

New awareness grows around shark-fin soup

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An invitation to a Chinese wedding banquet usually means you'll be sitting down to an extravagant 10- to 12-course meal. A few years ago, that feast would most likely have featured abalone, sea cucumber, fish maw (swim bladder), and shark fin, which are often considered the "big four" of Chinese cuisine. The pièce de résistance would invariably have been shark-fin soup, a delicate and invitingly fragrant dish consisting of a thick chicken or pork broth and shredded pieces of shark fin.

Nowadays, though, many Chinese Canadian couples are choosing to forgo the controversial dish in response to a growing awareness of the harm it's causing to ocean ecosystems.

"Every culture has their problem, right? It just so happens that this one is of a species that's very close to being pushed to extinction," Claudia Li, founder of Shark Truth, told the *Georgia Straight*. "We target Chinese couples between 18 to 35, who are generally aware of animal rights and environmentalism, so it's pretty well received, but, of course, every once in a while we encounter a grandmother or a very stubborn parent."

Shark Truth is a nonprofit group that began in Vancouver in 2009. It's run by volunteers, more than half of whom are of Chinese descent, and is represented by a cheerful cartoon shark mascot called Harry. The organization uses media to raise awareness about alternatives to shark-fin soup. It also puts on a wedding

campaign called Happy Hearts Love Sharks, in which couples can enter a contest if they pledge not to serve shark-fin soup at their wedding. Last year, a couple won a trip to swim with whale sharks in Mexico. This year, Shark Truth is planning to send the winning couple to Hawaii.

“The majority of shark-fin soup is served at wedding banquets, and that’s where I feel the biggest impact can be made,” Li said. “I would say most Chinese wedding banquets I’ve been to have at least 200 to 300 people, on average, so when one wedding couple says, ‘We’re going to protect sharks and we’re not going to eat sharks,’ that’s, like, 300 people not drinking it.”

The significant impact a couple can have by not serving shark-fin soup to hundreds of guests on their wedding day is echoed by Stephen Wong. A former restaurateur, Wong is a food writer and the founding chair of the HSBC Chinese Restaurant Awards, which recently announced the best Chinese restaurant dishes of 2011, none of which contained shark fin or abalone. Wong believes that shark-fin soup is still on restaurant menus because people continue to order it, not just at weddings but also for Chinese New Year, birthdays, and newborn baby celebrations. Priced between \$150 and \$200 for a large bowl that serves 10, it also represents a considerable amount of income for a restaurant.

“If you asked a restaurateur, they would say that if the customers stopped asking for it, then they probably wouldn’t serve it,” Wong said. “It’s a pragmatic thing. It’s on banquet menus for the reason of it being prestigious. The reason why they serve it is because it has the highest price of ingredients in Chinese cuisine.”

Wong explained that shark fin is also perceived to have medicinal qualities. “Chinese believe that edible gelatin will keep you supple, so shark fin is a part of that repertoire of gelatinous things that the Chinese eat, like jellyfish and sea cucumber.”

The organizers of [CIBC LunarFest](#), an Asian arts and culture event coinciding with the Lunar New Year that runs February 3 to 13, are hoping that this year’s theme, Ocean Heart, will help increase awareness of ocean conservation and threats to marine life within the Chinese community. The festival features a glowing-lantern aquarium display, illuminated by LED lights, outside the Vancouver Art Gallery on the West Georgia Street side.

“We wanted to continue our green message from last year, which was sort of what the Olympics were about,” said Sherry Wang, spokesperson for the Asian-Canadian Special Events Association, which organizes LunarFest. “So this year, we thought we’d turn our attention to the ocean. Water is important to our life, and the ocean is important to our environment.”

There are more than 450 species of sharks on Earth, and as many as 100 million sharks are killed each year, the majority of them for their fins. Although it’s difficult to predict what will happen if sharks become extinct, Li warned that most of the Earth “is covered in ocean and water, and that’s where humans get most of our oxygen from”. Removing a top predator could change the health and balance of the marine ecosystem.

One of the biggest obstacles Li and her team face is changing the minds of those who worry that taking shark-fin soup off of Chinese banquet tables would be stripping a culture of a time-honoured tradition. “Oftentimes, elders will say to me: ‘If you’re trying to remove shark fin from our tradition, then you’re removing a part of Chinese culture.’ But that’s not true, because are they saying that Chinese people who cannot afford shark fin are any less Chinese?”

“A lot of times, people are not willing to change, or parents are scared because the groom’s side of the family traditionally pays for the wedding banquet. They don’t want their guests to think they’re cheap, and they’re worried that they will look bad and lose face,” Li said.

Vancouver city councillor Kerry Jang also sees Chinese elders as the ones who need the most convincing. “It’s kind of a shock to the older generation,” he told the *Straight*. “It was an imperial dish in the ancient days. It was probably about the ’50s, ’60s, ’70s that everybody wanted to have it because it was a sign of wealth, a sign of making it in society.”

However, Jang is noticing a change in attitude among the younger generation. “What we’re seeing across Asia now—not just America, but Hong Kong as well—is that young couples are thinking in terms of sustainability. They’re actually opting out of shark-fin soup.”

Li has also detected that young Chinese Canadians are open to change, particularly those who have grown up here and were raised with both Chinese and western values. “The generations here are more willing to change because they’ve talked about other cross-cultural issues, like maybe moving out or dating a non-Chinese person,” she said. “I feel like there’s more willingness, and they’re pretty much ready to receive these types of messages.”

For those who still want to sip the tradition, Wong said there are substitutes, including “algae”, which simulates shark fin but is made from vegetables and seaweed.

Meanwhile, Li isn’t convinced that people who defend their food choices by calling them traditions are unable to change. She believes in strength in numbers and creating a community that supports change.

“Foot-binding was a part of Chinese culture, and that doesn’t make sense anymore. Polygamy was part of the Emperor’s culture way back when,” she said. “Cultures change. We’re dynamic, and we can adapt to what’s needed of the moment.”

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