

# CULINARY CONTROVERSIES

## Shark Fin Soup and Sea Creatures in the Asian Studies Curriculum

By Tami Blumenfield

In 2010, scuba diver Phil Tobin came across a shark carcass lying on the Ambon Harbor (Indonesia) ocean floor. The captured shark's highly valued fins, the key ingredient in shark fin soup, had been sliced off by its captors; the less valuable and more cumbersome body had been thrown back into the ocean. Without fins the shark, unable to swim, had sunk and starved to death. This shark was one of millions de-finned each year in order to satisfy the appetites of predominately Chinese consumers. Horrified, Tobin launched a campaign, deciding to act locally by protesting against a restaurant that served the offending soup.

A few days after I moved to Portland to teach at Portland State University in September 2010, the Institute for Asian Studies received a call from KBOO, a community radio station. The KBOO Food Program wanted to find a China specialist who could speak about exotic food items like shark fin soup, and I answered the call. Following on the heels of an article in the *Willamette Week* discussing Tobin's efforts to force shark fin soup off the menu of a Chinese restaurant and then a response by the owners of the restaurant, the radio show featured Tobin and me, a cultural anthropologist of China. As the restaurant did not send a representative to the show, I tried to balance two opposing points of view: environmentalists and animal rights activists on the one hand and proponents of certain consumption habits as culinary tradition on the other. The show generated many calls from listeners; most had been unaware of the controversy, but they quickly sided with the sharks.<sup>1</sup>

What is the controversy all about? Upon probing deeper, it involves issues of economic development and broadening prosperity; cultural issues of face and reciprocity; and expanding human control of oceanic resources. On another level, the controversy over shark fin soup reflects discomfort with changing global power dynamics and evokes uncomfortable racial tensions. It can provide a lesson in comparative civics and activism. In Hong Kong, activists have protested consumption of shark fin soup, but legislative changes have yet to be enacted. In the United States, first Hawai'i (2010) and then Washington, Oregon, and California (2011) banned shark fin possession, sale, and consumption. Celebrities like former Houston Rockets player Yao Ming



Scene from an anti-shark fin soup ad showing Yao Ming pushing away a bowl of shark fin soup. The voice-over statement for the advertising campaign states, "When the buying stops, the killing can too," from the Stop Shark Finning website at <http://tiny.cc/rlbaf>.

and actor Leonardo DiCaprio joined the campaign to ban shark fins in California. Even mainland China, with its opaque legislative process, has seen legislation to ban shark fin soup consumption introduced by billionaire legislator Ding Liguo (2011).<sup>2</sup>



Photo from the *Global Times* website, with the following caption: *Shark Champions Receive Awards*. From left: Richard Peirce, president of Shark Trust, Wan Jie, Ding Liguo, Zhang Xingsheng, and British Ambassador Sebastian Wood. (Photo: The British Embassy in Beijing)  
Source: <http://www.globaltimes.cn/NEWS/tabid/99/ID/661031/A-shark-reality.aspx>.

Following the September 2010 radio program recording, I decided to incorporate the shark fin soup debates into a unit on resource extraction and commodity circulations in part of a Globalization and Identity in Asia course. In this article, I share some of my experiences teaching this course and expand upon the issues involved in the hopes that others may also find these topics useful for teaching. In an environment where local food movements are gaining followers, and books like Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* attract millions of readers, topics like this with local themes and global ramifications captivate student interest and merit closer attention from educators.<sup>3</sup>

### THE CONTEXT FOR SHARK FIN SOUP

Shark fin soup originated as a delicacy served to emperors in China. Its consumption broadened by the Ming dynasty, but it retained its cachet as an imperial luxury. Fuchsia Dunlop, a British food writer and author of the culinary memoir *Shark's Fin and Sichuan Pepper*, explains that food is of exceptional importance in Chinese culture.<sup>4</sup> In a chapter focusing on rare ingredients like bird nest and shark fin, Dunlop emphasizes *kougan* (mouthfeel) as a key characteristic: "Theoretically, much of the appeal of these rare delicacies lies in their tonic properties, and their luxurious mouthfeels. Shark's fin, for example, is rich in protein, contains some minerals, and is thought to combat arteriosclerosis; it is also prized for its strandy silkiness in the mouth, and its gelatinous bite." Adding that seaweed has a similar mouthfeel, she continues: "Yet, in the end, one has to admit that much of their appeal lies in their snob value."<sup>5</sup>

As the Chinese economy has prospered in recent decades, banquets with expensive and rare ingredients have increased in frequency. Banquets have long been an important site for building business and personal relationships, a crucial fuel for forming a *guanxi* web of connections. The more impressive the banquet, the more likely that guests may be effectively influenced by their hosts. In some circles, serving shark fin soup has become a requisite menu item—delegations of mainland Chinese visitors to Hong Kong expect to find it or



Screen captures from the Asian Pacific American Ocean Harmony Alliance (APAHOA) video at <http://apaoha.org/page2/page2.html>.

complain of feeling slighted. As a Chinese student studying in Washington State commented after taking a tour of Chinatown:

*The biggest impression I had through this tour is Chinese people still keep their biggest characteristic—loving food. Within this small Chinatown occupied more than ten traditional bakery shops and at least fifteen restaurants. It fully reflects an old saying that some people eat to live; but Chinese live to eat. Food in China is like glue that holds everything together. . . It is an essential way of bringing the family, friends, and business partners together. Of course, it also becomes a way of bribing high authority, indirectly promoting corruption in China.*<sup>6</sup>

Food thus serves many functions, and particular foods can enhance the efficacy of those functions.

Shark fin soup has also become an expected ingredient at wedding banquets in Chinese communities, overseas and in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Along with abalone, sea cucumber, and fish maw, shark fin soup is one of the four key banquet menu items. The organization Shark Truth, founded by Chinese-Canadian Claudia Li, has taken a creative approach to reducing shark fin consumption, enlisting young Chinese-Canadian couples to pledge not to serve shark fin soup at their wedding banquets. One Vancouver bride who took the pledge, Judy Lao, explained that the soup held little meaning for those in her generation: “We don’t really care, our friends don’t care, and shark fin has no nutritional value anyway, so why should we serve it?”<sup>7</sup> Her parents took some convincing, though, concerned that they would lose face by not demonstrating their wealth with the pricey ingredient. California representative Leland Yee, speaking at a press conference opposing bans on shark fins, expressed the concerns of a more senior generation: “It seems that there are more and more examples where individuals or groups of individuals are trying to limit our heritage and our culture.”<sup>8</sup>

Taking another approach, Asian Pacific American Ocean Harmony Alliance co-founder Judy Ki wrote in an editorial:

*Shark fin soup was deservedly a coveted cultural dish due to the symbolism associated with the vitality of sharks and the rarity of fins related to the challenge of landing such a feared predator. But much of that cachet is gone now that millions of sharks are caught and finned by titanic floating fish factories and mass-distributed through global Asian restaurant conglomerates. The shark fin soup that once symbolized vitality and nobility now represents the ignorant depletion of ocean sea life to serve the appetite of an exploding global population of nouveau-riche Chinese.*<sup>9</sup>

This grassroots organization represents a different side of the shark fin debates.

## ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES AND RESPONSIBILITY

When discussing shark finning, most point to the consumers of the pricey soup made from fins as those responsible. As Yao Ming says in a WildAid public service announcement broadcast in mainland China and streamed on YouTube, “When the buying stops, the killing stops too.”<sup>10</sup> But should the blame for global shark population decline lie entirely with those demanding shark fin soup—95 percent of this demand comes from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong,

according to National People’s Congress Deputy Ding Liguó—or should the blame go to those responsible for meeting this demand through catching and definning the sharks.<sup>11</sup> (Argentina, France, India, Indonesia, and Spain are the top five fishing nations, according to a January 2011 report.)<sup>12</sup> The report faults the fishing nations for not doing enough to report shark catches by species—half of the twenty-one most commonly caught species sharks are threatened—and for not acting on earlier promises to regulate and restrict shark fishing. A 2009 study that calculated the dollar value of a single reef shark as a tourist attraction has influenced several island nations to designate their waters as shark sanctuaries or consider similar protections.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond killing sharks for their fins, a practice easily lampooned for its inhumane treatment of the shark, are there other, more sinister culinary problems that require attention? As Dunlop notes as she describes a visit to a restaurant specializing in endangered animal body parts, “The notorious traffic in fins is, however, just the tip of the iceberg, the fin of the fish. The Chinese are the world’s most rapacious consumers of endangered species in general.”<sup>14</sup> While this statement would be difficult to quantify, and the term “rapacious” may be pejorative, anecdotal evidence about consumption of endangered species abounds.

Nonetheless, some of the language used to oppose shark fin harvesting and consumption—and even the bans themselves—seems problematic. In an article titled “Is it Racist to Ban Shark’s Fin Soup? All Three West Coast States may Eliminate the Chinese Delicacy, but is it Pro-Environment, or Anti-Asian?” Lam quotes Chinese-American chef Jonathan Wu: “It’s a tough call, but I support the ban. While we are at it, I’d also ban Caspian caviar and bluefin tuna [Caspian sturgeon and bluefin tuna are both considered endangered by many scientists] until their fisheries recover—no doubt, that would raise an uproar in certain other cultural communities.”<sup>15</sup> Lam’s conclusion is worth quoting at length:

*And that’s the thing: It’s not that this ban is “racist” as some have put it, it’s that it’s the kind of thing that smells a bit of cynical political posturing, scoring cheap environmental points because no politician is going to lose any votes that matter. Get rid of a grody-sounding food that only the Chinese are stupid enough to save up their money for? Easy! Try to take away the endangered tuna from voters’ Friday night sushi date, though, and there’ll be hell to pay. And don’t even think about doing anything about factory farming, the cheap-meat industry that is unequivocally ruining huge swaths of our ecology and our health. It’s not a good state of affairs when we can easily get up a head of steam behind laws that take away others’ pleasures, but refuse to even take a hard look at our own.*<sup>16</sup>

Lam may have underestimated the ease of banning shark fins in California—in the midst of a battle for the San Francisco mayoralty of three Chinese-American candidates, the issue may well have involved a loss of votes for certain politicians. Assembly Bill 376 sputtered through the legislature, received a majority vote in the final days of the 2011 legislative session, and was signed into law by Governor Jerry Brown only one day before the deadline for his signature or veto.<sup>17</sup> But Lam’s characterization of the ban as “disconcerting” seems on the mark.<sup>18</sup>

Looking beyond sharks, the procurement of food from dolphins and other whales, as described in the Oscar Award winning documentary *The Cove* and in books like Jun Morikawa's *Whaling in Japan: Power, Politics and Diplomacy*, has also raised allegations of cultural imperialism and prompted defensive claims about national interests.<sup>19</sup> Morikawa counterclaims that whaling is a deeply embedded Japanese tradition by arguing that commercial whaling differs dramatically from coastal, subsistence whaling practiced before the twentieth century. *The Cove*, in exposé style, spotlights the killing of dolphins rejected by buyers from the Sea World-inspired aquatic theme parks of the world in the Japanese village of Taiji. Politics and nationalistic rhetoric play a central role in both cases, but economic interests are not disregarded, either.

### CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS

I incorporated a unit on shark fin soup and global seafood consumption into my Globalization and Identity in Asia course in winter and spring 2011. In spring 2011, I taught the class to a combined group of matriculated Portland State University students (many of whom hailed from international backgrounds) and Waseda Oregon students—Japanese students in their first quarter of a yearlong academic exchange at Portland State. As in the previous quarter, I showed *The Cove* and asked students to listen to the KBOO radio program. To further underscore the hybridity of contemporary culinary practices and to give the Japanese students a bit of a cultural dining experience, I took the class to a campus sushi restaurant. The conveyor belt was filled with some seaweed-fish-rice rolls that Japanese students expected to find at a sushi



Portland State University students visit a campus sushi restaurant to explore hybrid seafood creations. (Photo: Tami Blumenfeld)

restaurant, but interspersed among these were thousand island dressing-drizzled creations and small plates of *kimchee*. We spoke with the Korean owners and watched the chefs (also Korean) pull prepared rolls from refrigerators before putting them on conveyor belts.

Afterward, students commented on the experience in online discussion forums. One Waseda Oregon student discussed her surprise at learning that her classmate was vegetarian. She then explained her own perspective: “His

## TEACHING NOTES

These topics are ideal for courses discussing sustainability and environmental practices, globalization, the anthropology of food, and Asian politics. Classroom activities to accompany these topics may include organizing debates over ethical eating and cultural consumption practices, writing letters to the editor, interviewing community elders about dietary habits or practices, or creating short videos about the controversy. In addition to the activities described above, I ask one or two students to research the topic in advance and facilitate a class discussion, a strategy that encourages dialogue. Sample discussion questions are included below, but the possibilities are not limited to these topics. Regardless of the teaching strategies selected, the nexus of ethical, ecological, political, and cultural issues that these culinary practices encompass makes them a rich trove of curricular content.

### Sample Discussion Questions

For today's class, you listened to the discussion about shark fin soup. What is your reaction to this controversy? Do you think this practice should change?

Legislation was just passed in California to ban shark fin possession and sale, and some other states have banned it too. Should [our state] ban the sale of shark fins? Why or why not?

In his article, Theodore Bestor says that the globalization of the bluefin tuna industry has caused damage to the environment.<sup>20</sup> What are some other globalized foods or resources that are affecting the environment? How do environmental issues affect our food choices?<sup>21</sup>

*The Cove* is about Westerners trying to get Japanese fishermen to stop killing dolphins because we think they are intelligent and cute. Animals have value that differs between cultures (cows in India, dogs in the United States). Does globalization affect the moral value of animals? How so? What are some examples?

Ethics aside, the fishermen in *The Cove* were only trying to fulfill a demand for dolphin meat. Should the fishermen be condemned for their actions? How or why? In America, how responsible are CAFO (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations) for the beef industry and the treatment of cows? How does cultural or physical difference affect how we judge the actions of others?

### Excerpt from Unit on Global Commodity Flows and Resource Extraction

Course: Globalization and Identity in Asia, International Studies Program, Portland State University

#### Day 1

How do resource extraction practices collide with cultural norms around food practices?

Film: *The Cove* (2009, 92 min.)

Read Theodore C. Bestor, “How Sushi Went Global,” *Foreign Policy*, 2000.

Explore *The Cove* website, <http://www.thecovemovie.com>.

Watch one *Whale Wars* episode, <http://animal.discovery.com/tv/whale-wars/>.

#### Day 2

How and why have resource extraction practices and dietary habits become politicized?

Recommended viewing: *Sharkwater* (2006, 90 min.)<sup>22</sup>

Read Chapter 1 from Theodore C. Bestor, “Tokyo's Pantry,” *Tsukiji: The Fish Market at the Center of the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 1–49.

Listen to KBOO radio program about the shark fin soup controversy, <http://kboo.fm/node/23779>.

Optional reading: Juliet Eilperin, *Demon Fish: Travels through the Hidden World of Sharks* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011).

#### Day 3

How are globalizing food products circulated and consumed? Why are certain products engaging in global encounters and not others?

Read Chapter 2 from Theodore C. Bestor, “Grooved Channels,” *Tsukiji: The Fish Market at the Center of the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 50–90.

Read “EAA Interview with James L. Watson on *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia*,” Lucien Ellington, ed., *Education about Asia* 8 no. 1 (2003): 7–9.<sup>23</sup>

#### Day 4

Class meets off campus at a restaurant today. We will eat dinner together. Details TBA.<sup>24</sup>

statement makes sense for me, but the way of thinking of Japanese people is different from him. Japanese people think that we can't live without living things, so we thank them and eat them all." This comment supports the assertion that at some level, everything is relative. Educators should expect students to approach these controversies from their own cultural perspectives. ■

NOTES

1. Related links include an audio archive of the KBOO food show: <http://kboo.fm/node/23779>; a *Willamette Week* article about the restaurant: <http://wwweek.com/editorial/3643/14460/>; and a letter of response from the restaurant owners: <http://tiny.cc/q222z>.
2. Ma Shukun and Cao Guochang, "Chinese Billionaire Lawmaker Urges Legislation against Shark Fin Trading," *Xinhua Report*, March 9, 2011, accessed July 2, 2011, <http://tiny.cc/n9i11>.
3. Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin, 2006).
4. Fuchsia Dunlop, *Shark's Fin and Sichuan Pepper: A Sweet-Sour Memoir of Eating in China* (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 2009).
5. *Ibid.*, 261.
6. Lingyun Zhou, personal communication, August 2010.
7. Cheryl Chan, "Trouble Brews over Ancient Soup," *The Province*, July 10, 2011, accessed August 18, 2011, <http://bit.ly/n6SpXp>.
8. John Upton, "Sen. Yee Harpoons Shark Fin Bill," *The Bay Citizen*, February 14, 2011, accessed June 3, 2011, <http://bit.ly/f1blpx>.
9. Judy Ki, "Viewpoint: Lawmakers Need to End the Race-Baiting and Ban Shark Fins," *The Sacramento Bee*, June 28, 2011, accessed July 3, 2011, <http://bit.ly/otXzOA>.
10. YouTube online video, accessed June 3, 2011, <http://bit.ly/c716Hz>.
11. Ma Shukun and Cao Guochang.
12. Mary Lack and Glenn Sant, "The Future of Sharks: A Review of Action and Inaction," *Report by Traffic: The Wildlife Trade Monitoring Network and the Pew Environment Group*, 2011. These numbers are based on reported catch and therefore may not accurately reflect actual catches.
13. T. Timms and C. Williams, "Bleeding the Ocean Dry? The Overfishing and Decline of Global Shark Stocks" (*WildAid*, 2009), accessed June 3, 2011, <http://bit.ly/qQYAs1>.
14. Dunlop, 263.
15. Francis Lam, "Is It Racist to Ban Shark's Fin Soup? All Three West Coast States May Eliminate the Chinese Delicacy, but is it Pro-Environment, or Anti-Asian?" *Salon.com*, March 7, 2011, accessed March 12, 2011, <http://bit.ly/nIDMTE>. For details on threats to other aquatic life referred to by Lam, see Bryan Walsh with Austin Ramzy and Robert Horn, "The End of the

Line," *Time* 178 (July 18, 2011), 28–36; Paul Greenberg, *Four Fish: The Future of the Last Wild Food* (New York: Penguin, 2010); and Charles Clover, *The End of The Line: How Overfishing Is Changing the World and What We Eat* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

16. *Ibid.*
17. Margot Roosevelt, "Battle Over Shark Fin Soup Heats Up in California," *Los Angeles Times*, June 29, 2011, accessed July 7, 2011, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/jun/29/local/la-me-shark-fin-20110629>. See also Steven Harmon, "Gov. Jerry Brown Signs Bill Banning Shark Fins in California," Bay Area News Group, October 7, 2011, accessed October 25, 2011, <http://tiny.cc/9h1b4>.
18. See Lam, 2011.
19. *The Cove*, Jim Clark, producer, Louie Psihoyos, director (Oceanic Preservation Society, 2009); Jun Morikawa, *Whaling in Japan: Power, Politics and Diplomacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
20. Theodore Bestor, "How Sushi Went Global," *Foreign Policy* 121 (2000): 54–63.
21. This question and the following two questions were written by William Rainsmyth, a Portland State University student enrolled in Globalization and Identity in Asia in May 2011.
22. *Sharkwater*, Robert Stewart, director (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006).
23. In addition to assigning this short interview with the editor of *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia*, many instructors find the entire volume an effective introduction to the divergence between global products and local consumption practices; James L. Watson, ed., *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia*, 2nd ed. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).
24. I look for a restaurant that exemplifies transnational influences on local culinary practices, and of course, one that is affordable for students (although schools and universities may subsidize the cost). For example, a Korean restaurant that Korean people find authentic is not ideal for this activity; one that combines regional preferences with national cuisines may be more effective.

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