

Serving Up Chineseness: Myths of Authenticity and Identity in Kylie Kwong's Cookery Texts

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the form and content of the culinary television programmes and cookbooks of Australian-Chinese celebrity chef and restaurateur, Kylie Kwong. It will utilise Bill Nichols' theory of "The Challenge of Persuasion" to demonstrate how Kwong's cookery show, *Kylie Kwong: Cooking with Heart and Soul*, is not just about food and cooking, but embodies particular ideologies and "myths," as theorised by Barthes, about Chinese culture and identity. It also draws upon selected excerpts from Kwong's cookbooks and food memoir, *Kylie Kwong: Recipes and Stories* (2003) and *My China: A Feast for the Senses* (2007), to unpack their representations of Chinese culture and identity. My aim is to elucidate how Kwong's cooking show and cookbooks transcend their pragmatic function to become representational tools that carry specific meanings about Chineseness, both in terms of its production and consumption.

Keywords

Chineseness, culinary television, Kylie Kwong, documentary, culture, identity

Fourth-generation Australian-Chinese celebrity chef, restaurateur, author and television presenter Kylie Kwong has drawn national and international acclaim for her social knowledge, both of traditional Chinese recipes and cooking techniques as well as expertise in culturally "authentic" food preparation methods. This paper aims to analyse a selection of texts that Kwong has authored and appeared in so as to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which she deploys her practical and aesthetic culinary knowledge, visual style and presentation skills to (re)present and (re)construct Chinese culture and identity. Her cookbooks, which also serve as travel memoirs, as well as the cookery shows she hosts on national Australian television, provide a rich body of texts from which ideas about Chinese identity and its representations can be drawn. From her own analogy that dining in a Shanghainese tea house is like

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being “inside a Chinese lacquered box” (Kwong, *Recipes and Stories* 5), Kwong attempts to elucidate how her reading and viewing audience *should* envision the experience of preparing and consuming Chinese food, which in her texts functions as a signifier of Chinese heritage and ancestral identity. Chineseness is rendered in exotic, fantastical terms and as a delicate, fragile ornament – but also as an ultimately *purchasable* commodity. In making this argument, I show how Chinese food and identity become exoticised into “signs,” which constitute the foundation of Roland Barthes’ theory of the “myth” that I will elaborate upon later.

I aim to explicate how Kwong’s representations of Chinese food and culture in her cookbooks and television shows are instead *mis*representations of Chinese food and culture. The language of Kwong’s cookbooks, as well as the filmic elements and techniques she utilises in her television programmes, valorise specific moods and methods that embody a certain kind of “Chineseness,” which Ien Ang alludes to as having descended from “a mythic China, a fetishized China” (31) – one which bears little or no connection to the everyday lives and practices of contemporary diasporic Chinese communities.

I demonstrate that through her preponderant use of visual imagery such as the red paper lanterns, woks and chopsticks, which become symbolic and performative signs in her texts, Kwong strives to assert her claim to knowledge on, and authority over, Chinese cuisine and culture. However, it is the myth and spectacle of “Chineseness” constructed in her cookbooks and television programmes that warrants further and deeper analysis in this paper, especially as Kwong, in her public appearances, persona and social standing as a “Chinese” chef, is ascribed by many in her audience to be an exemplar of Chinese taste, standards and authoritative identity. Utilising textual analysis, this paper focuses on one of her cooking television shows, *Kylie Kwong: Cooking with Heart and Soul*, and two of her cookbooks, *Kylie Kwong: Recipes and Stories* (2003) and *My China: A Feast for the Senses* (2007).

As Kwong’s cooking television shows are essentially documentaries on food preparation and cooking as well as travel documentaries, it is important to understand that the form of the documentary directly influences and shapes the content of Kwong’s television programmes. In his definitive text, *Introduction to Documentary*, Bill Nichols asserts that a documentary is a representational tool, and that representations to a certain extent always incorporate elements of fictionality, amounting to what John Grierson terms as the “creative treatment of actuality” (ctd. in Nichols 6-7); the term “creative” here means the use of aesthetic tools and technologies in order to present to the audience a compelling and persuasive piece of documentary. Nichols elaborates that a documentary filmmaker utilises the documentary format to “convince, persuade, or predispose us to a particular view of the world we have in common” (104). This is what Nichols terms as “the challenge of persuasion” in

documentary work. The specific and ultimate aim of the documentary is to align the audience's "aesthetic awareness... and social consciousness" around a particular cause, aim or social issue (Nichols 104). These persuasive tactics are implicit; the filmmaker must strategise as to what images, sounds, dialogue and sequence of images and editing are best suited to the topic at hand. As Nichols notes, documentaries are "organised sequences of shots that are about something conceptual or abstract" (101), usually regarding "*debated concepts and contested issues*" (101; emphasis in original).

Thus, by examining the documentary genre in relation to the culinary television programme under examination, I am able to reveal the "persuasive tactics" (Nichols 104) employed by Kylie, and what these tactics are meant to achieve. These strategies are particularly "persuasive" given the prevalence of celebrity culture in society as well as the growing popularity of reality cooking television, which includes the MasterChef competitive cooking show franchise and instructional cooking programmes that even feature Michelin-starred celebrity chefs. By taking a close look at this genre of food and travel documentaries, I hope to be able to illustrate how celebrity chefs hold sway in a society's interpretations and constructions of culture and identity.

In my analysis, I will specifically draw upon the traditional Chinese steamboat meal, where diners choose from an array of raw and marinated ingredients to dip into a simmering pot of stock at the centre of the dining table. The steamboat exemplifies the art of interaction and is used judiciously in Kwong's cookbooks and TV shows as a symbol of sharing and socialising. In addition, I will examine several excerpts from Kwong's cookbooks to demonstrate how particular images and tropes collectively elucidate a particular filmic and textual style and tone that represent the seemingly exotic and "timeless" qualities of classic Chinese cuisine and, by extension, the authentic Chineseness of the people who are involved in its production. Consider the following description by Kwong:

Da daaaaarrrrrrr! The table is set and we are ready to begin the epic steamboat. With flames licking the sides of the bubbling claypots and warming the stock, the drama begins. Everyone drops ingredients into all the pots and suddenly the clear, serene stock becomes *animated and alive*.... The stock becomes richer as time goes by. Toward the end of the meal, in keeping with tradition, noodles and tofu are cooked in the stock to produce an extraordinary broth: to me, this is *like a secret, magical potion, a healing elixir of life*. (Kwong, *My China* 150; emphasis added)

The steamboat stock "becomes animated and alive," a character on its own, in Kwong's requisite "drama" of Chinese food and identity. For Kwong, there is nothing more representative of a communal Chinese meal than the steamboat, where several people gather around a boiling pot of soup, each ladling and

tossing in their own desired ingredients, such as seafood, meat, tofu, leaf vegetables and noodles. In *Kylie Kwong Cooking with Heart and Soul* (Season One, Episode Eight), a steamboat party is the episode's focus, with Kwong instructing her viewers how to prepare everything from slicing and marinating chicken, beef, squid, fish, mussels and scallops, to making the steamboat stock and setting the table with the "right" cutlery and implements needed to "excite and enchant your guests," in Kwong's own words. These run the gamut from "a rice bowl, a side plate, chopsticks, a Chinese spoon, and... a little fishing basket," as well as various condiments set out on small plates: duck eggs, Chinese mixed pickles, numerous plates of dipping sauces, sliced ginger, fresh lemon wedges, and Schezuan pepper and salt. Kwong then rounds off the preparations with steamer baskets filled with five types of vegetables and mushroom, to be dipped into the simmering stock along with the various other ingredients.

It is noteworthy that Kwong describes and presents the steamboat meal in laborious detail in both her cookbooks (*My China* and *Recipes and Stories*) and her cooking television programmes. The Chinese steamboat meal encapsulates the spectacle of Chinese cooking promoted by Kwong in her cooking narratives. No longer a mere pot of soup filled with ingredients, it is instead, in Kwong's own words, "a secret, magical potion, a healing elixir of life," one that is to be treated with almost mystical regard and respect. Roland Barthes, in his seminal text *Mythologies*, aptly described the phenomenon of "Ornamental Cookery" (78), which can be closely tied to many of Kwong's recipes and cooking "rituals." Barthes portrays this form of cooking as "an openly dream-like cookery... which never show[s] the dishes except from a high angle, as objects at once near and inaccessible, whose consumption can perfectly well be accomplished simply by looking" (79). Kwong's steamboat meal, along with her other cooking demonstrations, bears resonances with this "spectacular" visual consumption of Chinese cooking and eating.

For example, Kwong reminds her viewers how the "right" cutlery is to be used for a steamboat meal; she shows them how to use the little wire basket to "fish out" the ingredients that one has dipped into the boiling stock. Together with the various marinades for the raw meats and seafood ingredients, and the side dishes of pickles, dipping sauces and vegetables, the steamboat meal would in reality take hours to prepare, far longer than the 20-odd-minute-long episodes of Kwong's shows. At the end of the steamboat episode, we witness Kwong hosting her Australian friends (mainly white Australians, arguably her majority Australian audience), all of whom are gathered around the dining area, which has been decorated with resplendent string lights. This scene is, once again, a spectacle of sorts, one which celebrates the classic Chinese steamboat feast, not so much for its humble origins as a shared or communal meal, but

instead for its qualities as a spectacle, a *show* of visual excess that, in Kwong's own words, is meant "to excite and enchant your guests."

This advancement of one of the many myths Kwong engenders in her texts (both television and print) is damaging particularly because it offers a skewed vision – a misrepresentation – of contemporary Chinese identity, one that is not historically situated or lived. For example, Barthes outlines the process in which a "myth" becomes naturalised in societies, where a "signifier" (symbols, objects, concepts, images), is attached to particular "signifieds" (meanings), thereby becoming a "sign." Myth, according to Barthes, is therefore the "result of several layers of 'signifiers' and 'signifieds' building upon one another, constantly evolving through time in order to remain relevant to different societies in different periods of time" (115). Thus, in Barthes' terminology, this is the "myth" of Chinese cooking which Kwong proposes to her audience, that Chinese food *must* be cooked a certain way – with numerous marinades and stocks – and *must* be eaten a certain way, with the correct implements and cutlery, and in the *right* atmosphere and ambiance. Chinese cooking and culture are frozen into a static image, one which can only gain its validity and "stamp of authenticity" from "essentialist and absolute notions of Chineseness" (Ang 30). This allows viewers (other than those who *do* identify with Kwong's discourse) little choice but to relate to the narrative that Kwong proposes: that Chinese cooking can only be *true* and *authentic* when it is done "right," that is, when it follows the methods outlined and advocated by Kwong.

It is also significant that in the steamboat episode of *Kylie Kwong Cooking with Heart and Soul* (Season One, Episode Eight), the visual leitmotif of magic and ritual is again appropriated, at first through a blurry image of Kwong sitting before a table lit with candles and tealights. As the camera slowly zooms in on Kwong, the image becomes clearer and more distinct and we note that Kwong is lighting these candles while sitting at her dining table. Sounds of indistinguishable chanting accompany these images, further highlighting the solemnity and ritualistic aura of the steamboat meal. As the camera cuts away to a high angle shot that focuses on the candles, Kwong intonates, "It's showtime – my guests will be here any moment. Light the candles, start the magic." The filmic style of this episode is of an identical spectacular nature: the music signifies to the audience the seriousness of the occasion, and the blurry fade-out shots and close-up of Kwong lighting candles serve to remind the audience that *this* is what *real* Chinese food and eating is all about, an intense and highly ritualistic affair (as we are also reminded in the preparation of the various side dishes, marinades and ingredients).

Moreover, in this episode of *Kylie Kwong Cooking with Heart and Soul* (Season One, Episode Eight), cutaway shots feature Kwong's television set, which comprise a highly-stylised "Chinese" kitchen, complete with woks, Chinese cleaver, steamer baskets hanging on the walls, and atmospheric lanterns and

vases decorating the kitchen cupboards. I acknowledge here that Kwong's television show is a television production and it is the visual imagery that stands out. However, in the next few examples that I will draw upon, we will see that even in her cookbooks and travel memoir of her homecoming to her ancestral village in China, Kwong utilises an identical style of prioritising qualities and symbols, which "signify," in the sense meant by Barthes, essentialised and highly exoticised representations of Chinese cuisine and foodways.

With reference to the television shows, we may hypothesise that though the director and producer may have had their own intentions and stylistic preferences to further their own artistic vision when filming and producing the show, after Nichols' theory of "The Challenge of Persuasion" in documentary filmmaking, Kwong's cooking television shows are essentially aimed at teaching their audiences how to cook. As Nichols asserts, documentaries encourage their viewers to "expect to learn or be moved, to discover or be persuaded of possibilities" (38). In Kwong's cooking television shows, then, what can we, as the audience, expect to learn or be persuaded by? I suggest that the answer to this question is that Kwong's cooking shows function to inform the general Australian public about what Chinese cooking is *about*. However, because Kwong targets a more mainstream, largely Caucasian-Australian, or Euro-American audience, the language and approach she uses is designed to resonate more with her target audience. In exoticising and magnifying the stereotypical and spectacular qualities of Chinese cooking, Kwong does little to account for the tastes and culinary preferences of contemporary Chinese diasporic communities worldwide.

Besides that, much like a magic show, Kwong's descriptions of numerous places in China also invoke bewitching, "enchanting" interiors – locales which draw you in, and are just as mysterious and "magical" as her pot of steamboat stock. In the following excerpt, she describes a Shanghai teahouse in minute detail:

[I]t was our visit to a traditional Shanghai-style teahouse that really moved me. A Chinese tea house is a place where family and friends meet, to spend time with each other and to drink Chinese tea. The one we visited was an enchanting room furnished with polished rosewood tables, complete with matching rosewood stools that fitted neatly under the tables like a jigsaw puzzle. Rustic copper teapots with long, slender spouts held chrysanthemum tea, which we sipped from elegant wide-rimmed glasses. Scenes from Chinese history were carved into the woodwork, delicate red-tasselled lanterns hung from the ceiling, and the windows had ornate frames and intricate brass latches. I felt like I was *inside a beautiful, magical Chinese lacquered box, exquisite in every detail*. Peering through the open windows, I could see golden and orange carp darting in and out of reeds in the pond below. *The thick, heavy Shanghai air brushed against my skin and the smell of China imbued every*

pore. I wanted to capture this moment in this place and bring it home with me in a special little box. I would release this 'essence' in my own restaurant.... (Kwong, *My China* 5; emphasis added)

In likening a teahouse in Shanghai to a “beautiful, magical Chinese lacquered box,” Kwong carries out what Kathleen Stewart deems as the “desire... to purify, reify, and miniaturize the social world and so to make a giant of the individual self” (253). Thus, what Kwong does here is twofold: first, she simplifies the characteristics of a “traditional Shanghai-style teahouse” to a silent, static image; and second, she declares her intentions to “capture” the “essence” of such a beauty that can be brought home to be “released” in her own “Chinese eating house” in suburban Sydney, Australia.

More so than a tourist who brings keepsakes or souvenirs home in order to remember the touristic experience, Kwong is the requisite “magician” here, much like she was at the helm of the steamboat pot, shrinking the “polished rosewood tables,” “red-tasselled lanterns” and “intricate brass latches” down to size, so she can turn them into a transportable and replicable “essence” when and where she likes it. “Chineseness” is, therefore, easily “packaged” and commodified into an “essence.” Most of all, it is transported into and duplicated in her own restaurant in the global, multicultural milieu of Sydney in recognisable, stereotypical, forms and signs of authenticity.

As Lisa Maree Heldke terms it, a “cultural food colonizer” sees him/herself as “entitled to *be* anywhere and everywhere” (53; emphasis original), and to be able to purchase commodities and experiences whenever and however he/she pleases. Kwong, as much as she claims to be an authority behind Chinese cooking, plays a part more similar to that of the “cultural food colonizer” in her quest for *purchasable* and *collectible* experiences, objects and people in China. There is little to no sharing of cooking knowledge between the local Chinese and Kwong; it is more about the “quest” for knowledge to feed Kwong’s *own* food adventures, rather than to learn *about* Chinese people, and their cuisine and culture.

Kwong delineates a restaurant in Lijiang in terms that bear resonances with her descriptions of the Shanghainese teahouse:

The Mill’s private dining room is a beautiful space lined with traditional Chinese windows framed with ornate woodwork. You can sit comfortably in the deep window seats and stare out at *timeless scenes of cobblestones, glowing red lanterns, Naxi people dressed in their distinctive traditional costumes, silhouettes of towering mountain ranges* – and feel surrounded by so much culture, history and potential. (Kwong, *My China* 150; emphasis added)

This private dining room in Lijiang, much like the teahouse in Shanghai, stands as an ornament, a rarefied space in which the performance of “authentic”

Chinese identity can take place, mirroring the “timeless scenes of cobblestones” outside. The “authentic” atmosphere within, with its “glowing red lanterns” and “ornate woodwork,” surrounds the diners/consumers, reminding them of this “performance.” As if in a museum, watching “Naxi people dressed in their distinctive traditional costumes,” Kwong sits as a spectator – a consumer, literally – while the spectacle of “Chineseness” unfolds before her. As Susan Stewart asserts, these types of

miniatures and collections exaggerate interiority... [as] these interiors are not just sanctuaries but also prisons.... Or they are timeless tableaux... crushed under the weight of a visual code that has been given the power to capture particular times, places, identities, and ways of life in a single silent image and without a moment's notice.” (ctd. in Stewart 255)

In Kwong's various narratives and instructional television programmes on how to experience and replicate Chinese cuisine and culture, it is this “single silent image” (Susan Stewart ctd. in Stewart 255) that always materialises, albeit in different forms. Whether it is the image of the steamboat pot, or the Shanghainese teahouse, “timeless tableaux” (Susan Stewart ctd. in Stewart 255) appear at the forefront of Kwong's selective imagery and descriptive prose. This is the creation and perpetuation of Barthes' “myth,” where signifieds (meanings) are attached to particular signifiers (symbols, objects, concepts, images), and, more importantly, where these meanings become *naturalised* to a point where they are no longer questioned in particular societies, cultures, times, or places. Kwong's steamboat and teahouse are transformed into “signs” that embody “Chineseness”: the allure and mystery of an exotic meal; an “authentic” native dressed up for the part in his/her costume; or a place frozen in time.

Kathleen Stewart contends, “Culture is more and more unspoken and unnamed. Painted onto the surface of things, it passes us by as a blur of images and we ‘read’ it instantaneously as if it is a photographic image already ‘written’ and framed” (252). Kwong's exoticised images of China, their fixed and static qualities, stand as “photographs” “already ‘written’ and framed” (Stewart 252) – images which we come to recognise immediately for their unspoken, perceived qualities of “authenticity,” “grandeur,” “majesty” and “timelessness.” These myths become so ingrained in our imaginations that we hardly question them at all – the glorification of a “true” and “unspoiled” past is one which freezes present-day ideas and concepts in a gridlock, becoming unaccepting and intolerant of change.

Furthermore, the textual style of Kwong's cookbook and travel memoir *My China: A Feast for All the Senses*, clearly demonstrates the ways in which we should view China and its people. The following descriptions of three locations in China further emphasise Kwong's mythicised imagery of China and Chinese

culture and identity. The first is of her grandfather's house in her ancestral village of Wong Nai Hang in the province of Guangdong:

The *haunting yet enchanting* brick house built by my goonggoong (my mother's father) still stands in the village.... *Uninhabited and virtually untouched since he left, the house feels like a museum*: his modestly furnished bedroom contains a small wooden-framed four-poster bed, and there are incense holders and family altars throughout. (Kwong, *My China* vii; emphasis added)

The second location features the Pavilion Restaurant in Yangshuo:

[S]ituated on the Li River, the Pavilion Restaurant is set inside an ancient two-storey house that's a work of art in itself. Crafted from *beautifully fine, rustic bricks*, it is furnished with traditional Chinese furniture and antiques, including stunning rosewood chairs, and illuminated by *sultry swaying lanterns*. Large wooden shutters open onto a crop of lotus leaves, and *wafts of fragrant smoke rise from incense and candles, creating a haunting yet serene ambience*. (Kwong, *My China* 108; emphasis added).

The third location features a kitchen in a monastery in Tibet, where Kwong travels to and where she consequently professes to experience a deep sense of spirituality:

Huge timber doors with a thick wooden latch open to reveal the most gorgeous space: *a dimly lit, almost cavernous room* with a hard, well-worn dirt floor, white-washed walls and beautiful sturdy, thick wooden columns and ceiling beams. *Wide shafts of natural light seep in through windows, creating an ethereal aura*.... Nearby stands a grand antique cupboard, made from caramel-coloured wood, complete with intricate inlay and carving.... The whole scene is made *all the more enchanting by the fantastic rays of light shining into the gloom*, illuminating the deep hue of the monks' robes and the steam rising off the piping-hot broth. *The silence that accompanies it all is exquisite and adds an air of divinity to the entire ritual*. (Kwong, *My China* 254-56; emphasis added)

These three excerpts share similarities in terms of the narrative techniques employed by Kwong to convey the "ambience" and "mood" of these three locations. All three spaces possess a "haunting" and "cavernous" feeling about them, yet, they are "enchanting" in their spectacular nature, and stand almost as museums, to be looked at with wonderment and awe. As Stewart claims, these locales stand as places already-known to their spectators, those who instinctively *know* what to think of such places even before the thought occurs to them. This is what Barthes terms as "the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature... [I]t is immediately frozen into something natural" (129). Kwong's grandfather's house, the Pavilion Restaurant in Yangshuo, and the Tibetan

monks' kitchen all carry the same message, the same myth: that Chinese culture and identity are at once made up of magnificent, yet remote and unattainable characteristics. Much like how her grandfather's house "feels like a museum," the Tibetan monks' kitchen is enveloped in an "ethereal" and "divine" aura – these locations are devoid of human life. By focusing on exoticised symbols such as the "sultry swaying lanterns" and "fine, rustic bricks," Kwong's China is a land that can only gain its relevance and value by being firmly rooted in the past.

As Barthes would proclaim, "A conjuring trick has taken place [with myth]; it has turned reality inside out, it has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature" (142). The monuments and locales that Kwong features in her cookbook and travel memoir *My China*, therefore, feature "timeless tableaux" (Susan Stewart ctd. in Stewart 255) that have been "emptied of their histor[ies]" (Barthes 142). They stand "cavernous" and "haunting" precisely because they contain nothing. Such locations magnify and exalt both the "past" and the "timelessness" of magnificent and grand monuments. Thus, for Kwong, the "true" and "authentic" China can only be found in symbols and monuments that are frozen in time, in spaces and places that are neither historically situated nor lived in by people. Hence, Kwong's China bears little relevance to contemporary diasporic Chinese communities across the world precisely because it is a highly mysticised and distorted representation of China. As Ien Ang asserts, it is "a mythic China, a fetishized China" (31) that is put on display.

Lastly, the people that are featured in Kwong's cookbooks also signify particular meanings which Kwong wishes to put forward about Chinese culture and identity. Mythic images are embedded into Kwong's descriptions of the Chinese people she has met in her cookbook *Recipes and Stories*. The first of these is her Uncle Jimmy's mother, Ah Pau, and the second is Uncle Jimmy's employee, Lan. It is worth noting that Kwong only describes Chinese women in detail, drawing upon familiar archetypes of the "exotic" Asian woman, with her "high cheekbones" and "almond-shaped eyes":

I would survey Mrs Jang's humble abode and quietly notice Ah Pau, Jimmy's father's mother. Ah Pau was about 90 years of age and reminded me of a *china doll*. She had the whitest of hair, neatly combed and held back from her face with a simple band. Her finely etched complexion told a thousand stories and wore a thousand experiences; *her very essence was family*. Ah Pau's bound feet were adorned with black patent-leather shoes – *like doll's shoes*. (Kwong, *Recipes and Stories* 118; emphasis added)

Similarly, Kwong goes on to describe Lan, a female employee at her Uncle Jimmy's noodle factory:

I always found myself secretly staring at her, fascinated by her unusual looks. For an Asian, she boasted an extraordinary tall frame that was strong and proud. She had an impossibly smooth, yellowy-olive complexion and *the highest of cheekbones*. She had *dark-brown almond-shaped eyes*, a nose that was somewhat European in its shape and length, and full lips that were burgundy-brown coloured. (Kwong, *Recipes and Stories* 154; emphasis added)

In Kwong's description of these two women, their images are once again encapsulated in a "single silent image" (Susan Stewart ctd. in Stewart 255), much like that of the Shanghainese teahouse. Ah Pau is reduced to "a china doll" wearing "doll's shoes," a stereotype instantly recognisable and familiar. With her tiny, dainty shoes, Ah Pau is frozen into a static frame of reference: she becomes another exotic object, a purchasable commodity, much like Kwong's Chinese lacquered box. With Lan, Uncle Jimmy's employee, Kwong similarly focuses only on her striking "Asian" features: "the highest of cheekbones," with her "impossibly smooth, yellowy-olive complexion" and "dark-brown almond-shaped eyes," with no mention whatsoever of the character she is and what her story might be – where did she come from? What is her history? This is what Stewart describes as "eccentric characters whose action is noted in story, not fact" (Stewart 261), a common occurrence when one operates on the level of myth and nostalgia. Hence, the women in Kwong's *Recipes and Stories* similarly possess no history – they stand as empty signifiers and beautiful "souvenirs" to be admired and looked at, nothing more.

For Kwong, the characters in her cookbooks *My China* and *Recipes and Stories* act merely as embellishments, they come and go as and when Kwong sees fit. Those with names do not have much of a story; whilst those who do not even have names attributed to them, linger on in the background, unrecognised and unacknowledged. In *My China*, pictures of local Chinese people going about their daily lives appear several times. These nameless faces wander through the pages of Kwong's cookbook, like ghosts flitting about aimlessly, with no backstories attached to them, no acknowledgment of their histories – just images of their "captured" beauty, their "essence" – in Kwong's own words.

This is Barthes' myth at play, whereby "at the moment of reaching [its audience], it [the signifier] suspends itself, turns away and assumes the look of a generality: it stiffens, it makes itself look neutral and innocent" (125). Here, the images of Ah Pau and Lan become "speech *stolen and restored*" (Barthes 125) – a sign who "when it becomes form... empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains" (Barthes 117). A new "sign" is established, that of "traditional" Chinese stereotypical looks (China doll, almond-shaped eyes, and so on), at once exotic and instantly familiar, yet one which has been emptied of all its substance, its temporally and historically situated narrative "stolen" from it. It is an effective myth, one experienced as

“innocent speech” (Barthes 131), because it “abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences... organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth... it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves” (Barthes 143). These women now signify “Chineseness,” they represent exoticism; but what they do not signify any longer, what they do not possess any longer, is their history, because they have been robbed of it via the myth-making process.

In conclusion, the particular images, prose and filmic characteristics of Kwong's cookbooks and cooking television programmes prioritise specific symbolic and performative qualities that have been chosen to embody a particular form of “Chineseness” – one that remains rooted in the past and anchored to static frames of reference. This “mythic” and “fetishised China” (Ang 31) is one that bears little or no relevance to the identifications of contemporary diasporic Chinese communities across the world today.

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