

# Four Dances of the Sea: Cooking “Asian” as Embedded Cosmopolitanism

Jean Duruz

## *Abstract*

This paper recalls (imperfectly, I suspect) a comment from the British television cooking series, *Two Fat Ladies*. “Add some chilli to the fish,” says one Fat Lady to the other, “That’s very Australian.” This begs the question: how did the taste of chilli become “very Australian”? Changes to Australian cuisine have provoked much lively debate regarding its “Asianisation,” hybridisation and current “stars” (Symons, Santich, Ripe). Rather than following these relatively well-trodden routes, however, the paper approaches issues of “new” Australian food cultures and social identities from an oblique direction. Its concern is to reflect on meanings of belonging through unraveling, in part, established conceptual/media/industry dichotomies of cook and chef (Gunders)—those hard distinctions between celebrity professional practice and the everyday place-making associated with migration. Drawing on Chef Cheong Liew’s signature dish, *Four Dances of the Sea*, and its biographical resonances, the paper examines the complex web of affective relationships that might “embed” a chef (even a celebrity whose international reputation is prized by the Adelaide Hilton) within his/her gastronomic community: childhood memories of Malaysia; extended family and friendship networks; local professional networks; food streets and markets; local producers and providores; transnational networks and global travel. Such mapping, in turn, allows a challenge to Nausbaum’s universalised liberal cosmopolitan “self” from a more nuanced take on the significance of “place” for cultural exchange, reciprocity and belonging through food. It also figures (tentatively) “new” hybrid forms of Asian-Australian culinary citizenship.

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## Introduction

[Cheong] came up with four small islands of seafood on a bare white plate. There were tiny fillets of soused snook (pike) on avocado slices with a wasabi mayonnaise, thin slices of raw cuttle fish with squid-ink noodles, slices of poached octopus tentacles with a garlic mayonnaise and spiced prawn sushi with glutinous rice. ... The result is a constant on the Grange's menu. It can not be taken off. As a creation, it is myriad flavours and textures all in magnificent balance ... Perhaps it is the greatest of Australian dishes. (Downes 2002, 72-3)

At the time Chef Cheong Liew first conceptualized “Four Dances of the Sea,” he was no stranger to celebrity. The year was 1995; the place, Adelaide, Australia. Cheong had already established his reputation for innovation as “the first to open other chefs’ taste buds to Asian possibilities” (Ripe 1993, 20) through his legendary restaurant, Neddy’s, and his years of teaching [cookery] at the Regency Hotel School—arguably Australia’s leading centre of hospitality training. Now he was about to take up the position of “consultant chef” to the Adelaide Hilton International Hotel’s restaurant, the Grange (Downes 2002, 51, 78-80). In the same year, his book *My Food*, written with Liz Ho, was published. In its foreword, Barbara Santich, an Adelaide food historian, wrote “Cheong is a culinary magician, a sorcerer of the kitchen” (1995, xiii).



Instead of a focus on celebrity, one on “real” places ...  
Author’s photograph

While Cheong’s celebrity status might be considered unrivalled in the history of Australian cooking, this paper is not primarily concerned with Cheong’s history or his contributions. Instead, it offers a different perspective on the global circulation of people and their food cultures and the emergence of new culinary “styles” and social identities in its regional context—Southeast Asia. Conceptually, this paper aims to challenge the conventional distinction between the opposed figures, “chef” and “cook” (Gunders, 2008), in other words, between the practiced professional with

an eye on global trends, and the experienced home cook, whose skills are rooted in the rituals of his/her community. We will enter some of those grey spaces in between, spaces where professionalism and immigrant home-making become entangled: a family farm near a Malay kampong, a long table in an Adelaide garden,

the cluttered aisles in Adelaide's Central Market, a table of chefs in Chinatown. In the process, the analysis addresses issues of identity, globalization, hybridity and cosmopolitanism that are negotiated within, and the dynamics of these "real" spaces. Specifically, the paper asks: how do global movements of people and their food continue to shape social identities in quite tangible and obvious ways? How might fashionable cooking "styles"—for example, "fusion,"—be reconceptualised as historically hybridized, embedded forms of everyday cosmopolitanism? What is the role of memory, encounter, exchange and place-making grounded in the practices of "cooking Asian" in Australia while at the same time fostering cosmopolitan sensibilities?

Before proceeding, a comment on the analytic approach this paper adopts deserves mention. Sensitive to the nuances in a particular immigrant's account of his experiences, memories, philosophies, and cooking, as well as his public profile, the argument develops a symptomatic reading of micro-narratives that emerged over several face-to-face conversations (Johnson, Chambers, Raghuram and Tinknell 2004, 194-5). Obviously, the intention here is not to produce a definitive account—I do not want to imply that a particular life history automatically claims "generalisability." Instead, textual readings of interview fragments deliberately seek out the "everydayness" of Cheong's narratives as intriguing points for reflection. In fact, by choosing a deliberate analytic path "against the grain" of the more usual one of celebrity and spectacle, I want to trouble its predictability. Such an approach allows for questions within the argument, at least, in regard to the hybrid histories of all food cultures and the mundanity and locatedness of their cosmopolitan imaginaries.

## **Places of memory: hawkers on the High Street ... the farm near the *kampong***

In his cooking, Cheong has a habit of returning to his roots. "Four Dances" signifies this return in its circular arrangement of "islands" on the plate, each indicating a critical place, person, or moment within Cheong's culinary biography. The strongest flavoured "island" is spiced prawn with glutinous rice, representing "a salute to home," more specifically, to Malaysia, particularly those years associated with his childhood, family, and growing up (Downes 2002, 72).

The imagery of "crossroads" pervades Cheong's memories of his early years. The shophouse from which Cheong's family initially operated its wholesale chicken business, and later a Cantonese restaurant, stood on the busy Jalan Bandar (High Street) in the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. The shophouse was close to a central bus station and market with a plethora of food stalls (Liew 1995, 1-2). "My favourite

stall was that of the Indian kacang man,” says Cheong. “He sold kacang puteh, roasted white beans...and a variety of fried beans and lentils.” “Just across the road,” he continues, “were numerous restaurants—Malay, Indian, Chinese—including the Chinese barbecue stalls with the most basic of tables and chairs, selling the equivalent of fast food” (1995,1). Nearby were Hokkien tea traders and noodle restaurants, and a Teh Chew restaurant serving congee with “a master stock full of duck and chicken, offal, pork ears and intestines, bean curd and pickles” (1995, 1-2). Hence, the shophouse is sited in Cheong’s memories not only near a main transport junction (from where point buses departed to points elsewhere in Malaya), but also at the “crossroads” of taste and ethnicity, where the proximity of different ethnic groups and their cuisines encouraged “eating across the borders” (cultural and religious rules permitting) (Tan 2001, 146-8).



Hawker stalls in Penang Rd  
Author's Photograph

The ritual appearance of hawkers throughout the day in the street below adds additional layers to this narrative of cross-cultural eating, serving as a timely reminder of cooking across borders:

At around eight the breakfast sellers would arrive. One of the first temptations was rice vermicelli cake with palm sugar. Then a Chinese lady would come with her nonya sweets, and around ten, the laksa man ... At noon the yong tow fu man would come on his tricycle, bearing the vegetables and beancurd stuffed with fish farce [forcemeat]. At three or four in the afternoon the

rojak seller would enter the scene, and at five, the soup man with red bean soup, peanut soup, black rice soup, and sesame soup, all eaten with coconut milk. (Liew 1995, 2)

While there is insufficient space to unravel the complex histories of these dishes, there are ample hints that these are stories of global migration (for example soups and stuffed bean curd from China; *rojak*, a spicy salad, from Indonesia), of local adaptation (the ubiquitous presence of palm sugar and coconut milk) (Holuique 1999, 146), of culinary fusion and cultural exchange (*laksa*, a soup combining Chinese noodles with Malay spices and coconut milk emerging in kitchens of Chinese traders who had married Malay women in the Straits' Settlements) (Brissenden 1996, 185-6). Such a childhood, which we could perceive as Cheong's then—its tastes, smells, textures and sounds—gives new meanings, or rather returns us to older meanings of “fusion” foods and “cosmopolitan” eating (Goldstein 2005, iv). These meanings are

nostalgic ones formed at intersections of global movements (of people, goods and cultures) and locally produced cultures (of time, place, tastes and ethnicities). This, of course, is an inherent reminder (if one were needed) that global movements of people pre-date twenty-first century forms of globalization and that “vernacular cosmopolitanism” is not the exclusive property of the “west” (Werbner, 2008).



Crossroads, fusion food and nostalgic for the *kampong* ...  
Author's photograph

In this sense, “fusion” becomes a deeply embedded phenomenon, bearing the imprint of history, memory, movements and change. A salad of Moreton Bay Bugs [shellfish] and toasted salted fish, for example, which Cheong remembers as “one of the first Oz fusion dishes ... I created ... at ... Neddy's” (Liew 2006a, 19), becomes homage both to his Malaysian heritage and to the Australian coast and its bounty. Meanwhile, Cheong's Christmas turkey with glutinous rice, saffron and turmeric, drawing on memories of “the kereosene-fuel oven that my aunty used for this creation,” brings to life the flavours of childhood. At the same time, the recipe is reworked (with the advice of local *providores* and availability of ingredients) for readers of Cheong's column in *The Adelaide Review*: “My gift to readers is this nostalgic recipe from past cultural crossroads,” he announces (2006b, 22).

When Cheong was fourteen, his family and four other families of relatives moved to their farm on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur while converting the shop on Jalan

Bandar to a restaurant. Nearby was a Malay *kampong*. With the extended Liew family invited to village celebrations, Cheong's culinary biography now included the festive foods of *kampong* (1995, 3-4). Reflecting on *kampong* life and food production in the 1960s, especially having seen it close at hand, Cheong paints this nostalgic recollection:

[It's] an idyllic lifestyle, really. They like to live in a place ... where everything is there for them. There's always a river where they can net a few fish, a few chooks in the yard ... The forest provides a lot of the herbs, you know ... [to] ... make their salads, and ... wild fruits ..., and there's always coconut trees ... Half the time they would just buy the rice and everything [else] is already provided ... [so] why do they need to work so hard [laughter]. (Liew, Interview transcript)

*Kampong* life, idyllic or not, is fast disappearing. In response to Malaysia's ethnic riots of 1969, government programs were developed to increase industry, hence employment throughout all states, as a means to eradicate poverty. These policies resulted in more young people moving to cities to seek employment, while increasing numbers of women in rural areas sought work on nearby industrial estates (Andaya and Andaya 2001, 304). Meanwhile, in Singapore, with the movement of much of the population to state-built, high-rise apartment blocks as part of "a national public housing programme (initiated in 1963) to accommodate residents of overcrowded urban areas, villages and *kampongs*," this left behind, in memories that still live on, a legacy of regrets for the irreplaceable loss of time, space, and most of all, "community" (Chua 1995, 228). Interestingly, Chua re-works this nostalgic longing as a strategy for criticizing the present:

[I]nvoking the relaxed life of the *kampong* is not about desiring to go back to the *kampong* with all its material disadvantages. Instead it points to an alternative construction of "what life can be" in the presence of improved material conditions. (1995, 238)

Thus does Cheong bring with him the values of the Malay *kampong* to the city of Adelaide, a city born "modern" under the planning of Surveyor-General Colonel William Light in the 1830s, and established as a gracious urban centre for a British colonial settler society (Whitelock 1985, 27-33, 180). Of his adopted city, Cheong says:

I'm proud to be an Australian, especially in Adelaide. ... The countryside is fantastic. Twenty minutes and you're at the beach or in a vineyard in the hills. But the beauty of Adelaide is in its ingredients. If I want to cook Indian, Malaysian, Chinese or Vietnamese, I can go to the Central Market. And there you'll

find one of the best food halls in all of Australia. ... Here people actually care [about their cooking], which I think is wonderful. (Liew 2001, 7)



Kampong Adelaide?  
Author's photograph

Certainly, for Cheong, there is no turning back to the *kampong*. After race riots broke out in 1969 (Andaya and Andaya 2001, 298), Cheong and his family dispersed to be reunited in Adelaide some years later. Nevertheless, in Cheong's description (above) of the city that has become his home, there are echoes of his earlier memories of the shophouse in the *kampong*. Once again we find in Adelaide the crossroads, the fusion, the fresh produce of the countryside, a community that cares about its food. Adelaide can never be the *kampong*-as-utopia of his youth (and would we want it to be?). Yet even in the most satisfying of adopted homes, ghostly criticisms remain: "So why do they need to work so hard?" Where is the image of "what life can be?" Cheong recalls a past that in Adelaide is only partially recovered.

### Long tables: in the courtyard ... in the garden

Adelaide, with its "mediterranean" climate, predominantly low-rise architecture and tradition of green spaces—parklands and private gardens—is obviously suited to outdoor dining. At Neddy's, the courtyard behind the restaurant, sheltered by a

grapevine that was “gnarled and almost a century old” (Liew 1995, 45), provided a particularly resonant space for “embedding” one’s identity as a chef, experimenting with new identities, culinarily speaking, and for creating a sense of community:

We dreamed in the Land of Dreaming ... and the courtyard led us to the Middle East along the spice routes, to the Greek Islands, to Tuscany, Provence, Singapore, Sichuan and last but not least to the Australian back garden. ... [The courtyard] was urbane or homely depending on your needs—you could breastfeed there, or play politics, or both. (1995, 45)

The homeliness of Neddy’s courtyard, in particular, is recalled by Cheong’s daughter, Gina, now in training as a chef in the Grange kitchen: “[As a child] I slept at the restaurant a lot, podded peas, peeled potatoes, generally hung around and I recall courtyard dinners we had there with big long tables of family and friends with kids running amok and waterfights” (quoted in Fleming 2008, 14). Interestingly,

Cheong himself had a similar childhood of “growing into” cooking within the extended family’s kitchens (both at home and at restaurants) (Liew 1995, 2-3). There are other ways, too, that dining in the courtyard could sustain intimations of homeliness. In keeping with Cheong’s history of belonging to a Cantonese family business with rural connections—one in which pigs were spit-roasted at the back of the restaurant and chickens, of course, were provided from the family’s own farm—Neddy’s (illegally) maintained its commitment to freshness through the keeping of live chickens in the cellar and live pigeons “at the back” (1995, 46). Just as the vine-shaded courtyard might provide a microcosmic glimpse of family and community, so too, can it call up images and tastes of the past—of freshness, seasonality and “rootedness” in the landscape.



“We dreamed in the Land of Dreaming ...”  
Photograph by Tony Lewis

Cheong, however, sketches an imaginative geography that releases the courtyard from its grounding in the “homely” and moves it in the direction of the “urbane.” Such “dreaming” might seem overly fanciful, of course, and riddled with clichés associated with travel destinations beloved of lifestyle prose (Falconer 2000, 5-6; Duruz 2004, 431-2). Moreover, the outcome of such dreaming might seem politically dubious: rather than courtyard “dreaming” performed as a “[a reflection of] the multicultural mood of Australia in the 1970s” (Liew, 1995: 46), it might, in fact, appear to be encouraging the commodification of difference on behalf of greedy cosmopolitan consumers (Hage 1997, 118-120; Cook, Crang and Thorpe 1999, 230-1; Probyn 2000, 81-2; Heldke, 2003). Nevertheless, I want to suggest that Cheong’s “Land of Dreaming” is not simply a manifestation of free-ranging consumerism of a plethora of places and products. Instead, drawing on the courtyard’s tension of homely-urbane, I would argue that these landscapes contain traces of anchorage points and moments of exchange.

The reference to the Greek Islands, for example, takes Cheong back to his early days of cooking in Adelaide when he worked in a Greek restaurant and learnt much from the chef who also loaned Cheong books on Greek food (Liew 2001, 5). One of the “dances” (“poached octopus tentacles with a garlic mayonnaise”) is a tribute to this period and to this mentor, while a further “dance” of snook with wasabi and avocado acknowledges a Japanese friend and colleague who conducted several fish-pickling classes for Cheong’s students at the Regency Hotel School (Downes 2002, 72). His sources of knowledge, then, are varied, consisting of exchanges with colleagues, learning from books, and observations of other cultures: “Who are the Australians?”, “How do they think?”, “What do they cook in their kitchens?” “This intrigues me still,” says Cheong (2001, 5). These sources importantly add to those gained by drawing on one’s past memories and stock of pre-existing knowledge.

From the courtyard at Neddy’s, it is a short step to one of the spaces it references—the iconic Australian backyard, with its legendary rituals of backyard eating and of outdoor cooking (Duruz, 1994: 199). Imagine it is the day of the Liew family’s “giant annual backyard Barbie [barbecue]” (Liew 2007a, 25). The household preparations are endearingly predictable: “We sweep the brick paving, clean down the barbie table, give the lawn a mow and get ready to grill for family and friends in the warm evening glow of summer” (2007a, 25). The sense of place, however, is even more palpable as Cheong describes the smells, flavours and textures of the feast. Lingering in the air are the aromas of fruit prunings thrown on the fire, the burning of wood from olive, pear, apple, persimmon, plum and orange trees and grapevines suggesting the seasonal abundance of garden and countryside. Meanwhile, a giant lobster is roasted in the embers, a ritual tribute to the sea, particularly near the South Australian coast (to which Cheong pays homage in his fourth “dance”—a portion of cuttlefish with squid ink noodles) (Liew 2007a, 25; Downes, 2002, 73).

A procession of dishes follow, recalling a mix of places and times, diverse cuisines and individual preferences. These include a salad of “mango, banana flower, Vietnamese mint, red chilli, cucumber and Spanish onion,” “earthy Italian sausages and super jumbo quails,” kingfish with spices, noodles and fresh coconut juice wrapped in banana leaves (for which, Cheong says, you can substitute leaves of fig, lime, persimmon or mulberry trees) and “a couple of young suckling pig legs ... [as] the final touch” (Liew 2007a, 25). The point of this appetizing description of a backyard feast is not simply the celebration of Cheong’s expertise transferred from the courtyard to the home garden. Here, significantly, the back garden becomes a place with its own nostalgic associations. Perhaps these associations stem from “earthy Italian sausages” that remind us of Australia’s popular celebrated outdoor meals of “chops and snags [sausages]” (Dunstan 1976, 36) but add as well more cosmopolitan inflections; or perhaps these arise from images of traditional Adelaide gardens drowsing through summers of ripeness and fecundity, the leaves of the fruit trees yet suggesting new possibilities? In quite complicated ways, then, this garden re-invents Neddy’s long-gone courtyard with its tension between homely and urbane, its potential for remembering and dreaming—a reference to the past and future. (Neddy’s, after all, was the courtyard Cheong described as infused with “the aromas of Chinese pork and European venison, the romance of provincial France in the stone walls and the bouquet of big Australian reds [wines]”) (Liew 1995, 46). So, in grilled suckling pig and “earthy” Italian sausages, the ghosts of Neddy’s past and the ghosts of his family’s spit-roasts at the back of the shop, together with Proustian-style remembrances of Australian gardens long past, haunt the Liew’s “giant annual backyard Barbie” and re-affirm “the sheer happiness of [having] family and friends around you” (2007a, 25).

## Melting pots, cooking pots: meeting at the Market ... eating in Chinatown

Adelaide’s gastronomic heart is indisputably its Central Market situated near the centre of the city’s original mile and operating continuously on that site since 1869 (Murphy 2003, 20-2). Much lauded in tourist literature, food media, the local press and particularly in collective remembering (Murphy 2003, 12), the Market reverberates with images of cornucopia, sensory pleasure, sociability and diversity—the sum of innumerable ingredients, people, cultures, the following description being typical:

The Central Market is a mouth-watering melting pot of local and ethnic produce. Brilliant colours, intoxicating scents and animated camaraderie among the stallholders and customers make it a favourite meeting, eating and shopping spot. Wandering up and down the aisles it’s easy to be transported to South-east Asia, Italy, Spain or Greece—anywhere that great food and *joie de vivre* are in abundance. (Gerard 2004, 51)



Melting pots, cooking pots  
Author's photographs

Leaving aside the much-disputed term “melting-pot” (with its overtones of racial assimilation) (Giroux 1998, 181), the market performs as spectacle—a diverse array of tastes, textures, sights, sounds and encounters.

Here is how Cheong describes his regular visits to the Market as explorations in the gastronomy of specific ethnic communities:

One of the main attractions of working for the Hilton Hotel...is having the Central Market right next door...You've got virtually the whole world—from Eastern European and Germanic to Mediterranean, from Vietnamese to Thailand to Malaysia to China. (Cheong, quoted in Murphy 2003, 121)

Here, the Market, with its beguiling suggestions of global travel, and the intense differentiations between ethnic groups, cultures, seasons, geographies—not to mention the food products themselves and modes of preparation—echoes the courtyard's “Land of Dreaming.” Nevertheless, the fulsome “world-on-a-plate” imagery, threading through Cheong's comments and the typical Central Market described above, has disturbing connotations (Cook and Crang 1996, 136-7): Is this a scenario of exotic food products that have become fetishised as “taste experiences” to the extent that the people who produce and consume these traditional foods are simply shadows in the background? In Hage's words, is this an example of “multiculturalism without migrants” (1997, 118)?

I would argue against this by suggesting that Cheong's relationship with the Market is well-grounded in significant ways. His accounts of market visits do not focus exclusively on celebrity products or celebrity chefs. Instead, these are peopled with everyday figures, satisfying eating rituals and instances of cross-cultural exchange. Crucially, these stories take shape firstly, through the poignancy of memory, and, secondly, through accumulated everyday interactions.

Cheong has a long history of market-going. As a child of about eleven or twelve years in Kuala Lumpur, he would accompany his grandmother almost every day to a local market. He remembers these visits as ritual moments of sensory satisfaction:

I like going to the market because it's bustling and it's still dark [outside] and it's bright lights [inside] and I like looking at all the vegetables and the chooks, even when I was young and ... the reward is to have my early bowl of porridge. ... This is congee ... and well, a lot of people would be put off by this, this is a porridge of mixed pigs' offal. (Liew, Interview transcript)

Like Hage's Lebanese migrants, whose nostalgic images of home find a place in suburban Sydney's alien landscapes (1997, 108), Cheong uses his own market memories (with all the familiar rush of excitement and exploration) to connect with markets elsewhere, transforming all markets into reflections of their ethnic pasts. "I love the [Central] Market. I just have some affiliation with any market," Cheong says (Interview transcript). More precisely, all markets reflect the nuances of "home and the exotic." Paradoxically, this allows the incorporation of the "strange" into the comforts of everyday living (Highmore 2007, 16).

Furthermore, connections across place and time can also ensure a cycle of return: "I can still be known to turn up for a traditional bowl of laksa at Asian Gourmet in the Central Market on an early shopping expedition. I guess it is those Malaysian yearnings bringing me back to my spoilt-for-breakfast childhood" (Liew 2007b, 21). These cycles of embracing new places to the point that these become familiar ones while still remembering the old, continue to create complex spaces of belonging from which to venture forth into the unknown. And, in time, the ritual bowl of laksa at the Asian Gourmet acquires its own nostalgic baggage of "embedded" hybrid citizenship. Interestingly, this holds not only for Cheong but for Anglo-Australians as well, in



Central Market, Adelaide  
Author's photograph

spite of their very different histories—of eating and remembering—from his. ("On Friday nights customers still queue for tables ... [at Asian Gourmet] where they first tasted authentic Asian food") (Murphy 2003, 130).

Cheong's Central Market not only offers customers the tastes of "the world" or the "nostalgic past," but also a rich body of characters: stallholders, customers, providers and a density of

daily interactions. As a young chef, Cheong was part of a professional network that engaged with stallholders in ways that reflected their reciprocal respect for the Market's flourishing cosmopolitanism:

[As chefs w]e'd be looking for artichokes or we'd read a cookbook that mentioned a "salsifier" and if you didn't know what it was you could go into the Market and ask a couple of European ladies who'd say, "Yeah, but it's very hard to grow in Australia. We get it sometimes." (Cheong, quoted in Murphy 2003, 122)

This spirit of collaboration extends to assisting fellow shoppers and customers: "I just treat [going to the Market] as if ... I'm just a normal person doing my shopping," says Cheong, "And ... if [people] come up to me [and ask questions] ... I'm quite happy to give advice" (Interview transcript).

Aside from the uniqueness of having a celebrity chef on hand to answer cooking queries, it is precisely the delightful serendipity of such exchanges that is part of the nostalgic attraction of contemporary markets:

The modern public loved these powerful moments of local life which gave them a taste of types of social interaction, sociability, that had more or less vanished. In the cold world of market rationality, markets offered a little extra soul. (de la Pradelle 1996, 2)

It would be unwise, however, to assume that relations in these microcosms of "local life" are always harmonious and without problems, because this would run counter to the basic assumption that stallholders (like any other competitive businesses) have their own imperatives: to market their goods and, increasingly, to market the center's symbolic "soul" in this competitive context.

Obviously, selling one's "soul"—the unsellable—must be a contradictory enterprise. Gerard's effusive description of the Central Market at the beginning of this section continues with hints of the delicate balance required for maintaining social relations, more specifically, managing the tensions and ambivalences of groups with competing interests yet sharing the same space. "Most people have a good relationship here [at the Market]. There's a bit of healthy rivalry but most people are willing to help you if you run out of stock," says Say Cheese Manager and co-owner of Dough Bakery, David Mansfield (quoted in Gerard 2004, 51). That "Most people are willing" suggests, conversely, there are some who are not, and although the rivalry may be "healthy" (at least not destructive), there is no doubt that traders are continuously vying with each other for business.

Cheong alludes to this contradiction somewhat obliquely. Initially he lists some of the “name” providers in and around the Market, some of whom he has known professionally “for about twenty or thirty years now.” At the same time he expresses some diffidence about developing close relations with a number of the market traders and their staff:

I don't have that sort of intimacy with them...because I do a lot of purchase round there so I have to keep a little bit of distance so I don't want [them] to say “You have to buy this from me” or “You have to buy this from me”. ... I don't want to be tied down to buy from one shop ... specially [as] they know I work for the Hilton. (Interview transcript)

The image that offsets Cheong's comment about “distance” and not having “that sort of intimacy” is his ubiquitous figure in the Market. In fact, all the Market “regulars” probably recognize him but are far too “cool” to acknowledge his presence. Even *The New York Times* has noticed. In one of its articles, reprinted in part in the local Adelaide press, the following observation is included:

Everyone, from the guy deep-frying...fish and chips made from local King George whiting at Paul's café...to the Grange's celebrity chef, Cheong Liew, whom I spotted in Adelaide Central Market examining a kangaroo sausage as if he was diffusing a bomb, seems to have an obvious passion to live up to the cornucopia of fresh products that is... [South Australia]. (quoted in Jory 2008, 18)

During our interview, I commented on the lack of privacy that labels like “celebrity chef” must engender, (as Cheong responds to shoppers' queries), but he replied, “Well ... that's what life is, you know. I'm not a person [that] I have to be a really private person. I'm a market person, that's what I am!” (Interview transcript)

“Market person” is an appealing identity, for Cheong he trawls the stalls looking for “finds” and chats with the providers and enquiring cooks. Like the shophouse on the High Street, the Malay *kampong*, Neddy's restaurant courtyard and the Liew's Australian backyard garden, the market provides Cheong with an additional site for “grounded” everyday interactions. However, these interactions are not without inflection from other identity tracings. The figure of the chef haunts that of the cook as he offers advice, while at the same time keeping his “distance.” Cheong, in fact, is neither a normal shopper nor normal celebrity. The spirit of the market demands a sense of knowledge-sharing, a sense of belonging to an embedded community, and a sense of pleasure in ritual food practices. At the same time, the romanticisation of this spirit, together with the privileges and responsibilities of celebrity, must be

negotiated within market relations. The “warm fuzzies” (emotions of friendliness and sharing) of networks that I had anticipated among traders are tinged with a complicated mix of “willing to help” and “distance,” after all.



Eating in Gouger Street  
Author's photographs



A moment that was similarly unsettling (in terms of my expectations) occurred when Cheong and I moved our narrative from the Market's main hall to Gouger St., on its southern boundary.

Gouger Street, a place that has been subjected to the same degree of hype in the popular press as the Market itself:

[Gouger Street is] a gastronomic smorgasbord of diverse cuisine. ... It's the culinary equivalent of the Bermuda Triangle, a powerful vortex sandwiching Adelaide Central Market, Chinatown and 40-plus licensed restaurants along a 500m strip. ... This delicious evolution [migration from 1950s] continues today with a healthy dash of Asian influences extending the blend. (Andrews 2007, 42)

Cheong is delighted by the expansion, particularly the numbers of south-east Asian and northern and southern Chinese restaurants, clustering along the street and in the side lanes of Chinatown. For him, one of the positive outcomes of Gouger St. becoming *the* Asian food street of Adelaide is the development of a strong network of Chinese chefs who meet together regularly to exchange ideas: “Well, I'm not a restaurateur over there, but I do know virtually all the chefs... [Once] in a while everyone will bring a bottle of red wine and everyone will bring one dish to somebody's restaurant and they'll gather round and have a chat” (Liew, Interview transcript).

None of this is surprising. Cheong can be seen regularly at the tables of Gouger Street restaurants. I've noticed as well how frequently he refers to local chefs in his column in *The Adelaide Review* (see, for example, 2007c, 24; 2008a, 27; 2008b, 35). However, when I comment on the generosity of this professional acknowledgement

and on the apparent camaraderie among the Gouger St. chefs, Cheong counters replies:

Among the chefs there is a sense of competition...undercurrent. There'd have to be! ... On the surface they all sort of love each other as brothers... [laughter]. [But] I think I'm in a fortunate position.... They all consider me as the outsider because I'm working in a hotel, you see.... I'm not part of the strip. (Interview transcript)



With the band of brothers ...  
Author's photograph

Of course, in a similar way to Cheong's imagining himself as a "normal" Market shopper, his self-designation of "outsider" contains ironic overtones. These are not vested exclusively in the binary of business owner and paid worker or even small restaurants and hotel dining rooms, but more properly in that of international celebrity/local entrepreneur. I can only guess that that competitiveness might attain new heights when celebrity intervenes in the mix.

Unravelling memories and everyday practices, this account of cooking, eating, shopping and talking in acclaimed gastronomic urban spaces, in romanticised rural landscapes and in the privacy of suburban backyards has become a hybrid one

that challenges simple binaries. While certain figures dominate (or as the case may be, resonate) at points within the narrative—the celebrity chef versus other professionals, for example, or the migrant who carries market meanings as personal baggage versus a group of chefs' professional excitement in discovering “new” produce—none of these figures are uncomplicated by other identity meanings. The figure of the migrant, for example, blends into that of celebrity chef and vice versa. Hence the title for Downes' chapter on Cheong's contributions to Australian cuisine (“Refugee to Gastro-Father”) (2002, 71) might need re-working. Remembered traces of childhood and family, migration and re-settlement are ever-present in Cheong's gastronomy while experiences of celebrity and a profound sense of place shape his past, present and future. The refugee does not find himself left behind in the final stage of his culinary biography, or gastro-father status positioned as its pinnacle of achievement. In other words, Cheong's Four Dances are not choreographed as one linear progression but merge together as a cyclic map of return and re-embedding.

## Grounds for belonging: “grounded” cosmopolitanism and hybrid citizenship

Much debate has focused on the need for a “new cosmopolitanism” that addresses the task of living together in an increasingly globalized world in which people, goods and cultures appear constantly on the move (Werbner, 2008). The problematic element at the heart of many of these debates is shaped by critiques of western-centric forms of liberal humanism, as, for example, in Martha Nussbaum's work where, critics claim, “universal liberal values are privileged above family, ethnic group or nation” (Werbner, 2006: 497, citing Nussbaum, 1994; see also Bhabha 1996, 193-4). Approaching questions of nation, Malay identity and cosmopolitanism from the opposite direction to critics of universalism, Joel Kahn (2006) similarly complains of identity privileging, though this time privilege is not associated with the figure of the cosmopolitan. Instead, argues Kahn, locally situated identity representations that are “fixed” while at the same time, normalised—for example the mythical *kampong* dweller—ignore the complexity of people's identity positionings and the (literal and figurative) mobility of members of the modern Malay nation.

Our narrative of Cheong has deliberately trodden a path that takes heed of such debates. “Grounded” in everyday spaces, my analysis has sought to privilege neither the global nor the local, neither the chef nor the cook, the immigrant nor the celebrity, the *kampong* dweller nor the cosmopolitan. At the same time, like Kahn, and like Nussbaum's critics, I want to produce more complex figurings of cosmopolitan sensibilities. So, here “cooking Asian” and “eating Asian” in the city of Adelaide, Australia (a nation continuing as a colonial settler society, and one ambivalently

sited in the Asia-Pacific) (Moreton-Robinson, 2003, 37-8; Liddle, 2003, 23), becomes an exercise in hybridity—a series of strategic moves in identity bordercrossing rather than a dissolution of boundaries; an exercise in place and identity-making rather than simply resorting to “fusion” as a spectacular house “style.” Of course these moves are not always successful or without their losses (Cheong’s interview narratives range from the dark days of escape from racial hatred and the struggles of living in diaspora to survival in a competitive industry and its inevitable disappointments—his proposed venture for a commercial neighbourhood kitchen was rejected by a local council, for example) (Liew, Interview transcript). Nevertheless, his “I’m a market person” not only serves as an *aide memoire* for nostalgic travel to the past and for future encounters but also underlines the significance of space itself—spatiality—and of “real” spaces for negotiating difference and belonging (Jacobs 1996, 5). This dynamic is aptly captured by Jacobs, as she describes the struggles between different groups occupying the same “real” spaces and their different attributions of meaning to these: “These struggles produce promiscuous geographies of dwelling in place in which categories of Self and Other, here and there, past and present, constantly solicit one another” (1996, 5).

From the perspective of struggle, it seems that practice of “cooking Asian” in a “European” city of the Asia-Pacific is never completely embedded as idealized conceptions of culinary cosmopolitan citizenship, or in utopian imaginings of crossroads, collective sharing, respect for nature, awareness of diverse cultures, and pleasure through sensory embodiment. Instead, within relations of “real” spaces, these practices require continual wooing and re-embedding. In the everyday realm of this courtship, hybridized foods and identities become not only touchstones of productive encounters with people of different backgrounds but also of “embedded” cosmopolitan sensibilities for managing the challenges of social life. While few of us

are celebrity chefs, of course, we share in the tricky but potentially rewarding experience of meeting and eating at intersections of place, memory, taste and difference, which is, after all, the province of us all.



Embedded cosmopolitanism as a geography of struggles?  
Author’s photograph

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