?

JB and JW: Away from a Chinese community and away from relatives and friends. It is difficult to have authentic Chinese food, which is one of the reasons Wang opened her restaurant in town.

SS: When you hear the phrase 'Ritual Foods', what comes to mind?

JB and JW: Several things: one is what we eat for certain holidays. For instance people eat dumplings for the New year and Zongzi for Duan-Wu festival and etc. Another thing that comes to mind is that we worship our ancestors with the best food we have or their favorite food when they were alive.

SS: Any stories, images, smells, sounds? Why is this type of food important? How do you make this type of food?

JB and JW: Many. Let me tell you two of them. Zongzi, served during Duan-Wu festival, is sweet rice and other fillings wrapped with reed leaves. The story says that this sort of food was thrown into the river to save Qu Yuan's body from being eaten by the fish and etc. Qu Yuan (340-278 bc), greatest poet and politician, was greatly admired not only for his contribution to lit. but also his passion and love of his people and the country. He lost confidence in the corrupted government and later drowned himself. People eat Zongzi as a way of remembering this great figure.

Another story is about the Chinese dumplings, which I am sure you have tried yourself. Fillings of meat and vegetable wrapped with dough and then boiled or fried. This food resembles the gold and silver pieces (called Yuanbao in Chinese) used in the old days of China. The story goes like this: the emperor was going around the country and, everywhere he went, people show their respect by giving him good stuff such as the local special stuff or money (gold and silver pieces). But one

poor woman didn't have anything, but she wanted (or was forced to) to give something to the emperor, so she made dumplings in the form of gold pieces and the emperor liked it and was very moved. Thus the food became one of the popular festive foods.

SS: Is it difficult to obtain the ingredients here in Knox County? If so, where do you get them?

JB and JW: We get all the ingredients from the Chinese grocery stores in Columbus; there is nothing available from Knox County although people can get soy-sauce and the famous Chinese beer (tsing tao) from Kroger's.

SS: Mrs. Wang, Why did you decided to operate Hunan? Did you start Hunan or buy it from someone else? Where do you get the recipes from? Is it difficult obtaining foods for your restaurant in Knox County? How has your restaurant become part of the Knox County community? Has it become a place where Asian families come to meet other Asian families?

JB and JW: As mentioned above, one of the reasons was that there was no authentic Chinese food and another reason was that Wang could not get a job nearby. Wang and her friends started the restaurant from scratch. When the shopping plaza was being built Wang contacted the developer and secured a space for the restaurant and then contacted her friends who ran restaurants before and who have their own recipes. All the food and ingredients were provided by nearby merchants, vegetables from Lanning's of Mt Vernon, meat and rice and etc from Gordon food of Mansfield and Columbus and lots of Chinese stuff from Columbus. Hunan has become part of the Knox County community by providing good food and by supporting some of the local community activities. a place for Asian families? There are not many Asian families.

Hope this helps and please let use know if you have any other questions.

Prof. Bai