Sharing Food, Vulnerability and Intimacy in a Global Pandemic:

The Digital Art of the Chinese Diaspora in Europe

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Abstract：

This article examines the digital artworks created by three Chinese diaspora artists based in Europe: Berlin-based queer filmmaker Fan Popo's short digital video *Lerne Deutsch in meiner Küche* (*Learn German in My Kitchen*), London-based performance artist Zeng Burong's performance *Non-Taster*, and London-based writer David K. S. Tse's digital radio play *The C Word*. All three artworks were created in 2020 during the pandemic and all deal explicitly with the issues of anti-Asian racism and cross-cultural understanding. All these artworks also engage with issues of food and culinary practices. Through an analysis of the three artworks, I argue that making digital art about food can serve as a creative and culturally sensitive strategy to engage with pandemic politics. Indeed, in an era of rising nationalism and international antagonism, diasporic Chinese artists have turned to seemingly mundane, apolitical, and non-confrontational ways such as creating digital artworks about food to engage with the public about anti-Asian racism and cross-cultural understanding. This functions as a creative and culturally sensitive strategy to conduct social and political activism and to enhance cross-cultural understanding. It also showcases the political potential and social relevance of digital art for a pandemic and even a post-pandemic world.

In 2020, the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic struck the world. Many artists found themselves in a difficult situation: as traditional exhibition venues such as galleries and art museums were closed down, artists had to move online for art production and exhibition. Many traditional art forms and practices became digital art. Although digital art had existed for a couple of decades before the pandemic, it is the compulsory and ubiquitous transformation of various art forms and practices into the digital format that marks the distinction of the digital art in the current era (Sgourev 2020). It was perhaps no coincidence that the artist Beeple's NFT digital art was sold for 69 million dollars at the Christie's auction in March 2021, creating a record in the history of art and also proclaiming digital art as a prominent and legitimate art form of the current era (Chow 2021). The historical conjuncture of the 2020s makes interactive digital art possible because of the recent development in global information technology, marked by widespread internet access, availability of high-speed broadband, popular use of streaming platforms and technologies, and the continuing entrenchment of unequal access and digital divide all over the world. The pandemic has therefore unintentionally triggered and accelerated a digital art revolution and significantly transformed the global art landscape.

Creating art digitally and for an online audience brings about new opportunities and challenges. This article focuses on a specific group of artists – artists of Chinese heritage currently living in Europe – as a case study to examine how diasporic artists adapt to the digital environment and respond to issues pertaining to the pandemic. These artists are not only confronted with new technological and creative challenges; they also face cultural marginalisation, Sinophobia and anti-Asian racism in the Western societies where they live. Although some of these issues such as Sinophobia and anti-Asian racism had been in existence long before the pandemic, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these challenges and made previously latent forms of discrimination explicit. How contemporary diasporic Chinese artists respond to these social and political issues while they deal with the challenges that digital technologies bring to art production and dissemination is the focus of this article.

In this article, I examine the digital artworks created by three Chinese diaspora artists based in Europe: Berlin-based queer filmmaker Fan Popo's short digital video *Lerne Deutsch in*

meiner Küche (*Learn German in My Kitchen*), London-based performance artist Zeng Burong's performance *Non-Taster*, and London-based writer David K. S. Tse's digital radio play *The C Word*. All three artworks were created in 2020 during the pandemic and all deal explicitly with the issues of anti-Asian racism and cross-cultural understanding. All three artists used the digital format to present their artworks: Fan's digital video, Zeng's digital performance, and Tse's digital radio play. From these examples, one can see that the pandemic does not signal a stop to artistic creativity or social engagement; rather, artists continue to engage with important social and political issues by taking advantage of the media specificity and creative potential of the digital technology. Although the value and sustainability of these digital artworks in a post-pandemic world is not yet known, these artworks all generated social impact when they were produced and disseminated. They should be treated seriously for the social values they created. From these examples, we can see that digital art is not an inferior copy of the conventional art forms; it should be seen for its own merit, with its own technological affordance and affective attunement. How these artists use the digital format to overcome the geographical distance and psychological barrier and to create a sense of immediacy, intimacy and liveliness during the pandemic lockdown can provide inspiration for many other artists around the world and the study of contemporary art overall.

Juxtaposing the three digital artworks, we can also discern a shared theme: all these artworks deal with issues of food and culinary practices. This reflects a common trend during the pandemic lockdown: many people cook at home instead of eating out, and there is a scarcity of entertainment and food choices available at home. Cooking, eating, and talking about food has therefore surfaced as an important issue for both artists and non-artists alike. Besides, food is a particularly relevant topic for people from East and Southeast Asian communities, because of these communities traditionally attach vital importance to food (Farquhar 2002; Leong-Salobir 2019). People in East and Southeast Asian communities construct their subjectivities and establish their social relationships with others through sharing and talking about food (Yang 1994). The Facebook group 'Eating in the Time of Coronavirus' attracted nearly two thousand members since its inception in March 2020, with most members coming from East and Southeast Asian cultural backgrounds. But sharing food pictures and culinary practices can embody political potential as well. Since the start of the pandemic, 'Chinese' culinary practices have been criticised and even vilified in Western media and popular

discourse, and ‘eating bats’ is seen as the origin of the coronavirus (BBC 2020). In response to this, East and Southeast Asian communities have fought back, rejecting misinformation, and celebrating their cultural traditions. Food has therefore become a crucial way for these communities to articulate their cultural identities and social belongings in an era of surging anti-Asian racism. In this context, many East Asian artists have used food in their artistic creation to voice their social and political concerns. This is represented by the three artists discussed in this article, but also includes other artists such as the Berlin-based Chinese queer artist Musk Ming (Essen mit Ming, 2020) who uses fusion food to debunk the myth of ethnic authenticity in food and cultural identity, and the Vienna-based Asian women artist collective Mai Ling (2020) which uses cooking to articulate a diasporic Asian feminist politics.

In this article, I argue that making digital art about food can serve as a creative and culturally sensitive strategy to engage with pandemic politics. It constitutes a form of ‘soft activism’ (Bao 2020) that relies on art and culture rather than state or civil society organisation-led, confrontational political processes. After all, food is seen as a friendly and seemingly apolitical subject matter; creating digital artworks using food is thus an important way for such social and political engagement because of the accessibility, interactivity, and wide audience reach of digital art. Indeed, in an era of rising nationalism and international antagonism, diasporic Chinese artists have turned to seemingly mundane, apolitical, and non-confrontational ways such as creating digital artworks about food to engage with the public about anti-Asian racism and cross-cultural understanding. This functions as a creative and culturally sensitive strategy to conduct social and political activism and to enhance cross-cultural understanding. It also showcases the political potential and social relevance of digital art for a pandemic and even a post-pandemic world.

Learn German In My Kitchen: Queer Parody and East-East Referencing

In March 2020, at a Berlin subway station, a Middle-Eastern-looking young man shouted at Fan Popo, a Berlin-based Chinese queer filmmaker, ‘Corona, du bist Corona. F**k China, politische Diktatur.’ (Coronavirus, you are coronavirus. F**k China, the political

dictatorship.) (Amir in Berlin 2020).[1] This was not the first time when Fan encountered Sinophobia and anti-Asian racism, and such abuses have happened to many people of the East and Southeast Asian descent since the start of the global pandemic. Knowing that he would definitely lose in a fist fight, Fan took out his smart phone and videorecorded the incident. He subsequently took the video footage to the local police station to report a 'hate crime'. Instead of trying to help him, the policeman who took the case blamed Fan for videorecording the incident and thereby infringing upon the perpetrator's privacy. The liberal façade of the Western society began to crumble in front of Fan. Instead of giving up, Fan made a short film, using the video footage from that day while blurring that man's face, to address the issue of Sinophobia and anti-Asian racism. The narrative of the video revolves around cooking food.

Figure 1. *Learn German in My Kitchen* screenshot

The short video is titled *Learn German in My Kitchen* (Figure 1). It was commissioned by RBB (Radio Berlin und Brandenburg) and executed by BASIS Berlin as part of the radio/television station's COVID-19 short video series *4 Wände Berlin: 30 Videos mit*

[1] Parts of this section were developed from a short article on Popo Fan's video written by the author (Bao 2021), available online on a Creative Commons licence.

Abstand (*4 Walls Berlin: 30 Videos with Distance*). Fan's contribution to the series is a light-hearted comic short film that resembles a DIY cooking and language learning YouTube video. With a short duration of 2 minutes and 23 seconds, the video displays bilingual flashcards which divide the video into several segments. The words that appear in the video include: der Rice (the rice), die Karotte (the carrot), die Fledermaus (the bat), die Nudel (the noodle), der Virus (the virus). Each flashcard is followed by a German sentence with the word in it, emulating a language learning exercise. For example, the 'der Rice' (the rice) flashcard is exemplified by the sentence 'Ich hatte einen Reisbrei zum Frühstück.' (I had rice porridge for breakfast). The video clip that illustrates this sentence shows Fan making rice porridge using a saucepan. Notably, most of the words displayed on the flashcards have an association with China or Asia. In particular, the bat has become a potent and controversial symbol used by many to criticise the Chinese for their 'grotesque' dietary habits since the start of the pandemic. These short video clips are linked by a cooking sequence, in which Fan demonstrates the process of making a Chinese-style noodle in his flat. Although most words (such as rice, carrots, and noodle) on the flashcards are represented by real objects, some are not. For example, the 'bat' flashcard is followed by the sequence of several plastic bats used for Halloween decorations being thrown into a saucepan of boiling water, as a reference to the idea of 'bat soup'. This sequence is accompanied by mysterious and ominous non-diegetic music often used in a crime thriller, intensifying its dramatic effect (the same sequence also appears at the beginning of the video to create suspense). The 'virus' flashcard is surprisingly followed by the video clip that Fan shot with his smart phone about his own experience of racial abuse in a Berlin subway station, suggesting the real virus is racism. Resembling the style of a public interest advert, the video finishes with an intertitle: 'Coronavirus unterscheidet nicht zwitschen Nationnalitaeiten. Und wir?' (Coronavirus does not make a distinction between nationalities. What about us?'), highlighting the video's anti-racism message.

Fan's video builds on but at the same time challenges Western stereotypes about China/Asia and Chinese/Asianness. Food such as rice and noodles are often associated with Chineseness and Asianness, and bats have recently been seen as the mythical origin of the pandemic in the global circulation of misinformation. In the video, Fan introduces one of his favourite foods, the *reganmian* (literally hot and dry noodle) from Wuhan. Here, in the context of a global pandemic, the city of Wuhan is referred to not as a place of plague and misery, or a land of

bat-eating oriental barbarity, but instead as a place that is home to a type of local delicacy, with a human and personal touch. Following the 'bat' flashcard, Fan is shown in the video shaking his head and saying 'Nein, ich habe nie eine Fledermaus gegessen.' (No, I have never eaten a bat.) This statement helps dispel the myth that all Chinese eat bats. But Fan's mode of address here is rather personal and individualised. He is simply claiming that he has never eaten a bat himself, and this does not preclude the possibility that someone else might have eaten one. By using an individualised mode of address, Fan also refuses to represent, and speak for, a group of people, such as the whole Chinese nation. For Fan, speaking for a group is a precarious act, as it can often create inclusion and exclusion. This belief is reflected in his wider work, especially in his queer community documentaries where he talks about queer family relationships without making a statement about a universalised 'Chinese queer' experience (Bao 2020). An individualised mode of address, in this context, challenges both the Western accusation of Chinese as a bat-eating and barbaric nation, as well as the middle-class Chinese collective denial of a possibly minority dietary practice, demarcating the world along the primitive/civilised line.

When I interviewed the filmmaker on why he made this video, Fan replied:

> I would like to show to others what I do and what I eat at home, and I hope this can disrupt some confusions about and stereotypes of Asians. Food is a particularly important element in my life. It is also a reason why many Asians, and especially Chinese, are stigmatised in the world. This video shows what Asians really eat in a joking way. It functions as a form of self-irony and sarcasm.

Humour, irony, and sarcasm – these are the tools that Fan uses to critique racism and Sinophobia. As Muñoz (1999: xi) points out, humour is a valuable pedagogical and political project for queer minoritarian subjects; through humour, queer performers of colour find strength and solidarity in subverting the assumed seriousness of the dominant discourse. After the short film was released, Fan received a lot of positive feedback, especially from ethnic minority and migrant communities living in Europe. He actively engaged in intergroup solidarity building between minority groups. Also, Fan sees humour an audience-friendly

way to engage with serious political and social issues. In a time where national identities and state borders are taken too seriously, perhaps we all need a sense of humour to challenge these fixed categories.

Instead of being passive and pessimistic about the situation, Fan has adopted a more proactive and even activist approach to intervene in the current global pandemic discourse. Besides making films and short videos, Fan also wrote articles about his intimate life, reflecting on the transformation of queer intimacy in the current pandemic and satirising the queer-unfriendly, home-bound, and heteronormative quarantine measures. He led virtual tours, showing aspects of queer Asian life in Berlin. He also co-curated a film programme titled *How Can We See (Each Other)?* by juxtaposing films from East Asia, Middle East, and East Africa alongside each other. He even co-curated a film festival and video-making workshop titled *Imagining Queer Bandung*, exploring South-South collaborations in the queer world. In my interview with Fan, he reflected that people from East Asia, Middle East and East Africa rarely see each other's films. This is often attributed to international conventions in film festival programming: festival films are often categorised into geographical locations (e.g. Asian films and African films) in order to market to target audiences from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. But there is a more serious problem embedded in such a curatorial practice: Western hegemony in global film cultures. People outside the West often look to the West as their implied addressee and target audience, but seldom look at and learn from each other, hence the title of the film programme *How Can We See (Each Other)?*. Fan explained that the purpose of such programming is to make people outside the West 'look at' and 'see' each other. Fan describes such curatorial strategy as 'East-East referencing': 'We need to seek all kinds of resources from allies, build up our strategy of "East-East referencing". On the other hand, we also need to find our common language for communication.' (cited in Korbecka 2020). 'East-East referencing', therefore, serves as an important decolonising strategy, decentring global queer film culture and creating opportunities for cross-cultural communication and mutual understanding.

Recalling the event on that day, the person who attacked Fan at the subway station looked like someone from the Middle East. 'We are all marginalised people struggling to survive in a

Western society. Why do we hate each other?' Fan asked rhetorically. He reflected that he had no knowledge about Middle Eastern cultures before he came to Europe. It was through going to Middle Eastern shops and eating Middle Eastern food that he became aware of his own bias against Middle Eastern cultures. From this personal experience, Fan realised that seeing each other and understanding each other's culture is the first step towards mutual understanding and intergroup solidarity. Food and films are important ways to open up the discussion, hence this short video. Although the person who attacked him with racist language on that day looks like someone from the Middle East, Fan refuses to turn away from having a conversation. It is through bringing people together from different parts of the world that racial prejudice can be challenged, and mutual understanding can be achieved. All these films and curatorial practices function as creative and critical interventions in the current debate about pandemic racism. Food plays an important role in this process.

Non-Taster: Sharing Intimacy and Vulnerability in Apocalyptic Times

The end of 2020 felt like 'apocalyptic times', as London-based performance artist Zeng Burong recalls in an interview (CC Station 2021). This was not only because of the uncertainty brought about by the Brexit when the UK only reached an agreement with the European Union at the last minute and yet the implication of that agreement was far from clear, but also because of the lockdown situation caused by the surging infection and death rates due to the global spread of the pandemic. The whole country went into an extended period of national lockdown to contain the spread of the coronavirus just before Christmas, and the traditionally festive season no longer felt cheerful.

From 25 to 31 December, for a period of seven days, every morning at a quarter past ten, Zeng dressed herself up brightly in her flat, sat in front of a computer, opened a video camera, and livestreamed her breakfast in front of an online audience. That was her digital performance artwork *Non-Taster* (Figure 2) (Zeng 2020). Audience members were invited to join her in having breakfast together while listening to her talk at the same time. Each episode, lasting around fifteen minutes, starts with Zeng greeting the audience and making small talk about her daily mood and everyday routine in a virtual zoom studio. The camera then shifts to a breakfast table where Zeng prepares her breakfast, usually a cup of instant noodle purchased from a local supermarket. While waiting for the instant noodle to soften in

the hot water, Zeng returns to the studio and talks about an aspect of her life, focusing on a keyword each day. For example, in one episode, Zeng reminisces about her relationship with her parents; and in another, Zeng recalls her experience as a food critic and traveller after graduation from university. Some episodes appear more interesting than others. For example, in episode 1, Zeng tests the audience's patience by reading out a calendar, date after date from March to December, showcasing the monotonous passage of time in that year. An episode usually ends with Zeng eating the cooked instant noodle.

Figure 2. *Non-Taster* Screenshot

Zeng's digital performance resembles a breakfast show on British television, but it also differs from the latter significantly. Zeng's one-woman show centres on Zeng's experience as a young diasporic Chinese woman living in the UK; it appears less formal, more low-tech, more autobiographical, more introspective, and thus more intimate. When 'young Chinese women' appear on mainstream media, they are invariably represented in stereotypical ways, or as victims of anti-Asian racism, lacking in their own agency (Knox 2019). Instant noodle, as a strong symbol of East Asian food culture, materialises and humanises Asianness at a time when Asian culture is stereotyped and stigmatised, making Asianness more mundane and relatable. Eating instant noodle every day during the festive season of Christmas also

conveys to the audience a sense of human vulnerability and diasporic loneliness. Across the screen, the audience witnessed Zeng struggling to keep optimistic and cheerful, fighting loneliness and isolation, reminiscing about the past and imagining the future. There is a strong sense of human vulnerability that affects people, and this makes the artwork intimate and affective and even articulates a sense of resistance to hegemonic social forces and power relations (Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay 2016). It is this shared vulnerability of human lives that connects the audience with Zeng during the pandemic times.

The instant noodle that Zeng eats is a very spicy brand, and she accompanies it with hot chili sauce. The package of the noodle cup indicates that it comes from Chongqing – a symbol of cultural authenticity in a transnational and diasporic context. While eating spicy noodle may have been Zeng's everyday practice and personal preference, it assumes particular significance in this context. As Zeng explains in her artist's statement:

> I [...] chose instead to document my daily breakfast (mainly a variety of spicy instant noodles with sauces) via a series of photographs and scanned images. I started to taste their flavours, and their smells were as 'stimulating as tear gas' in my flatmate's opinion. I hoped that these images could deliver a sense of that spicy taste, combined with a hot and painful sensation which contrasts with the apathy, nostalgia, and homesickness, lamenting for the loss of taste/desire in the post-pandemic era. (Queer Art Projects 2020)

For Zeng, the spicy noodle is not simply a type of ready-made fast food that performs a practical function of filling the stomach and stopping hunger, but a creative way for her to establish emotional connections with her imagined home and with her audience across time and space (Zeng 2021). If the extended period of the pandemic isolation affords people with a sense of apathy – blasé to rising infection and death rates and indifferent to other people's lives and suffering – the sensation conjured up by the spicy taste effectively stimulates the human emotion, desire, and empathy, together with the hope for life, human intimacy, and a post-pandemic future. As the spicy taste spreads on the tongues and extends to the stomach, it morphs into excitement and pleasure which can also affect the audience across the screen. Such a sensation is contagious. It is through the contagion of taste, pleasure, and excitement

that Zeng's experiences and feelings are translated across the computer screen and across different cultures.

In her artist's statement, Zeng explains why this piece of artwork is titled *Non-Taster* (Queer Art Projects 2020). From January 2020, Zeng lost her sense of taste for several months. The loss of taste happens to be a typical symptom for COVID-19 infection. Although Zeng was not able to find out about the real reason because of limited COVID testing opportunities at the time, this experience gave her some inspirations to create an artwork. After some research, Zeng discovered that the change of bodily function and sensory experience is often related to changing psychological and emotional status. In other words, the loss of taste can be a somatic response: the social is reflected in the bodily and affective experience (Cornell 2015). Zeng reflected that her migratory experience has brought about much discomfort to her bodily capacities and emotional status. She therefore uses the idea of herself as a non-taster to explore 'the elusive connections between the change of taste and the migrant experience, questioning how constantly moving to new places affects the sense of taste' (Queer Art Projects 2020). Zeng's original idea was to invite the audience to participate in the co-creation of a performance art piece in a real-life setting:

> The initial idea was to invite audience members (one at a time) to operate on my tongue, drawing an image or writing a text with selected food ingredients. The initial concept concerned not just swallowing down food, but also thoughts, feelings, and emotions in situations in which there is no better option. Behind the performance, a number of postcodes I had accumulated over the past five years would have been projected on a screen. (Queer Art Projects 2020)

Zeng's original idea was to explore the relationship between taste and migration experience – an apt topic for a Chinese woman living in the diaspora. The pandemic situation made such a real-life performance impossible. Zeng had to reconceptualise the whole art project by turning to the online environment and exploiting the digital affordances. She eventually transformed a live art performance into a digital artwork and turned offline interactions in a physical art space into online interactions with the audience. Zeng's digital artwork *Non-*

Taster showcases the flexibility and creativity of performance artists in adapting to an online environment. It also explores how they create human intimacy and make connections with people in an isolated environment in the middle of a pandemic. Digital technologies, therefore, do not signal an end to intimacy and connectivity, they define intimacy and connectivity in different ways, challenging the anthropocentrism of intimacy and reaffirming the interconnections between human and non-human bodies (Miguel 2018). As Zeng's digital performance artwork connects people with spicy sensations and lingering tastes, it also humanises the Asian cultural identity at a time when Asianness is dehumanised in Western media and popular culture.

The C Word: Tasting the Unknown and Facing the Other

In summer 2020, during the temporary ease of the national lockdown, two British Chinese flatmates, Pat and Bea, invite their British friend Sue to their flat for lunch. Sue brings along her new boyfriend Steve to introduce him to her Chinese friends. Steve appears a stranger to the Chinese food served on the table; he also refuses to accept that the C word (short for Chinky, a slang referring to Chinese food or a Chinese takeaway restaurant) that he uses may sound offensive to many British Chinese. Growing up in the UK as second-generation British Chinese, Pat and Bea have long associated the C word with racial discrimination and racist abuse. Sue is quick to apologise as soon as she realises the mistake, but Steve is stubborn, insisting that he has done nothing wrong as everybody else whom he knows uses the C word. The lunch ends early and unhappily, leaving all the four people wondering whether a mutual understanding across cultures is possible at all in the context of the current pandemic.

The above story is the plot of the play titled *The C Word*, created by British Chinese writer David K. S. Tse in 2020 as a radio play. Originally commissioned by the Gonville and Caius College, University of Cambridge, in collaboration with Cambridge-based theatre company Menagerie, the play was a creative response to anti-Asian racism in the UK during the pandemic (Gonville & Caius 2020). The play was later rehearsed and performed by some students from Kings College London, in a creative art project led by Wing Fai Leung and Victor Fan titled *I Am Not a Virus* (Fan 2021). Twenty-five students from Kings College London volunteered for the art project. The students were divided into five groups, each group consisting of a director and four actors. They adapted the play

creatively and in their own way. Some groups followed the script instructions and made traditional radio plays by reading out the dialogues and adding music and special sound effects. Other groups took advantage of the Zoom technology and created a stage play on Zoom (Figure 3). [2] The result was five 20-minute plays performed online and on Zoom.

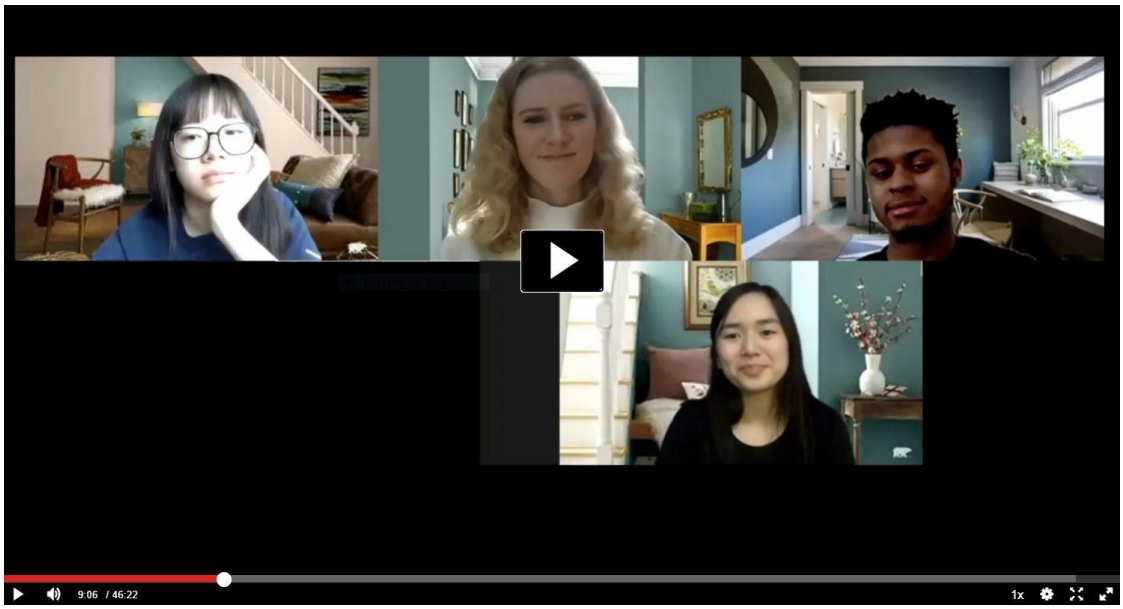

Figure 3. *The C Word* screenshot (character names from left to right and from top to bottom: Bea, Sue, Steve and Pat)

During a post-screening online discussion, Tse introduced that the play was inspired by his experience twenty years ago. Discrimination against East and Southeast Asians has been a perennial theme in the British cultural history, epitomised by the villain figure of Dr Fu Man-chu created by English writer Sax Rohmer during the first half of the twentieth century (Frayling 2014). This theme has become more manifest during the pandemic, in which implicit forms of discrimination and racism have become explicit, verbalised, and even embodied. The London Metropolitan Police recorded a 300 percent increase of hate crimes against East and Southeast Asians since the start of the pandemic (Hui 2021). *The C Word*

[2] In this section, I use the video footage of Group 1 from the Kings College London performance, which is a stage play performed on Zoom, as an example to illustrate how students made use of the digital technology to engage with issues of anti-Asian racism. The play by Group 1 was directed by Sonia Lefrançois; its actors include Eunis Cheung (Pat), Dominic Christopher (Steve), Xinyu Gong (Bea), and Mikayla Stuart (Sue).

dramatises the tension between cultures by placing cultural differences and anti-Asian racism on the table and over a 20-minute conversation. It is perhaps no coincidence that a large part of the conversation in the play revolves around China and food.

First, there is discussion about what is China and what is Chinese at the lunch table. Both Pat and Bea are identified as British Chinese or British East Asian. These two categories often overlap, but they are not the same: it is important to recognise that the British East and Southeast Asian communities include the British Chinese community, although other ethnic communities are often rendered invisible under the British Chinese category and even mistaken as Chinese (Yeh 2018). Many British East and Southeast Asians have been subject to similar racist abuses since the start of the pandemic because many people do not see the difference, or the heterogeneity, of the ethnic minority groups. While all are marginalised ethnic minority groups in the UK's demographics, overall British East and Southeast Asian communities are more marginalised than the British Chinese communities. Even when it comes to the discussion of the British Chinese community, there are different communities and community groups, and not all of them occupy the same subject position. People from the People's Republic of China are often seen as more 'authentically Chinese' than people from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other parts of the Sinophone world. And people from the Sinophone world often see themselves as more cosmopolitan, mobile, and transnational, thus possessing a greater sense of cultural capital than the mainland Chinese. While there are complex international relations and global geopolitics at play, the multiple and flexible definitions of China and Chineseness – whether they are national or transnational, and whether they are based on linguistic, cultural, or political affiliations – make the category intrinsically complicated as a form of identity and identification (Thorpe and Yeh 2018).

Second, there is also the issue of Britishness. When are the 'British Chinese' British and when are they Chinese? It is also worth interrogating why people speak of 'British Chinese' instead of 'Chinese British' (as in the case of 'Chinese American' or 'Asian American')? This has a complex historical genealogy. Britain has long imagined itself to be a Western and White society. Although Black and Asian communities have been part of the national history, Britain is still considered as a 'White majority' society even in the 2021 Sewell Report (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities 2021). Although the Chinese communities have

lived in the UK for more than two centuries, they are often seen as short-term visitors rather than long term residents (Benton and Gomez 2007; Price 2019). Their cultural difference is seen as an impediment to their full membership to the British national identity. Can Chinese become British, regardless of where they were born or which national passport they hold? This is not simply a practical question pertaining to paperwork, but an existential question for many Chinese living in the UK.

Take a sequence from *The C Word* for example, after being pointed out that the C word has negative associations and using it causes offenses, Steve refuses to apologise for his use of the word. He refutes: 'but your country has not apologised – Coronavirus came from China. Wasn't it correct? It's from the animals you eat.' Pat looks at him in disbelief: 'my country?' It is difficult for her to believe that as a British Born Chinese, other people still see her as Chinese instead of British. This bespeaks the general public's perception about the East and Southeast Asian communities in the UK: always a visitor to the country and forever an outsider to the British national identity.

Food constitutes a major source of conflict in the film. Steve is shocked by the Chinese food presented to him on the table: from the steamed fish to the marinated 'century eggs'. They look exotic to him, and they signify an alterity which he cannot comprehend. After some explanation and persuasion, Steve reluctantly tries the streamed fish and finds it rather tasty. ('This actually tastes like fish.') Here, eating creates a possibility, or a narrow opening, for cross-cultural understanding, although such an opening can be short-lived and fleeting. Steve is soon reminded of the 'Chinese' bat-eating behaviour that he has read on social media and is quick to see cooking fish with fish head and bone as a barbaric practice associated with primitive, oriental cultures. The group of friends try to explain to Steve how coronavirus comes from nature and it does not matter from which country it originates. Pat explains: 'most people in China don't eat bats. Besides, who are we to judge what poor people eat?'

This is a narrative strategy that Fan also adopted in his video: instead of assuming a middle-class position of condemning bat-eating practices, the play stops short of making generalisations; rather, it humanises Chinese food and the people who eat them. Chinese

culture, in this context, is materialised in food, and Chinese identity is embodied by Pat and Bea, two human beings who host the lunch. Although the look of the food may conjure up a sense of alterity for a Western eye, the taste of it can however create possibilities for cross-cultural understanding. The modern episteme is premised on the centrality of the sight or visuality (Foster 1998). Eyes are socially accustomed and culturally trained to make distinctions between the familiar and the strange, accepting the familiar and rejecting the strange. The visual regime in the modern world is shaped by the historical experience of colonialism and capitalist expansion (Hall 1997). However, taste is a different regime. The tongue may feel and experience the world differently from the eyes. While visuality constructs identities, taste may potentially resolve or blur identities (Probyn 2000). Taste lingers on; it is informed by what goes on before, during, and even after the act of tasting. The after-taste is as important experientially as the actual act of tasting itself. Taste does not rely on the knowable, but rests on the unknowable, unpredictable and the actual experience. It is this unpredictability and experiential nature of the taste that creates possibilities for alternative experiences of and relationships to the world.

The lunch is a contact zone marked by the process of cultural encounter (Pratt 1991). This short 20-minute video conjures up plenty of misunderstandings and conflicts based on cultural differences. It also gestures towards moments of reconciliation and mutual understanding. For example, Steve almost drops his guard against Chinese culture after having tasted the steamed fish. Sue shared a flat with Bea in the past and this has made her more accepting of Chinese food and Chinese cultural traditions. The lunch brings two British friends together with two Chinese friends, and this togetherness creates possibilities for mutual understanding. Inviting people to one's home is a gesture of hospitality and good will. Hospitality opens up oneself to the other and blurs the boundary between disparate identities and cultures (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000). Importantly, seeing each other in the face, online or offline, matters because the face visualises and materialises the other. Face is an important category for people's understanding of and relationship to the world. For Emanuel Levinas (1969), seeing someone's face reminds people of the existence of the other that is related to and connected with the self in a shared world. On seeing each other in the face and recognising each other's co-existence in this world, one assumes a responsibility, an ethical obligation, to know and care about the other. Face-to-face communication therefore embodies

the potential to dispel historically constructed cultural myths and social prejudices and to explore possibilities of human co-existence and interconnectedness.

Moreover, the rehearsal and performance of the radio play brought people from different cultures together. In a post-screening discussion, students from Kings College London talked about how they understand each other better by working together collaboratively to produce this play. Some even met offline to enjoy some Chinese food together. The boundary between the online world and the offline world begins to collapse as the story world of the radio play becomes intertwined with the narratives from everyday life. These encounters help dispel biases and promote cross-cultural understanding. Digital art and good play a facilitating role in this process.

Conclusion

This article has examined the representational strategies surrounding food and cultural identities deployed by three diasporic Chinese artists living in Europe. Together, they shine light on two crucial issues pertinent to our times: firstly, how to make use of digital platforms and technologies to create artworks? This question is not only relevant to art production and exhibition during the current pandemic but has significant implications for the transformation of the art world in the post-pandemic era. The three artists studied in this article have all transformed their art practices from an offline to an online environment. Although this process may prove easier for some than for others, these artists face similar challenges, including how to create interactivity and audience engagement using the digital format. They have not only remediated traditional media genres and formats (such as cooking and language learning programmes on YouTube, breakfast shows on television, and radio plays made on Zoom) but also added innovative elements to these genres and formats to create audience engagement. These examples demonstrate that it is possible to engage with the audience through digital art and that digital art is a no less socially and politically engaged art form and practice than traditional art.

Secondly, these case studies exemplify the use of food in engaging with pandemic politics. The three artists have unanimously turned to food in exploring issues of cultural identities, anti-Asian racism, and cross-cultural understanding. Talking about food functions as an

audience friendly, light-hearted, and seemingly apolitical way to engage with the public over sensitive political and social issues. The topic of food engages with the audience easily and conveys information in a subtle and friendly way. The significance of this approach lies in two aspects: first, the exposure of human face to the other, which has the potential to humanise cultural identities and counter racial and ethnic stereotypes; and second, the emphasis on a different sensorial experience (i.e. taste) from visuality. If the visual regime prioritises understanding the world through socially constructed categories and their perceptible distinctions, the sensory regime of taste is more subtle and nuanced: taste differs but we cannot put these differences into simple linguistic representation and through human perception; taste differs in terms of the intensities of affect and sensation instead of fixed social categories; taste lingers on in and over time and creates alternative temporalities of experience. The sense of taste therefore embodies the potential to challenge established ways of seeing and knowing the world. Exploring the potential of taste through digital artworks, these diasporic Chinese artists not only articulate their own cultural identities through food but send political messages to the public in a more subtle and non-confrontational manner. In an era marked by increasing antagonism and confrontation between nation states and political ideologies, this type of 'soft activism' through cooking, tasting, and talking about food is needed more than ever.

'You are what you eat', as a famous Western proverb says, suggesting the importance of food for human identity and subjectivity, but it somehow has a deterministic undertone, as if we never change. 'The desire for food and sex is part of human nature', as a well-known Mencius saying goes, pointing to the mundane but sensual aspect of food for human subjectivity (Farquhar 2002). We perhaps do not fully understand the importance and potential of food for human existence and social relations yet. In *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities,* Elspeth Probyn (2000) ruminates upon our relations to food:

> eating is both pleasurable and painful, boring and stimulating, a luxury and a necessity. In the end, it is the ways in which eating reveals us at our most vulnerable, hungry, solitary and needy, as it simultaneously brings us together in permutations of commensurability. As Bourdieu famously argues, we *are* our tastes, yet, *contra* Bourdieu, eating demonstrates our taste for change. (p. 9, original emphasis)

In other words, it is our shared condition of loneliness and vulnerability, together with our physical and psychological needs for survival, coexistence, and a better life, that connects us to food and to one another. What and how we eat can therefore serve as a pragmatic ground from which to articulate a politics and ethics of identities, cultures, and coexistence in post-pandemic times. Moreover, 'eating demonstrates our taste for change' in terms of identities, social relations, and societies. After all, our tastes do not stay the same; our ways of eating often vary according to circumstances; and so is the society we live in. Through enacting new ways of eating and eating together, we can imagine new identities, social relations, and societies. The three diasporic Chinese artists have vividly demonstrated the potential for social change through their creative digital artworks and through their culinary engagement with pandemic politics.

Glossary

David K. S. Tse 谢家声

Fan Popo 范坡坡

reganmian 热干面

Zeng Burong 曾不容

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