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Inter-Chinese race row in Vancouver over shark's fin soup

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Ian Young in Vancouver

Campaigner gets big Vancouver restaurant to drop the delicacy but is then labelled a 'banana' for failing to uphold his heritage

The debate over shark's fin soup has descended into an inter-Chinese race row in Vancouver, with a restaurant group branding a leading anti-finning campaigner a "banana" who failed to understand his own ethnic heritage.

Vancouver City Councillor Dr Kerry Jang, who has campaigned against the controversial delicacy for six years, is savouring a major success after helping convince the city's biggest Chinese restaurant to drop shark fin from its menu last week. The 1,000-seat Vancouver Chinatown branch of the Hong Kong based Floata chain is also touted as the biggest Chinese restaurant in Canada.

Jang, a leading member of the left-leaning Vision Vancouver party, said he had seen a change in attitudes towards shark fin. "I think it's great, I see an awareness of world values there, and not just Chinese cultural values," said Jang, referring to Floata's decision. "What I really dislike is that they [supporters of shark's fin soup] are trying to wrap this issue in the flag of China."

Jang was referring to a pronounced ethnic split on the issue, not between Chinese and non-Chinese but between immigrant Chinese and Canadian-born Chinese. Jang, a professor of psychiatry at the University of British Columbia, is a third-generation Canadian.

That split was emphasised recently by David Chung, head of the BC (British Columbia) Asian Restaurant and Cafe Owners Association, who said that Jang was not equipped to represent the Chinese community, or understand the importance of shark fin to Chinese culture.

"He was born in Canada, influenced by Western culture from a young age and is totally unfamiliar with Chinese culture - unable to understand the historical relationship Chinese have had with shark fin and the innate bond we share," said Chung, owner of the Jade Seafood Restaurant in Vancouver's satellite city of Richmond.

"He is not Chinese, he is a banana. He is only doing this to get cheap political votes. Many people in our industry have already announced that we will not vote for him during the next election," said Chung in a Chinese-language interview with *Ming Pao's* local edition.

"Banana" is a derisory term for Westernised Chinese - yellow outside but white inside.

A manager at Jade Seafood Restaurant said that Chung was unavailable for further comment until next week.

Jang said that the debate in Vancouver had become increasingly personal. "I wasn't offended [by Chung's comments], I know where he's coming from, but as a politician I'm trying to reflect the values of the entire community. I'm trying to be a Vancouver councillor, not a Chinese councillor ... in one way I took it as a compliment."

In contrast, supporters of shark fin have appealed specifically to overseas-born Chinese residents. Alice Wong, Richmond's Hong Kong-born Conservative MP in federal parliament, called a press conference in August in Chung's restaurant, tucking into shark's fin soup as she spoke out against the need for a municipal ban. But only Chinese-language reporters were invited, and it was widely decried when footage of it leaked into the mainstream English media.

"That was deliberate," said Jang of Wong's apparent exclusion of English-language reporters. "I was surprised. It was stupid ... if you want to say something, say it to all."

Richmond is the most Chinese city in North America by a substantial margin, at 45 per cent, while greater Vancouver's 400,000 strong Chinese population represents 19.5 per cent of the region's total population.

Jang is campaigning for a ban on the importation and trade of shark fin, not an outright ban on possession or consumption. He cited a Mustel Group poll which suggested last year that 77 per cent of Chinese Canadians opposed the importation of shark fin to Canada.

"For a lot of mainland folks it's an issue of conspicuous consumption, to show that they can [afford it]. For some older people from Hong Kong, they are more likely to view it as a right, something they should be allowed to do," said Jang. "But if you are Canadian-born then I think you realise there are other ways to honour your guests ... serve them abalone or something."

The locally based anti-shark- fin group Shark Truth is largely made up of young ethnic Chinese, including founder Claudia Li. "Floata is to be commended for their monumental decision to remove shark fin from their menu. This policy represents a socially responsible business decision that will be praised by the community," said Kevin Huang, director of campaigns at Shark Truth.

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