

*Number One  
Chinese  
Restaurant*



A NOVEL

*Lillian Li*



Henry Holt and Company  
*Publishers since 1866*  
175 Fifth Avenue  
New York, New York 10010  
www.henryholt.com

Henry Holt® and ® are registered trademarks of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC.

Copyright © 2018 by Lillian Li  
All rights reserved.

Distributed in Canada by Raincoast Book Distribution Limited

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Li, Lillian, author.

Title: Number one Chinese restaurant : a novel / Lillian Li.

Description: First edition. | New York : Henry Holt and Company, 2018.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017033308 (print) | LCCN 2017042542 (ebook) | ISBN 9781250141309 (eBook) | ISBN 9781250141293 (hardcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Chinese restaurants—Fiction. | Families—Fiction. | Domestic fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3612.I14 (ebook) | LCC PS3612.I14 N86 2018 (print) | DDC 813/.6—dc23  
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017033308>

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at (800) 221-7945, extension 5442, or by e-mail at [MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com](mailto:MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com).

First Edition 2018

Designed by Meryl Sussman Levavi

Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

This is a work of fiction. All the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THE WAITERS WERE SINGING “HAPPY BIRTHDAY” IN CHINESE. ALL fifteen of them had crowded around the party table, clapping their hands. Not a single one could find the tune. A neighboring table turned in their chairs to look. Their carver kept his eyes on the duck. The song petered out. The customer blew out the candle on her complimentary cheesecake, and, still applauding, the waiters scattered back to their tables, speaking the restaurant’s English again.

“We need great leader,” one waiter said to no one in particular. “Song not even song if no him.”

Sitting silently in a booth nearby, Jimmy Han fingered his duck-patterned tie. The waiter had clearly meant for him to overhear. No one called him “great leader.” Jimmy *did* have a strong and supple singing voice—a surprise, especially to those who knew him—but the staff’s real nickname they used behind his back: “the little boss.” Disrespectful, but what could he do? Most of the waiters had been around long enough to remember him as a boy. Some of them for thirty years. Who else outside his family had known him for that long? The waiters picked their way through the restaurant. Jimmy’s chest began to ache, and he pressed his hand against the bulging fabric of his jacket pocket. The thick envelope resting inside seemed to seize, like a second heart.

On the other side of the booth, Uncle Pang betrayed nothing. He didn't look like a man about to walk away ten grand richer. He looked like a man who'd just finished his potstickers. Shallow pools of oil spotted his saucer. His thumbnail ran lazily over a blot of black vinegar on the tablecloth. Uncle Pang was always picking something apart.

"Will you be serving duck at your new restaurant?" he said suddenly. He'd been looking around the dining room, but his attention fell back onto Jimmy.

Jimmy let a familiar tingle of lightning shoot through him. He considered what had once been an impossible question.

"We'll see." He wet his finger in his glass of seltzer and cleaned a smudge off one of the framed headshots on the wall. "I have a lot of decisions to make." The envelope seized again; the lightning disappeared. "What can I even afford?"

Uncle Pang didn't react. He merely shifted in his seat. His right hand began to tap an impatient, cascading beat against the tablecloth, the rhythm skipping on the ring finger's turn. Forty years and Jimmy was still not used to the missing finger. The stub had just enough flesh to bend at the knuckle.

"A fool could tell you." Uncle Pang looked around once again for Ah-Jack, their waiter, before scratching at an unseen speck on his crystal watch face. "Duck is simply a chicken that takes longer to make."

Jimmy used his fists to push himself out of the corner he'd sunk into. "I'll go see what's keeping your duck." He bumped his ass down the squeaky vinyl seat, his long legs tangling beneath him.

"I was very happy to hear that Jack had come out of retirement," Uncle Pang said. "But he might no longer be Duck House material, don't you think?"

"It was Johnny's idea to hire him back," Jimmy said as he stood up. His older brother, in Hong Kong for another month, had a nasty habit of making decisions for the restaurant over Jimmy's head. This one he'd made right before jetting off in January. "Loyalty counts for too much with him."

"Yes." Uncle Pang inspected the blade of his knife and rubbed at a water stain. "A good thing loyalty means less to you."

Uncle Pang's English, always fluent, had grown more dramatic over

the years, to great effect. A cold tail of sweat curled down Jimmy's lower back.

"I'll be quick." He bumped his hip lightly against the table.

"Take your time," Uncle Pang said. "I'll find someone to keep me company."



A quick scan of the crowded central dining room did not reveal Ah-Jack. Jimmy shifted his feet impatiently, before making his way through the restaurant. The main room's long, rectangular shape made it too narrow for the number of tables they'd managed to squeeze inside. The gaudy, overstuffed décor didn't help. A deep, matte red colored everything, from the upholstered chairs to the floral carpet to the Chinese knots hanging off the lantern lighting, their tassels low enough to graze the heads of taller customers. Framed photos of famous clientele protruded from the walls. His father's idea of class. The man had decorated the secondary dining room in the same fashion, except for a thick maroon curtain at the very back. What a pain in the ass to keep clean. Jimmy paused his search to beat the dust off the velvet drapes, pretending to inspect the air-conditioning vents above. He made sure the fabric still hid the blank wall behind. People preferred to believe in windows they couldn't see.

From the hostess stand, his niece, Annie, asked, "Have you tried the private party room," pointing to the doorway across from her. They could both clearly see that Ah-Jack was not in the private party room. She really was her father's daughter. Who else would wear heels to a job that had her on her feet for hours, heels that made her stand almost as tall as him? Jimmy snapped at her to stop leaning against her podium.

"It's your own fault your feet hurt," he said. "Stomping around like a damn ostrich . . ."

He trailed off, the rest of his sentence forgotten.

Uncle Pang had found company after all. William, the newest busboy, was standing next to his booth. Uncle Pang said something, and the busboy lowered into a crouch. Jimmy drifted closer, until he was leaning against the bar. A section of the wall blocked the men from view, muffling their conversation.

“Amigo,” he thought he could hear Uncle Pang saying, using the restaurant’s nickname for Latino staff. “I heard you had a baby girl recently.” The man wouldn’t, of course, say where he’d heard this news; his sources were numerous, like worms beneath the soil. Jimmy stuck his head as far past the wall partition as he dared.

William was visible again, as he got up from his crouch. The busboy’s hand was now in his pocket. Uncle Pang must have slipped a trinket into his fingers. Perhaps a pair of gold earrings, 24 karat and soft enough to eat. A few seconds later, William walked past the bar on his way to the kitchen. His head still respectfully dropped, he didn’t see Jimmy trying to wave him over. Jimmy stopped himself from calling after the busboy. He was being paranoid. Uncle Pang had never been more than friendly with the restaurant staff. But Jimmy had underestimated the man before. He probed the false tooth embedded where his right canine should be.

Part of the Han family not by blood or marriage but by circumstance, Uncle Pang had known Bobby Han since Jimmy’s father first arrived in America. Uncle Pang was, or had been, Bobby’s longtime adviser and best friend, a man who’d darkened certain family photos like a finger on the lens. Although Uncle Pang was now in his late sixties, Jimmy had trouble seeing him as an older man. His physical movements might have slowed, but he continued to glide through the world as oiled as the remaining strands of his jet-black hair.

It was effortless, the way Uncle Pang granted wishes you didn’t know you had, gluing you to him while you were busy fawning over a pair of baby’s earrings. It pained Jimmy to realize he might be no better than the busboy, though at least *he* had been trapped by something larger than metal in a pretty shape. At least he had actually used Uncle Pang’s connections. Without them, the Georgetown owner of that tapas chain would have never accepted his bid to buy out her lease on the waterfront. She hadn’t even returned his calls before Uncle Pang stepped in. Of course, now Jimmy had to find the money he’d so generously offered. Uncle Pang had promised to take care of that as well.

Jimmy felt for the envelope, then turned on his heel before Uncle Pang could catch him spying. Blood pounded in his ears. He slipped

into the cramped hallway that led into the kitchen. Where the hell was Ah-Jack?

At the mouth of the hallway, a current of Duck House staff buffeted Jimmy along. The Chinese and Spanish he'd banned from the dining room filled this narrow space, echoing off the walls. Waiters blocked traffic to grab beer from the lower fridge. Those stuck behind them pushed and scolded. On the opposite wall, busboys huddled against the main waiter station, pouring leftovers into paper cartons with hasty precision. At the end of the hallway, Jimmy nearly fell against the busing cart. An impatient Ah-Michael had shoved him while trying to grab an extra zodiac placemat from the shelf.

"So sorry, so sorry." The waiter pressed himself tight against the wall and slipped away. His tray dipped and rose above the heads of other rushing waiters and busboys. His tureen of duck bone soup barely rippled.

Already flushed from his search for Ah-Jack, Jimmy felt more heat rising up his tight collar, first at the nerve of Ah-Michael, with his poached-egg face, and then from the uncomfortably high temperature of the kitchen. Behind the stainless-steel divider, flames whooshed up to embrace giant woks, each cook casually stir-frying as fire sprang, volcanic, from the deep, blackened burners. How awestruck Jimmy had been by these sparking flares when he was a kid. Stuck at the restaurant on the weekends and through every summer, he used to sneak into the kitchen to stare at the sweaty cooks maneuvering the gas dials with their knees. He was transfixed by the fire roaring under their control. Inevitably, his father would drag him back out to pour water for the customers. But in those brief moments, Jimmy could forget his own misery.

"Where is Jack?" Jimmy grabbed one of the duck carvers, who had just hoisted her tray over her shoulder. "Where is the duck for table eight?"

"They go." She gestured her head toward the kitchen's side exit. Her large, braided bun tapped against the duck on her tray. Jimmy wanted to yank the mass of hair out.

"Forget your hairnet again and I'll shave you bald."

He pushed her away and took the side exit from the kitchen, which

put him back at the front of the restaurant. There he saw, to his anger and relief, the top of a shaggy-haired head. Ah-Jack was bent over, wrapping Uncle Pang's duck pancake.

Nan, his manager, hovered nearby. Hunched at the mouth of the private party room, she looked like an agitated collie, with her thin, feathered hair and bright eyes. Her stomach pooched over the gaudy belt she'd decided was management material. In all the years he'd known her, Jimmy had never seen the woman more than a few yards away from Ah-Jack. He suspected she was the one who'd gotten the old waiter's job back. Her love for Ah-Jack was one of many open secrets at the Duck House.

From the way Nan fiddled with her manager's headset, Jimmy could tell that she had read the dark expression on his face. When she saw him set off for Uncle Pang's booth, she sprang into action too. Jimmy was quicker. Agile only in this restaurant, he dipped under passing trays, squeezed through chairs pushed up against each other, and dodged a small posse of bored children, all without the slightest stumble. Before Nan could warn Ah-Jack, Jimmy was at his side, planting a heavy hand against the waiter's thin back. It was like palming a hollowed-out melon.

"I hope you've already apologized for the wait," Jimmy said.

"The kitchen give me bad duck first," Ah-Jack said to Uncle Pang. "I say, I not give bad duck for VIP! They take long time."

"We are so sorry." Jimmy pressed his hand into Ah-Jack's back.

"So sorry," Ah-Jack echoed, buckling into a bow.

Uncle Pang had already picked up his duck pancake.

"Not a problem," he said. "You're here now." He cleared his throat. "But we can't blame the kitchen for every mistake we make. If you'll humor me, I'd like to lay out how I want the rest of dinner to go."

The situation defused, Jimmy and Ah-Jack settled in for the lecture. But for some reason, Nan continued to approach the booth. What the hell did she think she was doing?

"I hope you remember that I like to eat my duck *with* my entrée, and not before," Uncle Pang was saying. "If you haven't already put in the order for the Szechuan lamb chops, you're going to have to rush it."

"Jack very busy." Nan broke into the huddle. Jimmy grabbed her

wrist, but she ignored his fingernails. "May can taking your table. She very quick."

Uncle Pang recoiled as if Nan had rapped him on the forehead.

"I don't think I'll let Jack off so easily." He attempted a smile. "I just wanted to ask him to check on the progress of the lamb. Not a big request."

"You're not asking for too much at all." Jimmy fluttered his hands in front of his chest. "The lamb will be ready, Uncle. Jack probably remembered that you like to dine at a more leisurely pace."

"There is leisure," Uncle Pang said, his finger stabbing into the tablecloth, "and then there is just plain slow."

"We're very sorry." Jimmy tried to keep the sincerity in his voice from going flat. "I won't let this happen again. Let me send you a slice of cheesecake. And your bill is, as always, on the house."

The "as always" slipped out of his mouth so innocently that another person wouldn't have noticed. Uncle Pang, however, didn't believe in such accidents. Indiscretion was equal to insult.

"Jack, go check on my lamb," Uncle Pang said. "Nan, bring me an unopened bottle of this place's finest scotch. And two glasses."

"Just one glass," Jimmy said, but Uncle Pang waved his request away.

"Don't make a man ask twice for a drinking partner." Uncle Pang gestured to the seat across from him. He was acting playful, which meant he was a hair away from losing his temper. Jimmy's remaining nerve bowed in like a decaying floor.

With two sharp jabs, he sent Ah-Jack to the kitchen and Nan in the opposite direction. He settled gingerly into the booth. Nan hurried back with an amber bottle and two glasses. Uncle Pang patted her hand in thanks. He slid one of the glasses over to Jimmy and tipped in a heavy plug of scotch.

"You're too generous," Jimmy said, and felt instantly the quiver of another trap he'd seen too late: Uncle Pang was never generous without cause.

"I want to make a toast." Uncle Pang held up his glass. "Let's drink to the Beijing Glory. Our pride and joy."

Jimmy clinked his glass lightly against Uncle Pang's. He thought

about taking a fortifying gulp but held his drink tightly against the table instead, as if trying to cut a circle out of the cloth.

“How’s the progress?” he asked.

“We’re almost there,” Uncle Pang said. “You’re doing well. Better under pressure than you used to be. Or maybe you’ve finally grown up. Another week or so, and I’ll deliver what’s been promised.”

“You found investors?” Jimmy steeled himself against the lilt of hope in his chest.

Uncle Pang put his drink down mid-sip. “I never said anything about investors.”

Jimmy pinched the cartilage piercing in his left ear and took a short sip of his seltzer. “You did,” he said. “You said you were going to take the Duck House off my hands.”

“I am going to take the Duck House off your hands.”

The meaning of those words bubbled up so quickly inside Jimmy that he felt flooded. How could he have been so stupid? If Uncle Pang had found investors, he would have said “investors.” If he had found buyers, he would have said “buyers.” There was only one recourse that required such vague, precious phrasing. One recourse that would wedge Jimmy as far underneath the man’s thumb as his father had been. Jimmy shook his head sharply. He wanted out. But Uncle Pang misunderstood.

“You were always a dense boy,” he said. “Tell me, what did you think I meant?”

“I don’t know.” Jimmy wormed his finger into a hole in the vinyl booth. “Something with investors. For the Duck House. So I’d have enough to pay off the Glory.”

“And that lump in your chest.” Uncle Pang reached over the table to tap against Jimmy’s jacket pocket. “What’s that for?”

“For your troubles,” Jimmy managed to force out.

“You should know better by now.” Uncle Pang shook out the napkin on his lap. “Especially with your family history.”

Jimmy turned to see Ah-Jack arriving. The waiter held a large serving plate of Szechuan lamb chops, elegantly piled under a hearty mound of onions and red peppers. The meat glistened with black pepper sauce, flecks of spice filling the air with a rich, roasted smell. Uncle

Pang greeted him with a clap of his hands, the sound ringing with false delight. Jimmy was suddenly overwhelmed by the noise of everything happening around him. His body was too heavy to move. Something had gotten on top of him, was smothering him with its weight. He'd been having these attacks recently, but always in bed, in the middle of the night. Never in public. He dug the tip of his tongue into the canker sore on his bottom gum. The sharp, acid sting made the panic lift, just enough for him to wriggle out from underneath.

He was probing the sore again when a jangling sound jerked his head up. The gold chains around Ah-Jack's wrists were trembling against the china platter. The plate dipped up and down. The old waiter could barely hold on to the heavy lamb chops with both hands. Who the hell let him leave the kitchen like this?

Jimmy was starting to stand when a resigned, almost amused look passed over Ah-Jack's face. Like he was tired of waiting for disaster to strike. Before Jimmy could stop him, Ah-Jack took one of his hands away from the plate to grab the two serving spoons. His left wrist did not even make an attempt to hold the weight of the plate on its own. Jimmy's outstretched hand caught air.

Heavy with sauce, the lamb chops plopped onto their table. Some landed on the tablecloth, while others bounced off and onto Uncle Pang's lap. The platter hit the side of the table with a muffled sound before ricocheting under the booth. Sauce splattered everywhere, leaving greasy inkblots on their clothes. Someone in the next booth gasped. For a few calm moments, the three of them looked on curiously at the tremendous mess. Then, Uncle Pang was up and roaring. Ah-Jack was left to tremble, cradling his left hand like an injured bird. He looked around wildly, for an exit, or, perhaps, for Nan. Jimmy dove under the table without knowing why. He started picking up the fallen chops, his hands leaving tacky prints on the dirty carpet. Above his head, Uncle Pang was threatening to tear down the restaurant. With a *thunk*, the scotch bottle fell off and rolled under the table, hitting Jimmy in the knee. The smell of cigarette smoke drifted down, as well as Nan's timid voice, asking Uncle Pang to put out his light.

"I'm not going to burn this place down with one fucking cigarette!" Uncle Pang shouted. He stalked away from the booth, toward the front

door. Nan's thick ankles quickly followed, with Ah-Jack's jerky shuffle bringing up the rear.

From his temporary sanctuary, Jimmy twisted the cap off the scotch bottle and, for the first time in a year, took a deep, searing drink. The sore in his mouth sang out, then quieted into a buzz.



Outside, the early-August air was balmy and windless. The evening traffic roared by, kicking up litter and dust. At the intersection, a thin white man held a cardboard sign. Jimmy and Uncle Pang stood perched on the restaurant's curb. Every crook and pit on Jimmy's body was slick with sweat. Illuminated by the two faux-Chinese lanterns affixed to the storefront, his face must have looked as shiny as the Peking ducks inside.

"Why are you calling off the plan?" Uncle Pang demanded.

"You should have told me what it was," Jimmy said.

"Stop playing dumb. You've been doing that since you were a boy."

"You overestimated me," Jimmy said. "I would never do that to my father's restaurant."

"Oh, *now* it's your father's restaurant." Uncle Pang wiped at the brown spot on his pants, attacking the stain with unnecessary violence.

"We'll pay for the dry cleaning," Jimmy said. "Jack will be punished."

"That won't change anything." Uncle Pang shoved his handkerchief back into his pocket.

"The stains look bad, but they come out very easily." Jimmy pointed to a spray of dark soy sauce on his knee. "I get stains on my pants all the time."

"Don't be an idiot," Uncle Pang said. "You're trying to cut me out of my fair share." He waved sharply at a car idling in the middle of the parking lot. "After you begged for my help. After you shook my hand."

Jimmy blinked, his eyes dry and dulled from the nips he'd taken of the scotch. What had he been so scared of? Uncle Pang was a childhood boogeyman. Granted, he had once knocked a tooth out of Jimmy's mouth, after Jimmy had snorted most of the coke he'd been tasked to sell. But that was decades ago. He'd been a dumb kid. Now he was

forty, with an ex-wife and mortgage payments, and Uncle Pang was pushing seventy. Almost the same age Jimmy's father had been when he died.

"If you say so," Jimmy said. "But I'm saying that we're both businessmen. We know the difference between good business and bad business and personal business, and I hope you understand which one my decision is."

Uncle Pang laughed by clearing his throat.

"You little cunt." He took a step toward Jimmy. "You think you're going to push me out of the Glory? You think you're the first desperate loser to ask for my help, then back out?"

"Don't take this the wrong way." Jimmy held up his hands. "I'll always be grateful to you for finding me the new place. I'll still give you the ten thousand you asked for earlier." He pulled out the heavy envelope he'd been lugging around all evening. The disappearance of its weight felt like a liberation. "For your trouble."

"Money is going to make me forget this?" Uncle Pang's car pulled up to the curb and he wrenched open the passenger door, but not before snatching the envelope. "I'll tell you exactly what I told your father. I've got a long memory and I will ruin you for this."

He spat on the ground, clipping Jimmy's shoe, and dropped his smoldering cigarette into the mess. "Might as well say goodbye to your new restaurant now."

He slipped into the black BMW, disappearing behind tinted windows. Jimmy expected the car to peel off, tires squealing, but instead it continued its vibrating hum. It slid through the parking lot, the purring engine matching the decibel of all the other night sounds, and these little noises collected like smoke, drifting over his head, until he could hear nothing else.