

## The Conversation Piece Podcast: Ann Hui

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HOST: Women have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Many have been forced to drop out of the workforce over the past year, with some people calling the COVID-19 economic downturn a she-cession.

And this downturn is impacting racialized women even more. Ann Hui travelled across Canada, visiting Chinese restaurants in small towns from coast to coast. And she tells us how the pandemic has been going on far longer for some communities.

Welcome to The Conversation Piece. This is Ann Hui.

### ANN HUI:

The book details of road trip that I took a few years ago, driving across Canada in order to learn about Chinese restaurants and the people who run them. And one of the most enduring images that I have in my mind from that trip is from a Chinese restaurant in Bonnyville Alberta. Bonnyville is about a three hour drive East of Edmonton. It's a typical Prairie town of about 6,000 people. And in Bonnyville the restaurant was called The Panda garden. And what I remember is walking into The Panda garden and seeing at the back of this restaurant, this bar, and when I walked around the bar, I was surprised to find a small bed.

It was a play area that the restaurant owners had set up for their two daughters. So what does that have to do with "she-session?" You know, we've heard a lot today about, uh, the glaring inequities that this pandemic has thrown right into our faces. We've heard a lot about how the pandemic has affected women in particular, and it's no secret either that this pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on racialized women. So of course, among that group is immigrant women. And I think that restaurants like the pendant garden, give us a snapshot into what that actually looks like on the ground for some of these immigrant women, you know, it's just a small slice into what this pandemic has done to, to, to everyday people and end their lives. You know, immigrant families like the one running the Panda garden for them. This restaurant is a way of creating jobs for themselves.

It's a way that they can work for themselves and hopefully build a better life for their kids. For Karen Lu, who was the co-owner of the restaurant. You know, it's meant that she's able to run her own business, that she's able to have a family, um, while working and not have to leave the workforce. And this is a model that I saw on my road trip all across the country. You know, the most typical model would be a husband working in the kitchen, a wife, uh, working in the front of house. So serving customers or minding the cash register. And typically there would be a kid stashed away in, in storage room, somewhere in the back. Um, you know, is this model ideal? Absolutely not. Do I wish that there were better options for some of these women, especially when it comes to childcare? I think everybody does, but in the absence of those options, this is a model that works.

You know, I also saw a lot of single women, lots of single mothers, running restaurants like this all by themselves. Um, I met some single mothers who had only been in Canada for a couple of

years who were living in these tiny, tiny towns in the middle of nowhere, running these Chinese restaurants by themselves. And often for these women, their only other option would have been either working minimum wage, somewhere or unemployment. So we've seen that the pandemic has hurt all restaurants. Um, food service has been, you know, one of the hardest hit industries in this country, but the pandemic has had, I think, an especially pronounced impact on Chinese restaurants. We've heard throughout this past year, a lot of rhetoric that's been specifically aimed at Chinese communities. We've heard language that blames Chinese people for the disease. We've heard a lot of language, that's evoked the yellow peril of the 19th and 20th century.

And we've seen a huge rise in hate crimes against, um, Asian communities. Many of them violent attacks against elderly people. You know, one Chinese restaurant owner I know in Thunder Bay actually told me that she was probably the happiest person in her city when local health officials actually started recommending everybody wear masks. And this was because she said she actually felt safer being out in public with most of her face covered. So I think it's fair to say that for most Chinese restaurants, you know, they've actually had to suffer a longer pandemic. And this is because for many of them, their businesses began to suffer long before the lockdowns even began. You know, just about every single Chinese restaurant owner I've I've spoken with in the last year has said that their businesses have suffered, uh, many are on the verge of shutting down. So what does that mean?

How does that tie in with today's theme, you know, as these restaurants suffer so too, will the women behind them. Um, and, and this is what we're losing in the pandemic. You know, these are restaurants, but they're also institutions. These are institutions that for generations, uh, have been proven to work, have been able to allow for immigrant families and immigrant women to, to, to, to build new lives for their futures. And I know this because my own family lived it. My parents ran a Chinese restaurant in Abbotsford, BC before I was born. You know, my dad was the man in the kitchen, cooking the food. And my mom was the one running back and forth between the dining room and a toddler in the storage room. Um, and for them, that was something better. It's how they've built their lives here. And I can only hope that other families will continue to have the same or hopefully better opportunities.

HOST: Ann Hui is a food journalist at *The Globe and Mail* and the author of *Chop Suey Nation* and she spoke at The Walrus Talks at Home: Shifting the She-cession, and she's just one of the over 800 fantastic Canadians who have walked and wheeled, or virtually zoomed into the stage at The Walrus Talks and The Walrus Talks at Home.

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And Ann brings us to the end of season two of The Conversation Piece. We'll be taking a few weeks break. But then we'll be back before you know it...with a new bi-weekly format.