

Abstract

“The Delicacy of Shark Fin Soup”

By: Jessica Fu

This narrative describes the speaker’s feelings toward shark fin soup. The speaker talks about the first time she encountered this soup at a Chinese wedding banquet, and how delicious it tasted. However, she later finds out about the unethical practices in which shark fins are obtained: sharks’ fins are cut off and their bodies are tossed back into the ocean, and they are left there to helplessly die. In addition, the soup has contributed to shark endangerment. This narrative contrasts the unethical practices of shark finning to the shark fin soup’s significance to Chinese culture, and the speaker comes to a conclusion about her feelings toward the soup.

Jessica Fu

The Delicacy of Shark Fin Soup

My father held my hand as we walked into his long time friend’s Chinese wedding banquet. I was seven years old, wearing white kitten heels and my favorite blue and white dress. My dress was fit for a princess, with curly white ruffles on the white bodice and a smooth, pale blue skirt.

Little bright yellow lights on the ceiling cast a glowing warmth, and the vases full of colorful, assorted flowers welcomed us to our table. This Chinese restaurant featured the statement gold dragon sculpture attached to one of the walls, with dark, bold emerald green eyes and a body full of small scales. It had the paws of a tiger, scales of a carp, and beard of a goat. The empowering symbol of Chinese culture and the spirit of our people. A legendary creature

capable of breathing fire, flying high into the clouds, and summoning wind and rain. Unlike the evil Western dragon, the Chinese dragon is a worshipped, benevolent creature that represents power, excellence, and nobility. The lights bounced off each scale of the dragon, giving off a constant glimmer of good fortune to the newly-wed Michael and Angela (Van Hinsbergh).

I slowly walked past the red felt chairs to our designated seats, feeling a sense of self-importance. Click-click-clack, went the heels of my dress shoes against the wooden floor. Each resounding clack made me feel more and more grown-up, like my female teachers at school who owned the hallways with their loud heels. The intimidating sound of authoritarian and sophistication. The sound that magically stopped kids from running in the hallways or cutting each other in line. Tonight, I too, wanted to fit in with the adults, so I put on my big-girl attitude, determined to act proper and mature for this fancy occasion. “So no elbows on the table, no chewing and talking at the same time, no fighting with my sister, no burping,” I told myself, because at the age of seven, that was my definition of acting adult-like.

The waiters gestured us to our seats, and began serving traditional Chinese cuisine. Every dish was placed on the glass lazy Susan at the center of the table, so we could rotate and help ourselves to any dish we wanted. It was everything I wanted within one spin. Turning the glass to the left brought me chilled jellyfish with green onions and sesame oil or sautéed mushrooms with bok choy. Turning the glass to the right brought me dishes like seafood drizzled with vegetable stock sauce in a crisp noodle bowl, or crab and egg fried rice. I devoured the Chinese roast pork belly, the rough pork skin crackling in my mouth with each bite. I closed my eyes to relish the smooth, moist meat marinated with five-spice powder and rice wine vinegar. And I savored the wedding staple of braised sea cucumber, hooked to the strangely slippery and firm yet jelly-like texture, with delicious ginger and soy sauce seasonings. Being a homophone for

“good heart” in Cantonese, sea cucumber serves as a reminder for the couple to be considerate towards one another to avoid conflicts. It’s also an essential dish to wish a good, smooth relationship between the couple and their families (Soh).

But then, the waiter came to our table with a family-sized bowl contained a dark brown broth with sparse translucent white strands. All the adults at the table eagerly looked at the soup and ladle in hungry anticipation. But not me. Why would I have interest in a murky looking soup that just looked like thickened soy sauce with lumps of mystery meat?

I planned to skip the soup to save room for the more appetizing entrees. However, my dad made me try the soup.

“That just looks gross. That looks like it would taste disgusting,” I complained.

“No, it’s shark fin soup! From the fin of a shark! This is a Chinese delicacy, and it’s expensive! You never know if you’ll like it until you try it,” my dad enthusiastically exclaimed.

I did not want to make a fuss while sitting with so many adults, so I took a cautious sip of the stew, already preparing myself to discretely spit it out in my napkin.

The stew was thick and rich with chicken, soy sauce, and oyster sauce flavoring. The texture was contradictory, being so thick, yet sliding down the throat so smoothly. It was not quite as thick as gelatin yet not as thin as water, and had sinewy, stringy bits of shark fin. The shark fin was soft from first being soaked in cold water for at least 8 hours, boiled for an hour, and rinsed with cold water. It was then boiled for about 30 minutes, infused with the chicken stock, mushrooms, and cornstarch mixture, for that gelatinous consistency (Chinese Shark Fin Soup Recipe). I could feel the chewy textures from the thinly sliced mushrooms and shark fin, and feel that perfect balance with the saltiness of the broth. Every spoonful was infused with

perfect proportions of the flavorful soup and smooth shark fin that snapped apart at every bite. The marriage of these unique textures came together to create this guilty, luxurious soup.

In the months following this wedding banquet, I kept pestering my parents to buy me shark fin soup, constantly asking, “Can I have some on my birthday? Can I have some as a Christmas present?” But they always responded that shark fin soup was an expensive delicacy, and reserved for special occasions like weddings. So I would sigh and scheme about the ways I could curb this insatiable craving. *Maybe having one of my favorite comfort foods could subside this craving? Could a classic bowl of vanilla bean ice cream do the trick?* But no other food ever satisfied my appetite for the stew; I was left to dream about the next time I could finally taste shark fin soup.

Sometime in middle school though, I stopped craving the soup. I found out the unethical practices in which shark fins are obtained. One click of a “Recommended” video on YouTube led to another, and soon I happened upon a short but shocking documentary about this finning industry.

Fishermen drag the flailing, helpless shark onto their boat. The ocean predator becomes the prey. They surround and hold down this magnificent animal, take a large silver steel knife, and hack at the fins until they have become fully dismembered. It’s a pitiful sight to see this king of the ocean rendered immobile, tossed back into the water, and left there to die a slow, painful death. No longer able to swim, its body slowly sinks to the bottom of the ocean, where the scavengers have a feast.

To honor guests, Chinese emperors used to have the shark fin soup prepared because it represented victory. The victory of winning a fight against such a powerful creature. But I wonder why was there so much pride in killing an innocent, exalted creature of the sea. Why kill

one that never set out to harm you? What kind of pleasure is there in seeing the powerful writhe in pain?

With China's growing population and the soup's increasing popularity, the shark fin trade has largely contributed to the approximately 100 million sharks killed every year. But sharks have slow growth and low reproductive rates, making them at risk of extinction. The scalloped hammerhead and smooth hammerhead have already become endangered because of the finning industry (Fairclough). Should we really endanger an entire species to satisfy some craving for a soup? The shark fin itself is tasteless and used for the soup's texture, so why not use imitation shark fin or sea cucumber to emulate that chewy texture?

And, if we're going to kill sharks as a food source, then why not make the best of it and use the entire body? Why don't we honor our kill and eat more than just the shark's fin, instead of wastefully dumping the body to bleed out into the ocean?

After learning about the tortured, pathetic death of the powerful kings of the ocean, I can no longer innocently enjoy this soup. I imagine that the stew is thick and rich with the unmistakable flavoring of pain and helplessness. Every spoonful is infused with waves of guilt and flavorless, slimy textures. The marriage of these consistencies come together to create this bland, conscience-stricken, over-salted soup.

Through TV, internet, newspapers and magazines, most Chinese-Americans know about this animal cruelty that we are complicit in when we decide to have shark fin soup. However, many Chinese wedding banquets still have the soup on their menu. So I asked my dad (a Chinese immigrant) for his thoughts on why we continue to serve this soup despite the cruel finning industry and overfishing.

“It’s a delicacy and an expensive soup. Banquets have to serve the best food,” my dad replied. When I asked him if he would continue to have the soup despite the ethical dilemmas, he replied, “If they serve it, I’ll eat it. If they already made it, it’s too late to save the shark.”

And, well, I guess in technical terms, that’s true.

“I would probably still have shark fin soup,” is the sentiment of most Chinese people, especially when it’s placed in front of them, the delicious aroma wafting in the air. And having shark fin soup at weddings is part of tradition. Ordering the shark fin is expensive, so it signifies status and future prosperity in marriage. Like a Louis Vuitton handbag, it shows off wealth and social status. Folklore used to say, “a bride marrying into a family without shark fin soup on the table, is marrying into a poor family.” This message doesn’t hold true anymore, but the soup still signifies respect and status, which is important symbolism to have at a Chinese wedding (History of Shark Fin Soup).

As a Chinese American, I know that if I get married, I will have a Chinese wedding banquet of my own. I will hands down have all the delicious and mouth-watering traditional cuisines.

But I think I’ll skip out on the authentic shark fin soup. Imitation shark fin will have to do.

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