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Shark fin soup not a tradition worth keeping

BY CLAUDIA LI, SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN SEPTEMBER 23, 2011

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Claudia Li is the founder of the non-profit organization Shark Truth, which is dedicated to promoting awareness and saving sharks.

How does it feel to be brushed by the tail of a seven-metre whale shark? Surreal and somewhat humbling.

I'm in the middle of the Caribbean Sea under the scorching hot sun, buoyantly floating in the heavily salted water when a white-spotted, square-headed female fish half the size of a bus swims inches away from me. Although one of the slower shark species, it only has to wiggle its body to travel at five kilometres per hour; yet, I'm in my touristy snorkelling outfit paddling breathless. When I finally catch up to the ocean giant, everything around me feels like it's slowing down. As I watch her head, dorsal fin, seven metres of her body and pectoral fin glide right past me, I'm amazed at how this living fossil is shockingly docile as it cruises along — something it has been doing for millions of years.

I just returned from a trip to Isla Holbox, Mexico where I swam with four whale sharks — the biggest fish species in the world. Although they have no sharp teeth, whale sharks can grow up to 18 metres long by feeding on only plankton. Compared with other sharks, whale sharks are relatively slow in speed. In the family of 450-plus species of sharks, whale sharks would be akin to the grandmother that forgot her dentures, just slowly gumming her way through dinner.

All cultures have their respective food problems and shark fin is no exception. Foie gras, a liver delicacy in French cuisine, has come under flames due to the practice of force-feeding animals, while North American food production is notorious for factory farming and our dangerously heavy protein diets.

Seventy-three million sharks are killed each year, primarily for the fins to make shark fin soup — a dish popular at middle- to high-income Chinese banquets. It is part of the "Big Four" dishes in Chinese cuisine, which includes abalone, sea cucumber and fish maw or fish swim bladder. Shark fin is a particularly popular item, as it was commonly said that a "bride marrying into a family without shark fin is marrying into a poor family."

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The fin itself has no taste, only texture that can easily be replaced. The soup's lip-smacking effect is thanks to the condensed chicken and ham broth, and likely a sprinkle of MSG. It is known that shark fin represents status, "face" and wealth, but it also symbolizes the deep-rooted Chinese tradition of "sharing fortune." Growing up in a family where my elders struggled in poverty, having this dish at a banquet dinner was their way of saying to their guests, "Look how hard I've worked and how far I've come. Let me share this fortune with you."

Thus, my Chinese elders also despised wastefulness. At dinner, our hands were slapped if we left a grain of rice in the bowl. In Chinese cuisine, we consume as much of the animal as possible, including the feet, tongue, and other body parts that some cultures would find repulsive and throw away. The fins of sharks make up less than five per cent of their total body weight on average, but this is the part of sharks that is in highest demand. Due to the high value of their fins (a dorsal fin of a whale shark can sell for up to \$50,000) compared with the low value of their meat, their bodies are often discarded and wasted at sea.

Having been brought up in a traditional Chinese culture, my family cringes at wastefulness.

The Chinese culture is also one that is rooted in the values of nature and balance — the practice of shark finning and shark fin consumption simply does not fit.

Claudia Li is first-generation Chinese-Canadian and the founder of Shark Truth.

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