

SPAGHETTI LO MEIN
(working title)
A One-Act Play in Three Parts
By Elizabeth Ung
v. 1.2 (12/3/2021)

(c)ELIZABETHUNG

CHARACTERS---

JINNY

mid-20's, Chinese American, female or femme, she/her

GRANDMA SIU (MEI LIN)

50's-60's, Chinese American, female or femme, she/her

ZHAO JUN/MYSTERIOUS CUSTOMER/MYSTERIOUS STRANGER/LINDA

late 30's-40's, Chinese American female or non-binary, she/her/he/him/they/them

WHITE MAN/EMILY/PAMELA

late 20's-40's, White, female or non-binary, she/her/he/him

(Home Video Sequence Only)

YOUNG JINNY

seven-years-old, Chinese American, female or femme, she/her

ELDERLY ZHAO JUN

50's-60's, Chinese American, male or masc, he/him/his

Elderly ZHAO JUN and young seven-year-old JINNY are portrayed by separate actors in a short-filmed sequence, if possible. Alternatively, they may just be played by JINNY and ZHAO JUN's stage actors.

All Chinese American characters must be portrayed by Asian or Asian American female, femme, or non-binary actors. Whitewashing is prohibited.

SETTING---

The past: how we want to remember. A stylized flashback.

The future: how we fear to remember. A hipster, gentrified restaurant.

The present: how to remember. The Jun-porium Chinese Restaurant at the heart of Chinatown.

HISTORICAL REFERENCES---

The Kitchen God

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kitchen_God

MSG Craze and Hoax

<https://news.colgate.edu/magazine/2019/02/06/the-strange-case-of-dr-ho-man-kwok/>

THE PAST
How We Want to Remember

(GRANDMA SIU sits at the kitchen table with a twelve-year-old JINNY. They are rolling up meat dumplings of some kind.)

GRANDMA SIU

A long time ago... before our people were accepted into society. Before the grand dynasties of street-corner Chinese takeout and Panda Express. Before air fryers were a symbol of luxury, in a time when we used one knife to cut and chop and risked cross-contamination.

JINNY

Ew.

GRANDMA SIU

Shh. Imagine, it's the Year of the Metal Rat. Your Grandma was at the age of twenty-something. On a peculiar street at a peculiar vendor in Chinatown, there was a boy your Grandma pined for.

JINNY

Ew.

GRANDMA SIU

Shh. That boy was named Zhao Jun.

(ZHAO JUN appears in a stylized way---perhaps in the spirit of Beijing Opera but not as extravagant. Everything is stylized for this flashback.)

GRANDMA SIU gives a wave at ZHAO JUN. ZHAO JUN winks back at her and he summons many kitchen utensils.)

GRANDMA SIU (cont'd.)

Zhao Jun came from a proud lineage of chefs. His father, grandfather, and forefathers all served under the Emperor as the Royal Cook.

JINNY

Didn't China stop having Emperors around World War II---

GRANDMA SIU

Shh! *Aiyaa*. You and your technicalities.

ZHAO JUN

Ahem.

(ZHAO JUN starts frying up various foods.)

Spaghetti Lo Mein – Excerpt – by Elizabeth Ung

GRANDMA SIU

Zhao Jun had no less talent than his ancestors. He sold his famous dumplings as a street vendor. Then, went on to create hundreds of noodle dishes in Shanghai. Peking duck? He cooked and sold them by the dozens. Oh, you want the most delicious, succulent roast pig? Not a problem for Zhao Jun. He did it all.

(ZHAO JUN opens up his restaurant.)

GRANDMA SIU (cont'd.)

By some stroke of fate, Zhao Jun landed in America where he opened up his restaurant: *THE JUN-PORIUM*.

(ZHAO JUN reveals THE JUN-PORIUM logo with much splendor.)

JINNY

Jun-porium?

GRANDMA SIU

The Jun-porium.

JINNY

Is that really a good name?

(GRANDMA SIU slaps JINNY's back and continues the story.)

WHITE MAN enters, wearing over-the-top glasses and mustache.)

GRANDMA SIU

Zhao Jun served over thousands of customers every month. He gained the attention of food junkies, food critics, and regular people. Myself included. Every day we flocked to his restaurant, which was at the heart of Chinatown. It was rumored even the President and First Lady visited this authentic Chinese cuisine.

JINNY

Which President?

GRANDMA SIU

Eh, the non-racist one.

JINNY

...?

GRANDMA SIU

Aiyaa! Will you please let me tell the story?

(JINNY puts her hands up "Okay, okay. Fine, I'll stop." ZHAO JUN notices the WHITE MAN.)

WHITE MAN

Howdy, neighbor!

ZHAO JUN

Uh, yeah. Hi. Need a table?

WHITE MAN

Sure. Just for one. Just me. I am a professor just down the road at "Generic University" and I have a big name in the science world. I have a wife and three kids---all boys, by the way. They will grow up to be a teacher, a football player, or a car salesman. Or all three. I got this job through my daddy's money and currently I am paid more than what I work for because of nepotism.

ZHAO JUN

Okaaay. What would you like, sir?

WHITE MAN

What is your recommendation?

ZHAO JUN

Oh, just about anything. You see, I've just expanded my menu to include the entire Asian diaspora. Singaporean noodles, Sichuan style pork, fresh kimchi, chicken adobo, butterfly wontons---

WHITE MAN

I'll have a burger.

ZHAO JUN

We don't serve that.

WHITE MAN

Oh.

Well, what's the closest thing to a burger?

ZHAO JUN

(sighs) We got some sweet and sour pork.

WHITE MAN

PERFECT THANK YOU

(ZHAO JUN whips up the pork dish and serves it to WHITE MAN.)

GRANDMA SIU

Spaghetti Lo Mein – Excerpt – by Elizabeth Ung

Zhao Jun gave the mysterious man a simple but tasty dish.

(WHITE MAN takes a bite of the dish.)

WHITE MAN

Oh...my...baby-Jesus-on-a-pickle...

ZHAO JUN

Yes?

WHITE MAN

This...is...heavenly!

(WHITE MAN scarfs down the rest of the dish and orders more from ZHAO JUN.)

GRANDMA SIU

You see, Zhao Jun and his family were not ordinary chefs. They all had the touch of the Kitchen God.

JINNY

The Kitchen God?

GRANDMA SIU

That's right. That was the secret to Zhao Jun's talent. Divine intervention.

JINNY

...not hard work and effort?

GRANDMA SIU

No, no. Did your Mom tell you that?

JINNY

Well...never mind. Continue, Grandma.

GRANDMA SIU

As the mysterious stranger ordered more dishes, Zhao Jun worked tirelessly. The regular customer at The Jun-porium didn't have the money like this customer did. The man kept eating and eating, allured by the notes of complex flavor profiles, textures, and spices from each dish Zhao Jun created. It was like a bunch of church ladies going at it at a Sunday buffet.

(ZHAO JUN serves WHITE MAN one last dish---a magnificent Peking Duck. WHITE MAN's eyes pop out of his skull.)

WHITE MAN

Spaghetti Lo Mein – Excerpt – by Elizabeth Ung

(wheezes)

ZHAO JUN

I hate to break it to you, sir, but my restaurant is about to close. And I have a hot date tonight.

(*ZHAO JUN winks at GRANDMA SIU.*)

ZHAO JUN (cont'd.)

Would you like to have the check now---

(*WHITE MAN holds ZHAO JUN's hand in agony.*)

ZHAO JUN (cont'd.)

Are you okay? You're sweating bullets!

WHITE MAN

Wha-wha-wha-wha---

(*WHITE MAN wheezes some more. ZHAO JUN gives him a cup of tea.*)

WHITE MAN (cont'd.)

Oooooooohhhhhh....

ZHAO JUN

Drink it, it'll cleanse your throat.

(*WHITE MAN gulps down the tea.*)

WHITE MAN

What. Is. In. This.

ZHAO JUN

Ah, I can't say. Or rather, I can't tell you. A family secret recipe.

(*ZHAO JUN holds up his hands and heavenly music quickly plays.*)

WHITE MAN

Oh, c'mon friend. (*hacks*) I'm your most valued customer.

(*WHITE MAN hands over several fat stacks of bills. ZHAO JUN suspiciously looks at them.*)

ZHAO JUN

You certainly have the means to be.

WHITE MAN

Not even just one nugget of information?

ZHAO JUN

My lips are sealed.

WHITE MAN

Pwetty pwease with a chewwy on twop?

ZHAO JUN

Sorry.

(under breath) Gwáilóu.

WHITE MAN

(beat) What did you just say?

ZHAO JUN

Oh, uh. Friend. It means friend. Yeah.

JINNY

Wait, Grandma, doesn't that mean "white trash---"

GRANDMA SIU

And so, language barriers aside, the mysterious customer was so determined to know what had made his pulse race, his armpits sweaty, his digestion out of whack, his stomach bloated, his blood sugar high.

WHITE MAN

Well, can you at least tell me where the bathrooms are?

ZHAO JUN

There's a pathway through the kitchen. Appreciate the tip, man.

(A la mustachioed villain, WHITE MAN "sneaks" around the restaurant, even with ZHAO JUN noticing his act. ZHAO JUN briefly exits and WHITE MAN reaches the kitchen.)

JINNY

But wait, that would mean he would've seen Zhao Jun's secret!

GRANDMA SIU

Not quite, little Jinny. Zhao Jun's secret wasn't something that could be "discovered" by the white man. Our recipes, our food, our culture has always been here as long as Chinese history had documented. But what that customer saw wasn't the secret. It was the fire he needed to burn down Zhao Jun's cultivated garden.

(WHITE MAN inspects the food, smelling, tasting, and overreacting. He takes out a notepad and pen, scribbling down his "findings.")

WHITE MAN

"Based on my thorough research into these Chinamen's culture, I cannot stress enough to my fellow decent people that any dish of the Oriental cuisine must be *avoided*. The minute my tongue touched the sweltering chicken, I could sense that something was not right. I felt the sweat run down my temples, my teeth were chattering, and the fairness of my pale skin turned tomato red. At first, I thought it could've been an allergic reaction. But I know it wasn't. I'm perfectly healthy. That's why I smoke tobacco and take a shot of whiskey at the end of each workday. And I eat all the canned food I want! This concoction of spices, broths, and heat cannot be merely "cultural" or "authentic." In fact, as the Peking duck made its way down my esophagus, it reminded me of a dangerous substance I studied during my lab experiments.

M. S. G."

(Thunderclaps and lightning appear. ZHAO JUN returns on stage, trying to look for WHITE MAN.)

JINNY

MSG?

(More thunderclaps.)

GRANDMA SIU

A terrible psychological weapon invented by the Americans to bring down the Asian food empire. Once that "customer" published an article condemning The Jun-porium, Zhao Jun served less and less customers. Even fellow Chinese American citizens were avoiding the restaurant to save face. It was that bad of a "review," if you could even call it that! Hmph.

ZHAO JUN

This is the way I've always cooked it! My father, my grandfather---*our* forefathers served these dishes to the Emperor and his family!

WHITE MAN

Well, last time I heard, there are no more Emperors in China, bro.

(WHITE MAN laughs triumphantly and walks away. ZHAO JUN continues to cook.)

JINNY

That's so terrible!

GRANDMA SIU

Zhao Jun lost his heart. His family suffered for it, too. Not even the divine intervention of the Kitchen God could repair the damage that was done upon the restaurant.

Spaghetti Lo Mein – Excerpt – by Elizabeth Ung

JINNY

Ugh. Some God we worship.

GRANDMA SIU

Aiyaa. You must have faith and trust in what the Gods do. Particularly, the Kitchen God.

JINNY

How will the Kitchen God save Zhao Jun?!

GRANDMA SIU

Patience.

Customers and diners didn't come to The Jun-porium, so The Jun-porium was forced to close down. Zhao Jun had no other talents, skills to support he and his family.

(GRANDMA SIU looks at ZHAO JUN with worry and love. ZHAO JUN puts his hands on GRANDMA SIU's shoulders, preparing to let go of the things he loves.)

ZHAO JUN

I'm sorry we couldn't keep our home. The landlord's payment was due three months ago. We are being evicted. I'm so sorry, my love. I have saved enough money to one day see my father in China, though I hear there is another war happening there, too. Use the money to stay with your family in Hong Kong. Hopefully, that will be the start of your new life.

GRANDMA SIU

Tch, *aiyaa.* Why are you so sad??? Stop being mopey and get back to the story!

JINNY

Grandma?

GRANDMA SIU

Zhao Jun may have sent away his family for a "better life," but the truth of the matter is, there is no "better life" anywhere else. Jinny, it's how *you* make it better that makes it a better life. Remember that.

JINNY

...Okay.

GRANDMA SIU

Zhao Jun was then approached by the very bastard who almost ended his career.

JINNY

(gasp) Grandma said the "b-word..."

(WHITE MAN enters. His mustache is bigger, his hat is bigger, his shoes are bigger, his ego is bigger.)

Spaghetti Lo Mein – Excerpt – by Elizabeth Ung

WHITE MAN

Ah! If it isn't Choi.

ZHAO JUN

It's Zhao. Good to see you, *gwáilóu*.

WHITE MAN

Ah, you know, I thought being brutally honest would make you *angry* at me. I'm still so glad you can call me "friend" after all these years because I actually have a proposition. I want to create a restaurant. Right here in the heart of Chinatown. Now, you're wondering why should a proper gent like me establish a restaurant in an immigrant community? Well, I should have you know my great-great-great-great grandfather was an Irish immigrant. So, I'm technically an immigrant.

ZHAO JUN

Your point.

WHITE MAN

Ah, yes. You see, I am planning to open up an *Italian* joint around these parts.

ZHAO JUN

You said you were Irish.

WHITE MAN

I am. And I'm Italian. And French. And British.

ZHAO JUN

Mayonnaise. Got it.

WHITE MAN

Yes, our menu will have mayonnaise if you want it! Now, there's just one problem---I have no space for this pet project of mine. And I hear there's a particular restaurant that's about to close down next week. Ah, but no worries, friend. I will have a job for you. *In the back*.

ZHAO JUN

Pardon?

WHITE MAN

You'll be a line cook. Don't worry, I'm sure you'll get the hang of it. I've already hired an authentic Italian chef. I think he goes by the name Giuseppe Mario. So *authentic*. In any case, he's in your kitchen now cooking up his specialty.

ZHAO JUN

Sorry what?

WHITE MAN

Now be a doll and bring out his dish. I have some taste-testing to do.

ZHAO JUN

He has no right to enter my kitchen when it's still my restaurant that I built from scratch---

WHITE MAN

Or I could just make you dishwasher. Your choice, friend.

(*ZHAO JUN exits.*)

JINNY

Oh no, Grandma! What's gonna happen to The Jun-porium?

GRANDMA SIU

Patience, Jinny. Like I said.

(*ZHAO JUN brings out a plate of spaghetti.*)

WHITE MAN

Ah. Spaghetti. How unexpected of Mario. You see, my friend. This is *real* cooking with ingredients that are *not* MSG'd and slathered in other foreign substances.

(*WHITE MAN scarfs down the spaghetti.*)

WHITE MAN (cont'd.)

Oh...my...baby-Jesus-on-a-pickle! Tell Mario to bring out another order!

ZHAO JUN

(*smirks*) Yes, sir.

(*ZHAO JUN brings out more plates of spaghetti. The plates stack high.*)

GRANDMA SIU

The customer would not stop eating the spaghetti! Every bite was a taste of heaven.

JINNY

Aww, now the restaurant really is going to be replaced.

GRANDMA SIU

But soon, the customer seemed to relive a very familiar food experience.

(*WHITE MAN's eyes pop out of his skull.*)

WHITE MAN

Wha-wha-wha-wha---

Spaghetti Lo Mein – Excerpt – by Elizabeth Ung

ZHAO JUN

Is anything the matter, sir?

WHITE MAN

My pulse is...racing! Oh! Armpits sweaty. Ooooh boy, I think I need to use the bathroom---
No! This is a brand-new suit tailored to my waist!

(*WHITE MAN puts a finger on his pulse.*)

WHITE MAN (cont'd.)

What's happening to me??!!

ZHAO JUN

Perhaps you, uh, ate too much.

WHITE MAN

No! Well, yes. Maybe! But this is too *good* to make me bloated. Bring out Giuseppe Mario!

(*ZHAO JUN turns around, bringing out a fake mustache and European chef out.*)

ZHAO JUN

(in a bad, fake Italian accent) Si, signore?

WHITE MAN

You??!!

ZHAO JUN

You just admitted you ate too much of my food.

WHITE MAN

Your food?

ZHAO JUN

You know, spaghetti is *really* similar to lo mein. Had to find a good substitute for tomato sauce, though. But it turned out to be *much better*.

(*ZHAO JUN winks at JINNY. WHITE MAN wheezes.*)

WHITE MAN

Y-y-y-y-y-y-you---

ZHAO JUN

Yes, let me just speak for you, sir. For one, MSG is a naturally occurring substance. No matter what, you will come across it. It's not a bad thing to eat...if you take it in moderation.

Spaghetti Lo Mein – Excerpt – by Elizabeth Ung

For rich people like you, whose only job is to gentrify and replace everything you don't like or understand, I guess moderation isn't something you're familiar with. MSG is not the enemy. It's people like you who want to make things more "palatable" for your bland taste buds by stereotyping and othering immigrants like us. The Jun-porium will stay open! We are here to stay!

WHITE MAN

Noooooooooooooo!

(A flash of light indicating a photo was taken for a newspaper shows ZHAO JUN happily standing over the agonized WHITE MAN.

THANK YOU FOR READING!

**IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO REQUEST THE REST OF THE SCRIPT, PLEASE CONTACT ME
VIA EMAIL OR MY WEBSITE!**

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