Chinese Food in Australia:

Diaspora, taste, and affect

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Abstract

This thesis examines the political and cultural significance of Chinese food in Australia by considering its specific discourses and representations. It begins by mapping the politicised history of early Chinese food in the 19th century and considers the circumstances underpinning its emergence and later proliferation. Building on cultural studies scholarship about migration and food from Australia and the United States, this thesis examines the interrelated link between migration and the generation of new cultural products. I reframe westernised Chinese food as an innovative and necessary response from the Chinese community. By identifying the adaptable and creative nature of Chinese food (and people), I problematise the belief that westernised Chinese food is “inauthentic” and a complete victim to western supremacy. This thesis indicates how Chinese food is an effective place from which to understand differences, identity, and power. Situating Chinese food in the 21st century, I analyse how notions and tastes for it have changed over time, within the Chinese Australian diaspora and more broadly. With a focus on material examples and auto-ethnography, I examine how intergenerational and cultural differences in the diaspora can influence what we eat and how we eat. Cautious not to undermine the structuring effects of racism and class privilege in food discourses, I consider how whiteness and middle-upper class “tastemakers” shape how we perceive and relate to Chinese food. Finally, this thesis considers the capacities of Chinese food by looking at the visceral feelings and affects it can produce. I examine how commensality (eating together) can help encourage new ways of thinking, feeling, sharing, and relating. Ultimately, this thesis moves toward a view of Chinese food that embraces multiplicities and variance, as opposed to singularities and tradition.
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Have you eaten yet?

As Doreen Yen Hung Feng points out in her book *The Joy of Chinese Cooking*, when there is more than one Chinese family in a city, you will inevitably find a Chinese restaurant in the vicinity (cited in Roberts, 2002: 197). The ubiquity of Chinese food in Australia is fascinating. One does not need to roam far before stumbling across a restaurant, bistro, or take-out shop serving some iteration of Chinese food. It is everywhere, from regional mining hubs to coastal retirement towns. It makes appearances on the menus of ritzy cosmopolitan restaurants, but is also no stranger to suburban food court bain-maries. Chinese food has carved a space for itself in Australia, embedding itself in the socio-cultural and material architecture of the nation. Prominent broadcaster and writer Annette Shun-Wah once said that:

[Chinese] food is more than just a convenient motif for looking at Chinese Australian settlement. It provides an accessible means of examining how these people have survived so successfully in what has been a largely hostile and intolerant dominant culture (1999: 25).

As Shun-Wah’s comment suggests, Chinese food is not produced or consumed in a vacuum, it is always situated: culturally, historically, spatially, and temporally. I want to think about Chinese food as a construction, a fabric that is woven of multiple overlapping, entangled, and loose strings.

I want to start this thesis by sharing some personal insights and circumstances through which I have found myself interested and impassioned by Chinese food. My birth parents migrated to Sydney, Australia in the early 1990s from Tianjin, a port city in northeastern mainland China. After my birth parents divorced, my mother, step-father, and I moved to a small coastal town in regional Australia in New South Wales. I grew up in an environment that was overwhelmingly white, working class, and suburban. As you could imagine, my difference and distance from whiteness was something I had internalised from an early age. But beyond the physical embodiments of that
which categorised me as Other, what also fell under interrogation at times were my cultural practices, customs, and family life. Eating habits and food, of course, fell into this spectrum.

It is safe to say that the majority of my childhood lunchtime meals consisted of spinach and ricotta rolls, and hot chips from the school canteen. This was because firstly, and in a material sense, my mother simply did not have the time and capacity to pack my lunches in between her jobs and responsibilities as a carer (to her retired-veteran husband). And secondly, in an embodied and symbolic sense, I had internalised a lot of shame towards Chinese food, and perhaps “Chineseness” in general. Chinese food was something that I consumed and engaged with “behind closed doors”, in the private sphere of home, shielded and removed from external judgement. When time permitted, my mother would prepare delicious Chinese dishes for myself and my step-father to enjoy. I linger on the visceral memories of her making dumplings (jiǎozi) on the weekend, and how it would often be a day-consuming process. ¹ Going to the nearest Asian grocer (more than an hour away), tending to the dough, folding and crimping dumpling skins, and of course, steaming and serving them with a side of vinegar.

It was not long before Chinese food moved from being a private affair to a public one. When my mother accepted a job as a chef in a local Returned and Services League (RSL) club, I was later employed as her kitchen hand and we worked there for several years. ² We served the kind of dishes that are most readily associated with Australian, or “westernised” Chinese cuisine: honey chicken, chow mien, and egg omelet (just to name a few). And now, more than five years later and in a different context, Chinese food is something that I sporadically prepare and enjoy in the company of my friends. Perhaps the easiest way to summarise my relationship to Chinese food is to draw on

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¹ Jiǎozi is the mandarin Chinese word for dumplings.

² RSL is an acronym for returned and services.
a favoured analogy – the ebb and flow of a tide. Like a body of water (choppy, smooth, unrelenting, and glistening), Chinese food has always felt consistent, despite its various different guises. It has weaved itself, temporally and spatially, into my life; affecting how I engage with my immediate/pre-mediate world and those enwrapped in it. And like water, Chinese food is reflective.

My thesis follows a historical order and is thematically based. I rely primarily on discourse analysis and each chapter is driven with a focus on one or two main theories, with others woven throughout. In some ways, my writing is a culmination of twenty-two years of how I have experienced, observed, and learned about Chinese food in Australia. With this in mind, I have deliberately chosen to include auto-ethnographical material, including anecdotal and observation-based examples. And while it goes without saying that my subjectivities play a role in this project, I wish to stress that I do not claim to be an authority on Chinese food. I am primarily interested in how Chinese food can be talked about, related to, re-invented, and re-interpreted in the Chinese Australian diaspora (and beyond). Finally, while I strongly believe it is valuable to explore the politicised history of Chinese food from a standpoint of creative migrant resistance, it is not my intention to disregard the role of migration in continuing colonial dispossession. A broader conversation about how migration and migrant economies benefit from the colonial structuring of Australia and the continuing denial of Indigenous sovereignty is one that needs to be discussed.

In Chapter One, ‘Striking Gold: Chinese food beginnings and assemblages’, I provide a rich historical overview of how Chinese food arrived and proliferated in Australia. I begin by locating early waves of Chinese settlement in the gold rush period, emphasising the inextricable link between transnational migration and the creation of food economies/ecologies. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1988) describe assemblages as arrangements which only exist in connection with other arrangements (cited in Probyn, 2000: 17). They argue we should consider the generative
affects of bodies in collision, and the forms of multiplicities and metamorphoses that can become of such interactions. Karen Cardozo and Banu Subramaniam (2013) build on this idea by emphasising how ‘plants, animals, viruses, bacteria, objects, humans, cultures and natures have come to be constituted and reconstituted in very deliberate and particular ways’ (2013: 3). In other words, assemblages are always contingent on spatial, temporal, historical and cultural contexts. Following this, I suggest that it is valuable to consider Chinese food in Australia as an assemblage of human, nonhuman, and conceptual bodies.

I explore how the perceived threat of Chinese migrants to the stability and identity of “White Australia” was enforced through racially discriminatory policies and xenophobic attitudes (Hornadge, 1971). When the Chinese were actively barred from participating in gold mining, these migrants were forced to spread diffusely into other regions to avoid violence and discrimination, which resulting in a number of developments. Firstly, it led to the fortification of Chinatowns, ethnic enclaves where the Chinese community had a shared space to: relate, communicate, and strategise. Secondly, since other sources of income were then needed in order for the Chinese to be self-sufficient, food emerged as an opportunistic means of self-preservation in a largely hostile political context. And thirdly, following on from the last, Chinese migrants were forced to invent styles of cooking which would invite and tantalise Anglo-Celtic tastes. This, I argue, is the premise for what has been coined the ‘westernisation’ of Chinese food.

I assert that the emergence and operationalisation of Chinese food was a tactical response to Anglo-Celtic xenophobia. Through food, Chinese migrants were able to circumvent racist regulations which sought to curtail their movements and freedoms in Australia. They re-invented Chinese food by playing with traditions and creating a remixed style of cooking which was appealing and accessible to the Anglo-Celtic population. These were the conditions under which
Australian people began developing a taste for Chinese food. This innovation allowed the Chinese community to generate an active and sustainable food economy, which offered financial stability (and a degree of) political mobility. For these reasons, I argue that Chinese food has a deeply politicised history which offers an unique insight into the struggles of early migrants. All things considered, Chinese food in Australia cannot be said to have generated out of “nothingness”. This ubiquitous industry spawned out of a series of interwoven ideologies, practices, objects, policies, people, movements, and collaborations.

In Chapter Two, ‘Diaspora Taste/s: How migration, class, and race influence notions of taste’, I build on the historical groundwork that I lay out in Chapter One by bringing my analysis into contemporary Australia. I acknowledge how Australians of today are equipped with a far richer and broader understanding of Chinese food, and how this can be attributed to a steady influx of migrants arriving from mainland China to major cosmopolitan cities (such as Sydney). I paint a vivid picture of the current state of Chinese food in Australia by exploring: the growing demand for regionally specific Chinese cuisines, the emergence of modern and fine-dining restaurants, and the evergreen status of Chinese takeout shops. Compared to the cookhouse shacks built on the goldfields and hazy teahouse eateries in early Chinatowns, the increasingly globalised and mobilised world breaks open and restructures the Chinese food assemblage in exponential terms. I argue that Chinese food is not a fixed entity; rather, it morphs and is always situated spatially and temporally.

Following the idea of Chinese food being an effervescent and fluid assemblage, I consider how notions and embodiments of taste are also subject to change over time and space. Drawing on Ien Ang’s (2001) description of diaspora as a literal ‘scattering of seeds’ (2001: 49), I consider how tastes for Chinese food differ between generations in the Chinese Australian diaspora. From these
‘seeds’, new cultural products, rituals, and ‘ways of knowing’ are subject to germinate and mutate depending on their external surroundings. In this sense, I argue the the Chinese Australian diasporic subject has ‘multiple senses of belonging across time and space’ (Curthoys, 2001: 17). Drawing these ideas into notions of taste, I follow Parama Roy’s (2010) suggestion that ‘dietary belonging is no longer tied to a place or context but becomes part of the portable apparatus of embodied practices that actually has the greatest effect by being set adrift in the world’ (2010: 22). I ask, how are food and eating practices transformed, remixed, and renegotiated in the Chinese Australian diaspora? How might recipes change, or perhaps, cease to exist? And in essence, how do tastes change?

In examining notions of taste, I draw on and contrast the works of Pierre Bourdieu (1979/1984) and Antoine Hennion (2007). It was Bourdieu who famously stated that ‘taste distinguishes in an essential way, since taste is the basis of all that one has’ (cited in Probyn, 2000: 26). I explore his argument that tastes are embodied and relatively fixed through our habitus, that is, the deeply ingrained habits, dispositions, and skills that we gain through life experience. And further, that our class position irrefutably shapes the way in which our tastes form. Taking into account criticisms about Bourdieu’s theory being un-dynamic due to its ‘preoccupation with the reproduction of culture from generation to generation’, I argue that his notion of taste as static and duplicable is incongruent within the frame of migration and diaspora (Mennell et al., 1992: 12, cited in Probyn, 2000: 27). In my argument I draw on concrete examples of how my tastes differ greatly from my mothers’ on account of several variables. I argue that intergenerational diasporic tastes are subject to change due to: the adoption of different cultural norms, involvement with distinct and separate social groups, and being unable to communicate fluently in the same language.
Searching for another model of taste, I refer to Hennion’s (2007) idea that taste (or ‘tasting’) is an active process which involves the individual being reflexive about their actions and participation in an event. For Hennion, ‘taste is not an attribute, it is not a property (of a thing or of a person), it is an activity’ (2007: 101). Comparing and analysing the differences between Bourdieu’s and Hennion’s articulation of taste, I suggest that understanding taste as a fluid and situated practice is vital when considering how diaspora influences food. To understand how tastes for Chinese food are reconstituted in a creative process marked doubly by tradition and innovation, I draw on commentary from notable Chinese Australian diasporic chef, Kylie Kwong.

However, far from obfuscating Bourdieu’s valid critique of systemic power, I consider how Chinese food in Australia is still highly influenced and shaped by structural inequalities and relations of power. I argue that the reigning authority and voice on what constitutes “good” and “bad” Chinese food is typically white and middle-upper class. By analysing the work of highly praised, Australian modern-Chinese chefs (Neil Perry), I argue that the food industry is still largely predicated on white tastes being the implicit and objective point of reference. Beyond the identity politics of cultural appropriation in food, my argument is that we must consider the economic and cultural exploitation of Chinese food. I assert it is unethical for Chinese migrants (and their histories) to be unacknowledged and erased, despite their significance to the construction of a ubiquitous food culture that is so voraciously produced and consumed.

In Chapter Three, ‘Eating Together: Visceral feelings and Chinese food affects’, I build on my complication of taste in the Chinese Australian diaspora and attempt to address the key problematics raised in Chapter Two regarding racialised and classed power structures in food. My focus for the final chapter is to examine the potential of our bodies to generate new meanings and relationships to
Chinese food. I discuss how the re-signification of Chinese food and its visceral affects may help mediate how we talk about and understand power, difference, and identity. Further, thinking about Chinese food through a visceral lens may offer productive solutions to wider socio-political concerns, including racism, sexism, and classism. My analysis takes a turn to the personal, as I aim to consider the “hidden” affective potentials of Chinese food: how sensory experiences have a unique potential to become a catalyst for change, both through the self and in relation to others.

I borrow from the work of Allison Hayes-Conroy and Jessica Hayes-Conroy (2008) in their emphasis on visceral feelings and embodiments. They suggest that, ‘In emphasizing a visceral politics we are not advocating a move towards individualistic forms of being-political; rather, we move towards a radically relational view of the world’ (2008: 462). In the context of migration and diaspora, which is predicated on the movement of people and generation of culture, this relational perspective is deeply valuable. I argue that paying attention to the visceral senses (sight, smell, sound, touch, and taste), for migrants in particular, can reveal a lot about emotional and affective relations to ‘place’. Touching again on Ien Ang (2001) and Ann Curthoys (2001) who I cite in Chapter Two, I suggest that eating Chinese food and experiencing visceral feelings, is one way to intervene in the sense of ‘rootlessness’ experienced by (some) diasporic subjects.

Citing Robyn Longhurst, Lynda Johnston, and Elsie Ho (2009), I focus on how food can help migrants to create a sense of “home” in a new country. The kitchen, according to Longhurst and others, becomes ‘both the heart and the hearth of the home’; a space where migrant women are able to stay connected to home through sensory experiences and visceral feelings (2009: 338). To unpack this idea, I provide a detailed analysis and observation of events in which my mother prepares and eats Chinese food with her friends. Counter to previous feminist scholars who have termed the
kitchen as a ‘domestic jail’ that hinders women’s participation in public space, I argue that for racialised migrants, this glorified ‘public space’ can feel hostile and alienating (Maria Elisa Christie, 2006: 654., cited in Longhurst et al., ibid: 338). In this context, the kitchen becomes a safe and transformative space in which migrant women can form new ways of relating (to the self) and where inter-cultural community bonds may be made and maintained.

I also turn towards my own body in an attempt to understand what cooking, eating, and sharing Chinese food is capable of. I identify the basic set of affects (shame, interest, surprise, joy, anger, fear, distress, and disgust) and consider how bodily responses and sensations are as much random, as they are relational. The main object of study I incorporate here is a dinner party that I organised for a small group of friends, in which I prepared three Chinese dishes from scratch. In examining how Chinese food is capable of eliciting a broad spectrum of affects in my body, I argue that eating can magnify how our bodies are not just comprised of material flesh, but also ‘bits of past and present practice, openings, attachments to parts of the social, closings and aversion[s]’ (Probyn, 2000: 18). It follows then, that sharing food with others, can be an opportunistic window into sharing parts of ourselves with others. I conclude that affects, thoughts, and ideas shared through food can be a transformative event. The productive capacity of Chinese food lays in how it can be a catalyst for the for connection, story-sharing, and imagining.

In summary, it is my sincere hope that this thesis will offer an insightful analysis of Chinese food in Australia. I aim to foreground its politicised history, as marked by migrant driven resistance, innovation, and resilience. Challenge Eurocentric presumptions and definitions of Chinese food which may render it static and depleted of its cultural and political context. Seek to offer a new way of thinking through Chinese food as an entanglement of power, difference, and identity. With these
goals in mind, I intend to move towards a more empathetic and caring framework of talking about Chinese food. One that involves reflexivity and participation, and sharing (in) the experiences of Chinese migrants in Australia. Finally, it is my overarching hope that this thesis will re-centre migration as a source of growth, as opposed to loss.
Striking Gold: Chinese food beginnings and political resistance

I will begin by exploring how Chinese food first came to exist and proliferate in Australia by mapping early Chinese migration and their development of local economies/ecologies. Drawing on Karen Cardozo and Banu Subramaniam’s (2013) argument that we should consider objects from a natureculture perspective, I explore how Chinese food has been constructed along both nature and culture axes, as opposed to strictly one of the two categories. When considered with regard to the socio-political context of the time, it is clear that Chinese food was not spontaneously born into existence in Australia; it came to fruition as a result of many disparate but relational factors. Following this, I also embrace Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s (1993) notion of rhizomes, ‘a type of plant, such as a potato plant or an orchid, that, instead of having taproots, spreads its shoots outwards, where new roots can sprout off old’ (cited in Probyn, 2000: 17). This idea is helpful in thinking through Chinese food, not as a static object with neat boundaries, but as a complex arrangement with entangled relations to humans, nonhumans, practices, ideologies, and ecosystems. As I will go on to discuss, Chinese food may best be considered an assemblage of bodies with relational flows that connect it outwards.

Andrew Markus (2001) estimates that over 100,000 Chinese migrated to Australian colonies over the course of the nineteenth century (2001: 69). Though documentation is scarce, it is believed the first Chinese settlers were indentured labourers who worked across different colonies in various roles as plantation workers, miners, servants, and furniture makers (“Chinatowns across Australia.” Australian Government). Western Australia was experiencing a severe labour shortage at the time, so a vast majority of indentured Chinese
labourers were sent there (ibid). Many of the Chinese who first arrived were from southeastern provinces in mainland China, including Guangdong and Fujian. Their rural upbringing and background equipped them with skills in agriculture and water management, which were highly sought after at the time (ibid). Following the discovery of gold in New South Wales and Victoria in the following decade, large numbers of Chinese flocked to the colonies. In fact, by 1858 the Chinese population in Victoria had reached approximately 40,000: almost 25 per cent of gold miners at the time (ibid). Contrary to the popular belief of Chinese migrants banding together in large groups, an idea likely exacerbated by racist propaganda, most Chinese travelled between the colonies in small groups (ibid). In this way, early Chinese Australian settlement can best be described as being dispersed. In the 1871 New South Wales census, more than 75 rural districts and 54 towns reported having Chinese populations of less than ten (ibid).

This unpredictable and multidirectional migration sprawl typical of the Chinese is an idea I will return to later in this chapter, but for now, we will continue examining the specificities of their settlement. As deposits of gold in the fields diminished, a large proportion of Chinese miners were re-employed as: market gardeners, farmers, station servants, storekeepers, hawkers, and peddlers (Markus, 2001: 69-70). Employment options dwindled across all the colonies, but many were able to find work in the far north where, at least, the agricultural industry was revving. The Chinese found opportunities growing corn and rice throughout Queensland, and were particularly involved in the banana industry, which saw large quantities of produce being exported to southern capitals of the country (Markus, 2001: 70).

Beyond how the Chinese sustained themselves economically, food and eating were (of
course) other necessities. As I mentioned earlier, the earliest Chinese migrants arrived from south-eastern regions of mainland China. A large percentage of the community were from a province called Guangdong, where the food takes on a distinctive Cantonese flair (Barbara Nichol, 2008: 10). Cantonese cuisine is typically characterised by fresh fruit and vegetables, fish, poultry, pork, and rice. It is often described as using light seasoning and clean cooking methods to bring out the natural freshness of the produce ("Regional Cuisine." Ibiblio). However, Chinese food had not been monetised until 1854 when the first documented Chinese restaurant opened at Bakery Hill, in Ballarat, Victoria ("Defining Moments in Australian Food." National Museum Australia). For miners in the local area, the restaurant was accessible and popular because it served both Chinese and European style dishes (think plum pudding and stir-fries). Other Chinese migrants soon followed suit, opening small cookhouses on the goldfields which drew in both Chinese and Anglo-Celtic diners. It is interesting to consider how Chinese food served the dual purpose of creating community (among the Chinese) and creating profit, by being offered to the Anglo-Celts. By 1890, it is estimated that one third of all cooks in Australia were Chinese (Heanue, Siobhan. “Chinese restaurants in Australia documented for posterity by historians”).

At the turn of the century, Chinatown precincts were established in capital cities where you could find businesses offering accommodation, fresh food grown by Chinese market gardeners, and medicine ("Chinatowns across Australia." ibid). Many Chinatowns have since been refurbished or completely relocated, but originally they were found in: Melbourne, Victoria; Broome, Western Australia; the Rocks, New South Wales; Atherton, Queensland; Adelaide, South Australia, Darwin, Northern Territory; and Dickson, Australian Capital Territory (ibid).3 The congregation of Chinese communities in these central precincts

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3 Tasmania does not have a documented or established Chinatown.
coincided with the rise in anti-Chinese sentiments on Australian goldfields, which ultimately resulted in a number of discriminatory policies that forcibly barred Chinese migrants from accessing the fields. As such, it was imperative for those who were exiled to find new forms of employment and community. In search of employment and the opportunity to open a small business, many Chinese were drawn to the aforementioned city centres.

The global movement of the Chinese is a complex system (assemblage) of bodies that are constantly in flux over time and space. Bodies, in this sense, are not limited to human bodies or the association with flesh and organs. Rather, an assemblage of bodies that may be: human or nonhuman, material and immaterial, political and cultural. Deleuze (1992) does not define bodies by what they are made up of, rather, what they are capable of doing. He believes we ought to focus on how bodies can relate to, exchange with, and affect other bodies. This definition may be extended to nonhuman bodies (plant or animal) and immaterial bodies (ideas or sound) to show how all of these “things” have a potential to affect others, and each other. As Deleuze and Guattari (1988) suggest, we should consider the affects of bodies colliding with others and the forms of multiplicities and metamorphoses which become of such interactions (cited in Probyn, 2000: 17). Bodies and assemblages are rhizomatic because, like a ginger plant with roots that shoot out in multidirectional ways, they are generative and self-sustaining. This differs from an arboreal view of bodies which suggests that, like a tree, it would whither and die if its main root was severed. I find it useful to embrace Deleuze’s conceptualisation of bodies as rhizomatic because it offers a new way of envisaging Chinese migration as an assemblage of various bodies (including food) which all connect and relate in different ways. In this sense, the Chinese Australian assemblage is not simply a closed entity or circuit, it breaks open in ‘lines of flight’ and has multiple entryways (Probyn, 2000: 17).
As I have already argued, Chinese migration in Australia may best be described as dispersed. I am interested in the particularities of these movements and the involvement of other bodies and political circumstances. The Immigration Restriction Act, the basis of what came to be known as the White Australia policy, was passed in 1901 with the primary objective to reduce, or rather, annihilate existing and future prospects of non Anglo-Celtic communities. I will explore this significant event as a catalyst for Chinese political resistance, and the use of Chinese food as a strategic vehicle for defiance. I will follow Cardozo and Subramaniam’s (2013) natureculture model of assembling, which stresses the interconnected nature of humans, nonhumans, technology, plants, and politics.

Following Deleuze (1992), Cardozo and Subramaniam suggest that bodies ‘plants, animals, viruses, bacteria, artifacts, objects, humans, cultures, and natures have come to be constituted and reconstituted in very deliberate and particular ways’ (2013: 2). They contest the notion of immigration being ‘natural’, arguing instead that ‘circuits of flora and fauna are not completely free flowing or random but rather informed by the political economy of complex bio-geographies as well as a powerful political imaginary’ (Cardozo and Subramaniam, 2013: 4). We can see this in the way Chinese labour was actively sought and exploited by Australian colonies, thus allowing the Chinese to “slip” into the nation, but later rejecting and vilifying the very same labourers. The White Australia policy was implemented (in part) to curtail Chinese immigration and manage the existing populations of Chinese people. Legislators of the White Australia policy envisaged an idealised Australia that was homogeneously Anglo-Celt, and this goal was to be actualised through the eradication of Indigenous people and exiling racialised bodies from the land. In this context, non-Anglos were seen as a rupture in the fabric of, what would otherwise be considered, a pure and
Colonial mechanics of exclusion seeped beyond immigration and into employment. Discriminatory annual taxes were thrust upon Chinese workers, leading to a non-compliance campaign that amounted to large numbers of the Chinese being jailed (Markus, 2001: 73). Particular hostilities towards the Chinese, highlighted by the push to restrict immigration, signified a few key elements: one; that Chinese people were considered culturally unassimilable, two; their presence would cause disunity and social upheaval, and three; they could jeopardise job security for the Anglo-Celtic population. Underlying these three elements is the prioritisation and privileging of Anglo-Celts, and the subsequent framing of the Chinese as an invasive and undesirable community. One only has to look towards the oft-cited propagandist slogans of ‘Asian Invasion’ or ‘Yellow Peril’ to see how the Chinese has historically been conflated as “harmful” to white Australia. From what I have already mapped, we can see how the Chinese Australian assemblage was locked into relations of power and constructed vis-à-vis a collective national imaginary. These ideologies and power structures were operationalised through legislation, distinguishing which communities and bodies were to be included, and which were to be excluded.

Cardozo and Subramaniam also point us toward the idea that anxieties around foreign migrants are routinely transferred onto foreign animals and plants (2013: 9). They explore this using the example of the kudzu, a luscious vine that was gifted to the United States from the Japanese government in 1876 (Cardozo and Subramniam, 2013: 6). The kudzu plant was initially met with marvel and embrace, to the extent that hundreds of farmers were hired to plant it all across the south of America. The reason it caught so much traction was because of its deep taproot system that contains nitrogen-fixing bacteria, which actually contributes to
healthy, fertile soils and prevents soil erosion (Cardozo and Subramaniam, 2013: 10). Much
to the Americans’ surprise and later demise, the kudzu thrived and grew in absolute
abundance everywhere it was planted. From this example we can see how shifting spatial and
temporal contexts can, at any time, construct species as either trash or treasure, pest or prize. I
find it useful to relate the genealogy of the kudzu in the United States, with the proliferation
of Chinese food in Australia. Like the kudzu, the earliest Chinese migrants were an ‘invited
invasion’ which began to mutate, multiply, and branch outwards. Like a vine climbing up the
side of a building, the Chinese built off of pre-existing fixtures to create new forms of
expression. They used pre-existing infrastructure to build cookhouses, where they would take
fresh produce harvested from the land and transform it into ingredients to be used in Chinese
style dishes. The Chinese absorbed and obstructed the host country’s body (Australia) by
competing with the Anglo-Celts on the gold fields and creating new businesses.

As the (cultural, social, political, and economic) potential of the Chinese dawned on
the Anglo-Celts, it became clear that these foreigners were no longer a ‘useful’ invasion,
rather, a ‘hazardous’ one. Like a farmer taking to the kudzu with an axe to hack it down, the
White Australia Policy was operationalised in an attempt to curb the escalating invasion.
However, the Chinese had developed clever ways to circumvent the discriminatory policies.
Taking a note from the often heard phrase, ‘the way to any man’s heart is through his
stomach’, the Chinese saw food as an opportunity to circumvent the White Australia policy.
In a blog post titled ‘the Little-known History of Chinese Restaurants in Australia’, the author
writes, ‘although the Australians’ resentment towards the Chinese differs was strong,
resistance to their food was impossible’ (“The Little-Known History of Chinese Food in
Australia.” Newcastle Diggers).
The proliferation of Chinese restaurants would later play a massive role during the 1901 White Australia policy. Under the policy it was stated that business owners who required staff not available locally were permitted to sponsor overseas workers with a ‘certificate of exemption’ from the English dictation test (Nichol, 2008: 11). This exemption would only be granted provided the government did not consider the business to be in unfair competition with similar Anglo-Celtic owned enterprises (Nichol, 2008: 11). Under these conditions, restaurant owners who served Chinese food to Anglo-Celtic customers were more likely to have their application successfully approved by the government because their food bore little resemblance to western food and was not considered an (obviously) competitive product. This conditional, policy “loophole” gave certain Chinese restaurant owners the opportunity to bring family members into the country. Since existing migrants were not permitted to bring in relatives, Chinese restaurant owners would deliberately change the names of their family members to hide any familial connection when presenting their application for a sponsored worker to the government (Heanue, Siobhan. “Chinese restaurants in Australia documented for posterity by historians”). Returning to the ‘Asian Invasion’ and ‘Yellow Peril’ framing of Chinese migration and the imagery of disease, it is interesting to consider the ways in which the Chinese came up with methods to bypass the White Australia policy. Much like a virus would mutate to defend itself against an antibiotic, the Chinese community adapted their strategies to the circumstance they were faced with and the cards they were dealt.

It was necessary for the Chinese to adapt their food making and business practices to remain (and thrive) in Australia. As mentioned earlier, in order to remain viable, Chinese restaurants were required to serve food that would not directly compete with that of white establishments, but would still cater to western tastes. In other words, Chinese food would
have to be different enough but ironically similar enough to western food. Given this
imperative restaurant owners began producing what is popularly known as “westernised
Chinese food”. The dishes which were typical of this new-style of cooking were generally
comprised of different texturally interesting vegetables (bean sprouts, water chestnuts,
bamboo shoots) mixed together with a ‘Chinese sauce’ (usually soy sauce with a thickening
agent) (Roberts, 2002: 192-193). Though on the surface level the process of ‘westernising’
Chinese food appears to be a fairly benign process, I want to complicate this by considering
how colonialism and eurocentrism operate through food and eating discourses.

Elspeth Probyn (2000) explores the colonial appetite through a lens of disgust,
emphasising the histories that conjoin eating and racial affects. I want to focus on how the
consumption of food can illicit feelings of disgust, and how this eating affect has historically
served to categorise the Other. It is essential, particularly in settler colonial contexts, to
consider how everyday practices (such as eating) are inscribed with power. Perhaps more to
the point, to think about how food operates as a vehicle to produce and reproduce racialised
power structures. By looking to the past, we will find ourselves better equipped with the
knowledge of how colonialism has and—more importantly—continues to steer trajectories of
food and eating, albeit in different guises.

When he visited Australia, Charles Darwin remarked, ‘I felt utter disgust at my food
being touched by a naked savage, though his hands did not appear dirty’ (Probyn, 2000: 33).
The skepticism towards food that is prepared by the nonwhite, racialised Other is rooted in
white superiority and a fear of difference that is extended into the everyday practice of eating.
Chinese food was routinely looked upon with caution and deemed to be unhygienic or too
exotic to stomach. Samuel Williams, an American missionary, wrote a lengthy essay in 1835
called the ‘Diet of the Chinese’ after spending time in Guangzhou. He describes:

The cooking and mode of eating among the Chinese are peculiar… The universal use of oil, not always the sweetest or purest, and of onions, in their dishes, together with the habitual neglect of their persons, causes an odor, almost insufferable to a European… The dishes, when brought on the table, are almost destitute of seasoning, taste, flavor, or anything else by which one can be distinguished from another; all are alike insipid and greasy to the palate of the foreigner (Samuel Williams, 1835., cited in Roberts, 2009: 35).

The homogenising discourse of Chinese food (and people) as being filthy and incompatible with European tastes was evident in Australia too. Chinatowns were largely considered centres of vice and disease, where antisocial behaviour—such as gambling and drug use—were commonplace (Hornadge, 1971: 8). It is clear that the disgust towards Chinese food was paired with hostility and suspicion towards the people who produced and ate it, illustrating the shared histories between food and people. Returning to Cardozo and Subramaniam’s (2013) idea of natureculture assemblages, I reiterate how cultural anxieties routinely seep into representations of supposedly ‘pure’ categories, such as produce and the environment.

Interestingly, these xenophobic associations did not lead to the complete abandonment of Chinese food by the Anglo-Celts. The exoticism of Chinese food had a double effect: it signified its status as an Otherised food and fuelled a fascination for it. Drawing on Deleuze’s idea of a rhizomic body, Grossberg (1992) points to the horizontal possibilities that connect us outward: how lines of flight can disarticulate and open up an assemblage, cutting across unity and hierarchies (cited in Probyn, 2000: 17). I argue this is a prime example of how spatial and temporal contexts can subjugate bodies in an assemblage, but there may also be generative outcomes. As I will explain further, the exercise of innovation and adaptation as
necessary survival tools for Chinese migrants was one generative response to the discrimination they endured.

From what I have mapped, it is clear that Chinese restaurant owners had a number of hurdles to overcome in order to make their food accessible and attractive to Anglo-Celtic populations. Chinese migrants worked within the social and political parameters of the host nation, coming up with innovative techniques to bend their cuisine and business practices to suit western tastes. Colonial cookery relied heavily on combining different meats and vegetables that would then be boiled down into indecipherability. Despite being valued for its cheap, filling, and exotic nature, westernised Chinese food was oddly similar to the savoury, primal stews which sustained the Australian colonies. By adopting new styles of cooking which veered from traditions, Chinese food was made intelligible to the Anglo-Celtic diner. Its ingredients and aesthetic was reminiscent of western food, which made it a “different” yet “familiar” dining experience.

Chinese restaurants also gained critical cultural importance due to their dual function as nightclub-eateries (Roberts, 2009: 189). Since they were conscious of diners wanting inexpensive and filling food, restaurant owners realised they could make profit back through sheer volume of customers and selling liquor (Roberts, 2009: 191). Before long, westernised Chinese food had infiltrated mainstream popular culture; the humble Chinese restaurant appeared in a number of popular texts ‘as the quintessential urban, working-class eatery’ (Roberts, 2009: 195). Economic, social and political freedoms that came alongside a burgeoning western consumer society in the early to mid 20th century provided a fertile ground for the expansion of Chinese food. Despite initial denigration, Chinese food gained specific cultural currency by taking on a form that was designed with the Anglo-Celtic
consumer in mind. As Annette Shun-Wah says:

That’s how the Chinese survive in business – as adaptable and shrewd as ever.

Meeting stereotypical expectations so as not to rock the boat, and more pertinently not to miss out on potential customers. What does it matter to them if a bunch of hungry diners are oblivious to the difference between people from different regions of China?

(Annette Shun-Wah, 1999: 25)

In this chapter I have provided a rich historical background of Chinese settlement in Australia, stressing the interrelated history between food, people, culture, and politics. I have argued that early Chinese migration was highly dispersed, until racially discriminatory policies were put into operation, ultimately forcing the Chinese community to seek new avenues of employment. Despite the xenophobia they faced the Chinese pushed back against racism by building ethnic enclaves (Chinatowns) and creating new economies, namely food, which would later flourish. Through collectivisation and inter-community dialogue, Chinese migrants were able to strategically circumvent the White Australia Policy. It was largely through food that Chinese migrants were able to legitimate their status in Australia, and it also served as a passageway for their family members to join them. Finally, while the argument can be made that westernised Chinese food signifies a subservience to eurocentrism and white superiority, I want to make the point that it is also a clever and adaptive response to racial discrimination by the Chinese community.

In the next chapter I will extend my analysis into a contemporary timeframe to examine changing models and ideas of what constitutes Chinese food. De-centring westernised Chinese food as the focus of my study, I will explore other styles of Chinese cooking which have emerged and gained prominence in modern Australia. Changes to food and eating practices, as I will argue, is an interesting place from which to begin exploring
identity and difference. I want to consider different conceptual models of taste by looking specifically at how our/my taste for Chinese food has morphed over time.

Borrowing ideas that I have introduced in this chapter, I will reassert how Chinese food is characterised by its fluid and adaptable nature, however it is still influenced by overarching, systemic power structures (racism, class privilege).
Diaspora Taste/s: How migration, class, and race influence notions of taste

In Chapter One I argued that food is not only a convenient motif for looking at Chinese Australian settlement, ‘it provides an accessible means of examine how these people have survived so successfully in what has been a largely hostile and intolerant culture’ (1999: 25). It is through food, and against all odds, that Chinese migrants have been able to carve out a space for themselves in Australia. Chinese food was a way for migrants to push back against political discrimination by responding and adding richness to Australia’s culinary palette. The self-determination of Chinese migrants through the food industry has not faltered, in fact, it continues to expand rapidly in 21st century Australia. Westernised Chinese food may have been defining during the gold rush period, but new forms and styles of cooking have since taken the stage.

With a steady influx of migrants from mainland China to major cosmopolitan cities, including Sydney, a new wave of restaurants serving regionally specific delicacies and dishes have dramatically altered the landscape of Chinese food in Australia. Many are now familiar with previously foreign flavour profiles, such as the tongue-numbing spice distinctive of Sichuan and Hunan, which are western regions of China known for using copious amounts of garlic and chilli. And migrants from northern China have brought with them recipes that champion wheat as the main ingredient, such as bouncy, hand-pulled noodles and fluffy, steamed buns. More recently we have seen a surge in the number of Chinese international students in Australia, who making up a large number of restaurant diners. These communities are creating demands for ‘entire shopping districts of Chinese restaurants’, resulting in the
increased representation of regional Chinese cuisines (Symons, Michael. “Australia’s cuisine culture: a history of our food”).

In this chapter I will build on the historical groundwork I laid out in Chapter One by bringing my analysis into contemporary Australia and by examining changing notions of ‘taste’ regarding Chinese food. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s (1979/1984) influential framework of taste as something which is embodied and classed, I will consider how migration and diaspora can (in some ways) fracture the linear model of cultural reproduction and taste. Extending on this, I will incorporate Antoine Hennion’s (2007) model of taste as an activity, as opposed to an embodied and inherited trait, to explore how an intermingling of social variants can vastly influence our tastes.

Parama Roy (2010) argues, ‘dietary belonging is no longer tied to a place or context but becomes part of the portable apparatus of embodied practices that actually has the greatest effect by being set adrift in the world’ (2010: 22). As I write this thesis, I find myself frequently returning to this idea because it is oriented around migration and emphasises the complexity of cultural exchange – of displacement, and the simultaneous creation of space. It is through channeling their skills (‘portable apparatus’) that migrants are able to carve out space, (re)make identity, and create community in ‘hostile and intolerant’ host cultures (Shun Wah, 1999: 25). Given Australia is a settler-colonial nation, it is important to recognise how migration has served the purpose of continuing the dispossession of Aboriginal land and sovereignty, either ‘directly in the taking and development of land, or indirectly in the economic development and intensification of settlement around the country’ (Ann Curthoys, 2001: 20). In my discussion of Chinese migration and its significant contributions to the nation, I do not wish to understate or diminish our role in this process.
While migration may be considered a rupture or weakening of traditional and cultural food practices, I will instead examine how taste travels and morphs across time and space. That is to say, taste ought not to be thought of as static, but rather an adaptive process where the self learns from and reacts to different environments and encounters. Taste, as Hennion points out, is a largely ‘situated activity’ that always involves a point of contact or a situation of ‘between-the-two’ (2007: 101). Which leads me to consider how diaspora, like taste, is a largely situated politics which involves a meeting of different contexts and cultures. Diaspora, as defined by Ann Curthoys, is ‘the development through migration of dispersed communities that relate not only to their nation of residence but also to a homeland, or the idea of a homeland, or to each other’ (2001: 20). The diasporic Chinese community in Australia has, ‘multiple senses of belonging across time and space’, and it is precisely this dynamic nature that allows cultural practices (eating/cooking) to be constantly renegotiated and remixed (Ann Curthoys, ibid). In that sense, the mobility afforded by migration and the modernised community it creates, ‘may enhance rather than weaken Chineseness’ (Tu Wei-ming, 1994: 33., cited in Ien Ang, 2001: 42).

In her description of diaspora as a ‘scattering of seeds’, Ien Ang (2001) argues that notions of identity and belonging are radically unsettled for the diasporic subject. A sense of dislocation and rootlessness, which I myself have experienced, is at times remedied by fictive notions of kinship and heredity (Ien Ang, 2001: 49). I will admit to having romanticised certain attachments to Chinese food, at times, as a means of strengthening my self-identification, and perhaps conflating my perceived authority to speak on issues relating to Chineseness. The outcome of which, as you could probably guess, was developing a protective stance on who can righteously produce and even consume Chinese cultural
products. The enduring concept of unity across all Chinese people is described by Rey Chow (1993) as the ‘myth of consanguinity’, a narrative which always involves returning to an imposed ‘centre’ or homogenised cultural identity (cited in Ien Ang, 2001: 49). In the process of writing this thesis, it has become necessary to intervene in my own submissions to consanguinity. This emotional work has involved a lot of time reflecting on patterns of thinking that signify and contribute to cultural essentialism.

Submitting to consanguinity, as Chow argues, radically diminishes a subject’s agency; it is a reductionist interpellation (internalisation of values) that constructs the self as passive and lineally predetermined (cited in Ien Ang, ibid). If we are to follow this logic, it would be counterproductive to assign Chinese food with universal definitions, in terms of what it should resemble and who can produce it. Central to such an assumption is the fictitious ideal of a ‘pure’ and homogenous Chinese culture, believed to exist un tarnished and unattached to external social variants. Westernised Chinese food, such as sweet and sour pork or honey chicken, would certainly not fit into such a narrow definition. However, as I have already argued, westernised Chinese food is a clear example of Chinese resistance and innovation (if that doesn’t make it Chinese, then I don’t know what does). Conceiving diaspora as a literal scattering of seeds from which new forms of cultural forms germinate and mutate depending on their ecosystem helps to disrupt consanguine thinking. I trust this rhizomatic approach will drive us toward a more wholly-encompassing understanding of Chinese food that re-centres the agency of diasporic-Chinese subjects.

Having tracked the genealogy of Chinese food from the gold rush period, we now arrive at modern Australia where it is clear that a lot has changed. As I have already touched on, some of the key reasons why Chinese food has propagated so ubiquitously is a steady
flow of new migrants and a pre-existing food industry infrastructure. A vital part of this infrastructure is shared knowledge passed through the Chinese migrant community, a general “know-how” on how to run restaurant businesses. This ‘know-how’ is, of course, historically and culturally situated; it is a bank of knowledge consolidated by earlier waves of Chinese migrants. I am interested in why the spread of Chinese food has continued to spread outwards into regional areas and upwards into the realms of fine dining. Beyond the material and perhaps pragmatic explanations, such as creating distance from other competing restaurants, I believe another reason is nested in Australia’s changing discourse on multiculturalism and how this intersects with understandings of food.

For much of the 21st century, Australian foodways (or food culture) has emphasised the ways in which multiculturalism has contributed to a rich culinary landscape. One food writer describes his local Sydney shopping centre as being ‘small but rich in cuisine choice’ and credits Australia’s culinary expansion to migration (Symons, Michael. “Australia’s cuisine culture: a history of our food”). When a handful of chefs and critics were asked about how they perceive Australia’s food scene, one interviewee defined it as being ‘open-minded, skillful, [and] not weighed down by traditions or rules’ (Riordan, Olivia. “Australia confidential”). However, despite the mainstream insistence on Australian foodways being characterised by an open acceptance to multicultural influences, many have pointed out how eating frequently ‘naturalises colonial, racialized and ethnic relations in present-day Australia, and pushes them to the background’ (Probyn, 2000: 103). Food, far from being exempt from institutional and oppressive power, can reproduce power relations that are quite often raced, classed, and gendered. This can be observed in glossy, multicultural food narratives, such as the following, in which one writer (under)states:

Asian food was introduced to Australia during the gold rush of the 1800s, when
Chinese prospectors yearned for the tastes of home. For many Chinese people, opening a restaurant became a more financially-attractive option than panning for gold (Senior, Nicole. “How Australian food has evolved”). There is a failed (or rather, altogether absent) recognition of how racial discrimination towards the Chinese played an integral role in the uptake of restaurant ventures as an alternative to gold mining. By neglecting to account for the politicised history of Chinese food as a response to xenophobia, narratives such as this continue to perpetuate an implicit white perspective that diminishes the effects of racism.

It is also worth mentioning how the vast umbrella category of ‘Asian food’ or ‘Asian flavours’ as a common reference point often erases the specificities of each unique food culture, reinforcing a homogenised and blurred pan-Asian, monolithic identity. It is common, as Cardozo and Subramaniam would suggest, for Asian cultural and food production not to be ‘marked as undesirable or dangerous but absorbed into the host culture or appropriated… in uncritical forms of multiculturalism’ (2013: 13). However this process largely invisibilises how food—what we eat, and how we eat—continues to be highly racialised and classed. To explore this further, I will consider the levels at which taste operates to distinguish and categorise people on the basis of race and class. I will look at examples of cooking Chinese food with my mother on a commercial basis (at the restaurant we used to work at), and preparing Chinese food at home.

It was Bourdieu (1979/1984) who famously stated that, ‘taste distinguishes in an essential way, since taste is the basis of all that one has—people and things—and all that one is for others, whereby one classifiers oneself and is classified by others’ (cited in Probyn, 2000: 26). In other words, the self is defined by its preferences for certain things (art, food,
places, lifestyles), and these tastes are used to distinguish the self from others. All individuals are assigned a class position from birth, according to Bourdieu, and this designates how much symbolic (mainly educational) and economic capital is at their disposal (Mennell et al., 1992: 12, cited in Probyn, 2000: 27).

When my mother and I worked in a regional RSL kitchen, many of our customers were regulars; familiar faces who we would see at least once every week. The venue itself served as a central community hub, as it was within close distance to retirement homes and the suburbs where many working-class families lived. Our regulars were pensioners and retired war veterans, but tradesmen and families also made up a large percentage of the diners we served. Presumably what made our menu so appealing were a number of factors: the quantity of food in each singular dish, convenience of fast-food, and its cheap price point (ten dollar lunch specials and no dish exceeding fifteen dollars). Bourdieu might argue that this assemblage (of food/space/people) is a particular ‘map’ or ‘universe of class bodies, which… tends to reproduce in its specific logic the universe of social structure’ (Bourdieu, 1979/1984: 193., cited in Probyn, 2000: 29). In other words, the collective ways in which tastes are embodied and performed by people on the basis of their class, forms and reforms the structuring of our society.

However, as many have pointed out, ‘Bourdieu’s preoccupation with the reproduction of culture from generation to generation makes his theory appear rather undynamic’ (Mennell et al., 1992: 12., cited in Probyn, 2000: 27). The body is seen as ‘sign-bearing’ and ‘sign-wearing’ as opposed to sign-making. If we were to follow Bourdieu’s supposition, then the retired pensioners who ordered egg omelettes from my mother and I everyday, would not likely have any upper-class tastes. If these pensioners had children and grandchildren, then
Bourdieu might also suggest that they would have similarly aligned tastes and class-statuses. In Probyn’s terms, this is a static concept because ‘the body that eats is in the end eaten by the overdeterminations of culture’ (2000: 29). I find Bourdieu’s model of taste helpful when considering broader systemic power, and will certainly revisit it later when I explore constructions of whiteness and privilege in the food industry. But for now, I want to complicate fixed and reproductive understandings taste by considering how these notions are particularly incongruent within diasporic communities.

As a child, my mother would often prepare a certain corn millet porridge that I really grew to despise. It was pale yellow in colour, of a sloppy consistency, grainy in texture, and minimally seasoned. I would bemoan every time she made it and would find myself often reaching for the closest box of cereal in the cupboard as a replacement meal. Since my diet outside of our home consisted a great deal of eating with my friends, often gorging in sodium-saturated, processed foods, there were certain dishes my mother enjoyed that did not translate well. As one of many others, this example highlights how taste is not something that can be reduced to being universally duplicable. Later in life, I learned that on account of food shortages during the Cultural Revolution period in China, the corn millet porridge was a dish that sustained my mother and her siblings through politically tumultuous times. I suspect it is for this reason that the dish holds a special significance for her; I, however, was not able to internalise those meanings. Returning to Ien Ang’s notion of diaspora as a ‘scattering of seeds’ I suggest that permutations in language, norms, social groups, (or perhaps more simply) experiences, can intercept the reproduction of taste and culture from generation to generation. Taste morphs across time and space in the diaspora, where cultural meanings may be lost, mis/re-interpreted, and generated.
As an alternative to Bourdieu’s rendition of taste, Hennion argues that taste or ‘tasting’ is an active process in which an individual encounters an object and opens themselves up to it, and the experience (2007: 102). He writes, ‘it is tasters that produce, reinforce, and elaborate what determines them, and not the abstract determinisms produced by sociologists’ (Hennion, ibid: 102). Our tastes are comprised of pieces of the past, sedimentary experiences (familial, scholarly, and social) which make up much of our identity (Hennion, ibid: 102). He argues ‘we rely on others in a reflexive way to constitute our tastes’ (Hennion, ibid: 103). To illustrate this, I want to consider some comments from well-known Chinese Australian chef, Kylie Kwong. Having become ‘synonymous with modern Chinese cooking in Australia’, Kwong is often cited as drawing on her southern Chinese heritage to re-interpret Cantonese cuisine. Her passion for food is said to be derived from her mother, who would run Chinese cooking classes from her suburban childhood home for the community (Govender, Ishay. “Kyle Kwong: ‘Food makes people happy and connects people’”). In an interview about her work she says:

We’ve worked hard for nine years to raise the profile of Chinese cuisine, to show that it’s not just about MSG-laden sauces but about the beautiful art of poaching chicken, of steaming a whole fish. People are beginning to see that Chinese food can be healthy, accessible and affordable (Dunlop, Fuchsia. “Chinese food reinvented”).

Kwong makes an attempt to re-orient Chinese food around an image of a “pure” and “artisanal” ideal which stands in stark contrast to the ‘MSG-laden’ dishes that most Australians were apparently used to. What is significant about this quote is that there is an intent to re-signify associations and representations of Chinese food, and an emphasis on how wider tastes for Chinese food have shifted. However, as I have already mapped in the first chapter, these ‘MSG-laden’ dishes Kwong refers to are steeped in a politics of resistance and
still continue to exist (and thrive) in lower socio-economic, suburban regions. Her restaurant Billy Kwong serves high-end, modern-Chinese food with an emphasis on ethically sourced and organic produce, with a price point to match (Durack, Kelly. “Billy Kwong”). As a tastemaker, Kwong’s reference points and interactions are likely to be with diners and chefs who are middle-upper class. While her ancestral roots are clearly invoked in her passion and adoration of Chinese food, it is also safe to suggest that her tastes may also be influenced by the socius around her.

Further, Kwong’s comment folds into the rhetoric of ‘so-called progressive politics of foodism where local is best and farmers’ markets are placed as the pinnacle of authentic eating’ (Probyn, 2017: 31). Embedded within ‘feel good food politics’ is a kind of moralistic tone and class-blindness, where the privileged take on ‘the congratulatory mantle of self-reflexivity in eating’ (Guthman, 2003., cited in Probyn, 2017: 32). This complicates Hennion’s argument that bodies have the agency and potential to experience beyond what they are ascribed as per their social determinations. According to Hennion, taste is reworked to that instead of being a static marker of difference, it can be a mode of relating (Hennion, 2007: 101., cited in Probyn, 2016: 59). I find Hennion’s articulation of taste as fluid and a learned activity quite helpful in thinking through departures from tradition and differences in food preferences in the Chinese Australian diaspora. However, I am also concerned that it undermines the materiality of class and its structuring effects in the food industry. I want to consider how power, specifically whiteness and class privilege, pervades the food industry in concrete ways.

As I have already explored above, the ‘feel good food movement’ is one concrete example of how power and class privilege is reinforced in and through food. It also shows
how there are often material obstacles which restrict certain people from accessing and consuming particular kinds of food, and thus, the opportunity to expand their tastes. Hennion argues that one’s social determination and taste can be worked on, and that these may be reinforced or surpassed (Hennion, 2007: 103). While centring the agency of the body, this presumption overlooks the importance of having a certain amount of capital in order to access particular “taste-broadening” experiences, for instance, fine-dining.

Another example of how power pervades food is the construction of whiteness and class privilege in the dominant figure of the white male tastemaker. On the topic of “classic” Chinese Australian dishes, influential restauranteur Neil Perry said, ‘there is a guilty pleasure to some of these dishes, the sort of things I’ve ordered late at night and hoped no one is looking’ (Bolles, Scott. “Neil Perry’s Jade Temple opens on Bridge Street”). Identifying such dishes as ‘guilty pleasures’, Perry implies that these dishes are not for the health-savvy individual. His statement is reminiscent of Kylie Kwong’s distinction between ‘MSG-laden’ and artisanal dishes, as he invokes a reflexive way of thinking about Chinese food, even to the point of self-surveillance (‘hoped no one is looking’). Perry goes further to suggest that ‘these dishes are really great when they’re done well and not a lot of people do them well… the flavours are classic for a reason’ (Gortan, Renata. “First look at Neil Perry’s rocking retro menu at the new Jade Temple”). Absent from Perry’s comments is an acknowledgement of how these classic Chinese dishes have a deep affiliation with the labour of Chinese migrant communities in Australia. The erasure and invisibilisation of Chinese food’s racialised history is one way the food media industry perpetuates an implicit white perspective, though a supposedly objective and expert voice. As Probyn writes, ‘whiteness has for so long worked as an invisible marker… as the invisible norm’, and this is no different in the context of food (2017: 38).
In a review of Perry’s Modern-Chinese restaurant, Spice Temple, he is described as having ‘let rip with the fiery flavours of lesser-known Chinese provinces that, until now, remained largely untried’. (Thomsen, Simon. “Review: Spice Temple”). The reviewer describes the food as ‘occasionally confronting’ but made less so by Perry’s obvious ‘style and finesse’. When taken under Neil Perry’s wing, century-old eggs turn from squeamish, fear-factor food, to what could be described as a ‘creamy and satiny dish’. Whiteness operates in discourses on Chinese food and broader food institutions through its invisiblisation; as the “objective voice” behind restaurant reviews and yearly Good Food guides. Structural power relations (race and class) are embedded in food discourses and steer the trajectory of what can be defined as “good” and “bad” food. Whiteness and class privilege still create the conditions under which a person’s capital can define whether they can, or cannot, have access to certain foods and experiences.

In this chapter, I have explored how the Chinese Australian diaspora is a space where cultural knowledge and forms are remixed and re-imagined, and how this necessarily complicates the assumption that culture and taste is continuously reproduced. I have considered how Bourdieu’s model of taste as being duplicable and passed down generation to generation is incongruent within the Chinese diaspora, because different tastes are activated and learned through permutations in language, cultural norms, and social groups. Hennion’s articulation of taste as a didactic and active process which always involves the taster being reflexive is a helpful segue out of Bourdieu’s relatively static analysis. I have argued that Hennion’s assumption that our class and tastes can be surpassed at the individual’s will runs the risk of invisibilising how food and eating continue to be highly racialised and classed.
In the next chapter, I will build on my exploration of taste by reflecting on the affects of making, eating, and sharing Chinese food. Flowing off the idea of commensality, the practice of eating together, I argue that in order to address some of the power structures which are so heavily laden in food discourses we must begin with an openness and willingness to listen, be empathetic, and supportive. I want to consider generative and rhizomatic connections to Chinese food, and how cooking and eating together can provide an opportunity to unpack these feelings.
Eating Together: Visceral feelings and Chinese food affects

In Chapter Two I examined Chinese food through different lenses of taste, considering how these are often complicated within the scheme of migration and diaspora. Undercutting my analysis was the idea that Chinese food (or “eating ethnic” in general) is not far removed from structural inequalities, including racism and class privilege. In my third chapter, I will attempt to address some of these issues that centrally concern power by focusing on the potential of our bodies to generate new meanings and relationships through/to Chinese food. Re-signifying Chinese food and its affects on visceral terms, as I will go on to discuss, may offer productive solutions to wider socio-political concerns. Rather than conceiving Chinese food purely as a commodity, I want to channel my analysis towards a sphere of the personal. I hope that this redirection will allow us to consider “hidden” affective connections to food and how sensory experiences, such as cooking and eating, can be a potential catalyst for change – of transformative modes of relating to the self, and to others.

Following on from the work of Allison Hayes-Conroy and Jessica Hayes-Conroy (2008); Robyn Longhurst, Lynda Johnston, and Elsie Ho (2009); and Elspeth Probyn (2005/2017) I will explore the relationship between food and visceral politics. More specifically, I wish to consider the capacities of Chinese food to elicit visceral feelings and embodiments; sensory energies which can travel diffusely through networks of bodies. As Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy suggest, ‘In emphasising a visceral politics we are not advocating a move towards individualistic forms of being-political; rather we move towards a radically relational view of the world’ (2008: 462). To illustrate these ideas, I will bring you inside mine and my mothers’ kitchen, where together we will work towards getting “a gut feeling” for Chinese food.
To begin, I want to express why I believe a visceral appreciation of food is important particularly in the context of migration and diaspora. The word visceral is used here to describe the different ‘sensations, moods and ways of being that emerge from our sensory engagement with the material and discursive environments in which we live’ (Longhurst et al., ibid: 334). Engaging with the visceral means paying attention to the senses—sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste—all of which are viscerally stimulating (Longhurst et al., ibid: 334). Previous work has shown how our visceral experiences of food (including tastes, textures and aromas) can reveal a great deal of our emotional and affective relations with ‘place’ (Longhurst, et al., 2009: 333). For this reason: eating becomes a central political issue, for the migrant subject especially, because of food’s interconnectedness to visceral feelings of belonging and not-belonging. Building on the work of Ien Ang (2001) and Ann Curthoys (2001), who I cited in Chapter Two, eating and feeling viscerally through food is one way to intervene in that sense of ‘rootlessness’ felt by some ‘scattered’ diasporic subjects.

When migrants come into contact with tastes and smells that resonate with a familiar experience, the sheer activation of those senses are enough to create and trigger cultural memories (Longhurst et al., ibid: 334). For instance, these days whenever I call my mother to say hello, there is a six out of ten chance that she has either just come home from her friends’ house, or is on the way there. There is a ritualistic element to these get-togethers, but to put it simply, it is usually an entire day of activities (dancing, playing music, eating dinner) partaken by a handful of friends, all of whom are Chinese women in their early to late fifties. My mother will frequently send me photos of the delicious food they prepare, half a dozen Chinese dishes spread across a kitchen countertop (along with a winking emoticon, of course). Preparing and sharing food with her friends is something my mother cherishes in her
leisure time, following the idea that ‘food can help people feel at home, it can prompt them to
miss home, and it can be a bridge to a new home’ (Longhurst et al., ibid: 333). Home, in this
sense, is a porous place with an open ‘intersection of social relations and emotions’ (Blunt
and Dowling, 2006: 27., cited in Longhurst et al., 335). When I ask my mother about where
she considers home to be, the answer is generally, “Australia is my home now.” The emphasis
placed on the word ‘now’ is particularly interesting as it implies homes are not only spatial,
but also temporal. There is a sense of having abandoned her “old” home (China), and feeling
dislocated in her “new” home. When prompted further, belonging and alienation can surface
as key themes and an everyday theorisation of what home means, or feels like. Home can
exist in multiple different forms at the same time; they can be made and unmade, occupy
many or few. As Blunt and Dowling argue, ‘Home can exist in more than one place’ (2006:
27., cited in Longhurst et al., 335)

In fleshing out the complexity of home for my mother, and for migrant women more
broadly, I want to focus on the kitchen as a commonly encountered and inhabited space.
Previous feminist scholars have labelled the kitchen as a ‘domestic jail of sorts that keeps
women outside the realm of public space’, and is therefore a major site of women’s
oppression (Maria Elisa Christie, 2006: 654., cited in Longhurst et al., ibid: 338). But what of
the women for whom that glorified ‘public space’ feels hostile and alienating? As bell hooks
writes:

At times home is nowhere. At times one knows only extreme estrangement and
alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place
which enables and promotes varied and every changing perspectives, a place where
one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference (1992: 148, cited in
Longhurst et al., ibid: 432-433)
For racialised migrants (like my mother) who live in majority white and regional areas, their access and comfortability in public spaces are not easily accomplished feats. In such cases, the kitchen can become ‘both the heart and the hearth of the home’; a space for migrant women to stay connected to home through sensory and visceral acts (Longhurst et al., ibid: 338). If we take the kitchen to be a sentimental compartment of one’s home, then the act of allowing others to join you there, to share that space with others, is deeply intimate. Opening the kitchen up to others is as much about food preparation and eating as it is about socialising, at least from what I have observed being in the presence of my mother and her friends. When their (white) husbands approach the kitchen, these men are either ushered away by the women or grow disinterested and leave, because they can not understand the conversations being had in Chinese. In these kitchens, women are able to relate and create; through cooking ‘women can share stories and build relationships at a visceral level’ (Longhurst et al., ibid: 341).

As Probyn (2001) suggests, eating is a strategic place ‘from which to begin to understand identity, difference and power’ because of its sensual and visceral nature (cited in Hayes-Conroy et al., 2008: 462). It is also a helpful way, for myself, to reflect on how I have come into my position and constitution as a diasporic subject. Earlier this year my mother invited me to a dinner party held at her friend’s house that she was helping organise. When I arrived I noticed that the kitchen counter was already lined with bags of fresh produce. My nose caught a strong whiff of chives and coriander, which I presumed would be finely chopped and mixed into a filling of pork for the dumplings I was already eager to devour. In hindsight, the smell of those pungent herbs was not always something that filled me with eagerness or joy. When I was younger my mother would always insist on buying cuts of pork
and fresh vegetables from Chinese grocery stores because she believed that is where they would be “freshest”. I remember boarding the train home together, carrying several bags of ingredients between us. While we were accustomed to the smells and tastes of what we had with us, I could not say the same for the other passengers onboard the train. Chives and raw meat were not exactly the most public transport friendly ingredients, especially when the trip home could take up to two hours. As Longhurst and others argue, migration ‘involves coming to a sensual and visceral understanding of different micro-geographies of the body, such as different languages, gestures, textures, sounds, smells, tastes and culinary practices’ (2009: 334-335). Smells and tastes that feel normative to migrants, when thrown against a white backdrop, appear sharply coloured and irregular. In this way, eating can discipline the body in particular ways, but in the safety of kitchens, many of these normative cultural conventions can be cast away (Longhurst et al., ibid: 340).

During pre-dinner preparations, I observed my mother and her friends as they rolled out perfectly thin and round dumpling skins. There was an almost hypnotic nature to the repetitive sound of their wooden rolling pins gliding over the floured kitchen bench. I offered to help speed the process up, much to my mother’s surprise, and she giggled at how clumsy my technique and gestures were. Mathee (2004) suggests that, for the diasporic subject, making food in the kitchen can reveal ‘a sense of owning and embodying knowledge attained through hands-on experience’ (cited in Longhurst et al., ibid: 340). However, as I explored in Chapter Two, embodied knowledge and techniques are not entirely duplicable in the context of migration and diaspora. For myself, as a daughter of a migrant mother, the actions which unfold in the space of her kitchen and the affects they produce are not always neat and linear. Ultimately, I am interested in the different kinds of affects that cooking and eating Chinese food can produce in different bodies within the Chinese Australian diaspora.
I figured that one way of exploring further how diasporic intergenerational differences may result in different kinds of visceral affects in relation to food, I decided to organise my own (Chinese themed) dinner party. In comparison to my mother’s dinner—which was held in a suburban home in a majority white, working class, regional town—mine was hosted in a small, terrace share-house in Sydney’s inner-west. The guests at my mother’s dinner were close friends, mostly Chinese migrant women, their children, and their (typically white) husbands. Their native tongue, educational background, age, and political views were wildly varied. My guests, on the other hand, were a handful of friends from different ethnic backgrounds, however we did share: a similar age bracket; socio-economic position; level of education; and political views. It is important to take these factors into consideration because, as Longhurst and others suggest, thinking along multiple axes allows us to place ourselves in relation to others in order to recognise the politics in normalised, everyday acts such as eating (ibid: 335).

In order to better understand the significance of visceral food, I turn towards my own body to try and understand what cooking and eating Chinese is capable of. While I have not explicitly mentioned it in my above analysis of migrant women’s occupation of the kitchen, and the observations made at my mother’s dinner, what makes food visceral is the affects it can produce within the body. In distinguishing between emotion and affect, I follow Probyn’s suggestion that an ‘emotion refers to cultural and social expression, whereas affects are of a biological and physiological nature’ (2005: 11., cited in Kristyn Gorton, 2007: 334). Silvan Thomkins further articulates affect to be a primary motivational system, and identifies a basic set of affects including: shame, interest, surprise, joy, anger, fear, distress, and disgust (Sedgwick and Frank, 1995: 5., cited in Kristyn Gorton, 2007: 335). While the affects
observed between my mother and her friends bend towards the “prettier” side of affects, joy and interest, I want to consider the “uglier” side of affects, namely shame, distress, and fear. However, in saying that, I do not mean to suggest that visceral affects are always neatly distributed along a plane of “good and bad” feelings. These bodily responses and sensations are as much random, as they are relational, and their outcomes are irreducible to binary objectivities of “good” or “bad”. As I will unpack later on, even supposedly “ugly” affects (such as shame, distress, and fear) may have transformative potentials.

Days prior to my dinner party I had already decided on the three dishes I would serve: braised pork belly (hóng shāo ròu), tomato egg stir-fry (jīdàn chāo xīhóngshì), and shredded potato in vinegar (suān lè tūdòu zhī). After scouring the internet looking for Chinese to English translated recipes and instructional videos, I began pulling together the ingredients needed for dinner by laying everything out on the table. I did every step in the recipe that could be completed prior to actually cooking in order to feel adequately prepared come time for dinner. When I began braising the pork, I found pleasure taking in the sights of the assorted spices and different smells that infiltrated the kitchen. Cubes of pork belly mingling with aromatic star anise and ginger, coated with a thick and bubbling mixture of melted rock sugar, soy sauce, and rice wine. As these ingredients swirled around in my wok and their scents hit my nose, my senses were permeated with joy and nostalgia. I recalled the times when I would wake up, as a child, from an afternoon nap to similar smells emanating from my mother’s kitchen – being met with these sensations again, in a disparate context of a new home, invoked a gut level response (Longhurst et al., ibid: 340). The sensory activity of cooking can engage a ‘politics of feeling’, which as Jenkin (1999) suggests, can reaffirm the body as both a prison and a vehicle for adventure (cited in Probyn, 2000: 18). Rather than conceiving the body as a closed entity, I would take from Deleuze’s description of bodies
being rhizomatic and always having multiple entryways (cited in Probyn, 2000: 18). For the Chinese diasporic subject, experiencing and experimenting with Chinese food can be a profound way of breaking into the body in order to understand our subjectivities and positionality.

As my dinner party guests began to arrive, I found myself growing increasingly flustered and distressed. The sights and smells of the pork belly braising away, which had previously filled me with excitement, had now taken on a consistency and smell which I had not anticipated. As I cranked the heat higher in an attempt to thicken the sauce, a faint smell of smoke permeated the previously rich and inviting scent. I noticed my body heating up and my cheeks flushing, particularly as the others gathered in the kitchen to watch me cook. Assuming that the hot flushes were partially caused by the fact that there were several people crammed into a small space, they were also exacerbated by knowing (or feeling) several pairs of watchful eyes on me in close proximity. As Roland Barthes (1961/1979) has argued, ‘food has a constant tendency to transform itself into situations’ and is always ‘bound to values of power’ (cited in Probyn, 2000: 63). In that moment, as the air of the kitchen grew heavy and the countertop a scattered mess of ingredients, my body responded by tightening up. In all honesty, these affects took me by surprise, and it was not long before I found myself scrutinising myself. It reasserted, in a way, what Deleuze (1992) has insisted time and time again: that we still do not know what a body is capable of.

Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy suggest that ‘tastes, as well as cravings, hunger, sensations, shifts in mood and all states of being, all play a part in determining food actualities’ (2008: 463). In comparison to my mother’s dinner which, from my perspective, appeared to run like clockwork, mine felt far more chaotic and disorderly. Shame, distress,
and fear collided in singularity as different signals fired off inside my body, reaffirming the unpredictable and dynamic nature of how bodies respond to material situations. I was distressed that the food I made would not taste quite right, fearful of how my friends might react, and ashamed about how uneasy and panic stricken I had become. In a rather unsuccessful attempt to push through these affects by finishing through the task at hand, I regrettably left out many steps and ingredients from the recipes I had planned to follow. At some point, I had even flirted with the idea of abandoning one of the dishes I wanted to serve, concerned that it may be too time consuming. On some level, these bodily affects seem to centre an anxiety around authenticity and performing Chinese culture the “right” way. However, as Probyn suggests, obsessing over authenticity is not all that productive because it places the “authentic” against the apparently artificial, and non-indigenous formations of identity (2000: 26).

Reflecting on the spectrum of affects I have experienced in relation to Chinese food allows me to appreciate the ‘chaotic, unstructured ways in which bodily intensities unfold in the production of everyday life’ (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2008: 462). Rather than perceiving Chinese food purely in symbolic and objective consumption terms, as I have covered in earlier chapters, it is clear that it can also occupy a pivotal role in the formation of visceral bodily feelings, relations, and expressions. Moreover, the simple act of cooking, a ‘seemingly mundane experience can in fact be a performatve politics of one’s subjectivity’ (Longhurst et al., ibid: 433). Eating can magnify the unique assemblage of our bodies, and reaffirm how we are not only comprised of material flesh, but also ‘bits of past and present practice, openings, attachments to parts of the social, closings and aversion to other parts’ (Probyn, 2000: 18). In this way, food can intensify and inflame the Chinese diasporic subject’s ‘lines of force’ which regulate and produce them in a constant, fluctuating
Following on from the idea of rhizomatic connections with Chinese food, I am inspired by the potential of sensory experiences to address and respond to ‘sense-based political projects’ such as anti-racism and women’s empowerment. As Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy suggest, ‘addressing the visceral realm—hence the catalytic potential of bodily sensations—has the potential to increase political understanding of how people can be moved either as individuals or as groups of social actors’ (2008: 469). To put these ideas into practice, I want to reflect on the conversations which occurred with my friends and the way we interacted and engaged with one another around the dinner table.

As I indicated earlier, while I was cooking dinner and even after I sat down to eat with my friends, I was rather wrapped up in feeling the affect of shame. However, Probyn argues that shame can also be productive and positive, especially when it feels bad (2005: 34). She writes, ‘the feeling of shame teaches us about our relations to others. Shame makes us feel proximity differently’ (2005: 35). In the intimate space of the kitchen and dinner table, commensality—or the act of eating together—allows bodies to become viscerally connected, in some way, on a similar plane or axes. At my own dinner, shame and distress were quickly noticed by my friends because they could read it in my facial expressions, and pieced it together from my constant apologising for things “taking too long to cook” and it “not tasting how it should”. Anna Gibbs (2001) puts it perfectly in her description of ‘contagious feelings’. She writes:

Bodies can catch feelings as easily as catch fire: affect leaps from one body to another, evoking tenderness, inciting shame, igniting rage, exciting fear – in short, communicable affect can inflame nerves and muscles in a conflagration of every

Coming together at the dinner table with my friends, it was not long before the topic of discussion turned to the food I had made; how I felt about it and what could potentially be improved for “next time”. In communicating my shame, I felt unburdened in a sense, and each person offered casual affirmations and encouragement. One of my friends was excited about simply eating potatoes cooked in a way that she had never experienced before, while another offered friendly advice for next time based off of her own mother’s recipe.

In keeping with the idea of all affects being generative, I want to briefly comment on the actual conversations which were had over the dinner table. Topics were often fleeting, much like what I had observed and participated in at my mother’s dinner; we talked about our careers, the news, and (interestingly) expectations and cultural differences between us and our parents. George Simmel (1994) insists that ‘of everything that people have in common, the most common is that they must eat and drink’ and that, because of this, eating is ‘most unconditionally and most immediately linked to each individual’ (cited in Probyn, 2000: 62). When I spoke about how panic stricken I had become over the course of dinner, each person accommodated and responded to this by offering their own subjectivities and thoughts on why I might have felt this way. Sharing food, in this sense, was an opportunistic window into sharing a part of myself with others, and vice versa. When they asked me why I had chosen the dishes that I had, everyone made an effort to validate the anxieties associated with performing your culture to other people. More importantly, the objective flavour and outcome of each dish, was relegated to the periphery as everyone became expressively grateful for the meal they were eating. They even went as far as helping me clean up the entire (mess of a) kitchen. It can be said, then, that sharing food in the intimacy of someone’s home can conjure both ‘satisfying and gut wrenching moments’ (Longhurst et al., 2009: 342). Thoughts and
ideas, which might be verbally communicated or embodied and interpreted *vis-à-vis* bodily encounters with food, can be transformative. The impregnation of new modes of thinking and relations to others through food, at once, stresses the rhizomatic nature of bodies and the potential of food as a vehicle for connection, story sharing, and imagining.

In my final chapter I have argued that thinking through Chinese food in visceral terms, that is, through the senses, is valuable in the context of migration and diaspora. Examining how Chinese food can affect us, and the relations which flow on from those affects, is an interesting place from which to explore entanglements of power, difference, and identity. I have delved deeper into the “unseen” potential of Chinese food, in terms of what visceral feelings it is capable of producing when prepared, eaten, and shared. These visceral responses are not often predictable or linear, rather they course through the body in spontaneously chaotic and disorganised ways. In this way, Chinese food when perceived as an assemblage event involving multiple bodies (humans, immaterial bodies, objects), has the capacity to: fold time; when it invokes memories, restructure space; when it is a source of connection to “home”; organise people; when shared and consumed communally, and spread understanding when it prompts conversations.
Last Orders

I began this project with, I admit, sedimented ideas of what Chinese food really is and a protectionist stance on who can (and cannot) make it. What I later came to realise was that, ultimately, this trajectory is limiting because it encircled the idea of cultural authenticity in the context of migrant economies/ecologies in a settler-colonial society. Migration, as I have come to view, invariably disrupts the linear logic of culture being reproduced from generation to generation. This realisation prompted me to question my own position in the Chinese Australian community, as a woman who has grown up in a white, working-class, regional area, but also has the privilege of a tertiary education and proficiency in English.

In writing this thesis I have tried to stay cautious of any tendency to romanticise my connection to Chinese food and culture. However, there was also a simultaneous urge to validate and speak into existence the feelings and experiences I have had with Chinese food and Chinese culture, more generally. Perhaps the most challenging aspect of my writing has been mediating this friction, and I have reminded myself that interrogating my own diasporic position is about both accountability and empowerment. I can now appreciate how difference from whiteness and distance Chineseness has the potential of opening up spaces where hybridity and remixing are the norm, as opposed to allying with tradition. Having said that, I hope that it is clear from my work that Chinese food in Australia ought not to be examined from a lens of loss, but of retrieval and creation. Moving away from a heterogeneity of culture, and towards appreciating its multiplicities.

None of these realisations would have been possible without first setting out to learn about the history of Chinese food. Acknowledging the historical genealogy of Chinese food
(and migration) allowed me to identify patterns of cultural invention and resistance. As a starting point this launched me into thinking about how tastes morph inter-generationally in the Chinese Australian diaspora and how mainstream attitudes towards Chinese food have also changed. Finally, connecting all the dots and mirroring my own self-realisations, I explored the transformative potential of Chinese food on an individual and social scale. I have demonstrated in this thesis that Chinese food is far more complex than it might appear. It is an interesting and accessible place from which to articulate and understand power, difference, and identity.

I sincerely hope that my thesis will contribute to a widening conversation on Chinese Australian migrant economies and ecologies. As mentioned in my introduction, a further point I would like to explore in the future is how these migrant assemblages can best work in collaboration with Indigenous communities, as reparations for (furthering) colonial violence and dispossession. Kylie Kwong, who I discussed in the second chapter of my thesis, has been using native Australian ingredients in her modern-Chinese restaurant. Kwong sources her produce from a company called Outback Pride, who endeavour to provide employment and training opportunities to remote Indigenous communities (Burgess, Kerryn. “Kylie Kwong on bush tucker”). In an interview about this initiative, Kwong says, ‘the very fact that more and more people are using this beautiful bush tucker is a very important statement in itself. We are saying, in my view, that we support and we respect the indigenous culture here. I mean, it’s about time.’ A topic I would like to explore in the future is how migrant food assemblages can ethically support and enrich Indigenous communities through sustaining local economies in remote areas. This might only be achieved through a commitment to inter-generational communication and cross-cultural labour.
Finally, on a personal and related note, I hope to one day be able to share my thoughts with my mother, and to hear her perspective on Chinese food. These are the conversations which fill me with inspiration and hope for the future.
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