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ESSAY

## A Sandakan Childhood: Recalling Hakka Food Memories

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### Abstract

This narrative is centred around recalling foods enjoyed in my childhood in Sandakan, a town in the Malaysian state of Sabah on Borneo Island. It is more of a stream of consciousness than reflective, more descriptive than analytical. In recollecting my memories of foods eaten in years gone by, I realise it is not an exercise in isolation. When we consume food, it is not merely for sustenance as our food practices are invariably intertwined with a whole lot of experiences, rituals and habits of old. The act of remembering favourite or comfort foods can set off triggers of feelings and emotions long past. My family, like most Chinese families of the time, expressed their love for each other through food. It is through food that I acknowledge the caring family environment that our parents created for us.

### Keywords

**Food; Love; Childhood; Memories; Family**

I must have been around seven years of age. I went into the kitchen, tiptoed and tried to reach the jar of sweets on top of the meat safe. As my arm stretched out my father came into the kitchen. My arm froze but all he said was, 'that's all right, take one.' I never felt so loved as a child.

That was my earliest memory of associating food and love. Christmas was a big deal in our then Catholic household. It meant a Christmas tree laden with baubles and fake snow. The house was decorated with crepe paper and tinsel. Sweets, prawn crackers and other special treats were bought and prepared well before the season. We knew well not to touch the goodies until Christmas.

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In recalling foods enjoyed in my childhood in Sandakan, a town in the Malaysian state of Sabah on Borneo Island, I have tried to recollect foods eaten in daily life as a child and teenager. Of course, recollecting one's memories of foods eaten in years gone by is not an exercise in isolation. When we consume food, it is not merely for sustenance as our food practices are invariably intertwined with a whole lot of experiences, rituals and habits of old. The act of remembering favourite or comfort foods can set off triggers of feelings and emotions long past. And so, my narrative is more stream of consciousness than reflective, more descriptive than analytical.

I thought I would go through the main meals of the day as well as snacks and restorative tonics. The memories that flood back are tinged with feelings of being loved and cherished as a child, of a simpler life. This is not looking back with rose-coloured glasses but it was a time when the long arms of modernisation of food production and globalisation were yet to reach Borneo or much of the globe. Staple foods and other sundries were bought from grocery stores, fresh meat and poultry, fruit and vegetables were obtained from fresh markets. Because there was not such a proliferation of foods available as today, specific meals and dishes spring to mind easily. It would have been inconceivable to my seven-year-old self to be able to sample the vast array of foods available today. As well, she would have been astounded at the seemingly infinite choice in ingredients, meals, snacks from all corners of the earth.

In 1881 the current day Malaysian state of Sabah became a British trading colony and was given sovereign rights to govern the territory. As a chartered company the British investors could reap mineral resources and agricultural produce without obligations to administer it in any particular manner. To help develop the hinterland of British North Borneo (as it was known then), the British recruited Chinese from southern China. Among these were the first recruitment of Hakkas to Sabah in 1883 from Guangdong. In time the Hakkas became the largest Chinese language group in Sabah. My Hakka grandparents from both sides arrived in Sabah as children. I'm a 69-year-old Chinese Hakka woman, born in Malaysia from second-generation Chinese and resident in Australia.

The Chinese Hakka people have a history of indeterminate origin with no specific geographical birthplace and is known more as a language group. 'Hakka' refers to differing definitions and notions—as guest people, nomads or even barbarians. The Hakkas migrated from northern to southern China from 400 CE. Economic hardship in the nineteenth century led them further afield, to Southeast Asia and later to North America.

With no identification to a particular geographical origin, cuisine has become an important identifier of what it is to be Hakka. Hakka food is hearty and rich as distinct from the more universally known Cantonese (fresh and light), Sichuan (spicy) or other regional Chinese cuisines. Hakka cuisine is one of the three main cuisines of Guangdong, the others being Cantonese and Chaozhou. Hakka cuisine involves stir frying, steaming, braising and stewing. The signature dishes are stuffed tofu, braised duck, and importantly, a complex dish of yam and pork, fried and steamed with an earthy gravy over several hours.

## Breakfast

In our Hakka family breakfast was the least important meal of the day. In any case it was not a sit-down family meal. We must have walked in and out of the kitchen for a bite? If that was the case, then it would be to munch on plain crackers, Jacob's Cream Crackers (British-made, from Aintree, among other consumables exported to British North Borneo). The crackers came in huge tins. I thought I was weird in not remembering exactly what we ate for breakfast in my growing up years. Indeed, this early morning meal was so immemorable that only one of us siblings (all bar one is in their 70s) can vaguely remember that mama cooked something for us. Our dogs fared better according to one brother, joking that the two or three dogs ate better than we did. His recollection (and mine too, now that he has brought it up) was that mama would have a couple of pots bubbling on the stove from early morning. The pots held contents of scraps of meat

and bones from the butcher and leftover meals from the day before. Whoever thought of buying ready-made food for pets? In any case there were no commercial pet foods for sale. It was probably only from the 1980s that Western-style supermarkets sold them.

Eldest brother said there was black coffee only which my mum brewed in a big pot. Second older brother said ma used to cook rice porridge in which she would pour beaten egg into the hot porridge. My sister said coffee. I also just remembered just black coffee with lots of sugar stirred in the pot. As each person's recollection of past history is always different, even among family members, so did our recollection of the history of various aspects of our childhood.

The only thing we all remember about breakfast was black coffee with lots of sugar. Mama would make a large pot from ground coffee, the beans being home roasted and ground, first thing in the morning. She would pour four cups for herself so they would cool down faster and drank them in quick succession.

Coffee loomed large in our lives. Our family drank coffee in the morning and afternoon. Boiling water was poured over coffee grounds and sugar, stirred, and left to brew for some minutes. With the grounds settled, no strainer was necessary. Mum roasted the family's coffee beans each month over a wok. Then we children would have to take turns to grind the coffee with a handheld grinder, British-made Spong. My brothers, who hated the chore, would adjust a notch at the back for the coarsest grind to hasten the process. As I was the youngest, I was allocated the least amount of beans to grind. Our mother preferred processing her own coffee as she was dismissive of the ground coffee sold in the shops. She alleged that they contained maize meal and other evil additives. That was my first inkling of food adulteration. Likewise, she never allowed Monosodium glutamate (MSG) in her kitchen, declaring that our hair would fall out if we consumed it. Years later when she learnt of my partnership with a European man, she warned me against feeding my child with 'that packaged processed baby food.'

Sunday meant morning mass at the Catholic church in Sandakan. We 'fasted' for a couple of hours in order to receive communion in church. We loved the rituals of the Catholic church—at home we played priests and nuns and gave each other 'communion,' wafers of round [haw flakes](#). Immediately after church though we made a beeline for the market, a municipal building housing meat, fish, poultry and fruit and vegetable stalls. Food and clothing stalls were upstairs. The eating outlets were mainly Chinese and Malay stalls, each stall with its own specialties. There was a drinks stall where you could order both hot (coffee, tea, Milo) and iced (lime and salted plum juice, iced coffee and tea). Sometimes we had wonton mee soup, other times, Hakka dry tossed noodles (*kon lau mein*) but my favourite was soft squid cooked in a peanut sweet and sour sauce accompanied by blanched *kangkong* (water convolvulus). While there was/is an abundance of seafood the squid used is of the dried variety. The squid is soaked in lye water (*kan sui*) before being cooked. That, with black coffee, tasted delicious and satisfying.

## Lunch

Limp sandwiches for lunch were still something to be confronted by in future years in Australia. There was always rice (always white) with fried or steamed fish and vegetables (stir fries, variously of greens, beans, bitter melon, even cucumber and lettuce). Sometimes the vegetables were flavoured by small morsels of pork or beef. Poor families would have a pan fried piece of salt fish to chase down with massive amounts of steaming hot white rice. Even today, the thought of this simple dish sends the saliva juices flowing. Even poorer families might have a splash of soya sauce on rice. Maybe people were leaner then, but I had not heard of malnutrition anywhere in our neighbourhood. In my high school years, we lived "in the country" (*san pah*), in truth, a place 11 or 12km from the town centre. This was where, my father, in his 'back to nature' phase, bought a piece of land of four acres, built a house and installed a generator as it was not in the electricity supply grid. He planted cocoa trees and hundreds of orchid plants. There were also fruit trees of pomelo, longan, guava, jackfruit, rambutan and mangoes. And so, when there were activities after school, I

ate lunch in the home of an “aunty” (*suk mey*, no relation, an ex-neighbour). I loved lunch there, my favourite being the small fish, no bigger than my palm, steamed and flavoured with aromatics. There were always several dishes to go with the rice. My mum would reciprocate by giving her a gift of some kind at festivals or Chinese New Year.

We never brought lunch to school, for a few cents, we could buy delectable meals from the school tuck shop. Our tuckshop lady, a jolly and feisty woman manned the large wok, deep frying round flat fritters of flour batter with dried shrimps and spring onion. At the same time she would be busy selling leaf-wrapped parcels of fried noodles or sesame balls made of sweet potato mash and mung bean paste. Not every snack was home-made. There were packets of clear cellophane wrapped (consumer goods branding was still in its infancy) preserved cuttlefish, dyed a lurid red and spiked with hot chillies; preserved either salty or sweet, tiny dried sweet and salted plums (*ham moi*), sweet and savoury biscuits and crackers. There were also ices on sticks, all colourful, basically frozen coloured and sweetened water. We were not allowed these for it was seen as a sure-fire way for the spread of cholera.

## Dinner

Dinner dishes were more or less similar to lunch ones, featuring rice, fish, small amounts of meat with vegetables. Both lunch and dinner featured fish on a daily basis, mostly prepared either steamed or shallow fried or braised with salted mustard greens. Salted and preserved vegetables of greens and root vegetables are characteristic of Hakka cuisine, probably a throwback to preserving foods during winter months in China. Soups of beef bones and peanuts, watercress soup with chicken and dried jujubes were seen as restorative staples. Rice, short grain white rice, never brown or long grain, was consumed at every meal. As it was years before the mass production of chicken in factory farms, chicken was a rarity at mealtimes. It was served on special occasions, especially at Chinese New Year. Many families kept chickens in their backyard for such occasions or they were bought from wet markets. Capons were prized and reared for their superior flavour. I remember the ‘chicken castrating man’ (whom I now know by his almost defunct profession as a caponizer) coming to the neighbourhood once in a while to remove the testes of male chickens and these birds were then raised with better food.

The Chinese are well-known for not showing affection to each other outwardly, but they express love through food. At the dining table, we know which family member liked a particular part of chicken, for instance. A brother who favoured breast meat was given that. As the youngest I was given the drumstick, seen as the most delectable part of the chicken. It is also an endearing custom for someone to pick up a choice morsel of food from the serving dish and place it in onto another person’s bowl.

From time to time someone would gift us a *kati* (500gm) or so of newly harvested hill or paddy rice from someone who had been to rural areas. Family members would exclaim how fresh and flavoursome the newly cooked rice was. This reminds me of the idea of how Chinese people are always ferrying food stuff from village to village, town to town, even across national borders. It has parallels to the notion of *terroir*, the French term for the unique taste and flavour of particular wines from specific regions due to the physical environment where they are produced. Growing up in Sabah, decades before the proliferation of supermarkets and online grocery shopping, we would hear how adults were excitedly receiving gifts of prized salt fish from Tawau or dried squid from Lahad Datu or a delectable chilli sauce from another town.

There was no dessert for meals; however, sometimes cut fresh fruit was served when guests came for dinner. Usually, these were imported apples or oranges sliced in wedges. Another esteemed imported fruit was red grapes. That was the fruit of choice to gift when visiting sick friends in the hospital. We ate fruit indiscriminately in the afternoon. There was always some local fruit in season: mangoes, pineapple, rambutan, *campadak* (*Artocarpus integer*), jackfruit, mangosteen, *tarap* (native to Borneo and the Philippines), rambutan and of course durian. While family and teachings of the Catholic church dictated it

was a sin to steal this edict did not stop us from raiding fruit trees belonging to others. It was easy pickings with the numerous guava trees belonging to our immediate neighbour. A gang of us would work on the tree and others kept watch. One day we were caught; the owner, an elderly woman, chased us with a big stick.

## Supper

Supper (*xiaou ya*, translated to ‘small nighttime snacks’) was not an everyday meal. Not every family served it, it was more like a treat, something extra, to be enjoyed a few hours before bedtime. It was consumed at home during my growing up years. It could be a congee, fried noodles or fritters or sweet cakes. In recent decades, supper has found a niche market in the explosion of eating out places in street food and restaurants in Malaysia and other parts of Asia. Today, market stalls and restaurants do a roaring business in supper meals, opening until past midnight.

## Tonics and Snacks

Other dishes consumed at night, not strictly considered as supper dishes, but were served as tonics or restorative concoctions. Some herbal soups were meant to be consumed only at night. The herbs were put together by the medicine man at the herbal shop where he instinctively collected various dried leaves, roots, berries and fruit for specific ailments or for invigorating the body. As a migraine sufferer, my mother frequently took me to the medical hall where the herbal medicine man would write out a prescription. I perched on a stool and the medicine man would check my pulse on the wrist, look at my eyes and throat, and proceed to prescribe herbs and medicines. He would instinctively pick out these items from the wall of drawers, all unlabelled. Some of the roots or seeds needed to be pounded noisily in his metal mortar and pestle. He would write out the recipe or prescription—ingredients and method of brewing on a pink piece of paper. The ingredients were wrapped in white or yellow paper and tied with a red and white cotton string. The medicine man would calculate the cost of the prescription by clicking on his abacus. It was always a bitter and foul-smelling concoction which my mother brewed for at least a couple of hours. As treat to take away the taste of the bitter medicine, we were given slivers of dried longan. Dried longan was usually included in the packet of herbal mix for soups too. My sister and I frequently raided these packets in the kitchen and picked out the longan.

This is not to say that we only followed the health practices of Chinese culture. We frequented the government hospital that had doctors and nurses trained in the Western tradition. Penicillin injections were given routinely for minor ailments. However everyday practices of Chinese Hakka culture meant that we seemed to know intuitively (surely subliminally absorbed from adult conversations) the principles of yin and yang. We did not know it as yin and yang though, only as cool and hot foods and a balance must be maintained. After eating durian, for example, (considered ‘heaty’) we would try to consume mangosteens (considered cooling).

On hot days, an afternoon snack would be a bowl of ‘cooling’ *chin pu liong* (a dessert soup of barley, lily bulbs, lotus seeds, longan and candied melon rinds). There is also a savoury version of this soup, cooked with pork but we did not have this in our family. Afternoon sweet soups were red kidney bean (heaty), mung bean (cooling) and sweet potato. They were simply soupy dishes sweetened by cane sugar. Tofu stuffed with pork is a traditional Hakka dish and in Sandakan this dish took on Malay or Indian influence. The stuffed tofu was cooked in a thick curry soup and was sold by a man and his wife driving around the neighbourhood. This was eaten as an afternoon snack.

The neighbourhood sundry store stocked myriads of goods: hessian sacks of rice, tinned and dried foods, condiments and, more enticingly, to children, the large glass jars of boiled sweets, biscuits and savoury treats. Nowadays, whenever I go to an Asian grocery store in Australia there seems to be an automatic impulse

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pulling me to the snack aisle where I can buy those treats of old—preserved fruit wrapped in blue and white tissue paper, or haw flakes and boiled coconut sweets.

There was a time when I was unaware of the loving childhood I had experienced nor did I appreciate the unique foodways of the Hakka people. Looking back, I acknowledge the caring family environment that our parents created for us. While the Chinese in my parents' generation do not demonstrate love verbally (as in saying 'I love you') or physically (with hugs and kisses) they more than make up in this through preparing nutritious soups and tonics, proffering choice morsels at the dinner table and food was served with love, notwithstanding the absence of a good breakfast. I have intuitively followed the same practices in bringing up my child, almost always providing the most nutritious foods and steering clear away from processed foods.