

NATIONAL WINNER
ASIA- AUSTRALIA
RELATIONS



JOY YE

PYMBLE LADIES' COLLEGE

**THE NARRATIVE OF AUSTRALIAN
MULTICULTURALISM: A STUDY OF CHINESE
CUISINE**

The narrative of Australian multiculturalism: a study of Chinese cuisine

ABSTRACT: Diversity in cuisine is often framed as a source of multiculturalism in Australia's history. This essay, however, contests simplistic connotations between acceptance and the availability of 'ethnic' food. Focusing on Chinese restaurants, the essay locates the value of these eateries in helping migrant communities survive in the face of racism.

“We walk down the street and see restaurants from many different cultures: Thai, Chinese Indian, and more”

The hypothetical example of the sight of various multicultural restaurants in a street has been used in political rhetoric for years as a reliable image or metaphor for politicians or commentators to promote Australia as a diverse nation. This assumption, however, that consumption of food from migrant cultures automatically leads to pluralism and acceptance is problematic. Using Chinese food as a case study, this essay will argue that food and immigration interact in a more complex fashion. First, the dominant Anglo-Australian narrative often conflates eating food with cultural knowledge, which is troubling because of the appropriation and assimilation of Chinese cuisine. The food Chinese migrants introduced to Australian society was advertised as ‘authentic’, yet, in actuality, it catered to Western tastebuds. Furthermore this ‘food diversity’ narrative advances an instrumental, as opposed to inherent, view of multiculturalism: that the presence of migrants is valuable because it satisfies the palate of the white majority in Australia. This multicultural mythology also serves to construct “national cultures”: it simplifies Chinese food, neglecting its internal diversity and constant evolution, while at the same time, framing the kind ‘western’ Australian society as tolerant and accepting. The significance of food history, therefore, lies in its ability to contest these narratives

about race, culture and power. Focussing on the reception of Chinese food in Australia from the 19th century to today, this essay will instead argue that the real way these restaurants matter is in providing a sense of identity and community for migrants.

First, it is important to offer a historiographical critique of Australian food history. The dominant historical narrative about the arrival of migrant food, which is often used to promote Australia's multicultural reputation, emphasises the delicious diversity of immigrant cuisines and how bland Anglo-Celtic 'Australian' food was in comparison, therefore attempting to paint a positive image of the migrant community and their contribution. *Taste magazine*, one of Australia's most popular and prominent food publications, offers a version of this stereotypical story, noting "The 'melting pot' of nationalities in Australia has brought with it a dazzling wealth of cuisines"¹. This link between multiculturalism and cuisine has become so ingrained in Australian society that when Rebecca Huntley asked Australians in focus groups what migrants have contributed to the country, "they gravitate[d] immediately to food" as the main example of the benefits of multiculturalism². For Huntley, this narrative is problematic because it assumes anti-racism can be achieved via passive contact with difference, whether that is by simply consuming the food of another culture or interaction with the people preparing and serving it. Moreover, she argues the arrival of new food cultures *coexists* with racism. For instance, even when Vietnamese food grew in popularity during the 1990s and phở became a popular menu item amongst wider Australian society, the

¹ "Australian Food: Evolution Of Cuisine". Undated. *Taste Magazine*. Accessed August 13, 2021. <https://www.taste.com.au/articles/how-australian-food-has-evolved/tafzotxs>.

² Huntley, Rebecca. 2019. "Sure, Australians Love Multicultural Food. That Doesn't Mean We're Not Racist - ABC Everyday". *Abc.Net.Au*. <https://www.abc.net.au/everyday/australia-can-have-a-racism-problem-and-multicultural-food/11636756>.

Vietnamese community were being subject to abuse from the public, in particular due to moral panics around drug crime. Ghassan Hage argues, moreover, that the dominant narrative “is a story that is almost entirely focused on the eater and the diverse and interesting food she now enjoys thanks to multiculturalism. The ethnic cook (not to mention the ethnic food grower or kitchen hand) is rarely at the centre of this story.”. Insofar as food can be a metaphor for multiculturalism, it is actually one of assimilation: food is often a diluted or invented version of “authentic” cuisine³. Moreover, Lara Anderson and Heather Merle Benbow argue, “cultural indigestion” and “food xenophobia” continue to exist in Australia despite its multicultural policies⁴. For instance, food taboos apply to the consumption of particular animals that might be common in Asian cuisines, while there is still an assumption that food made with Australian ingredients and restaurant ‘culture’ and ‘aesthetics’ is superior. Food history, therefore, finds its significance in contesting these popular narratives.

This conventional story about Australian food and multiculturalism can be challenged by turning to an archive of sources that reveal the ways Chinese food shaped Australian culture under the White Australia Policy. This history matters because it shows how the embrace of food can coexist with racism. Here, the magazine *Australian Women’s Weekly (AWW)* serves as an interesting case study because of its widespread circulation among Anglo-Australians. In an AWW issue published in 1978, just after the end of the White Australia Policy, an article, ‘A feast of Chinese food’, offers an eight page spread of various recipes from Chinese restaurants in Sydney, advertising how after reading the

³ Ibid

⁴ Anderson, Lara, and Heather Merle Benbow. "Cultural Indigestion in Multicultural Australia: Fear of “Foreign” Foods in Australian Media." *Gastronomica* 15, no. 1 (2015): 34-43. Accessed August 20, 2021.

article, a reader would become so knowledgeable of Chinese cuisine that there would be ‘no need to step outside of your own front door for a fabulous Chinese banquet’⁵. The assumption of accessibility here reflects how comfortable Australians already were with the flavours and techniques of Chinese cuisine. In 1948, a similar article entitled “Chinese food” offers “recipes for five piquant dishes and a rich, unusual soup.” It goes on to state “Those who are familiar with Chinese food will appreciate the recipe for the chicken and almond dish.”⁶. This reflects that Chinese cuisine was known to many diners in Australia even at the height of Australian xenophobic migration policy. Enthusiasm for Chinese food during the White Australia Policy even emphasised its supposedly ‘exotic’ and ‘different’ aspects, even at a time when cultural difference was not promoted in immigration policies. In a 1960s advertisement for a guided tour of Singapore and Hong Kong, the *Australian Women’s Weekly* paints Asia as an mystical region, reflecting the sentiments of traditional Orientalism to characterise the East as unsophisticated but yet appealing due to its foreign nature. Particular attention is placed on food and the ‘surprising’ quality of Asian cooking, with Chinese cuisine being the most featured in the magazine.⁷ As such, these sources reveal Chinese food was associated with diversity and excitement, even at a time when Chinese people were devalued.

⁵ *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 'A feast of Chinese food', 22 March, 1978 'p. 87. , viewed 15 Mar 2021, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article53250139>

⁶ *The Australian Women's Weekly* CHINESE Food (1948, November 6). p. 33. Retrieved March 22, 2021, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article55466967>

⁷*The Australian Women's Weekly* 'We take you to the magic East', 16 February 1972, p. 42. , viewed 15 Mar 2021, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article46241948>

Whilst the Chinese restaurant has been a place of novelty to white Australians, for the Chinese migrant community it has been a source of much needed financial stability since the 19th century. This, rather than the value to the curious Western consumer, is the true contribution of migrant cuisine to contemporary Australia. According to historian Barbara Nichol, the first sightings of commercially available Chinese food in Australia appeared in the 1850s as Chinese migrants found work in kitchens to be more stable than laboring on farms or down mines, especially since they were less susceptible to discrimination⁸. By 1890, a staggering one third of all cooks in Australia were Chinese⁹. Even under the White Australia Policy, Chinese Australian restaurant owners who were already in the country were given an exemption to bring in Chinese workers. This allowed them to develop and foster a larger Chinese-Australian community, even during a period of intense discrimination. Over time, restaurants offered a form of financial security, especially for migrants with limited English skills. Discrimination in wider Australian society also meant it was one of the few small businesses Chinese people could own and operate without disdain. Jan O'Connell argues that, paradoxically and perversely, the anti-Chinese sentiment under the white Australia policy meant that running of restaurants was left to the Chinese community, rather than being appropriated by Anglo-Australians¹⁰. The segregation of the Chinese community from most of society meant that Chinese restaurants in Australia preserved more authentic traditions and ingredients, when compared to similar eateries in the UK and the US.

⁸Heanue, Siobhan. 2016. "Story Of Chinese Food Down Under Mapped By Historians". *Abc.Net.Au*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-21/humble-chinese-diner-mapped-by-food-historians/7187218>.

⁹Maxabella, Bron. 2018. "A (Brief) History Of Australian Food". *SBS Food*. Accessed August 13, 2021. <https://www.sbs.com.au/food/article/2018/06/21/brief-history-australian-food>.

¹⁰O'Connell, Jan. Undated. "A Timeline Of Australian Food: From Mutton To Masterchef - Australian Food Timeline". *Australian Food Timeline*. Accessed August 13, 2021. <https://australianfoodtimeline.com.au/mutton-masterchef/>.

When historians analyse the Chinese migrant experience during the White Australia policy, the narrative of the Chinese migrant woman has often been overlooked. Even in the mid-20th century, however, Chinese migrant women actively exercised authority and challenged notions surrounding the roles of women. Chinese women were not simply confined to waitressing or smaller tasks in the kitchen, rather they also worked as hostesses or as chefs. Given that most Chinese Australian restaurateurs often lived above their business, the lines between the domestic and the commercial spheres were blurred. Chinese Australian women were thus not limited to the home, rather their roles were porous: they had an important function in the restaurant and the home. As such, this history matters insofar as it reveals the true significance of these restaurants in the history of modern Australia.

The restaurant was also a space that allowed the Chinese-Australian community to negotiate orientalist assumptions and reductive views of difference, by offering an insight into a culture. It allowed them to mitigate xenophobic hostility to some extent. But such a process required anticipating and combatting anxieties around Chinese cuisine, such as the assumption it was too exotic, difficult, low-status and associated with unsanitary cooking conditions. An article on “Chinese Food” published in the *Cairns Morning Post* in 1907 notes, for instance, “some Chinese restaurants are furnished expensively with teawood stools and tables inlaid with ivory and mother-of-pearl. They have entrances so constructed that the patron, to reach the dining-room, must pass through the kitchen, the idea being that the patron should

examine the kitchen, should see how clean it is, before he eats the food”¹¹. Here, the decor adds to the cultural capital of Chinese food, while the design undermines racist assumptions about cleanliness. In 1940, *The Daily Telegraph* reported on the Consul-General for China, Dr. Pao and his wife, Madame Pao, who invited other elite Australian individuals for a special authentic banquet. The article, ‘Ate Chinese Food with Chopsticks’¹² reveals the way that food was used as a form of cultural diplomacy by the Chinese nation-state, utilising cuisine as a method to grant direct exposure and understanding of Chinese culture. The emphasis on the high status figures such as judges and politicians eating Chinese food reinforces the idea of Chinese food having high cultural capital, even at a time it was generally considered low-status. Both of these stories expose how not all food in Australia’s multicultural cuisine has always been equally esteemed: European or French cuisine is still considered higher status when compared with Chinese, Vietnamese or Thai. This relates to the notion of cultural capital, or non-economic status applied to certain practices and communities. In terms of cultural capital, Chinese cuisine is paradoxically deemed ‘low culture’ while marking out the sophistication of the consumer. Such a historical narrative, focusses on its value to Western consumers, rather than the way it has been used as a tool by migrant chefs.

One needs to look no further than the xenophobic treatment of Chinese restaurants during the COVID pandemic, to see how racism coexists with cuisine diversity, while migrant communities use their food cultures to remain resilient. During the early stages of the pandemic, there was a conflation of Chinese citizens and Chinese-Australians, as

¹¹ Cairns *Morning Post* Chinese Food. (1907, December 21). p. 6. Retrieved March 22, 2021, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article39448588>

¹²*The Daily Telegraph* Ate Chinese Food With Chopsticks (1940, January 20). p. 10. Retrieved March 22, 2021, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article248229570>

such Anglo-Australians began boycotting or avoiding Chinese restaurants¹³. Although Australia claims to appreciate and genuinely care for its minority communities, and value its restaurants as symbols of diversity, there was a lack of substantial support given to the Chinese community in these times. Restaurants were economically harmed by this xenophobic treatment, even prior to the problems of COVID lockdowns. This has led to the closure of historic restaurants such as Melbourne's Shark Fin Inn. This is problematic because restaurants operate as a significant cultural and political site for the community, especially during times of distress¹⁴. For instance, restaurants in Sydney and Melbourne's Chinatowns served student migrants who were denied government assistance.

History does not have a monolithic or fixed significance: its meaning and impact varies based on the vantage from which it is told. This analysis into the experience of the Chinese Australians contests the narrative that Australia's multicultural dining scene or pluralism in taste means that Australia has overcome racism. Studying the lives of Chinese restaurant workers offers a new history for the wider Chinese Australian community. This narrative has relevance for our present moment, allowing us to hold the wider Australian society accountable for the lack of change in attitudes towards immigrant communities, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹³ *South China Morning Post*, "Australians avoid Chinese restaurants amid coronavirus fears, fake news", 13/02/2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/australasia/article/3050529/coronavirus-chinese-restaurants-shut-doors-australians-shun>

¹⁴ Webb, Caroline, "Beloved Chinatown restaurant closes as customers stay away over coronavirus fears", *The Age* 12/2/2020, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/beloved-chinatown-restaurant-closes-as-customers-stay-away-over-coronavirus-fears-20200212-p54076.html>

ANNOTATIONS

Huntley, Rebecca. 2019. "Sure, Australians Love Multicultural Food. That Doesn't Mean We're Not Racist - ABC Everyday". *Abc.Net.Au*. <https://www.abc.net.au/everyday/australia-can-have-a-racism-problem-and-multicultural-food/11636756>.

Written by Dr Rebecca Huntley in 2019, this secondary source "Sure, Australians Love Multicultural Food. That Doesn't Mean We're Not Racist - ABC Everyday" is an article that analyses the current public sentiment on the benefits of multicultural food for combating racism in Australia. It was most useful in offering evaluations and reflections on research by the author and Professor Ghassan Hage. I referenced this article in the first substantive argument where the essay challenges the assumption that cultural knowledge and tolerance is gained through the simple consumption of ethnic food. Considering that the author of this article and the referenced anthropologist are reputable and qualified researchers, this source can be concluded to be highly reliable.

Ate Chinese Food With Chopsticks (1940, January 20). *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney, NSW : 1931 - 1954), p. 10. Retrieved March 22, 2021, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article248229570>

This source is an article, 'Ate Food with Chopsticks', that recorded the extraordinary moment where high profile Australians were eating and being served food with chopsticks at the Consul-General of China's dinner party. Drawing on accounts from guests at the party, the unknown author emphasises the novelty of seeing people such as diplomats and dignitaries eat food with chopsticks, which gives the reader a clear insight the way mainstream society viewed the Chinese community their food as low-class and unfitting for such esteemed people. I used this article in my fourth argument that discusses how Chinese food was a platform for the Chinese community to combat Orientalist assumptions. In regards to this source's reliability, although the article has no named author, due to the format of older newspapers, *The Daily Telegraph* is a

well-established newspaper in Australia, and, at this time, was not in its current tabloid and popular form.

***The Australian Women's Weekly* 'We take you to the magic East', 16 February 1972, p. 42. , viewed 15 Mar 2021, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article46241948> viewed 15 Mar 2021, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article46241948>**

This source is an advert for a cruise trip to East Asia written in 1972 published in the *The Australian Women's Weekly*, boasting about the exotic but unrefined nature of places like Singapore and Hong Kong. This advert is used in my second substantive argument, where this evidence is used to exhibit how racism and the fascination of cultural food coexisted in Australia. Given that this cruise trip was a collaboration with *The Australian Women's Weekly*, there is a clear incentive for the magazine to exaggerate its language and description of the various Asian countries. However, the source is still useful as *The Australian Women's Weekly* was one of the most popular magazines at the time. As such, it offers a representative view on how Australians depicted and understood Asia, and offers an accurate reflection of how the general public felt about the East in the 1970s.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anderson, Lara, and Heather Merle Benbow. "Cultural Indigestion in Multicultural Australia: Fear of "Foreign" Foods in Australian Media." *Gastronomica* 15, no. 1 (2015): 34-43. Accessed August 20, 2021.

The Australian Women's Weekly, 'A feast of Chinese food', 22 March, 1978 'p. 87. , viewed 15 Mar 2021, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article53250139>

The Australian Women's Weekly CHINESE Food (1948, November 6). p. 33. Retrieved March 22, 2021, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article55466967>

The Australian Women's Weekly "Here's To The Children! - Party... - (1933 - 1982) - 6 Jan 1945". 1945. *Trove*. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/47117697>.

The Australian Women's Weekly 'We take you to the magic East', 16 February 1972, p. 42. , viewed 15 Mar 2021, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article46241948>

Cairns Morning Post, "Chinese Food." 21 Dec 1907". 1907. *Trove*. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article39448588>.

Catholic Weekly, "Home Cooking Of Chinese Food ", 16 Dec 1948". 1948. *Trove*. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article146661073>.

The Daily Telegraph , "Ate Chinese Food With Chopsticks", 20 Jan 1940". 1940. *Trove*. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article248229570>.

The Canberra Times (ACT : 1926 - 1995) "GOOD Times - A Sophisticated Chinese Meal | The Good Times Gastronomic Correspondent Reviews A Chinese Restaurant Which Has Departed From The Usual Decor And Menu", -1 Jul 1988". 1988. *Trove*. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article102033706>.

Heanue, Siobhan. 2016. "Story Of Chinese Food Down Under Mapped By Historians". *Abc.Net.Au*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-21/humble-chinese-diner-mapped-by-food-historians/7187218>.

Huntley, Rebecca. 2019. "Sure, Australians Love Multicultural Food. That Doesn't Mean We're Not Racist - ABC Everyday". *Abc.Net.Au*.

<https://www.abc.net.au/everyday/australia-can-have-a-racism-problem-and-multicultural-food/11636756>.

Maxabella, Bron. 2018. "A (Brief) History Of Australian Food". *SBS Food*. Accessed August 13, 2021.

<https://www.sbs.com.au/food/article/2018/06/21/brief-history-australian-food>.

Noone, Yasmine. 2018. "Why Does Every Town In Australia Have A Chinese Restaurant?". *SBS*. Accessed August 13, 2021,

<https://www.sbs.com.au/food/article/2018/11/22/why-does-every-town-australia-have-chinese-restaurant>.

O'Connell, Jan. Undated. "A Timeline Of Australian Food: From Mutton To Masterchef - Australian Food Timeline". *Australian Food Timeline*. Accessed August 13, 2021.

<https://australianfoodtimeline.com.au/mutton-masterchef/>.

Schofeild, Leo, Good Weekend Asked the Sydney Morning Herald's Restaurant Critic One of the Two Restaurant Critics of the Age, to Switch Cities and Review Four Restaurants Each. - the Canberra Times (ACT : 1926 - 1995) - 6 Oct 1985." 2014. Trove. Trove. 2014. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/132369392>.

South China Morning Post, "Australians avoid Chinese restaurants amid coronavirus fears, fake news", 13/02/2020,

<https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/australasia/article/3050529/coronavirus-chinese-restaurants-shut-doors-australians-shun>

Taste Magazine. "Australian Food: Evolution Of Cuisine". Undated. Accessed August 13, 2021.

<https://www.taste.com.au/articles/how-australian-food-has-evolved/tafzotxs>.

Webb, Caroline, "Beloved Chinatown restaurant closes as customers stay away over coronavirus fears", *The Age* 12/2/2020,

<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/beloved-chinatown-restaurant-closes-as-customers-stay-away-over-coronavirus-fears-20200212-p54076.html>

Zakharov, Jennie, "FOOD & WINE - GOOD TIMES | Breaking From The Tradition Of The Male Indian Chef | Canberra Is Home To A Rarity — A Female Tandoor Chef., *The Canberra Times* (ACT : 1926 - 1995) - 30 Mar 1989". 1989. Trove.

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article120919503>.