The Contemporary Dissemination of Qing Tuan and Tang Tuan from China to New Zealand

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Supervisor

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Abstract

"Food is culture" (Montanari, 2006, p. xi). From the moment humans selectively grow crops in their respective territories to the moment humans choose food according to their own preferences, no matter how natural the original intention is, it is a cultural choice. This dissertation explores the socio-cultural impact of *qing tuan* (青团) and *tang tuan*(汤团), two sweets that carry important and distinct symbolic meanings for Chinese people; it also studies the changes in the new cooking environment. *Qing tuan* is a traditional green glutinous rice ball filled with sweet bean paste. In China, *qing tuan* is enjoyed by people during the *Qing Ming* Festival (Tomb-sweeping Day) and the Cold Food Festival. *Tang tuan*, another white glutinous rice ball, is served during China's Lantern Festival and has deep cultural roots in Chinese culinary traditions. As these delicacies cross borders, they are transformed by local ingredients, flavours and cultural practices. In my dissertation, I use a relativist ontology, a constructivist epistemology, and a subjectivism paradigm. The autoethnographic methodology and symbolic interactionism approach will be based on my dual identity of growing up in Shanghai, China, and later living and working in Auckland, New Zealand. This allows me to express my emotions, memories, and nostalgia, analysing how *qing tuan* and *tang tuan* are perceived, consumed and integrated into a multicultural environment, and this leads to my findings and answers. By exploring the journey of *qing tuan* and *tang tuan* from China to New Zealand, this research helps understand how foods act as cultural ambassadors and how they evolve within diaspora communities, and highlights the dynamic interplay between culinary traditions and globalisation. In doing so, this research examines the impact of migration on our personal connection to traditional cultural foods.

Acknowledgements

Completing this dissertation has been a journey of discovery and personal growth. First, I would like to express my appreciation to my dissertation supervisor, Robert Richardson, for his support, guidance, and patience. His expertise and understanding shaped my academic writing and encouraged me to think creatively about gastronomy.

My deepest thanks to my beloved parents in Shanghai, China, for their open-mindedness, unconditional love, and endless encouragement. Their willingness to let me leave home and explore the world has granted me the freedom to pursue my passions and academic ambitions. Though we are miles apart, their belief in me has been my greatest motivation.

This research is also a tribute to my grandparents, whose love and care shaped my earliest memories. They raised me and gave me not only the warmth of family but also the values that guide me to this day. Their legacy lives on in the stories and flavours.

I am also grateful to my lecturers for reminding me that gastronomy is not just a subject but a story of people, places, and passion.

Last but not least, I would like to express my gratitude to David Parker for his proofreading. His expertise and attention to detail enhanced the quality of this dissertation.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Name: Jia Hu

Signature: _____

Date: [30 July 2025]

Chapter 1: Introduction

1. Rationale for My Research

To fulfil the requirements of my master's degree, I must complete a dissertation. When preparing for this academic journey, my supervisor offered crucial advice: "Choose a topic you truly love, because writing about it will become your life for many months". This guidance led me to examine two traditional Chinese foods – qing tuan (青团) and tang tuan (汤团) – not just as objects of cultural study but as vessels carrying my personal history, familial bonds, and evolving identity.

My research is deeply motivated by the following: First, in China, where food is never merely sustenance but a language of memory, ritual, and philosophy, qing tuan and tang tuan embody profound symbolism. These foods are cultural texts that have been read and reinterpreted across generations. Second, my personal connection to these foods is inseparable from my upbringing in Shanghai, where my grandparents raised me. The act of making and sharing qing tuan and tang tuan was never just about eating; it was about storytelling, preserving heritage, and reinforcing bonds. Yet, these foods took on new meanings when I migrated to Auckland, New Zealand. In a Western context, where such traditions are not inherently understood, I found myself straddling two worlds: one that clung to the flavours of home and another that required me to explain, adapt, and sometimes compromise. So, I decided to use autoethnography to reflect on myself. Then, while writing, I realised that my study is not just about food as a cultural artifact but a work in progress, a blend of tradition and transformation.

2. Dissertation Overview

I employ autoethnography as my primary methodology in this dissertation, which distinguishes my research from traditional dissertation structures. Autoethnography merges personal narrative with cultural analysis, allowing me to explore gastronomic experiences through my own lived encounters with food, memory, and identity. Unlike traditional approaches, this method embraces subjectivity, reflexivity, and evocative storytelling to generate knowledge.

This dissertation explores the cultural and symbolic significance of two traditional Chinese glutinous rice-based foods, qing tuan (青团) and tang tuan (汤团), within Shanghai's gastronomic landscape.

The study begins by establishing its foundations in the present chapter, Chapter 1: Introduction, which sets out the research aims and questions while outlining the research approach of autoethnography undertaken within this project. The investigation then grounds itself in Chapter 2: Background, introducing Shanghai before examining the broader context of Chinese food culture, particularly focusing on rice's central role. This chapter highlights qing tuan specifically as a seasonal Qing Ming Festival food and tang tuan as a symbol of reunion, and details the process of making them.

Building upon this cultural foundation, Chapter 3: Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks establishes the study's philosophical underpinnings, namely social constructionism and symbolic interactionism, while incorporating material culture theory to analyse food as an active social agent. These theoretical lenses then inform Chapter 4: Literature Review, which synthesises existing scholarship on food symbolism and gastronomy, focusing on how Chinese culinary traditions encode cultural meanings. The methodological execution appears in Chapter 5: Methodology and Method, where autoethnography is presented as both a research strategy and analytical tool, with symbolic interactionism providing the framework for interpreting food-related interactions and meanings.

The heart of the research emerges in Chapter 6: My Personal Narratives, where four autoethnographic stories bring theory to life. Finally, Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion synthesises these findings, analysing how foods mediate cultural identity and memory while reflecting on broader implications for food studies. The dissertation concludes by considering future research directions and reaffirming gastronomy's value for understanding cultural continuity and change.

3. Research Questions

In my exploration of personal migration and the changing symbolic cultural and familial meanings of qing tuan and tang tuan, my research question asked:

- What are the symbolic cultural and familial meanings of qing tuan and tang tuan in Shanghai, China?

To underpin that question, my secondary question asked:

- How has my duality as a Chinese New Zealander impacted my understanding of the socio-culture of the Chinese, and the Chinese living in New Zealand, in relation to qing tuan and tang tuan?

4. About the Author

你好, my name is Jia Hu. I was born in Shanghai, China, and raised in Shanghai by my grandparents. I was back and living with my parents when I turned 14. Why? That is because my parents were suffering from Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution, sending the students to the countryside to re-educate them. According to Dikötter (2017), this was called "go up the mountains and down to the villages to learn from the great proletarian masses" (p.155). My parents were sent to *Anhui* Province to do farm work; according to my mother, the major food for the students was sweet potatoes. A beautiful picture was described to the students by the government, but the reality was a nightmare: poverty, lack of nutrition, and heavy farm labour caused a large number of students to fall ill (Dikötter, 2017). Because my parents performed well on the farm in *Anhui* Province, they were approved for jobs in the major cities in *Anhui*. Although my parents left behind the heavy farm labour and found better jobs in the city, a bad result that no one could have predicted happened again. As a result, they were forced to stay in *Anhui* to continue working and could not return to Shanghai. However, those Shanghai students who did not perform well on the farm were sent back to Shanghai and returned to their homes. This meant that, after I was born, they had to leave me in Shanghai with my grandparents in order to give me the best educational opportunities, because Beijing and Shanghai are considered the best cities in China. The same thing happened to my elder cousin. My grandmother resigned from her job and stayed home to raise both of us; only my grandfather was working then. In my memory, I recall seeing my parents only twice a year; one was during the Chinese Spring Festival, when they came back from *Anhui*, about 500 kilometres away from Shanghai, and spent around a week visiting the family. Another time was during my summer school holidays; I took the train, spending the whole day getting to *Anhui*, and stayed with my parents for about two months. During

the Chinese Spring Festival, they brought a variety of food to Shanghai, including meat, rice, fruits, and snacks. I would say this was the happiest time in my childhood.

Growing up, I completed tertiary education in Shanghai and enjoyed volunteering at the Shanghai Museum. I made friends with people who shared a common interest in museums and historical relics, and we often travelled together. At that time, I worked with a French gentleman who was the company CEO of Three On The Bund, as his personal assistant; he looked after me and shared his expert food knowledge with me as well. The company is located in the famous Bund area, in a historical building with Michelin Star chef Jean George's restaurants inside. My daily job was to assist him in managing this building and those restaurants. In my 30s, I realised I was at a crossroads and decided that I wanted to continue my studies in a Western country. I am now in a peaceful country, Aotearoa, New Zealand, working as a programme coordinator at the AUT School of Science while studying my Master of Gastronomy at AUT. But unfortunately, I am away from my parents again and on the other side of the earth.

Chapter 2: Background

1. Introducing Shanghai, China

When discussing Shanghai, the growth and impact of Shanghai's foreign concessions cannot be overlooked. The origins of this foreign-controlled enclave can be traced back to the aftermath of the Opium War, which saw the British Empire pry open China's closed-door policy and establish a series of treaty ports and concession areas along the eastern coast (Davis & Gowen, 2000; Hevia, 2003). What began as a modest British settlement in the 1840s grew into a vast network of foreign-controlled zones, including the International Settlement and the French Concession (King, 1993). These concessions allowed foreign powers to exercise a significant degree of control over Chinese territory, collect customs revenue, and shape the economic and social fabric of the city (Wong, 2012). It was also from that time that Shanghai's food culture was strongly influenced by Western society.

Figure 1
Map – Shanghai, China

Note. From "Shanghai," by Baruch Boxer, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, July 18, 2024 (https://www.britannica.com/place/Shanghai).

Shanghai boasts a land area of 6,340 square kilometres and a population of 25 million as of 2018, making it one of the largest metropolitan areas in the world (He et al., 2019). The Yangtze Valley, with its favourable environmental conditions, is believed to have been a crucial centre for the emergence and dispersal of rice cultivation, which subsequently spread to other regions of China and Southeast Asia (Higham & Lu, 1998).

Shanghai, the bustling and dynamic metropolis located on the eastern coast of China is situated at the estuary of the Yangtze River, the longest river in Asia. The city offers a captivating blend of rich history, cutting-edge modernity, and diverse cultural influences. As China's economic, financial, and technological hub, Shanghai has experienced fast growth and transformation over the past decades, solidifying its position as a global city region (Huang, 2006) and its reputation as the "Paris of the East" (Scheen, 2022, p.12). However, it was not until the 19th century that Shanghai began to emerge as a major economic and commercial centre and played a crucial role as a global hub for commerce and logistics (He et al., 2019). Since Shanghai is located at the midpoint of China's north and south coastlines and is a port city, countries have chosen Shanghai as their trading hub in China and established consulates there. The Bund became the starting point of Shanghai's urban development; it is known as the International Architecture Exhibition. It has also become the financial and trade centre of Shanghai and China. It is also known as the Oriental Wall Street (Henriot, 2010). Following the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 and the end of World War I in 1918, the Communist Party of China was founded in Shanghai in 1920. In the 1930s, as the war continued, many Chinese and foreign businesspeople relocated to Shanghai for development, driven by the impact of political trends. At this time, Shanghai's economy was at its peak. It was not until August 1943 that Shanghai's century-long concession history came to an end (Scheen, 2022).

2. Chinese Food and Culture

Food has always been a significant part of Chinese culture, serving to build relationships and strengthen family values (Li & Hsieh, 2004). In traditional Chinese society, the act of sharing a meal is not just a simple act but one that holds profound meaning. It is a means of celebrating important life events, such as weddings, birthday parties, and religious ceremonies (Ma, 2015). As Denton and Kaixuan (1995) point out, the Chinese people's deep connection with food is deeply rooted in their cultural, historical, and astronomical perspectives. Food selection and consumption patterns in China differ markedly from those in the West, with social and symbolic significance often taking precedence over mere nutritional value (Denton & Kaixuan, 1995). Chinese philosophy emphasises the importance of consuming foods that are in season (Si & Ieng, 2020), reflecting a deep appreciation for

the natural cycles that govern the availability and quality of ingredients. The foundation of Chinese philosophy is the concept of *Yin* and *Yang*, the delicate balance of opposing yet complementary forces that govern all aspects of life (Fang, 2012). This principle of harmony extends to the realm of Chinese cuisine, where the consumption of foods that are in season is seen as crucial to maintaining a state of balance within the body. Through the lens of ancient Taoist and traditional Chinese medicine texts, we can understand the importance placed on seasonal eating in Chinese culture. The Taoist classic philosopher *Lao Zi* (老子)[1] emphasises the value of keeping the middle (守中),[2] or maintaining a harmonious state, and it is believed that, by aligning our dietary habits with the natural rhythms of the seasons, we can achieve this ideal balance (Hua, 2023). Similarly, traditional Chinese medicine recognises the profound influence of wood, fire, earth, metal, and water, which are the five elements, on our physical and spiritual well-being (Tai, 2012). Each season is associated with a particular element, and the foods that thrive during that time are thought to resonate with the corresponding energetic properties, holistically nourishing the body and mind (Chen, 2022). Moreover, the concept of harmony between nature and humans is also a recurring theme in Chinese philosophy, and it is embodied in the reverence for seasonal, locally sourced ingredients (Yan et al., 2022). As aptly described in the text *Ji Shen Lu* (稽神錄)[3], the ancient Chinese people advocated integrity and simplicity, especially in the diet, finding beauty and spiritual sustenance in the humble, wild-harvested foods of the mountain forests (Chen, 2022). By aligning Chinese culinary choices with the seasonal cycles, Chinese people not only participate in a centuries-old tradition but also cultivate a deeper connection to the natural world and the rhythms that sustain it. Moreover, Chinese cuisine is renowned for its exquisite flavours, diverse ingredients, and meticulous preparation techniques that have been honed over centuries of cultural evolution. The first written record of Chinese foodways

[1] 老子: The founder of Taoism.

[2] This research considers "守中" as "keep nature". From 王育婧 (2014). 《老子》"守中"新解--读《老子》及《中庸章句》札记. See https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:223496258

[3] 稽神錄: Ji Shen Lu is about ghosts and gods and karma stories. It was written in the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127). See https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/chinese-rare-books/catalog/49-990081049610203941

dates back to the 6th century, with the publication of the book *Qi Min Yao Shu* (齐民要术)[4] by Jia Sixie, which documented the regional differences in ingredients and culinary skills across China (Cheung, 2013). Chinese cuisine is a complex tapestry of regional flavours and traditions shaped by different eras' geographic, climatic, and socio-political factors (Cheung, 2013). One of the hallmarks of Chinese cuisine is the emphasis on maintaining the unique textures and flavours of the ingredients (Cheung, 2020). This is achieved through techniques such as boiling, steaming, and rinsing, which preserve the natural properties of the food while enhancing its overall appeal (Varlamov et al., 2018). Cheung (2013) also mentions that while northern and southern Chinese cuisines may exhibit distinct characteristics, they share a common foundation of culinary knowledge that has been passed down and adapted through internal migration and the introduction of new ingredients and techniques. Rice is typically the staple food for people living in southern China, while food such as buns and steamed bread made of wheat flour are preferred by northern Chinese (Ma, 2015).

3. Rice in China

Rice is the staple food for billions of people around the world. It originated from the wild progenitor species *Oryza*. *O. sativa* (Asian cultivated rice) is one of the two cultivated rice species growing globally (Khush, 1997). Over time, the wild rice species spread across the southern regions, with evidence suggesting that the middle Yangtze region of China was one of the primary centres of rice domestication (Higham & Lu, 1998; Zhao, 1998). The archaeological and archaeobotanical evidence suggests that rice cultivation began around 8500-8000 years BCE (Higham & Lu, 1998; Zhao, 1998). As humans learned to cultivate and selectively breed rice, the crop's yield and adaptability increased, allowing rice farming to expand southward into southern China and Southeast Asia (Higham & Lu, 1998).

The importance of rice has long been recognised. Coclanis (1993) explains that the crop is referred to as "dhanya" (an Indian word), meaning "sustainer of the human race" (p. 1050). The classification of

[4] 齐民要术: Qi Min Yao Shu is about the essential techniques for the welfare of the Chinese people. See https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/chinese-rare-books/catalog/49-990067413880203941

rice can be approached from various perspectives, including botanical, genetic, and agronomic considerations. Botanically, rice can be classified based on factors such as grain shape, size, and colour, as well as plant characteristics such as height, leaf structure, and panicle type (Ahn, 1993). From an agronomic standpoint, rice can be classified based on growth duration, water requirements, and end-use characteristics (Ahn, 1993). One such classification scheme categorises rice into three main types: indica, japonica, and glutinous (Zhu et al., 2018). The quality attributes of rice, including its cooking and eating qualities and its nutritional value, play an important role in determining its market value and consumer acceptance (Lau et al., 2015). For example, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean consumers prefer sticky rice with low amylose and protein content. At the same time, aroma, grain size and shape, and non-sticky properties are essential for consumers in countries with a prevalent Indian culture (Mahmud et al., 2018). According to Atungulu and Pan (2014), China is the world's most extensive rice consumer and producer, and has cultivated rice for thousands of years. China accounts for nearly one-third of global rice production, making it a crucial player in the world's food security.

4. Rice Festivals Around the World

Rice has been celebrated through various cultural festivals that highlight its importance, abundance, and significance in local traditions. These festivals not only showcase the diversity of rice cultivation and consumption but also serve as platforms for preserving and passing on traditional knowledge, festivities, and community bonding. One of the most renowned rice festivals is the Pongal celebration in India, which marks the harvesting of the rice crop and is considered a thanksgiving to the sun, the rain, the soil, and the cattle that contribute to the success of rice cultivation (Ahuja & Ahuja, 2006). The International Rice Festival, held annually in Crowley, Louisiana, United States, is another prominent example of a rice-centric celebration. This festival showcases the importance of rice production in the region, with various agricultural exhibits, cooking competitions, and cultural performances (Bankston & Henry, 2000). The Feria du Riz, a festival held in Arles, France, is a celebration with bullfighting, flamenco dancing, and paella cooking, recognising the local rice

industry as a Spanish import (Wardleworth, 2017). A famous ancient Chinese poem, The Peasants (II) (悯农 (其二)),[5] also praises farmers and rice, and every child can recite it:

The Peasants (II) **悯农（其二）**

(Tang Dynasty) Li Shen（唐）李绅

At noon they hoe up weeds; 锄禾日当午;

Their sweat drips on the soil. 汗滴禾下土。

Who knows the rice that feeds; 谁知盘中餐;

Is the fruit of hard toil. 粒粒皆辛苦。

5. Glutinous Rice

In South China, glutinous rice is called *Nuo Mi* (糯米),[6] and is known as sticky rice or waxy rice in Western countries. The main difference between glutinous rice and other rice is that the starch is mainly amylopectin, reaching about 98%. Therefore, it is stickier after cooking and has a softer texture than ordinary white rice (Wang et al., 2019). According to Liu et al. (2016), test results showed that sticky rice was added to the Beijing Great Wall and some of the ancient Chinese city walls' construction to achieve more durable, and a higher bonding strength mortar. If you have eaten glutinous rice, you will find that glutinous rice is particularly good at staving off hunger. You (2006) states that, when travelling far away or preparing for joining the army, the ancients carried dry food, such as steamed and dried glutinous rice known as *bei* (糒).[7] This was first steamed and then dried to form a cake. *Bei* and *lao* (醪)[8] (alcohol) were also supplied to comfort the army. The *bei* was then put into a cloth bag and hung on the shoulder. When a break was needed during military action, there was no need to raise a fire; the *bei* could be soaked in water and eaten. This tradition was still in use during the Qing Dynasty (You, 2006), a period in Chinese history that lasted from 1636 to 1912.

[5] 悯农 (其二)：*The Peasants (II)* is an ancient poem by Tang Dynasty poet Li Shen.
[6] Nuo Mi (糯米): Glutinous rice or sticky rice.
[7] 糒 (bei): Steamed and then dried glutinous rice, formed as cake.
[8] 醪 (lao): Alcohol with dregs.

Moreover, the symbolic importance of glutinous rice extends beyond its nutritional value, as it is often used in religious and ceremonial contexts to represent the bond between individuals, communities, and the divine (Ma, 2015). One of the most apparent examples of glutinous rice's use in Shanghainese cuisine is the qing tuan (青团)[9], a steamed green ball made from glutinous rice and mugwort leaves, traditionally filled with sweet red bean paste. This delicacy with its eye-catching colour is a beloved treat, often served during the Qing Ming Festival (Tomb-sweeping Day, from April 4th to April 6th), a traditional Chinese holiday celebrating the arrival of spring and honouring ancestors (Ong, 2023). Another notable food that showcases the versatility of glutinous rice is the tang yuan or tang tuan (in the Shanghainese dialect) (汤团),[10] a type of glutinous rice round-shaped dumpling filled with black sesame paste or savoury pork (Li & Hsieh, 2004). The chewy, sticky texture of the glutinous rice dough perfectly complements the rich and flavourful fillings. Chinese people consume tang tuan during the Chinese New Year Festival and the Lantern Festival.

6. Introducing Qing Tuan

Eating qing tuan is a unique and cherished tradition in China, one that has been enjoyed for centuries, dating back to the early Christian era. There was a three-day distinctive practice of abstaining from using fire for cooking in memory of the scholar-official *Jie Zitui*, who made the ultimate sacrifice for his lord (see Appendix A). To be able to eat, people choose this steamed glutinous rice ball as their choice for cold food. This was later recognised as a new festival, the Cold Food Festival, during the Tang and Song Dynasties (Holzman, 1986). Later, because the Qing Ming Festival (Tomb-sweeping Day) fell one day after the Cold Food Festival, people combined the two into one (Aijmer, 2010). This custom of offering qing tuan to ancestors during the Qing Ming Festival originated in *Jiang Nan*, the region on the south bank of the middle and lower Yangtze River (Shanghai is part of *Jiang Nan*).

[9] Qing tuan (青团): Chinese traditional Qing Ming Festival (Tomb-sweeping Day) food. 青 means green colour.
[10] Tang tuan (汤团): Chinese traditional New Year food, consumed during the Lantern Festival.

7. Making Qing Tuan

Making qing tuan is not difficult, but it also depends on the producer's proficiency at every step. Mugwort is traditionally eaten around the Qing Ming Festival. This season's mugwort is fresh and juicy. Other studies have shown that mugwort has antibacterial, antifungal, hepatoprotective, choleretic, and analgesic effects (Ekiert et al., 2020). In the old days, before the Qing Ming Festival arrived, people would go to fields and riversides to pick fresh mugwort. Recently, people have been going to the vegetable market to buy fresh mugwort. Fresh mugwort must be boiled with limewater. According to older generations, this method removes the bitterness, resulting in a greener and more fragrant product. Next, it is rinsed until clean and then mashed into a paste. Finally, this green paste and glutinous rice flour are mixed together and kneaded repeatedly. Once the green colour is evenly incorporated into the original white glutinous rice flour, one would rely on experience and perform the final task of kneading into a big green dough ball and then cutting it into smaller dough portions.

Figure 2
Cutting the mugwort

Photograph by Jia Hu, 2021.

Figure 3
Making the green glutinous rice dough

Photograph by Jia Hu, 2021.

The traditional filling of qing tuan is red bean paste. To make the filling, one must soak the red beans overnight in a pot then add rock sugar together until the red beans are cooked and very soft. Then, the red beans are turned into a red bean paste, oil is added, and the paste is stir-fried. Finally, the paste is wrapped into the mugwort glutinous rice dough. After being processed into mugwort glutinous rice balls and steamed in the steamer, the fragrance of mugwort breaks through the steamer. The children gather around the stove, waiting impatiently, hoping to eat first. When the qing tuan comes out of the steamer, it must still be eaten hungrily, even if it is piping hot and can burn the tongue. The qing tuan

made by my grandfather are fragrant and soft, and they are always full of fillings. When I bite, the sweet and honey-like red bean paste filling will overflow. It is so delicious that one cannot stop eating it.

Figure 4
Qing tuan

Photograph by Jia Hu, 2021.

Figure 5
Qing tuan with red bean filling

Photograph by Jia Hu, 2021.

8. Introducing Tang Tuan

In China, the fifteenth day of the first lunar month of the year is the Lantern Festival. In the lunar calendar, the first month is called *Yuan Yue* (元月).[11] In addition, the ancients called the night *Xiao* (宵),[12] so the fifteenth day in the first lunar month is called the *Yuan Xiao* Festival (元宵节).[13] In Western countries, it is called the Lantern Festival. The fifteenth day of the first lunar month is also the first full-moon night of the year. It is the night when the earth rejuvenates; spring will return. People celebrate this occasion because it is also the last day to celebrate the New Year. According to Chinese tradition, when the bright moon hangs high in the sky on this night, people light up thousands of coloured lanterns to celebrate. They go out to enjoy the moon, light lanterns, set off fireworks, guess lantern riddles, and eat glutinous rice balls, which North Chinese call *yuan xiao* (元宵)[14] – but in South China, they are called *tang yuan* or tang tuan. It is a joyful time for family reunions and celebrates the beginning of the new year. According to Huang (1991), the Lantern Festival originated in the Han Dynasty when lighting lanterns was first observed to honour the gods and celebrate the

[11] Yuan Yue (元月): The first month in the lunar calendar, 月(Yue) means month.
[12] Xiao (宵): Means night in ancient China.
[13] Yuan Xiao Festival (元宵节): The Lantern Festival.
[14] Yuan Xiao (元宵): A white, round-shaped glutinous rice ball, consumed in the Lantern Festival.

harvest. The formation of Lantern Festival customs was a long process, and the festival has evolved and incorporated elements of Taoism and Buddhism over the centuries (see Appendix B).

9. Making the Tang Tuan

Tang tuan is made from glutinous rice flour and fillings, and has a unique taste that I can still recall from my childhood. I watched my grandfather make it many times in my early years, and the various processes were complicated.

The first is the glutinous rice flour. Grandfather usually did not buy ready-made glutinous rice flour in the market but ground it by hand. He washed the glutinous rice first. Then, put the washed glutinous rice in a large basin and soaked it for about two hours. The water would cover the glutinous rice. Then, he took out the grinding stone he used every year and put it on a small square stool. Grandfather sat next to the grinding stone and poured the glutinous rice in the basin into the holes on the top layer of the grinding stone with a spoon. While he held the handle of the stone grinder and turned it clockwise, the glutinous rice became as white as milk and gradually flowed out from the grinding stone and slowly into the gauze pocket under the grinding stone. Soon, he would finish grinding a large basin of glutinous rice, and the gauze pocket under the stone grinder would be fat and bulging. He then would tie the gauze pocket and hang it to drain the water. The next day, my grandfather would take out the large flat basket made of thin bamboo strips at home, cover it with newspapers, use chopsticks to spread the half-dried glutinous rice flour evenly on the flat basket and place it under the winter sun. After a few days, my grandfather collected the dried glutinous rice flour into a plastic bag, ready to make tang tuan.

Figure 6
Grinding stone

Photograph by Jia Hu, 2023.

Figure 7
Tang tuan

Photograph by Jia Hu, 2023.

The second step is to make the filling. The filling of the tang tuan is lard and black sesame mixed with sugar. Grandfather would fry the black sesame seeds and mash them. Then, he would take out a large bowl, add hot water, and melt the lard in the bowl. Next, he would add some glutinous rice flour to the mashed black sesame, add sugar, and finally, mix with the melted lard together. Finally, he would let it rest in the kitchen, and the low temperature in winter would freeze the black sesame filling well. Grandfather rolled the filling into small balls, wrapped them and put them in the kitchen.

The two ingredients for making tang tuan were ready, and grandfather started to make the tang tuan. That day, he took out the glutinous rice flour he had ground before, put it in a basin, added water and mixed it. At first, grandfather's hands would be covered with sticky flour, and after he kneaded it, the glutinous rice flour turned into a dough. Grandfather rolled the dough into long, thin strips and cut it into small balls. He would pick up a ball and flatten it with his hands, then put in a black sesame filling inside, and continue rolling it between his hands. After a while, a tang tuan came out. The round-shaped tang tuan were placed on the flat bamboo basket and were ready to be cooked in the pot.

Chapter 3: Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

My dissertation is structured around the use of theoretical and conceptual frameworks. The theoretical framework establishes the theoretical basis of my research, while the conceptual framework applies these theories to my research topic. Central to my research is an exploration of knowledge and reality. Before beginning my dissertation, I had rarely reflected on these notions. However, as I examine them now, I recognise their significance and how often they are taken for granted in everyday life. The most important thing is that the theories below not only support the theme of my dissertation and give clear explanations but also promote my broader understanding of the world around me.

In this chapter, I use ontology and epistemology to reflect the essence of things' existence and how I use this knowledge to perceive the real world. These two concepts are the fundamentals of the philosophical study of this dissertation. I also use the theories of social construction of reality from Berger and Luckmann (1967), and symbolic interactionism from Mead, (1934/2015) to reflect how qing tuan and tang tuan construct meaning for Chinese. Hence, ontology and epistemology, the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), and symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934/2015) frame my research's metatheories. In thinking and writing about them, I distinguish between theoretical and conceptual frameworks. This approach allows me to bridge theory and practice, and demonstrate their relevance and integration in my work.

1. Theoretical Ontology and Epistemology

1.1 Ontology

The ancient Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle started grappling with questions of existence, reality, and the nature of the universe (Cohen et al., 2016). Hofweber (2005) states that ontology is the philosophical study of the nature of being. At its core, ontology seeks to understand the fundamental structures and categories that make up reality, exploring what it means to be. Bryman (2008) considers the key aspect of ontology to be whether the social world is something external to the actors or whether reality is fundamentally constructed and shaped by our individual or collective experiences. According to Neuman (2014), from the positivist ontological view, there is a single,

knowable reality that would not be impacted by human thoughts. However, Nightingale and Cromby (2002) observe that the pragmatist approach to ontology emphasises the importance of action and change in shaping our understanding of the world. This view posits that the essence of ontology lies not in the pursuit of absolute truth but in the practical implications of our beliefs.

1.2 Epistemology

Epistemology explores questions about the nature of justification (the reasons or evidence that support a belief), truth (the correspondence of a belief with reality), and belief (the mental acceptance of a proposition), and the processes by which individuals come to know and understand the world (Scotland, 2012). Epistemology seeks to answer questions such as: What is knowledge? How is knowledge acquired? What differentiates true knowledge from mere belief or opinion?

Scotland (2012) argues that a researcher's epistemological stance is influenced by their positionality, this includes their background, identity, and experiences. Additionally, Buchanan (2018) and other critical realists point out that while there is an objective reality, it can only be partially understood through human inquiry. Knowledge, therefore, is always tentative and subject to revision. Nevertheless, Bryman (2008) states that there are two epistemological positions: positivism and interpretivism. Interpretivism argues that the social world is different from the natural world. Social phenomena require interpretation, as they are shaped by human experiences and meanings. The interpretivists often favour qualitative methods, such as interviews and ethnography, to understand these subjective realities.

1.3 Considerations of Ontology and Epistemology

Many people think of philosophy as an ivory tower, something far away from daily life. But I think philosophy comes from human nature and is a way of life. As a Master of Gastronomy student, my final dissertation set out to explore the cultural symbolism of qing tuan and tang tuan through personal self-reflection on their meaning to me and my family. Writing a dissertation requires meticulous attention to detail and thoughtfulness, so I faced many challenges. I needed to understand myself and what the world meant to me. By my understanding, ontology (the philosophical study of the nature of

reality) and epistemology (the examination of the origin, nature, and limits of knowledge) are linked in the process of self-reflection, and the two are inseparable. Since epistemology is the study of knowledge, where do we gain knowledge? Bruner (1991) links human and their "knowledge-gaining and knowledge-using capabilities to the culture" of which they and their ancestors "were active members" (p. 3). Ontology asks: What is reality? Bruner (1991) points out that reality is not an objective, fixed entity but is actively constructed through human interaction, cognition, and culture. This view is compatible with Berger and Luckmann's (1967) social construction of reality theory. Berger and Luckmann (1967) argue that reality is socially constructed through shared meanings, language, and institutions. They emphasise the role of social interactions in creating a common sense understanding of the world. Meanwhile, according to Bruner (1991), "narrative is a form not only of representing but of constituting reality" (p. 5). Bruner focuses on narrative as a tool for constructing reality. He argues that humans organise their understanding of the world through stories that interpret and give meaning to experiences.

Qing tuan and tang tuan are traditional Chinese festival foods and have specific symbolic meanings in the traditional culture of Chinese society. However, not everyone who tastes qing tuan and tang tuan knows their historical stories and the meaning behind them. Therefore, in the following paragraphs, I will draw on Berger and Luckmann's (1967) social construction of reality, Mead's (1934/2015) symbolic interactionism, and Woodward's (2007) material culture to further analyse my topic.

2. The Social Construction of Reality

The social construction of reality thesis was developed by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their influential 1967 work. It provides a foundational framework for understanding how knowledge and reality are constructed through social processes. Berger and Luckmann (1967) state that reality is a product of social processes. Human beings construct their understanding of the world through continuous interaction with others. Also, they argue, knowledge is not something individuals possess in isolation; it is shared and distributed within a society. Through interaction and communication, social groups come to agree on what is true or real. This knowledge is passed down and reinforced through social institutions like education, religion, and the media. Berger and Luckmann suggest that

the process of reality construction is divided into three key stages: externalisation, objectivation, and internalisation. This forms a cycle: society is a human product, society is an objective reality, and humans are, in turn, products of that society. Through this ongoing process, the social world both constructs and shapes human experience.

2.1 Conceptualising Social Construction of Reality

According to Berger and Luckmann (1967), externalisation occurs when human beings create and shape their social environment through their actions and interactions. For example, people externalise their ideas and intentions into the world by developing language, customs, or tools. Berger and Luckmann state that language also allows for transmitting socially constructed realities across generations, helping maintain social knowledge continuity.

Reflecting on the qing tuan suggests the following analysis: from ancient times, people used to eat cold food during the Cold Food Festival to commemorate a national hero; later, during the Qing Ming Festival, people prepared the qing tuan to offer to their ancestors; there was always a folklore behind them, passed down from generations. Through such traditional customs, the qing tuan has become a medium for interaction between the living and the ancestors. At the same time, the Qing Ming Festival, the day to sweep tombs and worship ancestors, is also a day for family members to get together again. After worshiping their ancestors, family members would sit together, share qing tuan and various fruits, and discuss family affairs, sharing both happiness and hardships. According to Aijmer (2010), death is believed to propel life, and ancestral energy is transferred to the living through rice. For me, this festival reflects the moral and ethical principles of Chinese people and the evolution of customs and traditions over the centuries. Qing tuan is a traditional snack from the *Jiang Nan* area. Making qing tuan requires experience and skills. Therefore, the production of qing tuan has become a traditional craft in modern society, and its production technology and taste are one of the keys to inheritance. In daily life, the qing tuan also has rich cultural connotations, such as praying for safety and health, worshipping ancestors, etc. These connotations have a special status in the inheritance of the qing tuan.

3. Symbolic lnteractionism

George Herbert Mead developed symbolic interactionism, which suggests that humans act based on the meanings they ascribe to things, people, and events. These meanings are not inherent but are created and modified through social interactions. Thus, society is a dynamic process of ongoing interpretation and negotiation of meanings (Mead, 1934/2015). Based on Mead's symbolic interactionism, Carter and Fuller (2015) have expanded the theory to address more contemporary applications. The application of symbolic interactionism proposes four key aspects:

Micro-Level Focus: This level focuses on face-to-face interactions and how individuals shape society through these everyday encounters. Carter and Fuller (2015) discuss how people's actions are based on the meaning of things to them, that these meanings arise from social interactions, and that these meanings are modified through interpretation.

Importance of Symbols: Symbolic interactionism theory asserts that people communicate through symbols, which carry shared meanings within a culture. These symbols can be words, objects, or behaviours. People interpret these symbols to understand social interactions. Carter and Fuller (2015) underline the importance of symbols' guidance of human behaviour and social processes.

The Self and Identity: The idea here is that individuals develop their identity and sense of self through interactions with others. Carter and Fuller (2015) suggest the self is not a fixed entity but is constantly moulded by social experiences. They discuss how individuals shape their identities through interactions with others and how this process is a continuous and dynamic journey.

Role of Society: From a symbolic interactionist perspective, society is a complex web. Carter and Fuller (2015) emphasise that society is not an external force acting on individuals but rather something that is continuously created and re-created through interaction.

3.1 Conceptualising Symbolic lnteractionism

Reflecting on the theories of Mead (1934/2015) and Carter and Fuller (2015), it is apparent that interaction is a key component; interaction is also an important part of tang tuan. As a traditional festival food, tang tuan is not only served at the Chinese New Year and Lantern Festival but is also

eaten on Chinese wedding days and occasions such as family reunions (Huang, 2020). The round-shaped tang tuan symbolises the new beginning and reunion. During the Chinese New Year Festival, family members who working in different cities are ready to go back home; there is a famous phenomenon in China called *Chun Yun* (春运)[15] (Zhu et al., 2021). Shanghai is always an immigration city, offering competitive job opportunities and a great business environment, attracting people from different regions. On workdays in Shanghai, public transportation is always full, and people always moving at a fast pace. However, as the Chinese New Year approaches, driven by deep-rooted traditional culture, a large number of immigrants return home to reunite with their families. Parents and family members in their hometown have also started preparing the new year's food early, looking forward to reuniting with their children and family members returning from far away. Just like when I was a child, the sight of my grandfather preparing to grind glutinous rice to make tang tuan always filled me with warmth and anticipation, signaling the arrival of Chinese New Year and my parents' return.

Traditional culture, festivals, and festive foods have always been part of Chinese people's daily lives. Zhiyuan (1993) likens traditional Chinese festivals to the glue that unites people, just like the Chinese nation is a complete whole. At this time, tang tuan has also become a way of interacting with people physically and spiritually. The process of making and sharing tang tuan is not just a physical interaction, but it also shared identity among the participants.

4. Material Culture and Actancy

Ian Woodward (2007) explores how objects and material things actively shape social life, identity, and relationships. For example, clothing can indicate social status, group affiliation, or personality. Objects can also act as mediators in social relations, improving interaction and communication between people and reflecting cultural background and social values as well. Woodward (2007) argues that the key point about actancy is that objects can affect human choices, routines, and

[15] Chun Yun (春运): A phenomenon of migration in China return to their hometowns during the Chinese New Year period.

experiences. For example, a family heirloom from past generations may hold emotional and historical significance, while an ordinary spoon may not.

4.1 Conceptualising Material Culture and Actancy

Reflecting on Woodward's (2007) theory of material culture and actancy, in my memory, my grandfather used a grinding stone every year to make tang tuan dough by himself. At the time, not every home had a grinding stone, so our one passed around neighbours for them to borrow. That grinding stone then became a unique tool, bridging communication and improving relationships between neighbours. Our neighbours often share their tang tuan with us as thanks, and they can exchange their skills in making the perfect tang tuan.

Chapter 4: Literature Review

A literature review examines the existing books, academic literature, and scholarly articles on a particular topic to understand the current state of knowledge, identify gaps, and inform future research (Webster & Watson, 2002). According to Booth et al. (2016), to achieve those aims, thematic and chronological approaches are commonly used for structuring a literature review. The thematic approach is based on the researcher analysing the key themes or topics of the academic resources; in contrast, the chronological approach occurs when studies are in a timeline. This method is beneficial for understanding how the field has evolved, as Booth et al. (2016) suggested. However, a literature review may combine these two approaches. According to Booth et al. (2016), researchers focus on the chronological development of events while dealing with the themes in the literature. Cognisant of the above theory, a thematic approach is the best fit for my research. So, my literature review is organised as follows: I first explore the relationship between food, culture and gastronomy, then elucidate the symbolic nature of food, and then understand the symbolic nature of Chinese food. This review establishes the foundational understanding for my later exploration of qing tuan and tang tuan in subsequent chapters.

1. Food, Culture, and Gastronomy

Food is not just a necessity for survival; it is the nourishment that nourishes our bodies, reflects our rich and diverse shared experiences, and is a gateway to understanding the complexities of our global communities (Bosco, 2020). As students of gastronomy, we dig into the complex relationships between food, including how it is prepared and the socio-cultural context in which it is consumed (Richards, 2003). This is the core concept of gastronomy. As a cultural category, food has long been an important marker of identity (Holtzman, 2006), and unique cuisines, dishes, and culinary preferences are symbols specific to different countries and communities. From the pasta of Italy to the sausages of Germany to the croissants of France, each culinary tradition is inextricably linked to the cultural identity of its birthplace and is a tangible expression of the unique history, values, and way of life that has shaped a particular society (Su & Horng, 2012). In an increasingly globalised world, food

has become a powerful tool for crossing geographical boundaries and cultural understanding (Cook & Crang, 1996).

As people now focus on preserving and sharing food and cultural heritage, food has also become a channel for cultural exchange, allowing us individuals to participate in and appreciate the diverse culinary practices around the world (Brulotte & Giovine, 2014). For example, when I travelled to Thailand a few years ago, one of the most famous local trips was to take visitors to the local spice market to buy fresh ingredients and spices and teach them to cook a traditional Thailand dish with the fresh ingredients you just purchased. The dish and the process of making it become an interaction, even though the visitors speak different languages and cultures. Moreover, each culture has its preferred flavour profile, such as India's love of spices (Sharangi & Acharya, 2018) and Japan's focus on the freshness of their sashimi (Sone & Nortvedt, 2009). Coincidentally, we thought that fish and chips was the most popular dish in the United Kingdom, but the fact is that Chinese takeaways and Indian curries have taken its place because of the influence of immigration (Buss, 1977). These are all examples of how food preferences are linked to cultural evolution (Krebs, 2009).

At the same time, culture and religious beliefs also determine what is considered acceptable or taboo. For example, Islam and Judaism prohibit the consumption of pork (Regenstein et al., 2003), while in India, many people avoid eating beef due to Hindu religious beliefs (Staples, 2017). In addition to serving as a cultural identity, food is also a tool for social hierarchy and socio-economic continuity (Bessière, 1998). For instance, olive oil has been one of the economic staples for centuries in Mediterranean countries such as Greece, Spain, France, Portugal and Italy (Uylaşer & Yildiz, 2014). According to Grigg (2001), in the 1950s and 1960s, people in the Mediterranean region obtained oils and fats in their diet mostly from olive oil. In addition, olives have medicinal uses for the gastrointestinal and cardiovascular systems. Olive oil can be used as a cardioprotective agent and to treat constipation and diabetes in traditional medicine (Uylaşer & Yildiz, 2014).

People's culinary preferences and dining experiences can often indicate their social status, and certain ingredients are considered more prestigious than others, or even unique (Furst et al., 1996). For example, in imperial China, sea cucumbers were considered a delicacy reserved for emperors and the

nobility. They were often featured in luxury banquets and imperial feasts (Yang et al., 2015). At present, China's wealthy class still has the habit of eating sea cucumbers and bird's nests (Kiew & Don, 2012), and dishes made with bird's nests and sea cucumbers are also considered the standard for entertaining important guests. There is a similar case in Europe, where luxury ingredients like caviar became symbols of sophistication. Caviar is costly and rare; only the upper class can afford it (Bronzi & Rosenthal, 2014). Serving caviar at events not only displays wealth but also conveys social superiority. Ultimately, food can reflect on culture, while gastronomy acts as a lens, allowing us to further understand the culture, scientific, and artistic significance.

2. The Symbolic Nature of Food

Food represents far more than physical sustenance. It reflects and shapes cultural identity, religious practice, social structures, political power, and personal emotions. For example, the *Hunger Games* trilogy explores how food is used as a tool of control and oppression, with its distribution and scarcity serving as a reflection of the power dynamics within the fictional society (Peksoy, 2014). Fischler (1988), in his work "Food, Self, and Identity", proposes that food plays a symbolic role in how we define ourselves, our cultures, and our relationships with others. Fischler argues that when we eat food, we do more than just absorb nutrients; we incorporate symbolic meanings associated with that food. The act of eating integrates the food's cultural, social, and environmental aspects into the body and, thus, into the self. Fischler calls this the incorporation principle, where food becomes a part of who we are, both physically and symbolically. For example, a vegetarian diet may symbolise health, sustainability, and fashion (Fox & Ward, 2008). A decade ago, lots of vegetarian restaurants appeared in China. Having a bowl of vegetarian noodles after visiting the Buddhist temple became popular among the young generation in China (Klein, 2017). From this phenomenon, it can also be seen that the popularity of vegetarianism represents the manifestation of a certain economic and cultural foundation of a city or region (Klein, 2017). Incorporating food also ties us to social groups. By eating the same foods as others in a community, we symbolically align ourselves with that group (Guptill et al., 2016). In this way, food choices help define social belonging or exclusion (Devine et al., 1999).

Moreover, when people eat together, they engage in a symbolic act that strengthens their social ties, whether within families, communities or religious groups, as the act of eating together fosters communication, solidarity, and trust (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991). For example, Thanksgiving dinners or Chinese New Year feasts possess cultural and religious symbolism, and these social interactions are where relationships are maintained and reinforced (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991).

Scholars such as Mary Douglas (2003) examine how societies create boundaries between what is considered clean (pure) and what is dirty (polluted) and how these boundaries reflect broader social structures and values. What is considered impure or polluted in one culture may be perfectly acceptable in another. For example, some animals or foods may be taboo in some cultures but seen as ordinary in others, like the taboo against pork in Judaism and Islam, but not in Christianity or Hinduism. Douglas (2003) argues that pollution is not inherently tied to something being dirty in a literal sense. Instead, it often symbolises disorder or breaking cultural or social boundaries. For example, it is natural for people to see dirt on the road, but if a restaurant kitchen is not clean, it can symbolise disorder or a violation of social norms.

By contrast, Lupton (1994) analyses the concept of good food and bad food from the perspective of people's childhood experiences. Lupton finds that people often develop definitions of good and bad food in childhood through school teaching and home education. For example, vegetables are a good and nutritious food, and schools often encourage children to eat more. Candy is a bad food that can cause tooth damage, and it is a food that parents prohibit or restrict. Lupton also emphasises that, due to the different family cultures in other countries, there are certain differences in the definition of good and bad food; these differences contribute to children's different values. For example, fast food and greasy, high-fat meals are bad for health by modern health standards, but these foods are often essential to some family gatherings. Lupton points out that eating experiences in childhood play a key role in shaping one's identity. Parents and schools influence children's attitudes towards food through social interaction; bad food and good food also reflect social and cultural norms. Lupton states that food often carries a strong sense of nostalgia, presenting food as memory.

While Lupton (1994) sheds light on how food choices in childhood can be part of an individual's identity, people define themselves by their preferences, dislikes, or moral stances toward food. Nevertheless, Fischler (1988) proposes an "omnivore's paradox" (p. 277). This paradox explains the attraction of new and diverse foods to humans as omnivores and the fear of unfamiliar or potentially dangerous foods that people (omnivores) have. At the same time, the paradox of omnivores also highlights the symbolic nature of food choices, as people balance the desire to explore new tastes with the need to maintain culturally acceptable and safe eating habits. For example, in today's era of globalisation, people can have food from all over the world, but people tend to maintain a strong attachment to the food of their own culture.

3. Exploring the Symbolic Nature of Chinese Food

Daily life is inseparable from food and, in China, according to Farquhar (2002), there has long been a saying that "*shi se xing ye* (食色性也)," meaning "appetite for food and sex is nature" (p. 1). As Ying (2011) states, for thousands of years the Chinese have believed in the idea that "*min yi shi wei tian* (民以食为天)," meaning "the masses regard food as their primary concern" (p. 141). It can be said that the collection, production and consumption of food is an important part of the continuous development of human beings, and it is also the innate condition for the survival and development of every nation. However, Oxfeld (2017) quoted the renowned archaeologist K. C. Chang's famous saying, "Few other cultures are as food-oriented as the Chinese. And this orientation appears to be as ancient as Chinese culture itself" (p. 2). Because of this, food plays a sacred and secular role in Chinese people's daily lives, becoming an indispensable ritual in their lives. It is at the core of the Chinese way of life and an integral part of the Chinese spiritual temperament.

What is a ritual? According to Kelly and Kaplan (1990), ritual refers not only to any particular event but is also "represented as ancient and unchanging" (p.120). Ritual contains a symbolic message about the social and cultural world of the participants (Alexander, 2004). Chinese rituals are mostly related to the seasons, agriculture, harvest, divination, funerals, and healing (Winkelman, 2023), as these all express the close connection between people, their surroundings and their bodies, and rituals

have played an important role in human history. Chinese lives are marked by a series of rituals, such as when a family celebrates the birth of a newborn. This event is called *Man Yue* (满月).[16] When a boy reaches the age of 20 and a girl reaches 15, they will perform a solemn rite of passage – the *Guan Li* (冠礼) [17]or *Ji Li* (笄礼)[18] (Li, 2017). Corresponding ceremonies, such as marriage and death, are also required at the turning points of life. In these activities, the shared awe and common hope brought about by the rituals bring together different individuals through their common concerns, thus forming a great force in society (Rappaport & Rapaport, 1974). More importantly, food is closely related to rituals, and many scholars have shown that food has a prominent place in religious ceremonies (Feeley-Harnik, 1995). For example, *la ba* congee (腊八粥)[19] is offered at *La Ba* Festival (Zhao, 2017), and is related to how Shakyamuni became a Buddha. Every Buddhist temple will make *la ba* congee during the *La Ba* Festival and share it for free with the poorer people and believers.

China is known as the 'state of etiquette' (Li, 2021), and there have been countless etiquettes and customs in food since ancient times. In Chinese culture, food has long gone beyond the physiological needs of hunger to contain complex cultural meanings, rising to a cultural symbolic system (Ma, 2015). For instance, some families will have noodles with gravy when they move to a new place, which represents a flavoured life (Zhang & Ma, 2016). When families in Shanghai move to their new home, they need to give two *ding sheng gao* (定胜糕)[20] as a gift to the neighbours, which means that the future life in the new environment will be sweet and successful (Shen, 2020). As a non-verbal way of information transmission, food condenses people's inner concepts and consciousness and expresses psychological desires and emotions through specific food methods (Hamburg et al., 2014). Since longevity is regarded as the most important blessing in China, it is highly valued (Yü, 1964). Chinese eat noodles on their birthdays and these noodles are called longevity noodles (Zhang & Ma, 2016).

[16] Man Yue (满月): One month after the baby is born.
[17] Guan Li (冠礼): Known as the capping ceremony; it occurs when a Chinese boy reaches 20 years old.
[18] Ji Li (笄礼): The transition of a Chinese girl to adulthood and eligibility for mariage in ancient times.
[19] La ba congee (腊八粥): Also known as Buddha's congee, made from a different variety of ingredients, such as glutinous rice, peanuts, longan, red dates, mushrooms, and lotus seeds.
[20] Ding sheng gao (定胜糕): A glutinous rice cake, pink in colour with red bean paste inside. They are shaped like ancient Chinese currency.

After the death of an elderly person, funeral attendees can receive chocolate and a longevity bowl, and people use that bowl to eat their meals as a symbol of their wish to live a long life (Bellocq, 2012).

Sui Shi (岁时)[21] is a unique expression of time in traditional Chinese society, originating from the Chinese people's understanding of daily life. The Sui Shi is a unique way of separating time created by the Chinese. It is a time system refined according to the rules of natural change, and the 24 solar terms are its representatives (Xiao, 2006). In daily life, memorable moments of *Sui Shi* are the basis of a lot of rituals and folk customs, such as the Spring Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, Qing Ming Festival, etc. Festivals and food are inseparable, and without the presence of food, festivals and rituals lose their joy and interest, which is why a relatively stable binding relationship between food and festivals has formed. For example, there is the association between *chong yang gao* (重阳糕)[22] and chrysanthemum tea for Chinese people living in the *Jiang Nan* area; they are served at the Double Ninth Festival (重阳节)[23] (Zhiyuan, 1993). On that day, the local Chinese Government gives *chong yang gao* with a little red flag on top to the senior citizens to wish them longevity. *Gao* (糕) is a symbol for height (高); on the Double Ninth Festival, the younger generation in the family makes chrysanthemum tea served together with the *chong yang gao* for the grandparents to show care and appreciation. In China, the chrysanthemum symbolises a strong character that has endured the cold. Another example is *Zong Zi* (粽子),[24] which is associated with the Dragon Boat Festival (端午节), where people hang mugwort on doors and windows to ward off evil spirits and dispel diseases. Additionally, they throw *zong zi* and pour realgar wine into the river to worship the patriotic poet and statesman *Qu Yuan* (Fan, 2014). A further example is chhaang (青稞酒),[25] which is consumed during

[21] Sui Shi (岁时): Means season.
[22] Chong yang gao (重阳糕): A steamed assorted rice cake offered in Double Ninth Festival for the senior citizens in the Jiang Nan area, China,
[23] Double Ninth Festival (重阳节): A traditional Chinese festival on the ninth day of the ninth month in the Chinese calendar. Nine was a special number in ancient China.
[24] Zong zi (粽子): A triangle-shaped festival food made with glutenous rice, meat or red bean paste wrapped in bamboo leaves, consumed in Dragon Boat Festival.
[25] Chhaang (青稞酒): A Tibetan alcoholic beverage made from *Hordeum vulgare* var. nudum (a grain crop distributed in the alpine areas at an altitude of 4200-4500 metres).

the Tibetan *Wang Guo* Festival (望果节)[26] when Tibetan people worship the earth and celebrate the sacrifice of the god of the land. It is also a folk custom for Tibetan farmers to celebrate the harvest (Quancheng et al., 1998).

Because every festival food carries emotions, a rich folklore has been formed around festival food (Fieldhouse, 2017). Festive food is not only a special delicacy but also an expression of mood. The sacrifice of the first fruit picked by farmers, the ritual of harvesting, and the banquet after the harvest are very important practices among farmers. The sacrifice, gift and sharing of festival food constitute an essential tradition of Chinese material life (Sterckx, 2011). From the *Sui Shi* to the festival, the Chinese people's time consciousness has experienced a development process from ancient sacred worship to today's daily use; 'time-worship' has gradually become a joint joyful occasion of celebration for the gods and the people.

[26] Wang Guo Festival (望果节): Tibetan people worship the earth and celebrate the sacrifice of the earth god. It is also a folk custom for Tibetan farmers to celebrate the harvest; people sing, dance, drink and race horses during the Wang Guo Festival.

Chapter 5: Methodology and Method

This chapter discusses my research methodology and method. While the methodology refers to the specific tools or techniques used to gather and analyse data, it encompasses the theoretical framework guiding the research; the method is the practical application of that theory in addressing the research topic (Bryman, 2008). My research adopts a constructionist perspective (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), which acknowledges that humans construct their world in order to understand it. As such, my study follows a qualitative paradigm (Bhandari, 2020), aligning with the investigation of subjective experiences. More specifically, I employ a combination of autoethnography as the core methodology alongside symbolic interactionism as a method of analysis. The core concept of symbolic interactionism emphasises how individuals create and interpret meanings through interactions, providing insights into subjective experiences (Carter & Fuller, 2015). Robert Prus (1995) views "social and individual reality as inherently intersubjective" (p. xiii). It evolves as people interact and people approach the world around them in a common way. Prus points out that "intersubjectivity depends upon sharing language and symbols" (p. xiii). He also states that the social sciences cannot rely solely on objectivist methods, whether qualitative or quantitative and not abandon empiricism altogether. According to Carter and Fuller, symbolic interactionism connects personal identity with broader social influences, offering a view of social phenomena that explores how meanings evolve over time through social interactions and captures the fluid nature of human behaviour. Unlike quantitative research, which focuses on collecting and analysing numerical data, my research contrasts with this approach by emphasising the subjective nature of participant experiences, consistent with symbolic interactionism (Carter & Fuller, 2015) and the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).

1. Autoethnographic Methodology

According to Ngunjiri et al. (2010), an autoethnographic methodology uses the researchers' own life experiences to describe, examine, and critique cultural and social phenomena. Adams et al. (2014) state that this approach includes storytelling and self-reflection to offer a unique perspective on the

interplay between self and culture. Stahlke Wall (2016) mentions that the leaders who use autoethnography as a method in the research area are Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner. Ellis (1995) in her book *Final Negotiations: A Story of Love, Loss, and Chronic Illness* uses her own experience of her partner's illness and death to examine personal loss, relationships, and cultural meanings associated with grief and illness. Later, Ellis (2004) presents autoethnography as a method that combines narrative writing with social science research. She explores the possibilities of autoethnographic writing as a form of storytelling and reflection. Bochner (2016) reflects on the evolution of autoethnography and narrative research in the social sciences, discussing how personal stories can contribute to academic knowledge. Also, Ellis and Bochner (2000) state that personal writing is for "understanding [...] some aspect of a life lived in a cultural context" (p. 742). However, Ngunjiri et al. (2010) argue that autoethnography can be more than a methodology; it can be a way of living and understanding the world. Adams et al. (2014) view storytelling as the core to autobiographical ethnography. They advocate for evocative writing that aims to engage readers emotionally. This approach is in stark contrast to the traditional research method that is centred on objective facts. The idea is to create an immersive experience for the reader who can resonate with the narrative and even generate self-reflection at the same time. More recently, Chang and Boyd (2016) have presented various autoethnographies exploring the role of spirituality in higher education settings.

My research uses a personal narrative autoethnographic approach pioneered by Ellis and Bochner (2000). This approach emphasises reflexivity, storytelling, and emotional resonance to foster deeper understanding and connection between individual experience and collective meaning. As noted by Qutoshi (2015), autoethnography works as an "un-locker" and a "revealer" (p.162). This duality has always been a driving force in my research, as I can incorporate my own life experiences into the challenges of academic discourse. Consequently, Muncey (2010) points out, autoethnography emerges "out of the iterative process of doing research, while engaging in the process of living a life" (p. 2). Through this approach, I am able to examine how my past experiences have shaped my perspective and influenced my current research. By delving into these moments, I can gain a deeper

understanding of how my cultural identity influences my research practice and the way I interpret the world around me. In conjunction with this approach, my research is framed by the four tenets of symbolic interactionism outlined by Carter and Fuller (2015). One of the key aspects of symbolic interactionism that has influenced my research is the recognition of the dynamic, interpretive nature of human behaviour. Acknowledging the fluidity of meaning has allowed me to approach my research with an adaptable mindset (Ryan & Mooney, 2018).

2. Symbolic Interactionism as Method

Forte (2010) states that symbolic interactionism emphasises the central role of symbolic communication in shaping human behaviour and social interactions. The foundations of symbolic interactionism can be traced back to the works of scholars such as George Herbert Mead, Herbert Blumer, and Erving Goffman (Dingwall, 2001). Scholars have explored how symbolic interactionism can be applied to various domains, including education, organisations, and identity formation (Forte, 2010). A symbolic interactionist approach proposes that individuals act based on the shared understanding of meaning within their social context rather than solely on external, objective factors (Husin et al., 2021). Consequently, Forte (2010) points out, the literature also highlights the importance of the contextual and dynamic nature of social interactions as individuals continuously redefine and renegotiate the meanings attached to their experiences. The theory of symbolic interactionism, outlined by Carter and Fuller (2015), emphasises the importance of symbols and shared meaning in human interaction. These four principles provide a structure for understanding how individuals create, interpret, and modify meaning through social interaction. These principles are discussed in the following paragraphs.

> The first tenet states, **"Individuals act based on the meanings objects have for them"** (Carter & Fuller, 2015, p. 1).

As I have reflected on this idea, I have come to see that the meanings people attach to objects, like food, foster interaction. This insight connects deeply with Woodward's (2007) concept of actancy, as well as Berger and Luckmann's (1967) social construction of reality theory. These meanings

influence how individuals choose, prepare, and consume food and how they perceive its value and significance. When applied to qing tuan, this principle transforms it from a mere culinary item into an actant. This dynamic force mediates interactions and conveys meaning to those groups and persons who interact with it. Through this lens, qing tuan symbolises behavioural norms, rituals, and traditions. It also highlights the shared identity of those who value qing tuan, including myself. In this way, qing tuan is not just food; it is a medium through which meaning is communicated, relationships are strengthened, and cultural identity is preserved. For me, every ingredient, dish, or culinary tradition carries a unique meaning for different people, influenced by their personal experiences, cultural background, and social context.

> The second tenet states, **"Interaction occurs within a particular social and cultural context in which physical and social objects (persons), as well as situations, must be defined or categorised based on individual meanings"** (Carter & Fuller, 2015, p. 2).

In reflecting on this tenet, I have realised the intricate and evolving relationship between Shanghai culture and my own experiences, particularly in how tang tuan serves as a vessel for social and cultural meaning. Tang tuan is not just a traditional dessert; it is a living, breathing expression of Chinese cultural identity. At the same time, it reveals how food acts as a bridge between the local and the universal. Before embarking on my dissertation, I had viewed tang tuan through a somewhat superficial lens – seeing it as something Shanghainese simply did, a routine part of life, without deeper interrogation. Through this exploration, my research, grounded in this tenet and the other three, adopts a distinctive emic perspective (Harris, 1976). This insider viewpoint enables me to engage deeply with the cultural and personal significance of tang tuan, uncovering how it shapes and is shaped by my lived experiences.

> The third tenet states, **"Meanings emerge from interactions with other individuals and with society"** (Carter & Fuller, 2015, p. 2).

When considering Carter and Fuller's (2015) third tenet within my research, I also recognise that, as in Blumer's (1986) foundational proposition, meaning is not inherent in objects but is instead

constructed through social interaction. This principle is particularly relevant when examining traditional foods such as qing tuan and tang tuan, whose significance extends far beyond their physical form or nutritional value. However, to fully appreciate how meanings emerge and evolve, I turn to Mikhail Bakhtin's (1998) concept of the dual realm of existence, which provides a richer framework for understanding the interplay between tradition and innovation, structure and spontaneity in the cultural significance of these foods. It consists of two interconnected dimensions: the official and carnivalesque realms.

As Bakhtin (1998) describes, the official realm represents the structured, authoritative, and institutionalised aspects of culture. From a gastronomic point of view, the official realm encompasses the traditional practices, rituals, and symbolic meanings tied to food. In contrast, the carnivalesque realm represents spontaneity, creativity, and subversion, where conventional norms and hierarchies are temporarily suspended. It is marked by playfulness, humour, and the inversion of traditional orders, creating opportunities for new meanings and perspectives to emerge (Bakhtin, 1998). In gastronomy, for example, qing tuan, while traditionally associated with ancestral reverence, might be presented in modern contexts as a dessert with unconventional flavours. As such, I believe the use of this framework allows me to appreciate the interaction between New Zealand and China and see the importance of these foods in distinct ways within different societies.

> The fourth tenet states, **"Meanings are continuously created and recreated through interpreting processes during interaction with others"** (Carter & Fuller, 2015, p. 2).

Symbolic interactionism's final tenet highlights how meanings are not fixed but fluid, and it emphasises that knowledge is both a source of security and a catalyst for change. Meaning evolves through the ways individuals and groups engage with one another and their cultural contexts. By recognising the dynamic and socio-temporal nature of meaning, it reminds me that knowledge and meaning are not static but ongoing works. Just as past knowledge consolidates my considerations of qing tuan and tang tuan, my ability to create new interpretations of them is promoted through ongoing interactions and reinterpretations. It is within these communicative interactions that wider changes in

knowledge and understanding are created, allowing for both the preservation of tradition and the embrace of innovation.

3. Integration of Symbolic Interactionism and Autoethnography

As someone who has grown up with and continues to engage with traditional foods like qing tuan and tang tuan, I bring a personal perspective to the research. Autoethnography allows me to reflect on my own experiences, memories, and emotions associated with these foods. Food is deeply tied to emotions, memories, and sensory experiences (Polat & Polat, 2020). The four tenets of symbolic interactionism are a sociological framework that carries layers of meaning that are continuously created and recreated through interactions, as food is a symbolic object and part of the construction of one's identity (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013). As a Master of Gastronomy student, I have chosen symbolic interactionism and autoethnography as my research methods because they provide a combination of theoretical analysis with a personal reflection for exploring the cultural, social, and personal dimensions of food.

4. Research Ethics

This research is conducted as part of my Master of Gastronomy studies and adheres to the ethical standards in academic research. Where personal experiences and reflections are included, they are presented with a commitment to honesty and self-awareness. This research is grounded in my own views, opinions, and experiences, which may differ from those of others. I acknowledge that my interpretations are subjective and shaped by my cultural background, personal history, and individual perspective. I have ensured that my interpretations are grounded in evidence and critical analysis, avoiding bias or misrepresentation. This study does not involve primary research with human participants other than me, so it does not require formal approval from the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee.

Chapter 6: My Personal Narratives

In this chapter, I have selected four pivotal personal experiences that most vividly reflect my relationship with two traditional Chinese festival foods – qing tuan and tang tuan. My narrative engages with Bakhtin's (1998) concept of the dual realm of existence, as these reflections form part of my Master of Gastronomy dissertation's research at the Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand. These four stories span the period from my childhood in China to adulthood and eventual migration to Auckland, New Zealand. Over time, living across Eastern and Western cultural and geographical contexts, my perceptions and my worldview have evolved. Carter and Fuller's (2015) four tenets of symbolic interactionism underpin these personal narratives, which explore the following: consuming qing tuan during the Qing Ming Festival; eating tang tuan during the Lantern Festival; and the transformation of qing tuan and tang tuan into commercialised, frozen foods. I examine how meaning is negotiated, lost, and reinvented across diasporic space and time through these accounts.

1. Qing Tuan at the Qing Ming Festival

Qing Ming Festival always brings back countless memories, just like the first rain in the spring under the traditional Chinese 24 solar terms dampens the earth and awakens the dormant seeds beneath. For me, the Qing Ming Festival is not only a day to worship ancestors or sweep tombs but also a day to remember my grandfather and the qing tuan he made. Even now, many years after my grandfather passed away, and thousands of miles away in New Zealand, the scent of mugwort and the taste of sweet red bean paste still remind me of the house we lived in together and his small kitchen, where I first learned the art of making qing tuan.

My grandmother was born into a wealthy family, and my grandfather was a long-term worker in my grandmother's family. The two of them met and fell in love. However, their relationship was not favoured or allowed due to the traditional Chinese social class. So, my grandmother followed my grandfather and left her family. After that, my grandfather took on all the responsibility of supporting the family, and he began to travel back and forth between Hong Kong and *Guang Zhou*, purchasing

stationery, tobacco and alcohol and doing business with the Kuomintang. The Kuomintang was founded in 1894. The party officially became the ruling party of China in 1928. Later in 1949, following the victory of the Chinese People's War of Liberation, the Kuomintang troops decided to relocate to Taiwan (Wright, 1955). At that time, a Kuomintang officer asked my grandfather if he would like to go to Taiwan with them. Grandfather thought twice but refused. He realised that if he went to Taiwan, he would probably have to reclaim the land, and it was also likely that the living conditions there would be worse than what they had in China, and that my grandmother, who was born into a wealthy family, would have a hard time adapting there. So, my grandparents chose to stay in Shanghai. Due to the Cultural Revolution, I was left in Shanghai to be raised by my grandparents (see Chapter One).

When I was a child, the Qing Ming Festival was a sacred time. The weather around April is always gloomy; the sun is always hidden, and it rains all the time. You can see people burning paper money in front of their houses, muttering words in their mouths during the night. In my memory, the happiest thing about the Qing Ming Festival was that I could eat qing tuan. My grandfather would wake up early to prepare the ingredients for qing tuan. I would sit on a wooden stool by the counter, watching him measure glutinous rice flour, wash the mugwort leaves, and prepare the sweet red bean paste. His hands moved with a precision that came from decades of practice, each motion deliberate and unhurried. "Qing tuan is not just food," Grandfather once told me as he kneaded the dough into a smooth, jade-green ball. "I make them in order to remember your grandmother's parents. The green is for life, the spring, and the things that grow. The round shape is for family, unity, and the circle of life." I was too young to fully understand his words at the time, but I felt their weight. Qing tuan was a connection to the past and a gift to the future. "Like this," he said to me, handing me a small piece of dough to try. My attempts were always clumsy, but he smiled and said, "Good".

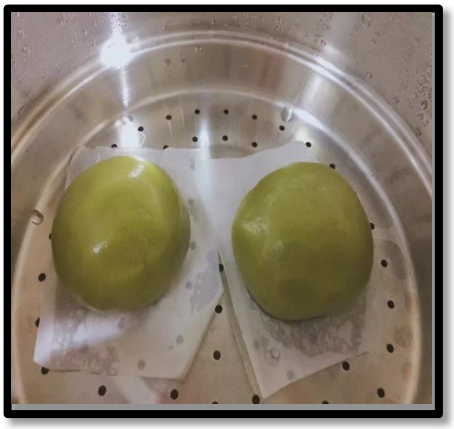
Shortly after my grandfather passed away, my grandmother, having lost her soulmate, began to suffer from Alzheimer's disease. But every time I visited my grandmother, she recognised me immediately and called me by my full name. With my grandfather's passing, a part of me felt like the Qing Ming Festival lost its meaning. The rituals felt hollow without his presence, and the thought of making qing

tuan without him was unbearable. But when I moved to New Zealand, far from the familiar sights and smells of home, I found myself longing for the comfort of those traditions. I stood in my kitchen, staring at a bag of glutinous rice flour; I searched all the Asian grocery stores and supermarkets in Auckland but could not find fresh mugwort. I could only use the barley leaf powder I drank daily as a substitute. I began to prepare the dough, and my mind started remembering every step that my grandfather taught me. I almost heard his voice guiding me: “Wash the mugwort properly first.” I followed his instructions but put the barley leaf powder into the warm water, stirred it well and mixed it into the glutinous rice flour. The dough came together but was not the same vibrant green as his. I felt a pang of frustration. “It is okay; the first time is always the hardest.” I imagined him saying. As I shaped the dough and filled it with red bean paste, maybe because I missed him too much, I felt a mix of emotions: grief, nostalgia, and deep love. The qing tuan I made were far from perfect; some were too thick, others too thin. However, as I tasted the first one, tears filled my eyes. It was not as good as his, and there was no mugwort fragrance, but it was mine. At that moment, I realised that making qing tuan was not just about recreating a dish but about keeping his memory alive. Every year since then, I have made qing tuan during the Qing Ming Festival. Each time, I try to remember more, the way he would steam the qing tuan just until they were tender, the way he would arrange them in a bowl with some fresh mugwort leaves for decoration. Moreover, each time, I feel he is there with me, guiding my hands and reminding me of the lessons he taught me.

Figure 8
My Grandparents

Photograph by Jia Hu, 2014.

Figure 9
The qing tuan I made



Photograph by Jia Hu, 2017.

In New Zealand, the Qing Ming Festival is not widely observed; qing tuan has become my way of staying connected to my roots. It is a bridge between my past and my present, a way to honour my grandparents and the traditions they held dear. When I share qing tuan with people here, sometimes I tell them about my grandfather and its meaning. In doing so, I keep his memory alive, not just for myself but also for others.

2. Tang Tuan for Leaving and Reunion

My grandparents raised me in a bustling neighbourhood in Shanghai. My parents, like so many others, had left to work in another city because of the Cultural Revolution. They returned only once a year for the Spring Festival. For me, Chinese New Year was a time of joy and anticipation, to feel the warmth of their presence, and to soak in the fleeting moments of being a family. However, as much as I looked forward to their arrival, I also dreaded the Lantern Festival because my parents would leave me again on the night of that day. As a child, I loved the Lantern Festival. The streets came alive with colourful lanterns, and the air was filled with laughter and firecrackers. I always felt that behind the excitement was sadness. My grandfather would make tang tuan, rolling the dough into spheres and filling them with sweet black sesame paste or savoury pork mince. He cooked the tang tuan as breakfast for the Lantern Festival; “Give to your parents,” he would say, placing a bowl in front of me. “It’s for good luck and 团圆 (*tuan yuan*)—reunion.” But to me, tang tuan did not mean reunion; it meant leaving. Each bite was a reminder that my parents would soon be gone, that I would once again be left with only their letters about the occasion. I would eat the tang tuan slowly. The round shape was supposed to symbolise wholeness and unity. How could something so perfect represent something so broken? When the night came, I would light the rabbit-shaped lantern and carry it for a walk with my father. After this, they would leave me for the late-night train.

Many years later, when I left Shanghai to start a new life in New Zealand, the meaning of tang tuan began to shift. The first time I returned home for the Spring Festival, I was no longer the child waiting for her parents to come back; I was the one coming home. My parents, now older and greyer, greeted me at the Shanghai Airport with smiles. My cousin drove us home, and I saw a table full of food

awaiting me. “We made these for you,” my mother said, her voice soft with emotion. “For 团圆 (*tuan yuan*).” Mum turned around and turned on the fire, cooking a bowl of tang tuan for me. This time, as I ate the black sesame tang tuan, I felt a different kind of sweetness, not just from the filling but from the joy of being together. The round shape no longer felt like a symbol of separation in my childhood, but it is now a symbol of family reunion, the love and connection that had endured despite the distance. It was from that moment that I fully understood why my grandfather had always emphasised the importance of eating tang tuan. It was not just about the shape or the taste; it was about the hope that no matter how far apart we were, we would always come back together.

I spent quite a long holiday with my parents and the family. But the Lantern Festival also brought another goodbye. My parents drove me to the Shanghai International Airport. The city’s festive lights flickered outside the car window, contrasting with my heart’s heaviness. I hugged them tightly at the airport, not wanting to let go. As I walked through the gates and into the terminal, I had to hold back tears; I felt a profound sense of loss. I had chosen to build a life on the other side of the world, but that came with a cost, a constant tug between two homes, two identities, two halves of my heart.

The flight departed just as the Lantern Festival began. Outside the window, the lights of Shanghai faded into the distance, replaced by the dark. When the flight attendant offered a meal, I was surprised to see a red bean mochi on the tray. It was not tang tuan, but it was close enough, a small, round-shaped treat. It is a reminder of the traditions I had left behind. As I ate the mochi, I thought about my family, the tang tuan they had made for me, and the meaning of 团圆 (*tuan yuan*). Reunion, I realised, was not just about being physically together; it was about carrying the love and memories of home with me, no matter where I went. Like the tang tuan, the mochi was a circle, a symbol of wholeness, continuity, and the unbreakable bonds that connected me to my family and my heritage.

Figure 10
The flight meal – Red bean mochi

Photograph by Jia Hu, 2025.

3. Qing Tuan — A Commercial Food

Living in Auckland, New Zealand, I have a few go-to bakeries where I can buy my preferred bread and pastries. One year, during the Qing Ming Festival time in Auckland, I visited a Chinese bakery to buy some treats. Instead, I was surprised to see qing tuan were displayed in their cabinet. However, they were with different fillings. I was confronted with an array of unfamiliar variations of qing tuan: black sesame and walnut paste, taro fillings, and even savoury options like bamboo shoots with shiitake mushroom fillings, and barbecued pork. At first, I was resistant. In Shanghai, qing tuan was a sacred food, and its preparation and consumption were deeply tied to ancestral worship. The idea of a barbecue pork filling felt almost disrespectful. So, I had to come up with the questions and concerns in my mind. Soon, I saw some people come in and choose the qing tuan they liked. It appears that people are not bothered by the non-traditional fillings, and this bakery's qing tuan business seems to be doing well. After this, I noticed that some other Asian bakeries were also offering qing tuan with different fillings during the Qing Ming Festival. This interaction forced me to reconsider my rigid notions of authenticity, as I noticed that these bakeries were not just catering to nostalgic migrants like me. Many customers, second-generation Asian New Zealanders, food adventurers, and even non-Chinese locals, had no deep cultural connection to qing tuan. For them, it was probably just a seasonal treat, something novel to try. After more thought, I realised that if the bakery owner only sells sweet red bean paste qing tuan, people will get bored. More choice means more revenue. Hence, here, food must adapt. The black sesame and walnut paste version, although unfamiliar, reminded me of the

black sesame and walnut milk that my grandparents and parents always drank in winter. They told me that black sesame is beneficial for maintaining healthy hair, and walnuts provide good nutrition for the brain. Perhaps these adaptations were not betrayals of tradition but creative reinventions, new meanings emerging from new social contexts. This commercial reality reshaped my understanding. If following tradition strictly meant qing tuan would fade into obscurity outside China, then perhaps adaptation was necessary for its survival. I began trying the new versions, first hesitantly, then with genuine enjoyment. The black sesame and walnut filling, rich and nutty, became a personal favourite.

Figure 11
Qing tuan – Bamboo shoots with shiitake mushroom fillings

Photograph by Jia Hu, 2022.

Figure 12
Qing tuan – Black sesame and walnut paste

Photograph by Jia Hu, 2022.

Figure 13
Qing tuan – Taro filling

Photograph by Jia Hu, 2022.

Figure 14
Qing tuan – Barbecued pork filling

Photograph by Jia Hu, 2022.

In 2024, I noticed something new: frozen qing tuan appearing in Asian supermarkets, imported directly from China. This was another departure from tradition; in Shanghai, qing tuan was always freshly made, never frozen. However, in New Zealand, where Chinese migrants may not have enough

time to prepare traditional food or cannot find the ingredients they need, convenience foods thrive. Honestly, I will need a whole day to prepare the ingredients for the qing tuan and spend another half-day cooking them. Given this, I immediately bought a box, steamed them at home, and found them acceptable, not as fragrant as the ones from my childhood, and a bit sweet for me, but still recognisable, and the shape is fancy-looking. I realised that this, too, was part of the evolution of meaning; just as the Chinese bakery owner adapted qing tuan for local tastes, the frozen version catered to the needs of a busy, globalised society.

However, this very realisation puts me into an emotional void. In Auckland, the absence of communal rhythms is most acute during traditional Chinese holidays, where streets in my homeland would buzz with ritual activity and public holidays granted; I am now at the office, busy like a bee. The frozen qing tuan on my desk, with its factory-sealed authenticity, contains the name and shape of heritage but none of its lived warmth. So, I can only chew industrialised versions of tradition after three minutes of using the microwave in the office. I would still like to make my own qing tuan in New Zealand, which is a way to remember my dearest grandparents. If there is one day when I really do not have time to make my own, I would not mind buying one box of frozen qing tuan from the Asian supermarket. Though I know these industrial qing tuan are fundamentally different from those my grandfather and I used to make, even in their distortion, they remain potent mnemonic symbols.

Figure 15
Qing tuan – Sold in Asian supermarkets

Photograph by Jia Hu, 2024.

4. Tang Tuan — From Ritual to Ready Meal

In Shanghai, tang tuan is the soul of the Lantern Festival. Every 15th day of the lunar new year, the city is steeped in the sweet, glutinous aroma. When I was little, living with my grandparents in our old house, at that time every household would start grinding glutinous rice flour with stone mills in the days leading up to the festival. My grandfather always said, “Only water-milled glutinous rice flour is fine enough to make smooth tang tuan.” On the morning of the festival, my family would gather around the big table, each with a role: Grandmother and my mother prepared the fillings: black sesame and pork mince; my father boiled the water; my grandfather shaped the tang tuan and then cooked them. Steam fogged up the kitchen windows as the tang tuan cooked inside the pot. Outside, the temperature dipped below zero, and firecrackers crackled in the distance, but inside, it was warm and full of life. Back then, tang tuan had a fixed meaning; it was a ritual, a family cipher, an annual anticipation hidden in the fragrant black sesame paste that oozed out when you bit through the chewy skin.

After moving to Auckland, New Zealand, tang tuan gradually faded from my life. In those early days abroad, I often felt adrift. I existed in a liminal state of migratory flow, neither fully rooted nor yet capable of reorientation. Which area should I live in? How about the cost of living in this area? Are they going to hire me for this position? What is the salary? For the new immigrant, no single act, from grocery shopping to greeting neighbours, exists outside the complex of cultural translation. The interaction becomes an epistemological negotiation. The tang tuan that had once connected me to familial and cultural certainties now mirrored my own displacement. Tang tuan was not a staple in Western cuisine, nor was it easy to find. Years later, I froze mid-step in a PAK’nSAVE supermarket when I spotted a bag of frozen tang tuan. As I opened the freezer door, a strong cold air rushed over me, strangely reminiscent of the steam that once filled my family’s kitchen in Shanghai when we cooked tang tuan together. It struck me: now, tang tuan does not have to wait for the Lantern Festival. It is available anytime. These days, my freezer always has a bag of frozen tang tuan; it is my quick comfort food after exhausting workdays when I lack the energy to cook or eat out. Though its taste is generic, nowhere near as rich or tender as hand-ground glutinous rice flour or home-toasted black

sesame filling, it has, in other words, become a mass-produced version of what we truly long for. However, it has also turned into my instant remedy for homesickness. During Auckland's COVID lockdowns, the Lantern Festival felt very quiet. In the past, the Auckland Council would organise Lantern Festival celebrations every year. But now, all such events had been cancelled, and the streets were nearly empty. That year, I boiled a pack of frozen tang tuan, opened WeChat, and joined my family in Shanghai for a virtual reunion dinner. The tang tuan in my parents' bowl was hand-rolled and kneaded with care; in mine, store-bought frozen ones from the supermarket. Yet, their smiling faces filled my phone screen, which, for that moment, became the big table in our old home. The physical distance remained, but the sense of participation came back to life through digital interaction.

Now, Auckland supermarkets stock tang tuan with diverse fillings, more options, more choices. Once, I served frozen black sesame tang tuan to Kiwi friends at lunch. When they bit into them, they said: "This is like a molten chocolate lava cake!" Someone asked, "Do Chinese people eat these regularly?" I paused. To them, tang tuan was an "exotic dessert," not a "family ritual." Part of me wanted to correct them ("It symbolises reunion, and my longing for home on the other side of the planet"), but another part enjoyed the novelty of this cultural hybrid. Now, the meaning of tang tuan has transformed from a family cipher into a cross-cultural symbol and reconfigured identities.

Figure 16
Tang tuan – Sold in Auckland supermarkets

Photograph by Jia Hu, 2023.

Figure 17
The variety of the tang tuan in Auckland

Photograph by Jia Hu, 2023.

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion

1. Discussion: My Research Findings

According to Dunton (2021), the primary purpose of the discussion chapter in research is to interpret, contextualise, and critically engage with one's findings in relation to the research questions, theoretical framework, and existing literature. In the following section, I present my findings through four themes: Qing tuan at the Qing Ming Festival; Tang tuan for Leaving and Reunion; Qing tuan—A Commercial Food; and Tang tuan—From Ritual to Ready Meal.

1.1 Discussing Qing Tuan at the Qing Ming Festival

In my childhood, qing tuan was never just food; it was an act of remembrance. My grandfather prepared it with care, the mugwort's earthy green dyeing the glutinous rice flour, the red bean paste smoothed into perfect spheres. Eating it during Qing Ming Festival was a sacred act, a way to honour those who had passed away. The round shape symbolised continuity, and the green colour echoed spring's renewal. Every step, from steaming to offering at gravesites and sharing meals, was a ritual. Here, Carter and Fuller's (2015) first tenet is clear: the meaning of qing tuan was inseparable from its ritual context. My family's actions, my grandfather's precise folding of the dough and the family members' chatting while we ate qing tuan were guided by its role as a bridge between the living and the dead. To alter its form or timing would have felt unthinkable.

When I moved to New Zealand, there were no graves for me to sweep, no collective making of qing tuan. In the first year, I tried to recreate the ritual alone, searching for mugwort in Auckland supermarkets and clumsily shaping the qing tuan in my small kitchen. But it was not the same. For Shanghainese, qing tuan was part of a larger tapestry of customs, including burning incense, cleaning tombstones, and family gatherings. The meaning of qing tuan had always been tied to shared labour. This dislocation forced me to confront a painful truth: rituals rely on context. In isolation, it became a relic, a tradition I could no longer fully access. Over time, I began to reshape qing tuan's meaning. I cannot replicate the ritual in New Zealand; instead, I used it as a private act of remembrance. I steamed the qing tuan on Qing Ming Festival Day, using barley leaf powder to make it. I ate them not

in silence but while telling stories about my grandfather to my friends and colleagues. The food is a little different, and its function shifted from a collective rite to an intimate memorial. This adaptation aligns with Carter and Fuller's (2015) first tenet: the meaning of qing tuan changed because my needs had changed. No longer a participant in a whole ritual, I repurposed it as a tool for personal grief and connection. Its significance became more flexible and more personal, less about strict tradition and more about sustaining memory.

My story supports Hamburg et al.'s (2014) theory that people express psychological desires and emotions through specific food. Qing tuan's taste and smell became conduits for accessing my grandfather's presence. Moreover, contrary to static notions of tradition, qing tuan's meaning proved fluid. My narrative challenges top-down cultural transmission models. Instead, it shows how meaning is personally enacted through my choice to keep cooking, to share stories, and to embrace imperfection.

1.2 Discussing Tang Tuan for Leaving and Reunion

In my early years, tang tuan existed within a specific social context – the annual return and departure of my parents during the Spring Festival. While culturally designated as a symbol of *tuan yuan* (团圆), reunion, my personal interactions with the food occurred primarily during emotionally charged farewells. The situation of my parents' impending departure fundamentally altered the meaning of the food for me. As Lupton (1994) suggests, experiences during childhood often influence people's attitudes towards food. Reflecting on myself, I see that cultural prescriptions (tang tuan as reunion food) conflicted with personal experience (tang tuan as a separation marker). The farewell meals overrode nominal cultural meanings. That is, food objects gain meaning through sentimental value. Now occupying my parents' former role as the returning traveller, the same food took on new significance. The social context had changed; I was no longer the child being left behind, but the adult choosing to return. This role reversal transformed my interpretation of the food's symbolism. Carter and Fuller's (2015) second tenet explains how the same physical object accrued new meaning through changed social interactions and situational contexts. My social roles (from being a left-behind child to

becoming a returning adult) reconfigured the meaning of food. The act of being welcomed home with tang tuan created new emotional associations – power dynamics in food interactions (who prepares, who receives) shape personal meanings.

Furthermore, in viewing tang tuan as a transcultural symbol, the airport farewell scene and subsequent aeroplane meal reveal how tang tuan's meaning continues to evolve in transnational contexts. The appearance of red bean mochi during my flight demonstrates how food meanings extend beyond original cultural boundaries. Carter and Fuller's (2015) framework helps explain how I could find emotional resonance in this similar but different food when the original was unavailable, showing how meaning transfers across related objects in new contexts. Food meanings can transfer to similar objects when cultural contexts shift. Transnational mobility creates hybrid food meanings that bridge cultures. The "good enough" substitute (mochi for tang tuan) maintains the emotional connection. This research supports Carter and Fuller's theory: tang tuan's journey from separation marker to reunion symbol illustrates how culinary meanings are not fixed but emerge through ongoing interactions within specific social and cultural contexts. My study reveals that food studies should more carefully examine relational dynamics in meaning-making. I believe the autoethnographic approach proved particularly valuable for tracking these meaning shifts across time and space. By examining my own lived experience, I was able to trace changes in meaning that cross-cultural studies might overlook, revealing the complex interplay between cultural practices and personal interpretations.

1.3 Discussing Qing Tuan – A Commercial Food

My encounter with the Chinese bakery, described in Chapter 6, highlighted how food professionals mediate between cultural preservation and commercial necessity. Their practical adaptation of qing tuan fillings, such as taro filling and barbecue pork filling, reflected the process of modifying traditional foods to suit new markets. This interaction challenged my Shanghainese-centric view of authenticity, revealing how meanings emerge between traditional carriers (myself) and new products created by cultural intermediaries (bakers). After reflecting on this, I realised that economic survival in migration necessitates culinary innovation. At the same time, authenticity becomes a negotiated

concept rather than a fixed standard. Observing diverse customers, from second-generation Asians to curious Kiwis, I recontextualise qing tuan, highlighting how non-heritage consumers keep foods apart from original cultural meanings (viewing qing tuan as a "novelty" rather than a ritual object). This creates space for new symbolic associations, for example, as Asian fusion or seasonal speciality. Within Bakhtin's (1998) dual realm of existence, the traditional Shanghai qing tuan, with its ritual, provides the original context; the Auckland qing tuan, with its different fillings, is the creation of the diaspora. At the same time, it is the dual realm of existence that creates a new meaning for me in qing tuan by breaking these rules. Later, the appearance of frozen qing tuan in Auckland supermarkets illustrated that industrial food production creates new consumption contexts, specifically convenience versus ritual. At the time, qing tuan generates new meanings, shifting from a sacred ancestral offering to practical instant food.

This study supports Carter and Fuller's (2015) third tenet, which claims that meanings are not inherent but emergent; they are shaped by everyday exchanges between producers, consumers, and food systems. Qing tuan's significance evolved continuously, demonstrating how immigrants created new forms of cultural expression.

1.4 Discussing Tang Tuan – From Ritual to Ready Meal

My autoethnographic narrative reveals how the meaning of tang tuan shifted from a sacred family ritual in Shanghai to a practical comfort food in New Zealand and finally to a cross-cultural dessert shared with Kiwi friends. These transformations demonstrate Carter and Fuller's (2015) fourth tenet, that meanings are co-created and re-created through social context, memory, and interaction. In Shanghai, tang tuan is a collective act, with family members gathering to knead dough, fill tang tuan, and cook them together. The meaning was that tang tuan represented unity, continuity, and cultural belonging. However, in Auckland, New Zealand, where I lacked familial and social structures to maintain this tradition, tang tuan fell out of my life. As a new migrant, survival took priority; finding work, securing housing, and adapting to a foreign environment meant that ritual foods became secondary. The rediscovery of frozen tang tuan in Auckland supermarkets marked a turning point. It is no longer tied to the traditional festival; it has transformed into a functional food sold year-round. It is

a quick meal after a busy day at work, a nostalgic bite. Moreover, when I cooked frozen tang tuan for my Kiwi friends, they compared it to a dessert rather than a cultural symbol. Their interpretation, framing it as a sweet treat like chocolate lava cake, split the food from its ancestral weight and redefined it within a Western culinary dictionary. I must admit, this is the clash of Chinese and Western cultures. Frozen tang tuan may lack the handmade authenticity, but it enables cultural practices in a fast-paced society. Tang tuan's evolution mirrors my own adaptation to life in New Zealand as well. This is known as "the principle of incorporation" (Fischler, 1988, p. 279).

2. Answering My Research Questions

Building upon these discussions, I now directly address my research questions by synthesising key findings from this study.

My research question asked:

- What are the symbolic cultural and familial meanings of qing tuan and tang tuan in Shanghai, China?

My response is as follows:

- In Shanghai, preparing and consuming qing tuan is for remembrance. The process of making qing tuan traditionally requires multiple generations working together, reinforcing family ties and the Confucian value of filial piety. For Shanghainese, the taste and aroma of qing tuan evoke nostalgia for childhood and lost loved ones, making it a reminder of familial history.
- Like qing tuan, making tang tuan is a family activity that reflects family harmony and completeness. In Shanghai, Shanghainese always prefer handmade tang tuan. During the festival, families gather to prepare large batches. For separated families, eating tang tuan during festivals becomes a symbolic act of connection, bridging physical distance and absence.

To underpin the main question, my secondary research question asked:

- How has my duality as a Chinese New Zealander impacted my understanding of the socio-culture of Chinese and the Chinese living in New Zealand in relation to qing tuan and tang tuan?

My response is as follows:

- My experience as both a Shanghainese native and a Chinese migrant in New Zealand has profoundly shaped my understanding of the socio-cultural significance of qing tuan and tang tuan. They are dynamic markers of identity and adaptation. My dual perspective highlights how migration dilutes the inflexibility of the ritual and expands emotional and functional meanings. But also, in migration, that reality fractured: Why maintain these practices when barely a few people around me recognise them? I have no idea. What I understand is that, at the moment, by living between two worlds, I have learned that food, like identity, is never static – it evolves, but never truly disappears.

3. Conclusion

In writing the conclusion, revisiting the philosophical and theoretical foundations that have shaped this research is essential. My understanding of ontology (Scotland, 2012) and epistemology (Buchanan, 2018) has deepened throughout the writing of this dissertation. Recognising that reality is not fixed but socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) has been particularly crucial in studying qing tuan and tang tuan, these two foods that are embedded in cultural meanings, personal narratives, and evolving traditions.

To further contextualise my findings, I draw upon symbolic interactionism (Carter & Fuller, 2015), which illuminates how individuals ascribe meaning to food through interaction. Additionally, the theory of material culture and actancy (Woodward, 2007) also acknowledges the agency of culinary objects, including ingredients, tools, and even qing tuan and tang tuan themselves, in shaping social practices. These theoretical frameworks allow for a multidimensional analysis of how food functions as both a cultural symbol and a material entity.

For an equally significant reconsideration of my methodological choices, refer to Chapter 3:

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks and Chapter 5: Methodology and Method. My use of autoethnography, guided by the four tenets of symbolic interactionism (Carter & Fuller, 2015), enabled a deeply reflexive engagement with my subject matter. Autoethnography not only facilitated an intimate exploration of qing tuan and tang tuan's cultural significance but also revealed to me, as an individual researcher, how my own positionality became central to the data interpretation.

3.1 Reflecting on Ontology and Epistemology

Chapter 3 establishes that ontology concerns the nature of reality; what exists and how we define it (Scotland, 2012) while epistemology examines how knowledge is formed and understood (Buchanan, 2018). In my dissertation, qing tuan and tang tuan are not just traditional Chinese festival foods but vessels of meaning, deeply intertwined with my lived experiences and cultural identity.

For me growing up in China, qing tuan and tang tuan were unquestioned markers of time, family, and tradition. Their presence was a natural part of my world. Yet, when I moved to New Zealand, their absence and my conscious efforts to recreate them forced me to confront the fluidity of my own ontological state. What once felt like a "truth" became a negotiated reality, shaped by displacement, adaptation, and cross-cultural exchange.

Epistemologically, my relationship with these foods has evolved from passive inheritance to active interrogation. In China, knowledge of qing tuan and tang tuan was absorbed through repetition and ritual. In migration, that knowledge became reflexive: Why do these foods matter? How do their meanings shift when detached from their original context? Autoethnography revealed that my understanding of these foods is not fixed but co-constructed through "failed" attempts to source mugwort for qing tuan abroad, and through the surprised reactions of Western friends tasting tang tuan for the first time.

This research has illuminated how theory permeates everyday life. I have come to see how my cultural background frames my "ways of knowing" and how my ontology and epistemology stretch and adapt in new landscapes.

3.2 Reflecting on Symbolic Interactionism, the Social Construction of Reality, Material Culture and Actancy

As I conclude my dissertation, I recognise how these theoretical frameworks, once abstract academic concepts, are not just analytical tools but inseparable lenses. This framework revealed how every interaction involving qing tuan and tang tuan, whether preparing them with my grandfather in Shanghai, China, or explaining their significance to friends from different cultures in New Zealand, was an act of meaning-making. The gestures, the stories, and even the failures became symbolic exchanges. I now see how these interactions teach me that traditions are not static but continually reinterpreted through dialogue, both with people and with the food itself.

Berger and Luckmann's (1967) social construction of reality theory helped me understand that, in China, their reality seemed objective – of course qing tuan is green, and the filling is red bean; of course tang tuan is eaten for reunion. Through research, I grasped how these foods' meanings were never inherent but collectively constructed, first by my family, then by my own choices abroad. Remaking them in New Zealand is not only nostalgia but an active re-creation of my social world.

Woodward's (2007) theory of material culture and actancy and Carter and Fuller's (2015) symbolic interactionism transformed my view of these foods from passive objects to active agents. Qing tuan's aroma and tang tuan's sticky texture demanded specific ingredients and techniques. The unavailability of mugwort and, later, my discovery of some of the Auckland bakeries offered qing tuan with different fillings, and the frozen tang tuan offered in local supermarkets, forced adaptations that, in turn, altered these two foods' meaning. These materials did not just respond to my actions; they enabled and redirected, proving that culture is not just something we think or do but something we negotiate with the physical world.

3.3 Reflecting on Methodology and Method

My research methodology is a fusion of autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and symbolic interactionism (Carter & Fuller, 2015). As Reed-Danahay (2021) suggests, autoethnography is a highly personalised narrative, where the author uses their own experiences to expand the

understanding of a specific subject or culture. Reed-Danahay also explains that the author reflexively employs their experiences in a specific culture to delve deeper into the interaction between the self and others. For me, this meant not only documenting the factual aspects of qing tuan and tang tuan but also confronting the emotional and cultural weight they carry. This challenge initially felt antithetical to my Chinese upbringing, where emotional expression is often subdued (Fei et al., 1992). However, after I immigrated to New Zealand, the encouragement of emotional expression in the Western world made me realise that I could use Bakhtin's (1998) dual realm of existence to reconcile the duality of my identity. Through this reflective process, I realised that the autoethnography research method serves as a bridge between my inner world and the outer world. Moreover, the symbolic interaction theory also played a dual role in my research. Theoretically, it reinforced my understanding of how qing tuan and tang tuan function as cultural symbols. They are vessels for communication, memory, and identity. Methodologically, it guided my inquiry, revealing how my interactions with the Western world carry deeper meanings regarding cross-cultural communication and personal transformation.

3.4 Research Limitations

While autoethnography provides a deeply personal and nuanced exploration of food culture, it also presents several limitations that must be acknowledged in academic research. Below are the key limitations of my study examining tang tuan and qing tuan through an autoethnographic lens:

- Autoethnography relies on personal experience, making the findings highly subjective. My interpretations of tang tuan and qing tuan may not apply universally to other Chinese migrants.
- My study assumes readers understand Chinese culinary traditions (e.g., Qing Ming Festival, tang tuan symbolism). Without this background, some nuances may be lost.
- Unlike quantitative or ethnographic studies, autoethnography does not seek external validation through large datasets or participant cross-checking.

Further research validity could be achieved in the following ways:

- To strengthen the research methodology, autoethnography can be combined with interviews of other Chinese migrants to compare and contrast their personal experiences. For example, approximately 10 to 15 individuals will be interviewed about their memories of food.
- A research diary can be maintained throughout the process to document and question the researcher's personal biases consciously. Furthermore, to ensure interpretive accuracy, participants such as family members will be invited to review the researcher's initial analysis.
- The surveys can be supplemented with autoethnography by posing questions like, "What does qing tuan mean to you?" to test broader relevance.
- To capture the dynamic nature of cultural identity, this study can be revisited after five years to track how meanings evolve. The approach can include interviewing younger migrant members to explore modern adaptations.

3.5 Future Research Directions

While I listed limitations of my research, here are some recommendations for further study:

- How do second-generation immigrants reinterpret traditional foods compared to first-generation immigrants?
- What role does food substitution play in maintaining cultural continuity in diasporas?
- How can food professionals leverage these meaning-making processes in culinary tourism or product development?

4. Closing Reflection

As I bring this journey to a close, I would also like to offer some insights into my personal dissertation experience. When I began this autoethnographic exploration of gastronomy, I expected to document my experiences with food: what I loved, what I struggled with, and how my culinary identity had evolved. But the process of writing this dissertation taught me far more than I anticipated, not just

about research but about myself, academia, and the deeper meanings embedded in food. I initially assumed that autoethnography would be the easiest methodology because it revolved around my own experiences. Yet, I quickly realised that turning the lens inward is more complex than analysing external data. During the writing process, I discovered that true autoethnography is not merely storytelling; it is a rigorous form of self-reflection. When I wrote about my grandfather's cooking, for example, it was not just nostalgia; it was a way to explore the transmission of taste, memory, and identity. Autoethnography taught me that emotion and analysis can coexist. One of my biggest challenges was connecting personal stories to theoretical frameworks. Through this process, I think, fundamental gastronomic research is about grounding abstract concepts in real, sensory experience. Ultimately, this dissertation reinforced what drew me to gastronomy in the first place: food serves as a lens for understanding culture, memory, power, and identity. What started as a personal exploration became a realisation that every meal, every ingredient, every kitchen memory is a text waiting to be read. Autoethnography allowed me to see my own food journey as part of something much larger; it is a dialogue between self and society. This dissertation was more than an academic requirement; it was a transformative process. I entered as a student of gastronomy, but I leave as both a researcher and a subject, more aware of how my own story intersects with broader culinary discourses. If there is one lesson I will carry forward, it is this: The most meaningful scholarship does not just analyse the world, it changes how you see yourself within it.

"Each act of incorporation implies not only a risk but also a chance and a hope" (Fischler, 1988, p. 281).

Thanks for reading!

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Glossary of Chinese Words

Alcohol (醪 (lao))	Alcohol with dregs.
Chhaang (青稞酒)	A Tibetan alcoholic beverage made from *Hordeum vulgare* var. nudum (a grain crop distributed in the alpine areas at an altitude of 4200-4500 metres).
Chong Yang Gao (重阳糕)	A steamed assorted rice cake offered in Double Ninth Festival for the senior citizens in the Jiang Nan area, China.
Chun Yun (春运)	A phenomenon of migration in China return to their hometowns during the Chinese New Year period.
Ding Sheng Gao (定胜糕)	A glutinous rice cake in pink colour with red bean paste inside; they are shaped as ancient Chinese currency.
Double Ninth Festival (重阳节)	A traditional Chinese festival on the ninth day of the ninth month in the Chinese calendar. Nine is the biggest number in ancient China.
Dragon Boat Festival (端午节)	A festival in summer that aims to ward off evil spirits, dispel diseases, and worship the patriotic poet and statesman Qu Yuan. People race dragon boats, apply realgar, drink realgar wine, and eat Zong Zi.
Dragon Head Festival (龙抬头)	On the second day of the second month of the Luna calendar, the dragon king is the god of rain; people celebrate this festival hoping for more rain in the future, which will help farming.
Dragon whiskers noodles (龙须面)	People eat Dragon whiskers noodles at the Dragon Head Festival and look forward to the good weather.
Dried glutinous rice cake (糒 (bei))	Steamed glutinous rice first and then dried to form a cake.
Ji Shen Lu (稽神錄)	Chinese Book (Northern Song Dynasty): writes about ghosts and gods and karma stories.
Keeping the middle (守中)	Keep nature.
Lao Zi (老子)	Lao Zi was born as Li Er; he was the founder of Taoism.
Min Yi Shi Wei Tian (民以食为天)	From 《Records of the Grand Historian》, means the masses regard food as their primacy.
Nuo Mi (糯米)	Glutinous rice.

Qi Min Yao Shu (齐民要术)	Chinese Book (6th century): writes about the essential techniques for the welfare of the people, e.g. Chinese agronomy, sericulture, brewing, cooking, storage, etc.
Qing Tuan (青团)	Chinese traditional Qing Ming Festival (Tomb Sweeping Day) food.
Se Xing Ye (食色性也)	From 《Mengzi: Gaozi I》, means appetite for food and sex is nature.
Sui Shi (岁时)	Season.
Tang Tuan (汤团)	Chinese traditional New Year food, people consume it during the Lantern Festival.
The Peasants (II) (悯农 (其二))	An ancient poem by Tang Dynasty poet Li Shen.
Tuan Yuan (团圆)	Reunion.
Wang Guo Festival (望果节)	Tibetan people worship the earth and celebrate the sacrifice of the earth god. It is also a folk custom for Tibetan farmers to celebrate the harvest; People singing, dancing, drinking and racing horses during the Wang Guo Festival.
Xiao (宵)	Night in ancient China.
Yuan Xiao (元宵)	A white, round-shaped glutinous rice ball, consumed in the Lantern Festival.
Yuan Xiao Festival (元宵节)	The Lantern Festival.
Yuan Yue (元月)	The first month in the lunar calendar.
Zong Zi (粽子)	A triangle-shaped festival food made with glutinous rice, meat or red bean paste wrapped in bamboo leaves, consumed in the Dragon Boat Festival.

Appendix A: Cold Food Festival (寒食节)

The Cold Food Festival, also known as Han Shi (寒食) or Qing Ming Festival, typically falls in early April. According to Aijmer (2010), the Cold Food Festival originated from Chinese folklore; during the Spring and Autumn Period (772 B.C.– 481 B.C.), when the Duke of Jin, Chong'er (重耳) was forced into exile, Jie Zitui followed with Chong'er for 19 years. Chong'er had no food and was hungry, Jie Zitui cut off a piece of flesh from his thigh to feed the hungry Duke. Years later, when the Duke had regained his position, he forgot about Jie Zitui's sacrifice and ordered his execution. Jie Zitui is unwilling to betray his lord, so he takes his mother together and hides in the mountain Mian. When the Duke of Jin realised this, he tried several times to invite Jie Zitui to return to official life from the mountain Mian, but all were refused. Finally, there is no way in the circumstances, only setting the mountain on fire to drive him out, where Jie Zitui and his mother eventually died from their burns. To commemorate Jie Zitui's tragic death, the Duke of Jin declared that no fire could be lit for three days, hence the name Cold Food Festival (Aijmer, 2010).

Over time, the Cold Food Festival has evolved; it merged with the Qing Ming Festival. In traditional Chinese culture, the Cold Food Festival is more than just a festival – it is a metaphor for seasonal agricultural tasks. The folklore accompanying the festival not only praises noble morals but also reflects the Chinese people's exploration of agricultural operations on another level.

Appendix B: Yuan Xiao Festival (元宵节) / Lantern Festival

Several stories exist about the origin of the Lantern Festival, which can be traced back to the Han Dynasty. According to Huang (1991), The Western Han Dynasty Emperor Wu was a devout emperor who believed in gods and held several sacrificial activities every year, including offerings to the gods and prayers for a prosperous year. The grand sacrificial ceremony lit up the whole city. It is said that the most significant ritual was on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month. Later, when Indian Buddhism was introduced to China (67 CE), Emperor Ming of the Eastern Han Dynasty ordered Taoist priests and Buddhist monks to compete for magical powers. The Buddhist monks won by "letting off bright five coloured light to the sky which caused the rain of colourful fire" (p. 169). Gradually, the fifteenth day of the first lunar month became a formal festival. At that time, every household would hang lanterns so people could have fun all night (Huang, 1991). The lanterns also evolved into different styles over time. Every year during the Lantern Festival in Shanghai, a theme is set. For example, 2024 is the Chinese year of the Dragon; the Dragon theme includes unique dragon lanterns and thousands of exquisite lanterns inspired by mythological stories. Eating a bowl of tang tuan during the Lantern Festival expresses people's best wishes for family reunion, happiness and harmony.

Peking University's website publishes some interesting stories about the Chinese Lantern Festival. Readers who are interested can learn about these folk tales at

https://news.pku.edu.cn/xwzh/117c9e6648f346a8b973b3abb696de3a.htm

Note: the website is in the Chinese language.