

Family History, Food, and Marketing Ethnicity in Helen Tse's *Sweet Mandarin*

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Over the last two decades, family memoirs, auto/biographical narratives of at least three generations of a family, have mapped the histories of diasporic Asian groups in the West. Jung Chang's bestselling *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (1991), which presents the story of three generations of women in her family and re-enacts the history of China and the subsequent immigration of Chinese to the West in the twentieth century, established a paradigm for the family memoir of the Asian diaspora. Subsequently, many Asian immigrant writers have turned to family stories as a source of personal, historical, and community understanding. Family memoirs of the Asian diaspora in the United States and Canada include Denise Chong's *The Concubine's Children* (1994), K. Connie Kang's *Home Was the Land of Morning Calm* (1995), and Pang-Mei Natasha Chang's *Bound Feet and Western Dress* (1996).¹ Helen Tse's *Sweet Mandarin* (2007) appropriates and expands Chang's paradigm by narrating the history of her family's immigration and adaptation to England through the story of their relationship to food and restaurants. The text, which shares its name with the restaurant Tse and her sisters open, harnesses the complementary metaphors of food and family to expand the ways in which the family memoir functions as a community-building historical narrative. It does this primarily through an immigrant success story that illustrates the itinerary of the Chinese presence in Britain, scripting the text of the development of that community. In this essay, I will discuss how Tse contributes to the narrative of the Asian diaspora in Britain by deploying the family memoir and the tropes of food and the Chinese restaurant as a locus for contemporary engagements with ethnic identity that juxtapose the local and global.

Writing a family memoir is often driven by a series of overlapping motivations that stem from what David Parker calls "a complex sense

of moral obligation” to tell stories that offer nuanced perspectives on ethnic persons, histories, and communities (“Narratives of Autonomy” 150). Parker suggests that authors of such memoirs acknowledge and work from the notion that the stories of one’s relatives are constitutive of one’s own story, that “the memories of these forebears in a sense are me, their languages partly constitute my speaking position” (150). Family memoirs generally acknowledge a cultural debt to family and explore the meanings that the author’s family history might have for his or her own family or community. Second, family memoirs recognize the power of personal narratives to engage historical and cultural issues. Personal narratives circulated in a public forum often challenge dominant mainstream narratives, which can hide, misrepresent, or invalidate such stories. Finally, family memoirs contain a commitment to preventing stories from disappearing in order to provide ethnic communities with potentially empowering narratives. In a sense, the motivations Parker describes function simultaneously on personal and collective levels. Although auto/biographical writing is primarily a personal project, many forms of auto/biographical writing—including the family memoir—exist “for [their] public interpretive uses, as part of a general and perpetual conversation about life possibilities. . . . In any case, the ‘publicness’ of autobiography constitutes something like an opportunity for an ever-renewable ‘conversation’ about conceivable lives” (Bruner 41).

A strong transnational character marks the conversation that Tse’s memoir initiates. By foregrounding her family’s and, by extension, the Chinese history of immigration to Britain and concluding the narrative with the story of her family members’ return to China, Tse privileges the transnational dynamic in the lives of Chinese immigrants in Britain. For her, the connections between her family’s country of origin and their new home become opportunities for revisioning both personal and cultural identification. As Angelika Bammer explains, in a remapped world in which “the concept of nation has been dispersed into the reality of diasporic identity,” writers struggling with the question of “how and where to reorient and reground oneself” turn to the family (95). Family memoirs privilege stories, rituals, and traditions taken from a former to

a new home in order to both forge and highlight a connection between the past and future. The baggage (stories, documents, rituals, food) carried along the *routes* travelled are harnessed to provide *roots*. As Bammer asserts, “It is the relationship, finally, between these two—the families to whom we are born and the communities to which we are joined by choice, tradition, or force of historical necessity—that shapes our sense not only of who we are but of our location as subjects of/in history” (105). It is in this context that I read Tse’s *Sweet Mandarin* through three lenses: as a family memoir that celebrates the courage and drive of her grandmother, her mother, and her own generation; as a food memoir that foregrounds the role of cuisine in narratives of the Asian and other diasporas; and, finally, as a self-orientalizing form of ethnic marketing, highlighted by the author’s repeated emphasis on the connection between family stories, her memoir, and her newly-opened restaurant.

The memoir recounts the story of a community of Chinese women struggling for agency. As Tse explains:

My story is about my grandmother, my mother and myself: three generations of independent Chinese women whose lives take in Guangzhou in southern China in the 1920s, colonial Hong Kong in the 1930s, the horrors of the Japanese occupation and a changing England from the 1950s to the present day. Like all families, we’ve been caught up in the times we lived in, shaken by the unpredictable and devastating upheavals in the Far East in the twentieth century, but the women in my family have always come through and lived to tell their tales. (4)

Emphasis is thus consistently placed on the bonds between the women in Tse’s family, linking the ownership and management of the restaurant to the family narrative; Helen, her twin sister Lisa, and younger sister, Janet, own, manage, and cook at the restaurant. Indeed, the author picture on the book jacket is a family portrait of grandmother Lily Kwok, her oldest daughter, Mabel, and Mabel’s three daughters. The center of Tse’s narrative is Lily, whose move to Britain in the 1950s changed the family’s fortunes. Tse narrates Lily’s story in the same way she learns it, piecemeal, as her grandmother helps her and her sisters organize and

shop for the restaurant they opened in Manchester in 2004. As they hunt for the Chinese ingredients they need, Lily begins to tell Helen stories which range from childhood anecdotes to the painful secrets she kept for years: “It was as though each bottle or package that she picked out for our basket was tied to a different chapter of her life, and now she wanted to share it with us. When your entire family works in restaurants, food becomes a family album—an heirloom that triggers memories” (4). Tse links the narrative of history and family stories to food metaphors, creating layers of meaning for the family as a personal and cultural collective.

The tropes Tse draws on to represent Lily’s stories follow the narrative structure established by works such as Nien Cheng’s *Life and Death in Shanghai* (1988), Jung Chang’s *Wild Swans*, Rae Yang’s *Spider Eaters* (1997), and Hong Ying’s *Daughter of the River* (2000). Texts of the genre often include accounts of the perils of Chinese patriarchy, as well as political and social oppression and representations of feisty girls who surmount difficult obstacles. Sau-ling Wong has dubbed these narratives “Gone with the Wind epics”; she argues that “Virtually all involve a multigenerational family saga interwoven with violent historical events . . . as well as a culminating personal odyssey across the ocean to the West, signaling final ‘arrival’ in both a physical and ideological sense” (“Sugar Sisterhood” 200).² Such texts generally promote an Asian diasporic identity that assumes the superiority of the West over Asia and, at times, endorse an orientalizing vision of Chinese women’s oppression. Helena Grice posits that they conform to an “Escape from Asia Tradition” but also warns that superficial similarities between these texts often mask real differences in style, social circumstance, and focus (14). Indeed, Tse’s version of Lily’s life differs from other examples of the genre in that Lily did not live in mainland China and thus did not experience the Communist Takeover and Cultural Revolution, events which serve as focal points of the other texts. Nonetheless, Tse replicates many of the orientalizing impulses of the other narratives in her formulation of Chinese womanhood—the book is subtitled *The Courageous True Story of Three Generations of Chinese Women and their Journey from East to West*—and her privileging of her family’s story.

The story of Lily's life begins with her birth as one of six daughters in a poor family living in Guangzhou in 1918. The account of her childhood poverty—barely eating, having to work at a silk factory at the age of six—is balanced by her memories of a happy family life. Lily's father, Leung, an enterprising man who loves his daughters and stoically bears the death of three sons, begins a small soy sauce business. A combination of luck, hard work, and ambition allow him to prosper and he moves his family to Hong Kong. But, as Lily recounts, "Soy sauce reminds me of the fine line between ambition and greed in men. My father was a good man, an ambitious man, but those around him were full of greed. When greed motivates men, they will do anything. Take anything" (Tse 53). When a rival, jealous of the success her father achieves with his business, kills Leung in his factory, the family once again falls into poverty. Lily, who turns twelve the day her father dies, trains as an amah to work with European families living in the wealthy section of Hong Kong. As Tse recounts, serving as an amah allows Lily to learn about Western culture and, importantly, to cook, "[n]ot just Chinese food in all its forms, for many of her bosses were partial to the local cuisine, but also delicacies from all over the world, depending on the nationality of her employers" (87). This skill later serves her well in both Hong Kong and Britain.

Lily survives the Japanese occupation in Hong Kong, learning to speak Japanese to work as a translator and continuing to support her mother. After the war, Hong Kong becomes a more cosmopolitan city as colonial structures weaken and Chinese residents begin occupying more important positions in society. In 1953, the Woodmans, the family for whom Lily has worked for several years, ask her to move to England with them. The move forces Lily to make a dramatic choice, as she has a husband and two young children. Interestingly, Tse does not mention this detail until rather late in the narrative, partly because, as she explains, her grandmother rarely spoke of her grandfather. When she finally hears the story of her grandparents' meeting, Tse comments, "Of all the tales my grandmother has told me about her life, the most extraordinary is the story of how she met my grandfather. Cities make coincidences and Hong Kong provided the bizarre twist of fate that brought Lily and

Chan together, the sea delivering him up to her” (122–23). Lily first saw her future husband, Chan, when she was 13; she was walking by the sea to a fish market, and he lay on the shore, washed up after escaping his failed attempt at a robbery. Neither forgot the other and, years later, Chan met Lily’s mother, who thought he would be a suitable match for her daughter and invited him home. The couple married and had two children, Ah Dar (Arthur), born in 1947 and Bo Yee (Mabel), in 1950.

The romance, however, did not last long. Chan began gambling, abusing his wife, and spending Lily’s money on prostitutes, until the family once again became destitute: “As she strove to advance herself in the Western world, Chan let the marriage crumble as he burrowed himself more deeply into the seamier side of Hong Kong. . . . In the end she woke up one morning to the sudden knowledge that the marriage she had poured so much of herself into, was over” (138–39). Most dramatically, Lily found herself pregnant for the third time. In one of the memoir’s most painful scenes, Lily’s youngest child, Ah Bing, is adopted by a kind woman, Mrs. Lee, who promises to care for her: “They parted, both on the verge of tears—Mrs Lee in the knowledge that she would be a mother at last, Lily knowing both that she had done the most terrible thing and the only thing that she could. . . . Lily never forgot the baby she lost” (142). Moving to England with the Woodmans gives Lily freedom from Chan and allows her to support her mother and children, who remain in Hong Kong. When Mrs. Woodman dies, she leaves Lily a generous inheritance, which Lily uses to open a restaurant. The memoir then focuses on the rise and fall of Lung Fung, the first Chinese restaurant to open in Middleton, and Lily’s determination to make a life for herself and her children in England.

Tse situates Lily’s migration to Britain within a wider social and historical account of immigration:

The Chinese have been travelling to England for hundreds of years, arriving first as diplomats and traders in the seventeenth century. By the end of the nineteenth century enough sailors had settled in London to form the original ‘Chinatown’ in the Limehouse district, huddled round the docks. Emigration to

the north began in earnest in 1948, when the British Nationality Act gave New Commonwealth citizens the right to live and work in the U.K. Nearly 50,000 Chinese people came to the U.K. in the 1950s, usually gathering in the great ports of London, Cardiff, Liverpool and later, cities like Manchester. Generally they built their communities in places that kept them close to the trade routes from China, and those who made the long journey did what they could to survive. Usually they began in the laundry business, then they switched to food, opening restaurants and wholesaling goods. (181–82)

After using her grandmother's story to exemplify the Chinese immigration of the mid-twentieth century, Tse shifts her focus to Mabel's life in order to illustrate the second generation's complex negotiation of the border between Chinese identity and the British world. Mabel learns English at the age of nine and has to deal with Middleton's subtle racism. She eventually marries Eric, a Chinese immigrant who, like Mabel and her mother, is also a chef. Shortly thereafter, Lily and her son-in-law begin to gamble, causing the family to lose Lung Fung. Lily begins again with a small take-out restaurant. Mabel and Eric also open their own chip and curry shop, where Helen and her siblings are born and raised. The story comes full circle when, after successful careers in the business world, the Tse sisters decide to reclaim the family business and open a Chinese restaurant.

Reading *Sweet Mandarin* from the perspective of immigration history emphasizes the connections between individual life and collective experience. In drawing on her grandmother's and mother's stories, Tse writes the history of the Chinese on the mainland, in Hong Kong, and in Britain, unveiling layers of complex cultural experiences. In the process, she does not elide her family members' less positive actions, such as Chan's opium addiction, abuse, and unfaithfulness; Lily's giving her youngest daughter up for adoption; and the gambling habit that leads Lily to lose everything that took her decades to earn. As told by her granddaughter, Lily's story becomes a narrative of immigrant success, adaptation, misfortune, and recovery.

Tse emphasizes her own and her sisters' identification with Lily's and Mabel's stories through her family memoir and, perhaps more significantly, through their joint decision to open a Chinese restaurant. As she explains, many of her friends wondered how three professional women could leave their jobs to return to the restaurant trade. She realizes, however, that their decision is interpreted differently by the previous generation. This broader cultural acknowledgment sustains the sisters:

I remember old Chinese—the bosses of the established Chinese restaurants and supermarkets—smiling on us with respect. It was an acknowledgement that we were carrying the flickering, dimming torch for a new generation, and they wished their sons and daughters would do the same, keeping the community alive and handing down traditional recipes and family business know-how to their own children. (3)

This reflection highlights the sisters' location within a diasporic community. *Sweet Mandarin* evokes community narratives and community belonging as much as a personal search for the past.

A second approach to the memoir involves examining Tse's use of culinary tropes to structure and shape the personal story. Barbara Waxman suggests that "Food is clearly a link among generations of immigrants and exiles; those who cook and write about food are 'culture-tenders' and at the same time teach people outside the cultural community about that community's values, rituals, beliefs. These elements and others draw readers to food memoirs and inspire authors to pen them" (359). Tse consistently positions Chinese food and the restaurant as the focal point of her family's understanding of itself: "My sisters and I were immersed from birth in the Chinese catering business—the fourth generation of our family to make a living from food" (Tse 1). Understanding their place in the family business shapes their collective notion of womanhood: "I was taught a great deal of what it is to be a Chinese woman in the kitchen at my mother and grandmother's sides. Cooking is at the heart of the Chinese family and for a Chinese woman it is at the very core of her identity" (269). Tse's description supports sociologist Claude Fischler's idea that "Food not only nourishes but also signifies"

(276). The process of transforming raw materials into satisfying dishes is central to our subjectivity because this transformation operates in “the register of the imagination” more than the material (Fischler 284). *Sweet Mandarin* demonstrates how food and cooking are civilizing acts that reveal who we are, what values we defend, how we develop interpersonal relationships, and why we cook the way we do. Terry Eagleton sums up the signifying properties of food when he notes that food “is never just food—it is endlessly interpretable—materialised emotion” (204). Indeed, Tse continually notes how both positive and negative family memories are structured around food: when Lily talks about her childhood, “it’s the aroma of food that she remembers first” (Tse 21); Leung’s soy sauce business leads the family to Hong Kong; Mabel “still finds the smells and sounds of a Chinese kitchen comforting” (203); Eric and Mabel’s courtship centered on the food they missed such as “pigs’ trotters in vinegar or ducks’ feet with black beans and bean curd” (214); and Tse describes her home as a “one-family melting pot” (215). When recounting Lily’s life, Tse marks time through the food her grandmother learned to cook: “These were the years when she learned to make the delicious ‘claypot chicken’ twice baked with shitake mushrooms, and created a savoury sauce for serving the sweet *lap cheong* sausages of the village feast days” (87). Several of the text’s chapter titles foreground food: “The Little Sack of Rice,” “Soy Sauce Delight,” “Bitter Melon,” “Chips, Chips, Chips,” and “Buhhda’s Golden Picnic Basket.” The epigraph of the first chapter is a Chinese proverb that focuses on food as well: “To the ruler, the people are Heaven; to the people, food is Heaven” (1). Both in its content and form, the memoir stresses the effects of Chinese food on Tse’s family solidarity, connections to the past, the material conditions of the family, and family memories.

The basic tenets of the cultural anthropology of food establish that cooking and eating serve humans’ most immediate biological needs and also construct the ritualized spaces of social occasions and situations. Cooking and eating are ways of building social identity and community solidarity. Food, as a symbol, conveys different meaning to people depending on historical, social, gender, economic, sexual, racial, and ethnic contexts. William Boelhower argues that “there are few moments

like the ethnic feast where ethnic identity can be so positively affirmed and socially reinforced,” and stresses that such feasts are “perhaps one of the best and most transparent literary topoi” for reading the ways ethnic subjects create meanings in their texts (113). Understanding the centrality of food—in both its practical and symbolic uses—leads to the recognition of its significance for ethnic identity formation. Food in ethnic literature may be examined as a code that expresses a “pattern of social relations,” reading the contents and sequencing of meals as texts (Douglas 61). Moreover, the description of food and meals plays a fundamental role in Asian diasporic writing; the alimentary images shape the texts’ aesthetic and cultural work. The focus, in many cases, is on “how eating and drinking constitute an elaborate and complex sign language which metonymically brackets and informs all aspects of discourse and human experience” (Hinz v). It is important, then, to understand food in *Sweet Mandarin* both as a part of material culture and as a figurative symbol that invites readers to think about how family and community relations can be structured. As many scholars suggest, food conveys the values of a society and nation to the world; food images often indicate acceptance of or prejudice against others.³

Importantly, food takes on nostalgic significance in the context of diaspora. Asian diaspora memoirs use food images as a way to know oneself and one’s family’s place in the world. Moral values and meals are complexly interwoven: the giving, receiving, eating, and serving of food become a means of signifying. Anita Mannur suggests that “Food therefore becomes a potent symbol for signifying the ethnic integrity of [diasporic Asians], serving both as a placeholder for marking cultural distinctiveness and as a palliative for dislocation” (“Culinary Nostalgia” 13). In her memoir *Meatless Days*, Sara Suleri writes that expatriates reveal their investments in their homelands through their preservation of traditional foodways, leading them to become “adamant, entirely passionate about such matters as the eating habits of the motherland” (22). In Asian diaspora history, “food and eating do not simply fulfill necessities; rather they serve as an index to a material history of survival, adaptation, ingenuity, and hybridization—a triumphant history of overcoming adversities” (Xu 8). From Leung’s soy sauce business to

the sisters' current restaurant, Tse's family story emphasizes the relationship between particular food and the family's fortunes. Lily's first journey to England foregrounds Lily's quest to perfect what later becomes her signature dish. Terribly seasick on the six-week voyage, Lily asks the ship's cooks if they would allow her to cook, and thus:

It was on the SS *Canton* that my grandmother began to experiment with the new techniques and ingredients she found on her journey, and it was here that the dish that made her name as a restaurateur came to fruition: Lily Kwok's Chicken Curry. Her elder sister Sui had married a Singaporean man and emigrated there, and from Sui's husband Lily learned to add a smooth coconut base to a curry. On the way to Malaysia she stirred in some self-raising flour to make it lighter and creamier, and in India she perfected the mix of spices that formed the hot core of the gravy. By the time they arrived in Gibraltar it was approaching perfection, and the crew clamoured for her to serve it up every night. (158)

Tse emphasizes not only the transnational process—voyage and ingredients—that lead to her grandmother's most famous recipe but also traces how cooking allowed a *route* to provide her with *roots*, connecting her to both her past in China and to her future in England.

Closely connected to the metaphor of food, the Chinese restaurant also occupies a crucial place in the articulation of ethnic consciousness. Tse figures her grandmother as a herald of the development of Asian cuisine in Britain: "She realised that Britain had given her an opportunity not just to climb the social ladder but to really make a difference to her adopted home. She may not have altogether integrated into British society, but she found her place and she could use her restaurant to bring joy to its people" (197). Lily's restaurant is presented as a crucial step in a process of mutual acculturation—the Chinese making it in Britain and Britain's taste changing to accept ethnic food as home food:

Lily made [Lung Fung] a place that served its community, a place where the local builder, the priest and the policeman

could share a table. The food must be good, the portions generous and the prices affordable—golden rules for anyone who wants to set up a customer base. . . . She was sensible enough to recognise that it would take a while for the British people who'd been raised on plain stews and boiled vegetables to venture a helping of spicy Chinese food, so she made special offers of the more adventurous dishes and kept on smiling. . . . By the 1970s Chinese food had evolved from an exotic delicacy to a cheap, regular indulgence, and takeaways and restaurants opened up in every city and town. (184–85)

Theoretically, therefore, culinary acculturation implies cultural familiarity. Describing the role of the Chinese restaurant in British culture, Tse seems to suggest that a kind of cultural harmony and understanding might have been achieved. This, of course, is more problematic than the author probably realizes, and Tse elides a more nuanced discussion of the realities of the place of the Chinese in contemporary British society.

Mannur argues that the desire to remember the past through the recreation of culinary memories is not simply a nostalgic gesture: “such nostalgically-framed narratives must also be read as metacritiques of what it means to route memory and nostalgic longing for a homeland through one’s relationship to seemingly intractable culinary practices which yoke national identity with culinary taste and practices” (“Culinary Nostalgia” 13). Mannur uses the term “culinary citizenship” to describe a form of connection “which grants subjects the ability to claim and inhabit certain subject positions via their relationship to food” (13). Though Tse writes her family story to emphasize her connection to generations of strong women, she pointedly classifies them as *women who cook*, validating her own current position as a restaurateur: “Lily and my mother, Mabel, inspired and shaped much of what I have done with my life: my success at school and in business; my return to the catering trade; my journey back to China to rediscover my roots, and in doing so, discovering her roots too. Her story is my story, and it’s the story of Sweet Mandarin” (1). Further, she explains, “[my sisters and I have] have drawn a kind of comfort and confidence in our Chineseness

through food, and Sweet Mandarin is the expression of all this, a true labour of love” (240).

Tse’s discussion of Sweet Mandarin leads to the vexed question of the marketing of ethnicity. In her study, *Shopping for Identity*, Marilyn Halter argues that, beginning in the late twentieth century, objects become extensions of selves and individuals increasingly reflect and create the ethnic components of their identity through what they purchase and, by extension, what they eat. Thus, “through the consumption of ethnic goods and services, immigrants and their descendants modify and signal ethnic identities in social settings no longer sharply organized around ethnic group boundaries and the migration experience” (Halter 7). The marketing, sale, and consumption of ethnic, particularly Asian, food as a business but, more vitally, as a symbol for superficial ethnic appreciation, connects with cultural positioning in an increasingly transnational world. While ethnic food conveys a sense of continuity and rootedness for members of that ethnic group, particularly because ethnic eating often revolves around ritual and ceremony, it also gives non-members a sense of participation in rituals that appear to define the group. Indeed, eating “ethnic food” promotes, at best, imaginary access to the group and, at worst, a romanticized vision of interethnic understanding and harmony. Thus, Tse’s story of the opening of her restaurant becomes a narrative of alleged interethnic comprehension and unity. The success of Sweet Mandarin, she implies, stems from the British appreciation of the history of the Chinese in Britain, and vice versa, as learning about the culture through food supports intercommunity understanding.

But this process is less straightforward than Tse maintains. Parker suggests that North American and European societies’ seemingly effortless appropriation of Asian food might actually reflect a preference “for uncomplicated forms of cultural fusion: eating multicultural variety is often easier than practising a real politics of ethnic desegregation and inter-racial contact,” as though problems of cultural difference might be solved by eating the same food (“The Chinese Takeaway” 88). The apparent ease with which the British have become comfortable with Asian food—Chinese and Indian, in particular—overlooks continuing difficulties in society. The experience of people eating the same food in

the same restaurant does not translate directly to a similar familiarity outside that particularly “ethnicized” space, though Tse does not note a problem. Indeed, she states:

Being Chinese in Britain is not problematic. We’re seen as hardworking, law-abiding, quiet people who just get on with our lives and pay our taxes. Sometimes we almost feel like an invisible minority that’s just dropped off the radar. I hope we can have the best of both worlds—integration into Britain while keeping the Chinese values that underlie all our achievements. (240)

Though Tse recounts memories of specific experiences of racism as a child, her current perspective conceals a more insidious reality. Acceptance or belonging is articulated in terms of continuing to be model citizens (that is, hard-working and non-confrontational) and conforming to the status quo (paying taxes), while providing the mainstream with the illusion of harmony through the sharing of ethnic food. She writes, “we were determined that we had to create a restaurant which expressed what we were—British-born Chinese in the twentieth century—and where we’d come from. We were passionate about the food that was our culture and our family inheritance, and we wanted to do it justice. We wanted people to look at it with fresh eyes and taste it with a fresh palate” (264). This performance of ethnicity, however, is predicated on their conformity to British paradigms of acceptable ethnic cultural products and behaviour, implying that the restaurant ultimately serves its customers what they expect to receive.

In the context of diasporic survival, Wong points to a hazardous exploitative form of self-orientalization that, following Frank Chin, she calls “‘food pornography’: making a living by exploiting the ‘exotic’ aspects of one’s ethnic foodways. In cultural terms it translates to reifying perceived cultural differences and exaggerating one’s otherness in order to gain a foothold in a white-dominated social system” (*Reading* 55). Historically, as Tse demonstrates, Chinese immigrants opened restaurants in Britain in order to survive: as with Asian immigrants in the U.S. or Canada, food production and service allowed them to gain a

foothold in their adopted country (Xu 10). Tse's deliberate link between the production of her memoir and the inauguration and development of her restaurant raises questions as to whether she plays into an exoticization of Chineseness or "food pornography." In fairness, Tse's perspective on the place of the Chinese community in Britain does not attend to the complex discursive paradigms of current diaspora theory; her position and ideas grow from the lived experience of a middle-class British-born Chinese woman who studied law at Cambridge. Yet the deliberate linking of the restaurant and the book by their names and the images associated with them—the restaurant's menu cover is identical to the book's jacket—points to a suspiciously contrived authorial strategy for connection. On occasion, Tse weaves details about the restaurant into her narrative, as she does when introducing the story of her philandering grandfather:

We have a cocktail bar at Sweet Mandarin with traditional Chinese spirits to go alongside the Smirnoff and the Jack Daniels bottles. There are strong spirits called mourai, three snakes liquor, plum wine, lychee wine and rice wine all racked up in colourful bottles with vivid, enticing labels. They may look innocuous but the alcohol is 40 per cent proof—enough to take the top off your head. We serve a snake blood cocktail which is irresistible to young men who want to prove their mettle on a Friday night out. (104)

Such descriptions highlight the kind of self-orientalization Tse, perhaps unconsciously, engages in, and serve as another strategy for creating the illusion of cultural understanding that communal consumption of ethnic food provides. Tse seems to hope that people who come to the restaurant might be inspired to read her family memoir; conversely, readers of the memoir are led by the evocative descriptions of food and the stories behind them to want to sample Sweet Mandarin's fare. Unlike other memoirs that focus on food, such as Leslie Li's *A Daughter of Heaven: A Memoir with Earthly Recipes* or Shoba Narayan's *Monsoon Diaries: A Memoir with Recipes*, Tse, perhaps strategically, does not include any recipes—the better to get people to come and try the food at

the restaurant, rather than in their own homes. Lily's chicken curry, for example, is described in great detail:

It's got something potent about it—I've heard customers wondering if it was laced with something or other that kept them hooked and coming back for more. That makes me smile. I know Lily's chicken curry doesn't need any gimmicks—its principles are simple and its ingredients are well-sourced and those are the only foundations it needs. There's the aroma of the roasted garlic, onion and spices, and the sauce that's thick and creamy but still lets a taste of the meat through, even if beef has been substituted for chicken. The spices are hot enough to give it a bite, but its mood is hot, sweet and aromatic all at once. (206–07)

As Tse tellingly notes in another context, “you cannot separate business and family in Chinese culture, one feeds into the other and they're both dependent on each other” (239). For Tse, the family business and the family story come together in both the restaurant and the memoir. Indeed, she illustrates Waxman's idea that “culinary memoirists, as they recall earliest food memories, aren't simply retrieving memories but are actually refashioning them, in part through the lenses of their mature food professionalism; they self-consciously try to show the seeds of their ‘foodiness’ and how they blossomed into sophisticated gourmands, food critics, food memoirists, restaurateurs, and, often, public figures” (Waxman 362). The idea of *Sweet Mandarin*, memoir and restaurant, makes sense only as a linked project.⁴

Tse's emphasis on the interconnection between the Chinese restaurant and the diasporic family memoir suggests a commodification of cultural otherness analogous to what Graham Huggan calls the “postcolonial exotic.” This entrenched Western cultural attitude, he explains, seeks otherness in cultural artefacts, rendering “people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery” (13). For Huggan, “late twentieth-century exoticisms are the products less of the expansion of the nation than of a worldwide *market*—exoti-

cism has shifted, that is, from a more or less privileged mode of aesthetic perception to an increasingly global mode of mass-market consumption" (15; emphasis in original). By promoting a restaurant that serves "exotic" food, I argue, Tse enters into a discourse of cosmopolitanism which, Huggan contends, might be read either positively as a "synonym for cultural tolerance or 'reciprocal interconnectedness'" or negatively as "a cover for new forms of ethnocentrism or as a mystification of the continuing asymmetries of power within inclusive conceptions of global power" (Huggan 11). Huggan argues that the notion of "commodity fetishism," the defining aspects of which include the "mystification (or levelling-out) of historical experience; imagined access to the cultural other through the process of consumption; [and] reification of people and places into exchangeable aesthetic objects," helps postcolonial authors achieve "an almost talismanic status" (19). The fetishization of cultural otherness often neglects the social and cultural contexts of the objects of interest. The peril of Tse's culinary self-orientalizing lies in her active role in promoting the commodification of Chinese immigrant culture—through cuisine—by pandering to the mainstream's eager consumption of food *as* culture in an effortless (and tasty) path towards an imagined cosmopolitanism. By consistently foregrounding the author/restaurant owner as Chinese and emphasising her family's history, Tse validates the text's and the restaurant's "authenticity" and opens them up for commercial exploitation. Within this process of marketing ethnicity, exchange remains primarily symbolic, both part of the mechanism of cultural self-fashioning and lip-service paid to political correctness.

Tse's project in *Sweet Mandarin* is coded ambivalently and situated at a critical juncture in diaspora studies. Ostensibly a family memoir of immigrant adaptation through food, it is also an orientalizing of that story with a dual commercial venture in mind: a book that sells a restaurant and a restaurant that sells a book. Using the trope of food and highlighting the immigrant's culinary nostalgia, Tse promotes a situation where readers become customers and customers, readers. But, as Halter observes, "without consumer goods, certain acts of self-definition in this culture would be impossible. . . . [W]hether we like it or not, we are all deeply immersed in a commodity-driven, consumer culture

that daily shapes who we are and how we define ourselves” (8, 198). And, to be sure, commercialized articulations of ethnic identity are not always empty or profit-driven gestures. The market, Halter explains, also “serves to foster greater awareness of ethnic identity, offers immediate possibilities for cultural participation, and can even act as an agent of change in the process” (14). Tse certainly seems to believe so as she enacts, through a memoir (itself a crucial ethnic commodity) that draws in the multiple stands of family loyalty, ethnic appreciation, and community empowerment. Lily’s advice—“When you cook, you are sharing your heart. So cook enthusiastically” (269)—has clearly been taken up by her daughter in these twinned projects.

Notes

- 1 For a full-length study of Asian diasporic family memoirs, see my *Relative Histories: Reading Asian American Family Memoirs*.
- 2 Some of the authors Wong lists as participating in the genre include Bette Bao Lord, Nien Cheng, C.Y. Lee, Linda Ching Sledge, Jung Chang, and Lillian Lee.
- 3 See Deer’s “Eating the Eurasian Text,” Mannur’s “‘Peeking Ducks’ and ‘Food Pornographers’” and “Culinary Nostalgia,” Liu’s “Chop Suey as Imagined Authentic Chinese Food,” Parker’s “The Chinese Takeaway and the Diasporic Habitus,” Roy’s “Reading Communities and Culinary Communities,” and Xu’s *Eating Identities* for more detailed discussions of food imagery and the Asian diaspora.
- 4 The restaurant’s website (<http://www.sweetmandarin.com/>) includes a link that allows visitors to order the book (and forthcoming cookbook).

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