An Autoethnographic Account of The Symbolic and Cultural Meaning of Xianmian Noodles in Fujian Province, China

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Supervisor

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Abstract

The value of food is not limited to physical nourishment. Food also provides material actancy. That consideration adds to food's symbolic dimensions and considerations. For the Chinese, food and its consumption are sources of profound symbolic meaning reflecting wider themes within Chinese socio-culture. Xianmian noodles are such a food. My research explores the cultural and symbolic meaning of xianmian noodles. That exploration occurs on two levels: my own autoethnographic personal narrative; and considerations of the significance of xianmian noodles within Fuzhou socio-culture. To make those connections and understandings, I applied symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934) as method within this research. From that application, I distilled four significant research themes. Those themes include my realisations that xianmian noodles are key to social interaction and communication in Fuzhou. These interactions not only engaged interpersonal communication, but also people's communication with the Gods and their ancestors. For me, xianmian noodles are a potent reflection of my emotional links to my family, my self-identity, and my cultural belonging. Consequently, my research not only contributes to those understandings, but also how I have come to know and understand the changing world around me.

Acknowledgements

To begin my acknowledgements, I thank my parents. Thank you for your dedication, particularly in difficult times. Thank you for being so caring and kind to me when I was a child. Without your loving guidance I would not be the person I am today, thank you.

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Finally, I want to thank myself for my courage and persistence that broke out of my 'comfort zone' and started and now completed an unknown study path in gastronomy, and my new life experience in Aotearoa New Zealand. In completing my dissertation, I realise that I have changed in so many ways. Those ways include more knowledge, but more importantly I have come understand myself in more meaningful ways by sharing my personal narrative about xianmian noodles.

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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 acknowledgments), 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.

Signed:

Date: 18th June 2021

Glossary of Chinese Words

Below, I summarise all the Chinese characters and words included in this dissertation.

Baozi (包子)	A type of yeast-leavened filled bun.
Bing (饼)	Dough-based Chinese flatbreads, pancakes, and other unleavened baked products.
Bingfu (饼赋)	Book title: *Ode to Bing*.
Changshou mian (长寿面)	Longevity noodles.
Fa (发)	Develop or prosperous.
Fan (饭)	Cooked rice.
Gao (高)	High.
Jiu Tian Xuan Nu (九天玄女)	Taoist Queen Mother's Empress daughter.
Lin'an (临安)	Zhejiang Province Hangzhou city's name during the Song Dynasty.
Mianxian (面线)	Xian (线) literally means thread, while mian (面), means noodles. So xianmian means noodles shaped like threads.
Niu bie (牛瘪)	A name of a special kind of Dong ethnic food derived from the squeezed semi-digested grasses in a cow's stomach.
Qimin yaoshu (齐民要术)	Book title: *Important Arts for the People's Welfare*.
Shuiyin (水引)	An ancient noodle name.
Suomian (索面)	Suo (索), in classical Chinese, means rope. Mian (面) means noodle. Suomian means noodles shaped like ropes.
Taiping (太平)	Peace and safety.
Tangbing (汤饼)	Soups with noodles.
Xiamen (厦门)	A city in the south of Fujian Province.
Xiaoshun (孝顺)	Refers to the behaviour of children who should respect their parents, elders, ancestors, and take care of their parents when they are old.
Xiapu (霞浦)	A county in Ningde City, Fujian Province.

Xiyang (西洋)	A small island in the southeast China in Fujian Province.
Yalang (压浪)	Ya（压） means suppress, lang（浪）means wave. Yalang（压浪）means to suppress waves.
Zi (籽)	A local Fuzhou word meaning a convenience xianmian noodle portion for one person.

CHAPTER 1: Introduction and Background Information

Introducing my Research

Food and culture are an essential part of gastronomic study and enjoyment. Key to that study and enjoyment are the meanings, customs, and rituals of food that can be viewed as significant vectors of local socio-culture, its values, and mores (Kittler et al., 2016). From that perspective food holds a dual socio-cultural role. As Kittler et al. (2016) observed, one role of food is to provide nutrition, while the other is to provide cultural and symbolic meaning. In these ways, food transcends its natural nutritional attributes by reflecting human social life. Qu (2011) pointed out that the study of food symbolism can help us gain insights into the different mysteries hidden in the depths of the human mind and the intrinsic motivation of people's behaviour. In that way food is often 'used' by people to understand and create the world around them. Consequently, food is part of our lived experiences and is reflected in our ontologies and epistemologies.

Xianmian noodles reflect those constructs. Xianmian noodles are a traditional wheat-based noodle commonly found in Fuzhou, Fujian Province, China (Xian & Zhou, 2013). There, xianmian noodles are regarded as a symbolic food that conveys information and expresses people's shared values within ritual ceremonies, social activities and other special occasions (Qu, 2011). In considering those observations, I have come to realise that the exploration of the cultural and symbolic meanings of xianmian noodles provides a valuable and unique insight into Fuzhou regional socio-culture. In this dissertation, I achieve that insight into and exploration of xianmian noodles within two perspectives. The first is my own lived experience of xianmian noodles. I capture that experiential data within my own personal narrative: my autoethnography relating to xianmian noodles. I complement and contrast that perspective within my wider socio-cultural considerations of xianmian noodles in the Fuzhou region and culture. Within that blend of perspectives, my dissertation reflects many of the essential constructs of autoethnography.

Specifically, my experience and personal narratives demonstrate how deeper values, emotional expressions, and ways of being and becoming are not only key to my own lived experiences, but also reflect my life and that of others sharing Fuzhou's collective culture. Consequently, for me and many others, that culture - particularly related to xianmian noodles - reflects and incorporates the importance of our many rituals, customs, and festivals. Those occurrences not only tell the story of xianmian noodles but, in doing so, also incorporate and reflect the processes inherent to personal narrative within autoethnography, inasmuch as I not only share my own narrative, but explicate it within my wider socio-culture. As Adams et al. (2017) proposed, that process reflects an autoethnographer's membership of a wider social group within the relaying of their own individual narrative.

To achieve that balance and understanding, I not only consider how personal narrative informs my research, but also recognise how the four tenets of symbolic interactionism provide a philosophical understanding of knowledge and reality and also a toolbox that constitutes my research method. Notwithstanding those considerations, I have developed the following research questions.

Research Questions

My primary research question asks:

> **What are the cultural and symbolic meanings of xianmian noodles in Fujian Province, China, especially in the Fuzhou region?**

My underpinning questions are:

> **In what ways have xianmian noodles reflected and been part of my life journey?**
>
> **How do my experiences of xianmian noodles compare and contrast with wider notions and understandings of the noodles and with the wider lived experiences of Fuzhou people in Fujian Province, China?**

Rationale for the Research

My rationale for undertaking this dissertation has been underpinned by several factors. Firstly, researching xianmian noodles reflects my personal interest in the cultural significance and evolution of Chinese noodle culture. China has long history of wheat noodle consumption. Noodles are a staple food for people who live in China's northern regions (Anderson, 2011). Noodle consumption in China has come to reflect the varied cultural traditions and customs of China (Zhang & Ma, 2016).

Secondly, as a person who grow up in the Fujian Fuzhou region of China, xianmian noodles are a very familiar food for me. Xianmian noodles carry many good memories of my life, particularly when I was living at home with my parents. Then, xianmian noodles were consumed at important occasions. Consequently, the consumption of xianmian noodles, within both my family and our wider socio-culture in China, emphasises that xianmian noodles are a traditional and meaningful food item in the Fuzhou region. Therefore, when I was considering my dissertation topic, xianmian noodles came to my mind. Before considering xianmian noodles as my research topic, I took my relationship with xianmian noodles for granted. However, in the process of researching and writing my dissertation, I have come to new understandings and realisations about the importance of xianmian noodles, to me and my wider socio-cultural environment in China. Additionally, and as I began my research, I realised that a gap existed in the literature that included the importance of xianmian noodles and their symbolic meaning. Consequently, my dissertation's research contributes toward the filling of that knowledge gap, within my personal narrative and its explication within Fuzhou socio-culture.

Overview of the Dissertation

This section provides an overview of my dissertation's chapter content and flow.

In the present chapter, Chapter 1, I introduce my research and present the historical and social-cultural overview of xianmian noodles in China and Fujian Fuzhou.

Chapter 2 presents my theoretical and conceptual frameworks. My theoretical framework presents the meta theories I used in my dissertation to understand how I view my world and use that knowledge and understanding within my research topic. Adding to that, my conceptual framework structures the application of theories within my research.

Chapter 3 presents my literature review. This chapter includes information about the considerations and relationships between food, culture, and gastronomy; the symbolic nature of food; and then a narrowing of those themes to concentrate upon the symbolic nature of Chinese food, particularly within considerations of Han socio-culture.

In Chapter 4, I discuss my research methodology and its application to my research within my presentation of method.

Chapter 5 presents my research findings. My findings are distilled from my gathering and analysis of my own personal narrative, lived experience and memories of xianmian noodles, particularly when I was growing up in China. My findings are important because they form the basis of the next chapter, Chapter 6, my discussion and conclusion chapter.

Finally, Chapter 6 presents my Discussion and Conclusion Chapter. In Chapter 6 I consider my findings (refer to Chapter 5) and my literature review (refer to Chapter 3) and in doing so identify my dissertation's contribution to research. Additionally, I directly respond to my research questions, identify my research limitations, and note my recommendations for future research, before concluding my dissertation with a short section of reflective writing.

Background Information

To understand and appreciate the cultural and symbolic meanings of xianmian noodles, the final part of this chapter begins by exploring the birthplace of xianmian noodles, the Fujian province, and its capital, Fuzhou city, China. Then, because xianmian noodles are a wheat-based noodle, I explore a brief history of wheat in China. Following on from that, I explore the origin and evolution of noodles to background my later exploration of xianmian noodles. Rounding out this chapter, I discuss the production and consumption of xianmian noodles from the time of the Song Dynasty (960 ~ 1279 AD) until more recent times.

Introducing Fujian Province, Fuzhou City, China

Fujian province is in China's southeastern region. The province has a long coastline and a well-developed maritime transport system (Hong, 2020). Historically, Fujian was the eastern starting point for the Maritime Silk Road (Hong, 2020). Initially, the province was famous for its tea exports (Ellis et al., 2015). In the Mandarin language 'Min' is a word contraction for the Fujian province (Rousseau, 2019). Fuzhou is the capital city of the Fujian province (Fillingham, 2016).

Figure 1: Map of Fujian Province, China.

Source: Tourism Maps (2006) (Reproduced with permission).

Fuzhou city sits at the estuary of the Min River in the north of Fujian province. Archaeological study has revealed that humans have inhabited this area for at least 7,000 years (Zhao, 2010). Since the Song Dynasty (960 ~ 1279 AD), the Han Chinese people have become China's most populous group, and have come to dominate this region (Zhao, 2010).

Today, the Fujian province has a population of 39.41 million people. Of that total, 7.74 million people live in Fuzhou city (Fujian Bureau of Statistics, 2020). The province's long history is matched by its food culture. Key to that food culture are wheat-based noodles.

Wheat in China

Flour, derived from wheat, is the main ingredient for many noodles, including xianmian noodles (Zhao, 2010). The spread of wheat farming laid the foundation for Chinese noodle culture (Zhao et al., 2015). In that way, as Fernández-Armesto and Kulshrestha (2001) stated, wheat, "represents a triumphant adaptation of nature to [suit] our own purposes" (p. 108) and advantage. As McGee(2004) realised, wheat was one of the earliest edible and cultivated crops,

not only in Asia, but also in the Mediterranean region. Consequently, as Standage (2009) proposed, wheat, as a source of calories, provisioned a foundational food for human survival. In those ways, wheat's importance parallels emergent civilisation and the transformation of people from hunter-gatherers to farmers (Standage, 2009).

As a generalisation, hunter-gatherers used seeds that were 'easy finds'. Such 'finds' included einkorn wheat (Standage, 2009). However, as time passed, and populations grew, higher yielding wheats were needed. That need led to the planting of emmer wheat (Standage, 2009). Einkorn and emmer wheat, as McGee (2004) noted, were the first wheat varieties that were 'domesticated' by humans (McGee, 2004). From that early start, and the ability of wheat to adapt to various growing conditions, an abundant and diverse variety of wheats evolved (Fernández-Armesto & Kulshrestha, 2001). Now, wheat production surpasses that of any other cash crop. Wheat demand, and its supply, make wheat one of the world's most contemporarily important staple foods (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2014)

Key to wheat's evolution and human use has been its biological properties. Most modern wheats (excluding soft flour-based wheats) are high in gluten content (Neill et al., 2018). Gluten is a soluble protein in wheat flour that, when mixed with liquid, provides its elasticity (McGee, 2004). The strong and cohesive gluten strands that form in doughs make wheat flour an exceedingly malleable product that provisions aerated items like bread. Similarly, pasta realises the malleable benefits of the gluten in wheat flour (Serventi & Sabban, 2002).

China, Italy, and some Arabian countries claim that noodles are key to their food culture (Fu, 2008). Consequently, the evolution of the noodle is contested. Between China and Italy, that contestation pivots on the Italian explorer Marco Polo's (Civitello, 2011) explorations of Asia. Civitello (2011) proposed that Marco Polo came to know noodles when he visited China. Then, on his return to Europe, he introduced noodles to the European diet. However, food historian (Clifford Wright, 1999) Clifford Wright (1999) suggested that pasta noodles were attributable to the pre-Roman civilisation of the Italian peninsula, the Etruscans. Supporting Wright's (1999) position is the observation that pasta is made from semolina, the purified endosperm of durum wheat, whereas Asian noodles derive from common wheat flour which is the most popular wheat flour in China (Wright, 1999). In the Arab world, the first record of boiled pasta is noted in Jerusalem's Talmud. The Talmud, written in Aramaic in the 5th century AD, notes pasta as "itriyah" (Serventi & Sabban, 2002), dried noodles. Given that many early Arabian traders engaged in long-distance barter and trade, their use of a dried noodle product is unsurprising (Serventi & Sabban, 2002). Notwithstanding those contested narratives, dried noodles and fresh pasta constitute a source of cultural pride within the cuisine of many nations (Rousseau, 2019).

Archaeological evidence suggests that around 4,000 years ago, wheat spread eastward from West Asia and into China, particularly, in an area near the middle and lower reaches of the

Yellow River (Zhao et al., 2015). Prior to that time, (within the Han Dynasty, 202 BC - 220 AD), millet was the staple crop (Zhao et al., 2015). Then, people boiled or steamed millet into a porridge. Millet, and its porridge, were appealing because they had a delicate mouthfeel and a fluffy texture (Deng et al., 2020). Adding to millet's popularity at that time was the consideration that wheat cultivation and consumption were inferior activities (Serventi & Sabban, 2002). Reflecting that and compared with millet, cooked wheat grain was hard, chewy and slightly bitter (Anderson, 1988). Consequently, within Chinese culture it was considered to be a symbol of a plain and simple life (Wang, 2012). Notwithstanding that, and in order to increase food production, the Han Government encouraged farmers to grow wheat (Wang, 2012). In the following few hundred years, wheat production increased, and its cultivation adapted to suit areas in China with low rainfall. Then, in the Tang Dynasty, wheat gradually replaced millet as the leading staple food (Zhao et al., 2015).

However, before wheat replaced millet's popularity in China, some wheaten products like noodles and dumplings were considered to be luxury foods that only the upper class could afford (McGee, 2004). That status reflected flour's scarcity consequent to a limited number of flour mills, and the handmade nature of the dumplings and noodles (Zhao, 2006).

Key to the rise in popularity of wheaten products was technology, namely the flour milling technology that was introduced to China from Central Asia (Serventi & Sabban, 2002). Technology not only improved the taste of the flour, but through mass milling production flour became a democratised product, rather than one associated with the upper class (Wang, 2012). Adding to wheat and flour's popularity, during the Tang Dynasty (618 AD - 907 AD), was the promotion of crop rotation and consequent increased yields (Roach, 2005). The combination of technology and agricultural practice promoted the development and popularity of the early forms of steamed buns, bing (饼), baozi (包子) and dumplings (Zhao, 2006). Over time a pattern of consumption emerged in China that Anderson (2011) noted reflected rice's popularity in southern China, and wheat's popularity in northern China.

Locating Noodles

Noodles have a long history in China. In 2005, a bowl of noodles, estimated to be 4,000 years old (Lü et al., 2014), was unearthed in the Lajia archaeological site of Qinghai Province. However, those noodles were made of millet, not wheat (Albala, 2017). The earliest written record mentioning wheaten food occurred in the period 475 BC - 221 BC. Then, during the Han Dynasty (202BC - 220AD), Suxi authored a text titled Ode to Bing (饼赋; wheat products) (Zhao, 2006). At that time, bing (饼) was a general term referring to all kinds of wheaten food

including bing, steamed buns, wonton, baozi and so on (Sterckx, 2011). That text illustrated various wheat noodles and dumpling wrapper foods by promoting their finer qualities (Serventi & Sabban, 2002). In the book, Suxi vividly depicted a scene of people consuming soups with noodles (tangbing; 汤饼) in the freezing winter weather (Zhao et al., 2015).

In AD 544, Jia Sixie authored a Chinese agricultural treatise titled Qimin yaoshu (齐民要术) (Important Arts for the People's Welfare) (Zhao et al., 2015). As Kushner (2012) noted, that text was the earliest noodle recipe book. In his book, Jia illustrated different shapes of noodles that were cooked in either broth or water. Among them was a noodle called shuiyin (水引). Shuiyin (水引) noodles are the primary form of Chinese long noodle (Zhao, 2006). Each string of shuiyin noodles is kneaded by hand. That process develops the flour's gluten, creating an elastic and somewhat slippery noodle. Shuiyin noodles are white, a little chewy, but have a silky texture when cooked (Zhao, 2006). As McGee (2004) proposed shuiyin noodles have the appearance of silk (McGee, 2004). However, McGee (2004) also advised that within the Qimin yaoshu text, people used extrusion tools to make starch-based noodles from rice, soybean, and mung beans.

From the Song Dynasty (960 - 1279 AD) onward, bing only referenced flatbreads, whereas mian denoted noodles (Zhao, 2006). At that time, noodles become a popular food (Albala, 2017). The techniques used in making hand-made noodles matured during the Yuan Dynasty (1279 - 1368 AD) (Albala, 2017). Additionally, noodle shops in different regions diversified noodle consumption through the combination of locality, eating habits, and noodle shape (Fu, 2008). Most of today's Chinese noodles styles originate from this time (Fu, 2008).

During the Southern Song Dynasty (1127 - 1279 AD), China's capital city Bianliang (汴梁) (Today, Kaifeng city, Henan Province), moved from the north of the country to the south (Xian & Zhou, 2013). There, it was renamed Linan (临安; today, Hangzhou city, Zhejiang Province) (Orell, 2011). That change generated migration, and with it the movement of food and food preferences (Xian & Zhou, 2013). Consequently, the demand for wheat rose in regions that previously preferred rice (Xian & Zhou, 2013). As Albala (2017) noted, south of the Yangtze the high price of wheat motivated farmers to grow it instead of rice. That trend maximised the popular desire for consuming wheaten noodle products. Unsurprisingly, noodles became a

crucial staple food alongside porridge and fan (饭; cooked rice) (Wang, 2015). Then, people from the Central Plains migrated to Fujian (Zhao, 2010). There, they grew wheat during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) Dynasties (Zhao, 2010). An important advantage of growing wheat, for them, was that wheat harvested between spring and summer solved the problem of food shortage between the two seasons of rice harvest (Xian & Zhou, 2013).

Over time, noodles became linked with festivals and customs. In northern China, on the second day of February each year, many people consume dragon beard noodles and pray to the dragon king. Those prayers reflect the wish for rainfall, good weather and crop success for the coming year (Wang, 2012). People began consuming noodles to celebrate their birthdays during the Tang Dynasty (Wang, 2012). Similarly, one month after giving birth to a child, a noodle banquet is held to entertain relatives and friends. On this occasion, the wish is that the noodles signify the child's long life (Wang, 2012). In these ways, historically, and contemporarily, noodles have come to connote symbolic and meaningful importance to Chinese people (Xian & Zhou, 2013).

Introducing Xianmian Noodles

The Production and Cooking of Xianmian Noodles

Xianmian noodles are wheat-based noodles (Zhao, 2010). Their production process is similar to that of ramen noodles inasmuch as both noodles are created within a 'pull and tug' motion. As McGee (2004) explained in referencing ramen noodles:

> hand-pulled noodles – La mian (ramen), for which the maker starts with a thick rope of dough, swings, twists, and stretches it to arms' length, brings the ends together to make the one strand into two—and repeats the stretching and folding as many as eleven times to make up to 4,096 thin noodles. (p. 578)

While ramen noodles are a 'cook and serve' noodle, xianmian noodles are a much thinner dry noodle. The ingredients for xianmian noodles include wheat flour, salt, and oil. Their production requires practice and knowledge because even a small production error may lead to the final product's failure (Lu, 2015). Traditionally, a warm but breezy day is ideal to make xianmian noodles because they need to be dried in natural wind and heat (Goldthread, 2020). Making xianmian noodles by hand takes more than 12 hours. Usually, a noodle maker will get up at midnight to prepare the dough (Goldthread, 2020). Next, the dough is hand rubbed into a thick rope shape, then it is twisted around two bamboo sticks and left to 'rest' for about 2 hours (refer Figure 4) ("Yiwan Xianmian [A Bowl of Xianmian]," 2011). Resting the dough in this way

loosens and softens its gluten structure, making it easier to stretch later (McGee, 2004). Then, the noodles are moved outdoors and stretched by hand until they are as thin as silk threads (Lu, 2015).

Figure 4: Making Xianmian Noodles.

Source: Goldthread (2020).

Success in making xianmian noodles depends on the noodle master's proficiency at every step of their production (Goldthread, 2020). That proficiency is reflected in the expertise of making a 40 cm rope of dough stretch to 190cm. Doing that creates a noodle thickness of between 0.6 to 0.7 mm, and a xianmian noodle expert can draw nearly 1,000 threads of noodle with a diameter of less than half a millimeter and a length of about six metres from just 500g of noodle paste (refer to Figures 5 & 6) (Lu, 2015).

After drying, the noodle maker will portion the noodles and tie the portions with red silk threads (Zhao, 2010). Each portion is called "Zi (籽)" in the Fuzhou dialect. One "Zi" provides a convenient noodle portion for one person. The noodle portions are tied with red string signifying a tribute to the ancestors because red is an auspicious colour for Chinese people (refer to Figures 7 & 8) (Xian & Zhou, 2013).

Figure 5: A Man Pulling the Xianmian Noodles.

Source: Lu (2015).

Figure 6: A Woman Drying Xianmian Noodles.

Source:Yujian Fuzhou (2017).

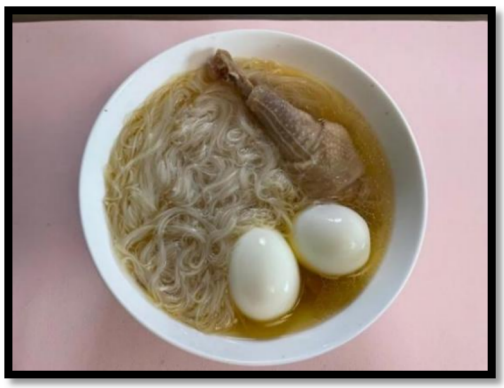
Figure 7: Packing Xianmian Noodles.

Source: Yujian Fuzhou (2017).

Figure 8: Portions of Xianmian Noodles.

Source: Author's own photograph.

Figure 9: Fuzhou Style Xianmian Noodles.



Source: Author's own photograph (2021).

Cooking xianmian noodles is easy, convenient, and quick. Usually, the noodles are boiled in water for one or two minutes, then drained and added to a clear meat broth (Pan, 2013). The broth flavours include chicken, mutton, duck, or any other savoury soup base. A chicken broth (soup) and dried mushroom with xianmian noodles is one of the most traditional yet contemporary Fuzhou dishes (refer to Figure 9) (Pan, 2013). Adding a teaspoon of locally brewed red rice wine to this dish enhances its flavour and authenticity (Pan, 2013).

As a wheat noodle, xianmian noodles have a neutral flavour. That neutrality provides a perfect base for the other ingredients including duck (McGee, 2004). Additionally, as Durack (1998) noted, wheat-based noodles like xianmian "work with all sorts of textures and flavours, [by] soaking up juices like a sponge" (p. 19). Those characteristics underpin xianmian's contemporary popularity.

Consuming Xianmian Noodles

Since the Song Dynasty (circa 1200 BC), xianmian noodles have been an indispensable food in Fuzhou (Pan, 2013). There, besides providing for physiological needs, xianmian noodles also play an essential role in various rituals. In these ways, xianmian noodles convey symbolic meaning. As Xian and Zhou (2013) observed, the symbolic meanings of xianmian noodles are reflected within worship rituals, celebrations, expressions of gratitude, and the strengthening of relations between people in their everyday lives.

Additionally, local folklore in Fuzhou maintains that xianmian noodles were invented by the

Taoist queen mother empress's daughter Jiu Tian Xuan Nu (九天玄女) (refer to Figure 10). To celebrate her mother's birthday, Jiu Tian Xuan Nu created a noodle that was as thin as silk and as long as hair (Lu, 2015). Consequently, traditional xianmian master noodle makers often enshrine a statue of Jiu Tian Xuan Nu in their homes, believing that she is the xianmian noodle-maker's spiritual ancestor (Lu, 2015).

Figure 10: Taoist Queen Mother Empress's

Daughter Jiu Tian Xuan Nu (九天玄女).

Source: Baifodian (n.d.).

That narrative not only provides xianmian noodles with symbolic meaning, but also recognises the importance of the myth of xiaoshun (孝顺)[1] within Fuzhou culture. Xiaoshun (孝顺) provides the core of Confucian family ethics. Consequently, it provides one of the most basic and defining values of importance to Chinese people (Rosemont & Ames, 2008). In that way, the myth's 'message' and adherence to it by Chinese people reflects Jung's (1969/2014) emphasis on the importance of myths, and how myths are shared within a collective unconsciousness. Within xiaoshun, Jung's position is reflected in the care that younger Chinese people give to their parents today. That care is almost an automatic response for young Chinese people. In this way, the conscious and unconscious influence of myth in the lives of many Chinese people not only reinforces notions about the collective unconscious but also the social construction of reality thesis (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and Mead's (1934) considerations of symbolic interactionism, through myth's reliance on interaction.

[1] Xiaoshun 孝顺 (pronounced "sheeow") means that the behavior of children should respect their parents, elders in the family, and ancestors, and take care of them when their parents are old (Rosemont & Ames, 2008).

CHAPTER 2: Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

This chapter presents the meta-theories underpinning my research. Together, and individually, they provide the philosophical basis and theoretical guidance for my dissertation. I begin the presentation and understanding of these concepts with ontology and epistemology. These notions are fundamental to my understanding and appreciation of reality and knowledge (Scotland, 2012). Specifically, ontology and epistemology are important because they reflect the ways in which I perceive my world within considerations of knowledge and realty. Key to understanding those considerations is my use of the social construction of reality thesis (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934) and Woodward's (2007) theory of material culture and actancy within my dissertation. It is the combination of these theories that not only supports my understanding and interpretation of my topic but also facilitates my own wider understanding and appreciation of the world around me.

To understand how I view my world and use that knowledge and understanding within my dissertation, I present two frameworks. My first framework is my theoretical framework. My theoretical framework explores the theoretical positioning of my meta-theories underpinning my dissertation. Then, my second framework, my conceptual framework, applies those theories to my research topic. Within my two frameworks I emphasise the difference between a theoretical and a conceptual framework, which is that the former relates its theory, while the latter denotes the theory's application within my dissertation.

Theoretical Framework: Ontology and Epistemology

Ontology

As Laverty (2003) observed, ontology relates to our understanding and appreciation of reality, existence and being. Similarly, Bryman (2008) viewed ontology as "a theory of the nature of social entities [inquiring if] the social world [is] regarded as something external to social actors, or as something that people are in the process of fashion[ing]" (p. 696). In other words, ontology asks, "what is real […] what is the human being [and focuses on finding out] what is" (Scotland, 2012, p. 9). Nightingale and Cromby (2002) discussed two dominant positions reflecting reality: realism and relativism. Within ontological realism, the world is objective, static, and measurable. Consequently, relativism suggests that there are multiple expressions of reality and that they are dynamic. In these ways, an ontologically relativist reality is based within context and subjective experience (Nightingale & Cromby, 2002). However, a realist, as Neuman (2014) observed, considers that there is only one constant reality. That reality is not influenced by human thought or perception. Consequently, we can understand ontology in

dynamic ways as something that is not static, but dynamic and critical to our understandings of the nature of reality, existence, and knowledge.

Epistemology

Epistemology examines the nature of knowledge and how we can acquire it (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Laverty (2003) considered that epistemology reflected "the nature of the relationship between the knower and what can be known" (p. 26). Additionally, as Buchanan (2018), like Guba and Lincoln (1994), realised, epistemology reflects how we know what knowledge is, and how we come to acquire that knowledge. Consequently, as Bryman (2008) pointed out epistemology reflects "what is (or should be) regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline" (p. 27).

Considerations of Ontology and Epistemology

Within my understandings of ontology (the nature of existence and what constitutes reality) (Scotland, 2012) and epistemology (how knowledge is created and how do we come to know it) (Buchanan, 2018) has emerged my wider appreciation that our almost unthinking 'use' of ontology and epistemology guide our everyday thoughts and actions. Therefore, I suggest that a symbiotic relationship exists between ontology and epistemology. I am not alone in that consideration. As Neill (2018) proposed, realising ontology and epistemology exist in symbiotic ways not only adds to their 'use value' but also adds to a researcher's understanding of each domain. Consequently, and for example, their symbiosis is inextricably linked when we consider 'what is real'? To understand reality, we need to have some knowledge of what reality 'is'. A similar argument exists when we consider knowledge, cognisant of reality. To understand knowledge, we must have an understanding of the reality of knowledge. Consequently, for me, viewing ontology and epistemology symbiotically not only aids my application of those domains in my research, but also facilitates my wider appreciation of how philosophy impacts research work in the relationship between ontology and epistemology. Extending those considerations, my next section of writing explores the social construction of reality thesis (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), Mead's (1934) symbolic interactionism, and Woodward's (2007) material culture and actancy theories as meta-theories within which reality and knowledge are realised and presented within my dissertation.

The Social Construction of Reality Thesis

Berger and Luckmann's (1966) social construction of reality thesis proposes that socio-cultures are subjective realities, and that human socialisation is predicated within negotiation, interpretation, and ongoing interaction. In these ways, the social construction of reality thesis

recognises our subjective experiences. Reality and knowledge within our lived experiences are dynamic and ongoing processes that are constructed and reconstructed over time (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Within that consideration Berger and Luckmann (1966) considered that language is the most powerful system through which we construct, within interactions, our everyday realities. Consequently, we need to consider language, within wider notions including not only verbal communications but also written language, gestures, facial expressions and other signs and symbols, as ways in which we come to understand and make sense of our world. Thus, an easy way to encapsulate Berger and Luckmann's (1966) social construction of reality thesis is to suggest that humankind creates its world in order to understand it.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological theory that explains how socio-culture is constructed and reinforced within "face to face, repeated, [and] meaningful interaction[s]" between people (Carter & Fuller, 2016, p. 932). Mead's (1934) theory of symbolic interactionism highlights the interactive relationship between people and emphasises human free will and agency, particularly how structure impacts free will. That, as Carter and Fuller (2016) suggested, reflects how. through interaction with others, we share, understand, and appreciate their experience, attitudes, beliefs, and emotions in shared and confirming ways. For Carter and Fuller (2016), interaction denotes the application of symbolic interactionism within everyday life, because:

> (1) individuals act based on the meanings objects have for them, (2) interaction occurs within a particular social and cultural context in which physical and social objects (persons), as well as situations, must be defined or categorized based on individual meanings, (3) meanings emerge from interactions with other individuals and with society and (4) meanings are continuously created and recreated through interpreting processes during interaction with others. (p. 932)

Consequently, as Carter and Fuller (2016) proposed, people are constantly engaged "in mindful action where they manipulate symbols and negotiate the meaning of situations" in shared interactive ways (p. 933).

Material Culture and Actancy

Woodward's (2007) material culture theory reflects "the mutual relations between people and objects" (p. 14). Material culture theory reveals how people use material items in ways that bestow them with emotional values and meanings (Woodward, 2007). In other words, the 'objects' and their meanings cannot be separated from the people who create and use them. Consequently, as Woodward (2007) proposed, the attribution of meaning and emotion to an

object “dissolves the boundary[ies] between people who ‘act’ and objects which are seen as inanimate” (p. 21). Actant[cy] is key to that dissolution. For Woodward (2007), actancy reflects the act of attributing values and emotions to inanimate objects, thus giving those objects what Appadurai (1986) would call “biographies” (p. 34). However, within considerations of actancy, Woodward (2007) emphasised that an object’s actant meaning needs to be considered within its broader socio-cultural context.

Conceptual Framework

Application of Ontology and Epistemology

Within considerations of ontology and epistemology, xianmian noodles reflect the transfer of symbolic knowledge and reality, particularly within the shared history and contemporary meanings of these noodles. Reflecting that, in celebrations, xianmian noodles are often served with two shell-free hard-boiled duck eggs (Xian & Zhou, 2013). In that dish, the duck egg signifies peace and safety, which is literally noted in the dish’s name Taiping (太平) (Zhao, 2010). In the Fuzhou dialect, a duck egg, ‘yalang (压浪)’, implies a calm wave (Lai, 2012). Because Fuzhou is located near the sea and river, many people have relied on fishing and marine transportation for their livelihoods. Reflecting that, a bowl of xianmian noodles conveys a family’s hope of travel without storms and a safe return home (Lai, 2012). Consequently, within the combination of those symbolic meanings conveyed through food, its sharing and interaction, wishes of longevity, peace and safety throughout life are conveyed and made real, albeit in symbolic ways. Consequently, knowledge and reality are constructed and reinforced within dishes including xianmian noodles. That elevates xianmian noodles to more than ‘just’ a food item. Xianmian noodles in Fujian socio-culture are a metaphor of longevity and safety (Chen, 2020). For example, for Fuzhou locals, a person celebrating their birthday eats xianmian noodles in the hope of a long and peaceful life (Lu, 2015). Similarly, family members eat xianmian noodles on the first day of the new year to signify their desire for safety and security in the year ahead (Lai, 2012). At weddings, eating xianmian promotes the wish for the newly married couple to have a long and happy marriage; and, within families, xianmian noodles are often gifted to celebrate a new-born child (Xian & Zhou, 2013; Zhao, 2010). In these ways,

xianmian noodles reinforce knowledge and the symbolic nature and realities of being and becoming for many people in Fujian Province, China.

Application of the Social Construction of Reality Thesis

The essence of Berger and Luckmann's (1966) social construction of reality thesis is that humankind creates its world in order to understand it. Additionally, that creation is reinforced through interaction. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) suggested, language is a key component of that interaction.

Reflecting how xianmian noodles have constructed meaning for people, Xian and Zhou (2013) gave the example of how xianmian noodles are used as offerings in ancestor worship. Used in that way, xianmian noodles mediate the relationship and interaction between the living and the deceased. Consequently, via the noodles' use in that way, Fuzhou people construct a way in which they mediate their relationship with their ancestors. In addition to serving as a spiritual tribute, xianmian noodles also promote interpersonal interactions. As Zhao (2010) observed, in Fuzhou, whenever a guest visits a family, the host will serve a bowl of noodle soup made with xianmian noodles and two hard-boiled duck eggs. That dish not only signifies the host's hospitality, but also evokes a blessing for the guest's safe and good life. According to tradition, the guest should leave one egg in their bowl when they have finished eating the dish. That egg connotes good luck for the host (Zhao, 2010). In these ways, the dish is highly interactive in both participatory and symbolic ways.

Application of Symbolic Interactionism

As Mead's (1934) considerations of symbolic interactionism reveal, meaning is made, reinforced, and transferred within interactions between individuals and groups. While I have noted the symbolic meaning of xianmian noodles in my section of writing above, what can also be realised from those examples is that interaction is a key component when we consider xianmian noodles in Fuzhou culture. That relationship also reveals the conceptual 'cross-over' between Mead's (1934) symbolic interactionism, and Berger and Luckmann's (1966) social construction of reality thesis. That crossover is defined within each theory's emphasis on interaction and is revealed within the symbolic and physical interactions xianmian noodles

promote within occasions including birthday celebrations, guest visits, and wedding ceremonies.

Application of Material Culture and Actancy

According to Woodward (2007), the concepts of material culture and actancy reflect how and why people give meaning to objects. That meaning, when shared between individuals and groups, adds another layer of understanding about how people interact and, within those interactions, come to make sense of their world. As a material item, xianmian noodles have actancy. That actancy is reflected within families, for example, each time xianmian noodles are used to celebrate a birthday, or the birth of a child. Additionally, actancy reflects the narrative that people build and share in consuming the noodles. Consequently, actancy, when applied to xianmian noodles, can be considered on multiple levels. Notwithstanding this, however, these levels reinforce how people from Fujian Province, China, use xianmian noodles not only for nutritional sustenance, but also as a way of creating and understanding their wider world.

CHAPTER 3: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter presents my literature review. The purpose of a literature review is, as Efron and Ravid (2018) stated, the presentation of a comprehensive understanding and evaluation of published scholarly literature on a specific topic. As Efron and Ravid (2018) noted:

> in reviewing the literature, the writer should present a comprehensive, critical, and accurate understanding of the current state of knowledge; compare different research studies and theories; reveal gaps in current literature; and indicate what needs to be done to advance what is already known about the topic of choice. (p. 2)

Additionally, a literature review is often considered in terms of a thematic and/or a chronological approach (Booth et al., 2016). A thematic approach, according to Booth et al. (2016), is evidenced when the author of the review analyses the current scholarly literature based on its themes or concepts. Complementing, yet contrasting this approach, are chronological literature reviews. A chronological literature review emphasises how ideas, topics and themes have developed over time (Booth et al., 2016). Yet, a synthesis of chronology and thematic approaches in literature reviews are common.

Cognisant of these points, my work adopts a thematic approach. My approach is guided by Jones' (2007b) suggestion that food is a metaphor of human communication and interaction. Consequently, my thematic approach emphasises and explores the symbolic meanings of food, in order to understand how food contributes to our wider ontologies and epistemologies. I distill these realities and present them within the chapters constituting my findings, discussion and conclusion. However, my literature review is structured in the following way. Firstly, I explore notions of food, culture, and gastronomy, and their relationships. Secondly, I illuminate the symbolic nature of food, before narrowing that focus to explore the symbolic nature of Chinese food. Those domains provide the base knowledge for my exploration of xianmian noodles in my later chapters.

Exploring Food, Culture, and Gastronomy

Because of food's nutritional elements, it is an essential item in the supply of energy and nutrition for all living things (Kaplan, 2012). In this way, food is foundational for the continuation of human life (Fieldhouse, 2013). Yet, while food is essential to human existence, the relationship between humankind and food is a complex one. As Counihan and Van Esterik (2013) explained, considerations of food are central to our understandings of our social, economic, and cultural activities. Additionally, the academic disciplines related to human science, including sociology, anthropology, psychology, as well as gastronomy, aid our understanding, in more formal ways, of the importance of food within wider socio-culture (Coveney, 2014).

As Jenks (2005) reminded us, culture can be defined as a collective mindset and system of practices and rituals that differentiate social groups. Highmore (2016) considered that culture represents "a whole way of life" (p. 46), and is closely linked to "habit (what people do habitually in response to events, to the seasons, to everyday activity) and to symbolism (what such practices stand for, what they symbolise)" (p. 51). In considering culture, Hall et al. (2018) emphasised that cultural habits and ways of being and becoming are reinforced through their repetition, a position reflecting considerations of the social construction of reality thesis (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), and symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934). Meanwhile, White (2016) pointed out that culture brings meaning to human life through the sharing of symbolic materials and their meanings. In these ways, as Lewis (2003) considered, culture is regarded as the embodiment of the continuity of social values within groups - maintained, as Hall et al. (2018) suggested, within their repetition. Consequently, cultural food experiences and knowledge are acquired by group members through the sharing and learning about the place of food in their everyday social lives (Hegarty & O'Mahony, 2001).

The omnivores paradox (Fischler, 1988; Rozin, 1976) provides an insight into foods socio-cultural role. Rozin (1976) proposed that within the paradox, food consumers vacillate between food's novelty, its diversity, and the challenges presented by unfamiliar foods. However, Kittler et al. (2016) proposed that the eating habits accumulated by a cultural group alleviated these anxieties. Exemplifying that are the minority ethnic group of Dong people who inhabit Yunnan Province in China. They consume a special kind of ethnic food derived from the squeezed semi-digested grasses from a cow's stomach. That mixture is called "Niu bie (牛瘪)" (Yang & Hu, 2019). "Niu bie (牛瘪)" is used by the Dong people to make soup and hotpot. Often, before the cow is butchered, it is fed with fine grasses and Chinese medicinal herbs that are designed to make the sauce healthier (Yang & Hu, 2019). While that dish may not suit Western taste sensibilities, it nonetheless is an integral component of Dong culinary identity and

tradition, reflecting the cultural culinary knowledge and historic accumulation of the Dong people's culture. Thus, food culture, like other cultural phenomena, includes the knowledge and meaning of food that has been accumulated by groups of people over time. Through repetition and adaptation, that knowledge is passed down between generations (Fieldhouse, 2013) and within that reveals the link between ontology, epistemology, the social construction of reality thesis (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934) and material culture theory (Woodward, 2007).

Key to understanding food's cultural role are considerations of commensality (Van den Berghe, 1984). Fischler (2011) defines commensality as people eating at the same table or eating in groups. As Van den Berghe (1984) early noted that sharing food and eating together is common in family dining and also within larger ethnic groups. Ayadi and Bree (2010) showed that communication within a family promotes the sharing of values and food habits. Jones (2007a) indicated that the process of preparing and sharing food, within a series of rituals and communications, constitutes the multidimensionality, symbolism, and social relations that food promotes for people, groups, and cultures. Part of food's multidimensionality is its symbolic importance. The Christian Eucharist provides an exemplar. Christians acknowledging the eucharist share sacramental bread and wine (Cockayne et al., 2017). Sharing those items communally reinforces the system of belief that Christians share, through ritual, symbolic meaning, and repetition. Additionally, the ritual of the eucharist provides a point of difference between practicing Christians and other groups. Consequently, food and beverage consumption can reinforce ways of being and becoming within systems of belief as well as in wider socio-culture.

Yet, food's commensality is not restricted to religion. In many socio-cultures, eating together is a common way to entertain guests, and in doing so signify the guest's acceptance (Sheringham & Daruwalla, 2007). Reflecting that, when entertaining guests, a host might not only provide a convivial environment but also, within some cultural, settings alcohol or cigarettes are offered to guest in order to strengthen the host–guest relationship (Jones, 2007a). In these ways, commensality reflects and includes the interactive process of a host's invitation and a guest's acceptance (Sheringham & Daruwalla, 2007) and the shared enjoyment of that invitation in often practiced and ritualised ways. Consequently, food can be understood as a language facilitating the social behavior of individuals and groups (Neuman, 2019). Lovers frequently eat together, and often feed each other, in order to build their relationship (Alley et al., 2013). Relatives and friends can increase their mutual understandings by eating together too (Hamburg et al., 2014). In these ways, food, its commensality, customs, and rituals convey, embody, and reinforce wider socio-cultural phenomena (Fieldhouse, 2013). Extending that are considerations of the variations of culturally based dining styles.

Exemplifying that, for Westerners, is the use of knives and forks. Wang (2015) suggested that their use connotes the Western philosophical emphasis on individuality and independence. Contrasting that are chopsticks used in many Asian cultures. There, Wang (2015) proposed, chopsticks reflect the communal and collective philosophy of Asian socio-cultures. To aid our understanding of such things, within the academy, gastronomy plays a critical role in explaining and understanding food's socio-cultural importance.

Reflecting the link between food, culture, and gastronomy is the work of academic Barbara Santich. As Santich (2009) understands it, "culture is the unique combination of the place where we live and the people. Cuisine is the product of foods and people" (p. 130). Santich's (2009) considerations illuminate Hegarty and O'Mahony's (2001) earlier suggestion that gastronomy can be seen as an indispensable expression of human culture. That expression is directly linked to gastronomy's founder Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin. Brillat-Savarin (1825/2002) introduced the concept of gastronomy as "the reasoned comprehension of everything connected with the nourishment of man [sic]" (p. 67). Brillat-Savarin (1825/2002) positioned gastronomy as a social science. Within that, Brillat-Savarin (1825/2002) realised gastronomy within its connections to natural history, science, culinary arts, and beverages, culture, geography, and human behaviour. Encapsulating that more recently, Gillespie and Cousins (2001) proposed that gastronomy engages notions of art, science, and fine eating. As Hegarty and O'Mahony (2001) claimed, gastronomy goes beyond material items, because gastronomy includes the art of living that brings pleasure to our everyday lives. Therefore, gastronomy not only involves the study of food, cooking, and dining, but also the exploration of food within wider socio-cultural contexts (Santich, 2007).

Consequently, food customs and practices are significant cultural components in gastronomic considerations of food's importance (Fieldhouse, 2013). The academic link between food, gastronomy, and culture realises the importance of what people eat over and above food's nutritional benefit. Within a gastronomic worldview, food provides a window of opportunity empowering us to understand the ways of being and becoming of an ethnic group, and how through food they come to understand and interpret the world around them (White, 2016).

The Symbolic Nature of Food

As Dan (2020) identified, culture and its symbols are synonymous constructs. For Chandler (2017), a symbol is something that, while portraying 'itself', also represents and stands for something else. In that way, according to Chadwick (2017), symbols interpret, convey, and express emotions and ideas within specific socio-cultural settings between individuals and groups. Consequently, the meanings inherent to symbols often reflect abstract concepts that sit beyond physical substance (Chadwick, 2017). Those notions reflect how material items become

imbued with actant meaning (Woodward, 2007).

To understand food's actancy, it is helpful to consider food as a 'language' (Corvo, 2015, p. 14). Considering food in that way reflects food as shared, culturally bound system of symbolic meaning (Chandler, 2017). Those considerations hold deeper 'roots' within the considerations of Lévi-Strauss (1966). For Lévi-Strauss (1966), within his considerations of the raw and the cooked, food, its cooking and enjoyment reflected a 'civilising process'. Simply put, and as Lévi-Strauss (1966) proposed, the process of cooking of food symbolically transformed it from its natural state (rawness) to its transformed 'cooked' state. For Lévi-Strauss (1966) that change metaphorically reflected humankind's transition from nature to culture. In that way, as Corvo (2015) noted, Lévi-Strauss's (1966) observation prioritised the symbolic function of food within wider socio-cultural considerations that arguably hold haute cuisine[2] at its apex. Food's associations, representing 'more' that 'just' food, are often accepted in almost unthinking ways.

Other academics have realised the importance of food symbolism. Mary Douglas expressed the view that food promoted communication. In her seminal work Purity and Danger (Douglas, 1966/2003), Douglas correlated the social order with the value and structure of the human mind within considerations of the themes of "clean[liness]" and "pollution" (Douglas, 1966/2003, p. 10). Douglas (1966/2003) explained how sacred and unclean foods, in different cultures, reflected how symbolic meanings impacted the dietary traditions within those cultures. Reflecting the binary of 'cleanliness and pollution', Hindus regard cows as sacred animals. Consequently, Hindus are forbidden to eat beef (Jones, 2007a). Similarly, followers of the Islamic and Jewish faiths regard pigs to be unclean animals. Therefore, for them, all pork meat and its byproducts are taboo (Jones, 2007a; Krishnan et al., 2017). In these ways, what is deemed to be edible depends not only on personal preferences, but also upon cultural traditions and systems of belief within and as a point of difference between socio-cultures. Those differences help to explain how and why food consumption differs between groups. As Marvin Harris (1998) aptly realised, "foodways are accidents of history which express or convey messages derived from essentially arbitrary values or inexplicable religious beliefs" (p. 14).

As Stajcic (2013) proposed, everything about food represents a form of meaningful communication. For Stajcic (2013), that communication includes how food is selected, obtained, and distributed, and who prepares it, serves it, and consumes it. Within these processes, people find meaning within the communication food promotes. Reflecting that, as Jones (2007b) claimed earlier, "people define events through food" (p. 134). Festival foods provide exemplars. Within communications centred around festival food, both verbal and symbolic refractions of

[2] Haute cuisine mainly refers to the cuisines that only affordable by a small group of rich and powerful people, and characterised by richness of dishes, complicated cooking procedures and delicate dishes display (Flandrin & Montanari, 1999).

consumer mindsets and emotional connections are made and reinforced within food's consumption (Jones, 2007b). Reflecting that, Jewish people often eat latkes (fried potato pancakes) and sufganiyot (jelly donuts) during Hanukah [Hanukkah commemorates the Jews' rescue of their land from their oppressors in 168 BC. After the victory, the Jewish people started to purify their Temple. Eating fried food signifies the miracle of the clean oil in the light that could only burn for one day, but lasted for eight days until the new consecrated oil arrived (Stein & Isaacs, 2017). Within that consumption, they believe that eating fried food in oil symbolically connects them with the miracle of the single oil light. Similarly, Hindus eat laddu (candy) during Dewali (Deepavali) [Diwali is India's largest festival, a time when Indians place a light outside their homes to symbolise the inner light that protects from spiritual darkness (Roy, 2012).] to express their gratitude to the gods for giving them happiness, knowledge, peace, and wealth (Roy, 2012). In Italy, on New Year's Eve, Italians eat lentils in the hope of promoting their future prosperity, the consumption of flat legumes symbolising early Roman coins (Parisi, 2016). In Western culture, Christmas is often associated with making and eating a Christmas pudding (Chevalier, 2018). At the family feast of Christmas Eve, people also put a coin in the pudding. Whoever eats the piece of the pudding with the coin will be regarded as having good luck in the coming year (Miles, 1976). In these diverse ways, the rituals and meanings related to food provide a lens through which we can explore our own food culture and that of others within consideration of food's actancy (Woodward, 2007).

As Fischler (2011) realised, socialisation is linked to food sharing and commensality. Commensality strengthens the connections between individuals within groups and, contrastingly, identifies those 'outside' that food sharing group. In that way, and as Brulotte and Di Giovine (2016) suggested, food preferences and food sharing between people signifies a deep emotional resonance between them. Key to that bond is its maintenance (Almerico, 2014). Here, repetition is vital. Therefore, food choices within groups promote affiliative behaviours that Franchi (2012) proposed are enhanced by word-of-mouth. Food reflects traditions and becomes an important culture maker (Alexandra & Paul-Emmanuel, 2014). Consequently, people not only construct and maintain their cultural affiliation by consuming specific foods, but also define themselves through the choice of food shared with others, which also separates them from others.

While identity is based on considerations of sameness individual, differences permeate group identity and belonging (Coulmas, 2019). Exemplifying that, but unrelated to food, is the notion that New Zealand is a rugby nation. While New Zealand's All Blacks are world famous, it would be erroneous to believe that every New Zealander supports rugby. Yet, being cognisant of Billig's (1995) 'banal nationalism', that notion is part of the shared psyche of Kiwi identity. Transposing that thinking to food suggests that our identity, constructed within food, is an iterative process that can be associated with being and becoming or, more simply put, our growth process over time.

Following on from Douglas's seminal work was Finkelstein (2004). Finkelstein (2004) linked food consumption with socio-cultural factors including gender, age, economic status, and class. In these ways, Finkelstein's (2004) research linked food with identity. That identity, according to Coulmas (2019), reflects the interaction of individuals within their socio-cultural setting. Consequently, food can be realised as not only an expression of individual identity, but also as a symbol of collective and cultural identity (Ashley et al., 2004). Koc and Welsh (2001) believed within that collective, social participants identify themselves and other group members in dynamic, yet embodied ways. In other words, what you eat and how you eat it signifies your affiliation to others sharing the same connections to food. Brillat-Savarin (1825/2002) encapsulated this very point in his oft-quoted aphorism "Tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are" (p. 22). Cognisant of that idea, individual and group identities emerge via food's consumption. For example, Ohnuki-Tierney (1993) regarded rice as being a metaphor for the collective identity of the Japanese. Their research revealed considerations of rice as symbolising "our food" (p. 116) and "our land" (p. 97). Consequently, rice is revealed as a symbolic materiality incorporating Japanese values and terroir.[3] Other national dishes reflect that notion. For example, the American hamburger, Japanese tempura, Korean kimchi, Chinese dim sum, Vietnamese pho, Italian pasta and pizza, Spanish paella, and English fish and chips are all foods that are commonly associated to those respective national identities. Yet, while those dishes represent national identity, not every American, for example, eats hamburgers. Notwithstanding such exceptions, the development of national dishes, through necessity, geography, and/or taste, (Fieldhouse, 2013) reflect Billig's (1995) considerations of banal nationalism. For Billig (1995), materially actant items like food are, as exemplified above, signifiers of national identity and their status as such is often taken-for-granted. Consequently, Billig (1995) drew attention to food's political considerations.

Reflecting that, the indigenous food of Māori, Aotearoa New Zealand's indigenous first peoples (or tangata whenua) provide an exemplar. Morris (2010) argued that Māori food is unpalatable, for Pākehā,[4] because Māori hold a "spoiled identity" (p. 23). Morris (2010) proposed that spoilt identity, for Pākehā, was predicated on the political activism of Māori, which many Pākehā found to be unacceptable. Morris (2010) proposed that food's acceptability, or not, within dominant cultures mirrors the acceptable/unacceptable nexus of that minority group by reflecting its 'place' within the dominating culture. Consequently, Māori as indigenous people,

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[3] The term 'terroir' originated in France in the middle of the 19th century. Terroir often refers to the geographical and cultural characteristics of agricultural products (Spielmann & Gélinas - Chebat, 2012). Today, terroir is a multi-dimensional notion. It also used to define the origin of products (Charters et al., 2017).

[4] Spoonley (1993) defined Pākehā as "New Zealanders of a European background, whose cultural values and behaviour have been primarily formed from the experiences of being a member of the dominant group of New Zealand" (p. 57).

are simultaneously inassimilable and their cuisine unpalatable to dominating Pākehā tastes (Morris, 2010). That, as Morris (2010) suggested, has come to reflect the subordinate position of Māori, and defines the state of race-relations in Aotearoa New Zealand between Māori and Pākehā.

Consequently, both food consumption and our identities are iterative and dynamic 'works in progress'. That 'work in progress' occurs at physical and psychological levels. As Neuman (2019) proposed, by consuming the symbolic value of food, we define ourselves in practice or in our wider worldview expectations. Our attitude toward food informs our behaviour, as the food we eat defines who we are (Thursby, 2008).

Best exemplifying that, are vegetarian and vegan lifestyles. The vegan diet is considered to be both environmentally sustainable and animal friendly (Chinea et al., 2020). As Kalof et al. (1999) noted, veganism evokes considerations of healthfulness, nature, and animal welfare. Contrasting that, for Willetts (1997) and Love and Sulikowski (2018) meat consumption evokes the perpetuation of patriarchy. Yet, in choosing to become a vegan or vegetarian, some people, adopt, within those identities, a way of life, values, and beliefs that impact and denote their entire lifestyle. Exemplifying that is the notion of vegan sexuality. In a contemporary expression of Douglas (1966/2003) and Finkelstein's (2004) notions of purity, pollution, and identity, Potts and Parry (2010) advised that many vegans will not contaminate their bodies by having sexual relations with non-vegans. Consequently, those exemplars not only reveal how food provisions identity, but also how people imbue food with symbolic meaning and emotional significance that impacts, in the case of vegan sexuals, their lifestyle. Those considerations, for Woodward (2007), constitute food's actancy within considerations of food as material culture. For Woodward (2007), actancy links the study of material culture to the meanings that people imbue into inanimate objects like food. Within that consideration, another avenue of food exploration becomes possible, one that reflects Civitello's (2011) suggestion that food is at the centre of human social life such that, food, through its sharing and development, serves to reinforce specific narratives via repetition. As Jones (2007a) relates, food is "a friend, a consolation, a hobby, a companion" (p. 135). Within Jones's (2007a) observation lie the ethereal aspects of food's actancy.

The Symbolic Nature of Chinese Food

An old Chinese proverb proposes that the "seven necessities to start a day, [include] firewood, rice, oil, salt, soybean sauce, vinegar, and tea" (Civitello, 2011, p. 540). That proverb, for Simoons (2014), places food at the centre of Chinese socio-culture. As Lin Yutang (1935 as cited in Höllmann, 2014) observed, for many Chinese, the most important thing in life is not to take politics seriously but eating. Consequently, food and its consumption are, for the Chinese, the source of the rich and deep symbolic meaning reflecting Chinese socio-culture.

The symbolic nature of Chinese food has a history. Reflecting that, Laozi, who lived in the 6th-century BC, viewed food as a political metaphor, as the classic quote from Laozi (as cited in Ivanhoe, 2003) reveals: “ruling a great state is like cooking a small fish” (p. 63), inasmuch as not stirring it too often, connotes less political intervention. Reflecting a similar connection, but many centuries later, Anderson (1988) observed that the “Chinese people use food to identify ethnic groups, cultural changes, legislation transformation, family food, and social interaction” (p. 244).

The symbolic nature of Chinese food reflects Anderson’s (1988) further understanding that food is “a marker of social status, ritual status, special occasions, and other social facts, [and that] food became less a source of nutrients than a means of communication” (p. 246). In these ways, Chinese food culture is not only about food and cuisine but also a reflection of the psychological and social needs of Chinese people (Qu, 2011). Consequently, the symbolic meaning of food provides a unique insight into Chinese traditional values, ontologies and epistemologies (Zhang, 2012).

There are 56 ethnic groups in China (China State Council, 2014). The Han ethnic group is China’s most populous. Following them in population size are the Mongolian, Hui, Tibetan, and Uygur peoples. Each ethnic group has their own language and culture (China State Council, 2014). Because of that diversity, and the limited word count of my dissertation, my research concentrates only upon the Han ethnic group, and their considerations of the symbolic nature of food. To understand that symbolism it is important to consider the five basic taste profiles inherent to Chinese cuisine.

Those profiles are sour, sweet, bitter, spicy, and salty flavours and tastes. Their combination creates an ever-changing assortment of diverse and tasty dishes (Höllmann, 2013). Yuan et al. (1999) suggested that those flavours parallel the complexity and variability of human life (Yuan et al., 1999) because, like food, people will experience all sorts of emotions and experiences. However, it is the balance between the five flavours that provides a metaphor for the concept of harmony in traditional Chinese culture (Yuan et al., 1999).

In these ways, and as discussed earlier, food enables communication within Chinese culture. That communication can occur in ethereal ways and is reflected in the spiritual communication between people, the gods, and Chinese ancestors. The offering of food and beverages to ancestors and the gods has been a long-standing part of the symbolic composition of ancestor-centric rituals in China (Sterckx, 2011). Many Chinese believe that, through worship rituals, the gods and their ancestors can have a direct impact on their lives and happiness (Simoons, 2014). Wu (2018) observed the ancestor worship practices of Chinese migrant communities in the United States. Those observations revealed that, in traditional families, on special holidays, a very hearty meal is prepared. Through the offering of burning incense and

paper money, the ancestors' souls are called home to eat (Wu, 2018). The food is then metaphorically shared with the ancestors and this ritual denotes their coming together (Anderson, 2011). Ancestor worship including the burning of incense, offerings of food, spirit money and other supplies (Clarke, 2000). People believe that, after those paper items were burnt, their ancestors will receive the real items in the other world (Clarke, 2000). These ceremonial offerings are permeated with deep emotions and expectations because it is believed that food is a necessity and a source of happiness for both the living and the deceased (Sterckx, 2011). In that way, and as Wu (2018) proposed, the material gift of food and money to the ancestors denotes a direct spiritual communication. Secondly, food is also considered to be an essential medium for interpersonal communication in Chinese socio-culture (Yang, 2011). There, offering food is regarded as a common courtesy (Anderson, 2014). As Ma (2015) proposed, many Chinese people tend to eat together in order to build and strengthen their relationships (Ma, 2015). Inviting friends to have dinner at home provides an exemplar of the importance of food. Then, providing more expensive and rarer food to guests signifies not only the hosts' hospitality, but also their respectfulness towards their guests (Ma, 2015). Similarly, in business, the completion of a business transaction must be accompanied by food and drink. The degree of luxury or expense incurred will vary according to the meaningfulness of the business dealings (Anderson, 2014). Additionally, at such events, the seat of the most honoured guest must face the door of the room. When the banquet begins, it must be the most respected guest who begins eating first (Yang, 2011).

The symbolic meaning of food within Han socio-culture is amplified in festivals and other important life cycle occasions (Yang et al., 2019). In Han socio-culture, different festivals have corresponding foods. These foods combine nutrition, art-forms, and socio-cultural denotation and connotation (Yang et al., 2019). Those themes include praying for peace and happiness and the yearning for progress (Qu, 2011). Exemplifying that, on Chinese Lunar New Year's Eve, most families living in northern China make dumplings. Due to their shape, the dumplings signify ancient Chinese currency and therefore symbolic wealth (Newman, 2004). Contrasting that, most southern Chinese Han people eat sticky rice cake (nian gao) in the hope of a better year ahead. Because gao (糕) has the same pronunciation as 'high'(高),' it infers better (Liu & Liu, 2011). In that way, dumpling and nian gao (年糕) promotes foods actancy (Woodward, 2007) by symbolically embodying people's hopes for a prosperous future (Newman, 2004). Similarly, the consumption of Mooncakes, during the Mid-Autumn Festival, symbolises the reunion of families and the blessing of life's harmony (Albala, 2012). The consumption of spring rolls recognises the beginning of the spring season, whereas eating glutinous rice balls occurs during the Lantern Festival. For many Han people, food also reflects personal experiences. For instance, family members often eat red colored eggs to welcome a new-born baby (Newman, 2004). Despite the globalised influences of the birthday cake, many Han people

celebrate a birthday and promote concepts of longevity by consuming noodles (Newman, 2004). Similarly, in Taoist culture peaches, another symbol of longevity, are given to elderly people on their birthdays (Thursby, 2008). In Han wedding ceremonies, the newly married couple enact the toast ritual (jiaobeijiu交杯酒) that symbolically reflects their lifetime's entwinement (Huang, 2004). While (Wang, 2012) advised that these rituals and meanings may appear to some as superstitious belief, nonetheless, like many Western rituals, they hold deep and symbolic meaning in Han socio-culture. Adding to that, and reflecting Berger and Luckmann's (1966) thesis, Chinese scholar Qu Ming'an (2011) concluded that people use food in those ways in order to help them make sense of their world. As a result, food has become a symbol of hope and good wishes within Chinese socio-culture (Qu, 2011).

The Value of Longevity and Taiping (太平)

In traditional Chinese socio-culture, the desire for both longevity and procreation are important (Qu, 2011). Qu (2011) reflected longevity's importance in two ways. Firstly, Qu (2011) linked the importance of longevity in both Taoism and in ancient Chinese legends. For Taoists, longevity is an eternal process, inasmuch as people can live forever (Eskildsen, 1998). Within that consideration is the notion of peacefulness (Thursby, 2008). These desires and aspiration towards them help to fulfill many Taoists psychological needs (Qu, 2011). Building on that is the concept of Taiping (太平).

Taiping literally means peace and safety (Qu, 2011). Taiping pervades the stability of the country's political environment and peace. Consequently, for many poor Chinese people, taiping is a popular consideration in their desire for peace and longevity (Qu, 2011; Zhao, 2006). In that way, taiping is part of the Chinese way of being, becoming, and consciousness.

While my review has noted significant literature exploring the symbolic meaning of Chinese food, there appears to be a shortfall of literature that details specific cultural explanations of that relationship. Consequently, my research contributes toward that gap within my emic position (Pike, 1967) as a Han Chinese researcher compiling an autoethnographic/personal narrative view of xianmian noodles. To achieve that understanding, I use the four base tenets of Mead's (1934) symbolic interactionism to inform my research.

CHAPTER 4: Methodology

As well as being a way in which we can philosophically understand constructs of knowledge and reality, comprising how we understand and negotiate our worldview, symbolic interactionism is also a research methodology. Meanwhile, as I noted in my introduction chapter (refer to Chapter 1), my dissertation is focused on my personal narratives of my lived experience related to xianmian noodles. With that in mind, I choose both symbolic interactionism and autoethnography as the methodological guidance of my dissertation. In the first section of this chapter, I present autoethnography and symbolic interactionism as methodological theory respectively. Then, in the second section of this chapter, I present symbolic interactionism's application as method. In the last section, I illustrate the connections between autoethnography and symbolic interactionism briefly.

Autoethnography as Methodology

An autoethnographic study is an autobiographical personal narrative exploring the researcher's own life experience (Adams et al., 2017). Chang (2016) believed that "autoethnography should be ethnographic in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation" (p. 48). Because of that, autoethnography was initially regarded as the ethnography of 'insiders' (Adams et al., 2017).

Ellis (2008) defined autoethnography as "ethnographic research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political" (p. 48). Hughes (2017) proposed that, like ethnography, narrative inquiry, self-study and hermeneutics, auto-ethnography 'positioned' the study of individuals in a broader social and cultural context. In autoethnography, the social and cultural aspects of the researcher's personal experience also become the object of research and study (Ellis, 2008). Therefore, extrapolated within wider socio-culture, an autoethnographer provides insight and meaning to cultural values, knowledge, and behaviours within the telling of their personal stories (Adams et al., 2017). Consequently, as Sparkes (2000) explained, auto-ethnographic writing reflects "highly personal accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding" (p. 21).

Unlike quantitative research, autoethnography prioritises the researcher's observations, feelings and experiences. The reflexivity within an autoethnographic study facilitates how the reader comes to know and understand how the author understands and interprets cultural meaning (Ellis, 2008), not only within the author's lived experience, but also their wider socio-cultural experiences of living. In that way, an autoethnographer's subjective voice and experience dominate a reader's experience (Denshire, 2014).

Heider (1975) initially adopted the term autoethnography in exploring how the Dani[5] people described their own culture. Later, Hayano (1982) refined autoethnography to include narratives reflecting the researcher as an 'insider' (as cited in Ellis, 2008). Later, and extending the scope of autoethnography, Reed-Danahay (1997/2021) used his personal experience to study the groups he belonged too. In that research, Reed-Danahay (1997/2021) projected a research duality inasmuch as the research denoted an "etic and emic" (Jary & Jary, 2005, p. 182) positioning.

From those beginnings, Ellis (2008) realised a range of diverse autoethnographic approaches. Two of those approaches are:

- reflexive or narrative ethnographies in which researchers talk about their personal experiences in studying other people's cultures and the 'movement' between researcher and the researched (Ellis, 2008); and
- indigenous ethnographies that are derived from indigenous researchers within marginalised or exoticized socio-cultures that are dominated by the colonisation or economic dominance of others (Ellis, 2008).

My research reflects yet another approach: personal narrative (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Within personal narrative the researcher is simultaneously subject and research object. That position reflects the idea that personal narrative reflects the researcher's own researched narrative that 'connects' to its reader's understanding (Dewan, 2017; Ellis, 2008). In that way, my personal narrative conveys my lived xianmian noodle experiences within a range of emotionally layered narratives that should resonate with my readers, even though their cultural backgrounds may be quite different to my own. Adding to that resonance is my conveyance of wider socio-cultural understandings within my personal narrative. As Chang (2016) realised, engagement in cultural

[5] The Dani people is the original tribe of Papua, Indonesia.

analysis and interpretation is an integral part of this research approach. Consequently, within my dissertation, my writing moves between my experience, my cultural positioning, and my theoretical understandings and interpretations of my own and my wider socio-cultural understandings of xianmian noodles.

Symbolic Interactionism as Methodology

Symbolic interactionism is a classic sociological theory advocating how socio-culture is constructed between individuals within "face to face, repeated, meaningful interaction" (Carter & Fuller, 2016, p. 932). The central notion of symbolic interactionism is that people use symbols to promote communication. Within that communication, language could be considered the most significant symbol. However, language and communication are not limited to only verbal communication. As Mead (1934) advised, communication includes other abstractions including words, patterns, and behaviours, as well as gestures. For Polk (2017), communicative interactions rely upon individuals' shared understandings of the meaning of any symbol. As Polk (2017) explained, "meaning is created by the interpretation of human meanings of symbols in interactions with others" (p. 1741). In turn, shared meanings create an interdependent and inseparable relationship between an individual and their wider socio-culture (Polk, 2017).

The evolution of symbolic interactionism is attributed to the theoretical concepts developed by American social psychologist and philosopher George Herbert Mead (1934). Mead (1934) emphasised the importance of interaction between the 'self'[6] and 'society'. Mead (1934) considered the 'self' to be at the centre of symbolic interactionism. For Mead, the 'self' consisted of his considerations of "I" and "me". *I* denoted a person's perception of themselves, whereas *me* reflected the perception of self through the eyes of others (Polk, 2017). Consequently, for Mead (1934), an individual's considerations of themselves not only involves the importance of external behaviour, but also the exploration of an 'inner experience' through consciousness. As Mead (1934) indicated, in that communication, a person's reaction to others is the result of thought and interpretation, not just intuition (Hewitt, 2003).

Following the work of Mead (1943), Herbert Blumer (1986) formalised symbolic interactionism not only by recognising the work of Mead (1934) but also that of Charles Horton Cooley. Within that amalgam, Blumer (1966) provided a systematic framework for understanding the relationship between individuals and society (Polk, 2017). Key to that, and symbolic interactionism's popularity in the social sciences, is that symbolic interactionism presents a 'bottom up' approach in understanding the social world. That approach contrasts with the

[6] A crucial theoretical basis for the concept of self in symbolic interactionism is the notion of looking glass self from Cooley (Allen, 2017). Cooley proposed that a person's self-concept is formed in their interactions with others. A person's self-knowledge is the reflection of how other people view them (Allen, 2017) .

‘top-down’ approach of structural functionalism (Carter & Fuller, 2016). Consequently, symbolic interactionism encourages a move in social science thinking that emphasises personal experience and behaviour and views socio-culture through individual experience. Reflecting that, symbolic interactionism is based on the view that society is constructed by individuals who have free will and give value to individual experiences and behaviours. As Carter and Fuller (2016) explained, individuals are “agentic, autonomous, and integral in creating their social world” (p. 932). On that basis, symbolic interactionism’s ‘bottom-up’ perspective is revealed, and wider considerations of ontology and epistemology come to denote an individual’s subjective viewpoint and experience (Carter & Alvarado, 2019).

Notwithstanding those considerations, it was Blumer (1986) rather than Mead (1934) who developed a methodology of social interactionism (Polk, 2017). Blumer (1986) refined and developed symbolic interactionism’s specific “methodological implications for sociological study” (p. 78). Consequently, symbolic interactionism developed not only as a theorical framework, but also as a methodology. Blumer’s (1986) concepts of symbolic interactionism are, for Fuller and Carter (2016), “the most influential in sociology” (p. 933). As a methodology, symbolic interactionism, for Blumer (1986), provides insight through the “direct examination of the empirical social world” (p. 48). Key to that examination or exploration of the social world are symbolic interactionism’s four base themes.

These themes include considerations that:

> (1) individuals act based on the meanings objects have for them, (2) interaction occurs within a particular social and cultural context in which physical and social objects (persons), as well as situations, must be defined or categorized based on individual meanings, (3) meanings emerge from interactions with other individuals and with society and (4) meanings are continuously created and recreated through interpreting processes during interaction with others (Mead, 1934).

It is within the application of these themes that I situate and continue on to discuss my method.

Symbolic Interactionism as Method

Method: Applying Symbolic Interactionism’s First Tenet

As Carter and Fuller (2016) noted, symbolic interactionism’s first tenet states that:

> Individuals act based on the meaning’s objects have for them. (p. 932)

As I have come to understand this notion, I have realised that the meaning that people give to objects promotes interaction. That interaction not only reinforces meanings but also the meanings attributed by people (to things) reinforce how people construct and make sense of their world. In that way, I link this tenet not only to my wider understandings and appreciation of ontology, epistemology, and Woodward's (2007) considerations of actancy, but also within my growing understanding of the social construction of reality thesis (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Applying that understanding to xianmian noodles promotes the noodles as actant vectors of interaction and meaning. Those attributes transcend the nutritional value of the noodles because, realised that way, the noodles become a metaphor that simultaneously creates, recreates, and reinforces cultural and personal meaning. In these ways, this tenet, when applied to these noodles, provides a way in which knowledge and understanding can be rationalised to symbolically denote behavioral norms, rituals, and habits, distinguishing that group and individuals, like myself, who enjoy these noodles and subscribe to their wider meanings.

Method: Applying Symbolic Interactionism's Second Tenet

Symbolic interactionism's second tenet states that:

> Interaction occurs within a particular social and cultural context in which physical and social objects (persons), as well as situations, must be defined or categorized based on individual meanings. (Carter & Fuller, 2016, p. 932)

In considering this tenet, I have realised the link created over time within Fuzhou culture and my own experiences of how xianmian noodles represent social and cultural contexts and situations. Within those considerations, xianmian noodles not only signify an important part of Fuzhou regional culture, but also provide a unique perspective into wider Chinese Han culture. Within my use of this tenet, I am aware that until undertaking my dissertation I took xianmian noodles somewhat for granted, as just something 'we' did. Focusing on xianmian noodles for this research has, within this tenet and others, realised my stepping back from my own culture and experiences and exploring 'what we do' and my own experiences of that 'doing' in new and exciting ways. Within these considerations, my research, not only within this tenet, but the other three as well, provides a unique emic (Pike, 1967) perspective.

Method: Applying Symbolic Interactionism's Third Tenet

Symbolic interactionism's third tenet proposes that:

> Meanings emerge from interactions with other individuals and with society. (Carter & Fuller, 2016, p. 932)

As I consider this tenet within my research, I am reminded that, through repetition, meanings and wider understandings of xianmian noodles emerge. The continual and repeated individual, group, and social interactions conspire to create a socio-cultural understanding of the symbolic meanings that xianmian noodles hold for people like myself. As Blumer (1966) proposed, through interaction, people give meaning to objects like xianmian noodles. In these ways, individual actions combine in creating ways of being and becoming for wider Fuzhou socio-culture. Consequently, the multiple meanings of xianmian noodles are formed in the day-to-day dietary practices and interactions between people living in Fuzhou. These meanings embody Fuzhou people's common understanding and negotiation of their lived experiences in Fuzhou, and beyond. Therefore, like the other tenets of symbolic interactionism, a parallel can be discerned between symbolic interactionism and Berger and Luckmann's (1966) social construction of reality thesis.

Method: Applying Symbolic Interactionism's Forth Tenet

Carter and Fuller's (2016) final tenet proposes that:

> Meanings are continuously created and recreated through interpreting processes during interaction with others. (p. 932)

This position implies that, within interactions, meaning and the symbolic nature of 'things' can be considered to be dynamic. That process of change not only incorporates the renegotiation of interactive understandings between people and groups, but also how socio-temporal factors impact change over time. For me, these realities are reflected within my lived experiences and the narratives that I relate in my findings chapter (refer to Chapter 5). Consequently, and as my later discussion and conclusion chapter (refer to Chapter 6) reveals, my processes in understanding xianmian noodles not only reflect my lived experiences of them but also how, those meanings and interactions have both changed, yet remain the same, over time. While that proposition appears oxymoronic, it can best be understood as the ways in which reality and knowledge can at first appear constant yet, upon closer inspection, is seen to be a dynamic, ongoing 'work in progress'.

Symbolic Interactionism and Autoethnography/Personal Narrative

In this dissertation, my autoethnography considers not only my choices of theoretical and applied theoretical positioning but also McCall's (2003) suggestion that the construction of society is the process by which people assign subjective meanings to objects and respond to them. In that way, and as Adams et al., (2015) understood, "autoethnographers intentionally use personal experience to create nuanced, complex, and comprehensive accounts of cultural norms,

experiences, and practices" (p. 33). Facilitating that for me is my choice of symbolic interactionism as my method. Consequently, my own reflections on xianmian noodles are contextualised within wider Fuzhou socio-culture. In this way my research method and overall perspective reflect Ellis's (2008) proposal that personal narrative as a form of autoethnography tells a researcher's story within the social and cultural aspects of their lived experience. Additionally, Chang (2016) argued that autoethnography not only involves descriptive or performative storytelling but, more importantly, that the stories can be reflected upon, analysed, and interpreted within their broader sociocultural context. At this point, autoethnography Adams et al., (2015) is aligned with symbolic interactionism, because they both stress that the individual experience is embedded within a wider socio-cultural context.

In the next chapter, I present my findings. For me, the best way to do that, considering my use of symbolic interactionism as a method, is to identity four key themes within my lived experience of xianmian noodles. Those four themes are xianmian noodles for birthdays, xianmian noodles for travel, xianmian noodles for the Chinese New Year, and xianmian noodles as an everyday food.

CHAPTER 5: Findings

Introduction

In this chapter, I present my research findings. However, before presenting my personal narratives, it would be timely to present a section of writing outlining my background.

I was born, in 1988, the Chinese year of the dragon. My birthplace was the small island of Xiyang (西洋) in Fujian province, China (refer to Figure 11). According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2020), Xiyang Island has 6,000 permanent residents. Once, Xiyang Island belonged to Fuzhou City. Later, during the 1950s, Xiyang Island was included as part of Ningde City (Local History Compilation Committee of Xiapu County, 1999). My grandmother told me that our ancestors migrated from central China and settled in Fuzhou's Changle city. Then, through necessity, my forebears went to Xiyang Island. There they engaged in fishing. Over time, my ancestors began to speak the Fuzhou dialect and to adhere to and enact many of the traditional practices and traditions of the Fuzhou people.

Figure 11: Xiyang Island.

Source: Author's own photograph (2017).

Exemplifying that, my father, as the oldest man in our family, would regularly visit the clan temple in Changle. There, he worshiped our ancestors. Participating in those events is important to my family because they reflect the continuity and traditions that encourage us to reflect and consider our origin and 'place'. Those considerations are similar to Māori culture, inasmuch as Māori people reflect upon their whakapapa[7] and tūrangawaewae[8] as reassuring 'markers' of

[7] According to *Te Aka Online Māori Dictionary* (Moorfield, n.d.), whakapapa means "genealogy, genealogical table, lineage, descent – reciting whakapapa was, and is, an important skill and reflected the

their identity and ‘place’.

My immediate family consists of five people: my parents, my two brothers and myself. As the head of the household, my father generated our family’s income. As a housewife, my mother took care of our family. On the island, my father owns and operates a small shrimp-seafood processing factory (refer to Figures 12 & 13). Consequently, seafood and xianmian noodles have been important parts of my diet, particularly when I was growing up and living at home, on the island. My father worked extremely hard. Sometimes he worked for 24 hours without sleep. Now, as an adult, I understand the pressures that he faced in providing the income necessary for our family to flourish. In those ways, my father’s dedication to providing for us, positioned him as someone of strength that my brothers and I looked up to. Despite that, and reflecting the nature of wider Chinese culture, there was always an emotional distance between us and our father. However, for my brothers and I, my parents were role models who shaped us into becoming well-behaved and independent children and, later, adults.

Figure 12: Dried Shrimps.

Source: Author’s own photograph (2017).

Figure 13: Dried Tiny Shrimps.

Source: Author’s own photograph (2018).

Until the age of 10, I was schooled on Xiyang Island. After that, and in order to improve my education, my brothers and I were enrolled in a school in Xiapu (霞浦) county. Xiapu county is 37 kilometres from our island home. Because of that distance, our mother accompanied us to Xiapu county. There, we all lived together until we were old enough to go to university. Our

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importance of genealogies in Māori society in terms of leadership, land and fishing rights, kinship and status. It is central to all Māori institutions”.

[8] According to *Te Aka Online Māori Dictionary* (Moorfield, n.d.), tūrangawaewae means “domicile, standing, place where one has the right to stand – place where one has rights of residence and belonging through kinship and whakapapa”.

father remained on the island and continued work at the seafood processing factory. However, during our time in Xiapu county we all returned to our island home during the school holidays. Then, when I was 18 years old, I went to university in Xiamen (厦门) city in southern Fujian. There, I studied international business and graduated in 2010 with an undergraduate degree. After graduation, I found my first job in Zhangzhou (漳州) city as an export specialist for a company producing chemicals and raw plastic materials. I was 22 years old. During that time, I met a man and we fell in love. Later, in 2015, we married and settled in Xiamen city. After several years' work, my husband and I both agreed that we should experience more ways of living while we were still young. Consequently, we decided to come to Aotearoa New Zealand. In New Zealand I began my study of gastronomy at AUT. My husband is a self-employed stock-market investor.

Locating my Findings

Having noted my background, I now present my personal narratives about xianmian noodles. To best illustrate the significance of these noodles within my life, I have identified four key themes that best reflect my lived experiences of them. While my four themes may appear limiting, those narratives are the ones that are most important to me. Their importance is underscored by my narration, particularly how my narratives move back and forth between my childhood and my adulthood, as well as my contemporaneous reflections, as I bring up my own children here in Aotearoa New Zealand. Within those considerations, I am mindful of how my narratives reflect Bakhtin's (1981/2010) dual realm of existence, because I am telling my story, not from Xiyang island, but from Tāmaki Makaurau, New Zealand. However, I also need to note that my research capabilities and theme selections are also constrained by my dissertation's word count and time frame.

Notwithstanding these considerations, I would also like to draw my reader's attention to something else. Over time, my considerations of and reflections about emotional expression have changed my way of thinking and my worldview. My own sense of self, my ontology and epistemology have been shaken in the completion of my dissertation. As I presented various drafts of my work, particularly my findings chapter, to my supervisor, he began to repeat the

same questions week after week. Simply put, he asked me, “Why are you writing your findings as a sequential series of ‘facts’? Where are your feelings and emotions about these themes?” These comments did not sit comfortably with me. Yet, week on week, he continued to ask me the same thing.

His questioning caused me to think about how I could capture emotion and feeling within my writing, yet still feel that I was telling a ‘true’ story within my dissertation, albeit subjectively. I began to reflect upon the emotional distance within my own family. In turn, that prompted me to consider the ‘place’ of emotions and feelings within Chinese culture, particularly in China. I began to research this topic in order to help me to understand the lack I experienced within my supervisor’s comments. In my process of reflection and research I located a wonderful quote. It began my emotional journey within my dissertation. Suddenly, I came to realise how Chinese culture perceives emotions and feelings, in generalised and, compared to, say, Italian culture, distant ways. As the Chinese sociologist Fei (1992) observed, emotion in Chinese culture is “characterized by reserve and restraint and cannot be displayed openly as it can in the West. It is this social environment, an environment dominated by lineages, that nurtures this Chinese personality” (p. 86).

While Fei’s (1992) observation is accurate, in my experience, my parents showed their love for us not only within Fei’s conceptions, but also by providing physical ‘things’ including food and money rather than verbally or gestural expressions of love. In that way, my family’s life is grounded within the internalisation of emotion, rather than its outward expression. In those ways, I currently consider how I negotiate emotions in Aotearoa New Zealand as a ‘work in progress’ and an integral part of my personal growth.

Considering my Findings

It is common in autoethnographic research that research findings are termed autoethnographic accounts. While I do not dispute the validity of that terminology, for me, my accounts felt like my ‘finding’ of the symbolic meanings of xianmian noodles within my lived experience. Consequently, while I am aware of alternate nomenclature, I choose to use Findings as the best descriptor of my narratives.

To illuminate my four personal narratives within my research themes, I engage the four tenets of symbolic interactionism. My four themes and personal narratives are encapsulated within my considerations of xianmian noodles for birthdays, xianmian noodles for travel, xianmian noodles for the Chinese New Year, and xianmian noodles as an everyday food. Additionally, I reflect upon these four domains within my wider understanding and appreciation of the socio-cultural settings that I have been exposed too. That position is best considered within Bakhtin's (1981/2010) notions of the dual realm of existence. That duality denotes my early life in the Fuzhou region of China and, more recently, my current life in Tāmaki Makaurau, and particularly how those socio-cultural spaces have impacted my realisations and understandings of xianmian noodles.

Xianmian Noodles for Birthdays

In China, many Chinese people associate the custom of eating longevity noodles (长寿面) for birthdays and the noodles' connotative link signifying a long and healthy life. While different groups within China recognise this link, its expression is distinguished by various noodle varieties and their cooking methods. However, in my hometown of Xiyang, longevity noodles only reference xianmian noodles.

From the age of 7, and until I was 18, I can remember that every year my mother cooked a bowl of xianmian noodles to celebrate my birthday. My Mum would serve the xianmian noodles in a pre-simmered broth, sometimes made from seafood sourced from my father's business. My mother completed this dish with two boiled, shell-free duck eggs. Usually, I ate this dish at lunchtime. However, as I consumed my birthday noodles, my parents and brothers ate something else, they did not share in my noodle dish. While I ate noodles, everyone else consumed rice, soup, and other dishes.

The celebration of my birthday was always restrained. I remember feeling somewhat 'cold' as I oxymoronically ate the xianmian noodles alone, yet with others. I recognised those feelings as time passed, particularly when I began to celebrate my birthday in Westernised settings and ways. Additionally, I realised that part of my feelings of restraint reflected the deep symbolic meaning of the noodle dish that my mother had prepared for me. My mother always told me that I must eat my xianmian noodles and duck eggs because, as she explained, the xianmian noodles

length and thinness symbolised the hope for a long life. Similarly, duck egg (taiping, 太平) enhanced the symbolic meaning of the noodles. In Chinese culture, duck eggs symbolise safety.

However, I must be honest. When I was young, xianmian noodles were not a dish that I particularly liked or enjoyed. Reflecting that, on one occasion, I remember well how my slow eating of the noodles made them absorb even more broth and continue to swell. Instead of my bowl of noodles getting smaller as I ate it, it appeared to be getting bigger. Despite that alarm, my mother always kept an eye on me, insisting that I finish the noodles, and at least one duck egg. Retrospectively, and despite my awareness of emotional distance, I realise that those were special moments of love that will never return to me in physical form since I am now an adult, living in New Zealand. While I recall those experiences as somewhat traumatic, my bowl of 'swelling noodles' has since become an amusing story in my life's shared journey.

For my parents' generation, longevity noodles and duck eggs were commonly prepared to celebrate birthdays. However, the influence of Western culture and the ways birthdays are celebrated within it have come to impact Chinese culture. As I remember it, the birthday cake became popular in my Chinese environment during the 1990s. During that time, my best friend Gugu celebrated her birthday. At her party, we all sang birthday songs, blew out candles, crossed our fingers for luck, made a wish, then shared Gugu's birthday cake. Then, as a young child, Gugu's birthday celebration and ritual were new to me. Frankly, I remember that the event fascinated me for some time. The more I thought about Gugu's birthday, the more I came to understand that for my next birthday I wanted a celebration like hers. However, on my next birthday, my celebration 'straddled two worlds'. At my birthday I ate a bowl of xianmian noodles and duck egg for lunch. Then, my mother produced a very delicate birthday cake that she purchased from the local bakery. To my added surprise and delight, my mother presented my birthday guests and I with a fantastic selection of kids' snacks including candies, soda, fruit, and sweet biscuits. My five friends, including Gugu, ate this food with relish. Everyone sang 'Happy Birthday' to me. I was so excited. Later, I reflected how this birthday contrasted with my previous birthdays where I felt I was alone yet surrounded by others.

Now, in Aotearoa New Zealand, for my own children, I convey my love for them with a Westernised birthday celebration. Within that event is my awareness of how to embody and

impart love and nurture. For my own children, and their birthdays provide an exemplar, love is expressed in more direct emotional and tactile ways than I experienced in my own childhood.

Despite that, and before coming to Aotearoa New Zealand, I also remember celebrating my birthday in China, but outside of my family home. My time in Zhangzhou (漳州) city provides a ready reminder. There I knew no-one, and at the beginning of my time in the city, I had no friends. Consequently, I felt alone. That was best evidenced when I celebrated my birthday in Zhangzhou city. With no friends, and alone, on my birthday I missed home and my mother's xianmian noodle soup. Filled with nostalgic memories and loneliness, I decided to make my own xianmian noodle soup in order to celebrate my birthday. In making and consuming my noodle soup, I reconnected to the warmth evoked by the memories and meaning that I had experienced eating noodles at home during my childhood birthdays.

When my mother saw my post, she contacted me and recommended that the dish needed some 'greens' to enhance its presentation. Nonetheless, my mother's comments gave me an immediate feeling of satisfaction inasmuch as despite our geographic distance, we were communicating in literal and symbolic ways. As I came to consider that I felt the love of my mother continuing in the dish I had made.

Xianmian for Travel

I stayed with my parents until I turned 18. Then, I went to university in Xiamen (厦门). On the day that I left home to begin my university education, my mother got up very early. After waking me, she began to make xianmian noodles for me. Her dish consisted of xianmian noodles, broth, shrimp, minced pork, and fish balls. Additionally, she added sliced celery and garlic leaves. Those ingredients enhanced the taste and aroma of my noodle dish. Those tastes and smells evoke memories of home for me. Topping my dish were two boiled, but shell-free duck eggs. Before I began eating, my mother told me that this dish conveyed her wish that I have a safe journey. Again, like my birthday, I was the only one eating this dish. Everyone else ate something else.

As I reflect on leaving home and eating that meal, its colour, smell, taste and textures fill me with a nostalgic melancholy that not only places the dish as being important to me but how it

also symbolises my parting from my family. With my family, on that day, I ate my noodles with reluctance, knowing that I was leaving home. I was acutely aware that I was about to set off to an entirely new location, and there to be all alone without my family by my side. As I lived that experience, my heart sank; I was leaving my familiar and comfortable home. Leaving made me feel helpless and very lonely.

When our meal was completed, my parents helped me to carry my luggage to the pier. They waited on the pier until the ship left. I felt my parents' grief and loss at my departure even though they did not convey their feelings to me. Similarly, I kept my own feelings of loss at my departure from home suppressed. I knew and felt that I would miss my parents and my lovely hometown for quite a long time.

Considering that reminds me that in the year before I decided to come to New Zealand, I went home again to see my mother. By this time, my father was deceased. She was now lived with my younger brother. My stay 'back home' was delightful. I enjoyed my mother's company, yet I was still aware that another departure faced me. On the morning the I left for Aotearoa New Zealand, my mum made "taiping" (太平) noodles, just for me. Seeing the dish and realising its importance, and my pending separation from my mother, created, for me, a wave of emotional ache. This time, I knew that my separation from my mother would be for much longer than before, not only in time but also distance. However, I was determined to face my unknown journey to and life in Aotearoa New Zealand. When mother companied me to the pier, I saw that my mother's eyes were red and full of tears. Seeing that made my own eyes swell with tears. Immediately my mind was filled with memories, but those memories were surpassed by the urgency of departure. The pier was full of people, and while our emotions surged, we both kept a staunch demeanour, determined to keep our emotions under control. After the boat ride to Xiapu and my ensuing flights, I arrived in New Zealand to meet my husband. There we were to start our new life.

Xianmian Noodles and the Chinese New Year

In my hometown, Xiyang island in the Fujian region, Chinese New Year celebrations last from December to the middle of the first month of the Chinese lunar calendar (normally between January and February of the Gregorian calendar). Integral to those celebrations and New Year

rituals are xianmian noodles.

For my mother, the New Year is the busiest time of the year. For New Year, my mother prepares everything we need for the Lunar New Year celebrations and our sacrificial rites to the Gods[9] and our ancestors. During the last three days of lunar December, my mother is kept busy preparing food and then taking that food to different locations to worship the Gods. Most of the residents on Xiyang island are Buddhist. Consequently, Buddhist statues are enshrined in many different temples. In offering food, at these temples, people present their wish to the God's that everything will go well in the coming new year. Xianmian noodles, symbolising longevity, are one of the essential offerings. Additional offerings include cooked foods, wines, and fruits. These offerings are tributes to heaven and Gods (refer to Figure 14). At this busy time, I always helped my mother in preparing food and taking our offerings to the temples.

Figure 14: Ancestor Offerings at Home.

Source:(Buddist New Vision, 2019)

[9] After Buddhism was introduced to China, from India to China, Chinese Buddhism evolved to incorporate many elements from 'local' religions. Important 'additions' to Chinese Buddhism were Confucian and Taoist themes. Consequently, in Chinese Buddhism believers' worship Buddhistic, Taoist and Confucian elements (Qing, 2015).

Among all the New Year rituals, our family reunion dinner, held on the last day before the New Year, could be considered to be the most important New Year celebration. That dinner symbolises our farewell to the ‘Old Year’ and our celebration of the beginning of the New Year. In our family, eating xianmian noodles for breakfast on the first day of the New Year is an indispensable part of this celebration. Additionally, we pray for the family to have a happy and smooth year ahead.

Traditionally, our New Year’s Eve meal is rich and substantial. My mother spends quite a long time preparing this feast. When the meal is ready to eat, we begin our celebration with a ritual prayer to the heavens and our ancestors. To begin that ritual we burn incense. The oldest male in the family completes that task. Its purpose is to call back home our ancestors to enjoy a festival feast. Then, I would usually pour a locally brewed rice wine into small red cups. Those cups and their contents are symbolic offerings for our ancestors. Then, my brothers and I would burn paper money. People believed that the burned paper money could become real money in the other world to provide a comfortable life for family who had passed away. At this time, my mother always asked us to repeatedly chant: “grandma, grandpa, great-grandpa and great-grandma, please come back home to celebrate New Year with us. Please bless our family with safety, health and good luck”. That request and chant denoted how my parents’ generation embodied and evoked ritual in summoning my deceased ancestors to join us for a family ‘reunion’ dinner. After we burned our paper money, we ended our ritual by setting off a small string of firecrackers. Doing that promotes our family’s good luck. After our ancestors enjoyed their spiritual meal, we start our own family dinner. During dinner, my parents would give each of us a red envelope with Yasui (压岁) money inside. Its purpose is to keep bad luck away, and to bestow safety and health. As a child, I always looked forward to receiving the red envelope from my parents. However, when I was older and had my own income, I gave my parents red envelopes enclosing money. That gift promotes the wish that my parents could be kept young.

When midnight arrives, every household sets off lots of fireworks and big firecrackers in celebration of the New Year. The explosive noise of the fireworks is called fa (发). In our local language, fa (发) has the same meaning as rich. The implication is clear: New Year fireworks symbolise the wish for a prosperous New Year.

Figure 15: New Year's Eve Dinner.

Source: Author's own photograph (2012).

Figure 16: New Year Celebration Fireworks.

Source: Author's own photograph (2012).

On New Year's Day, I would don new clothes. Then, everything should be new and clean. To celebrate, my mother prepares xianmian noodles and duck eggs. In our family tradition, the New Year xianmian noodle dish comprises of a stewed duck soup with tea tree mushroom (refer to Figure 17), and soaked xianmian noodles. At this celebration, unlike my birthday and travel experiences, everyone eats the xianmian noodle dish. As we eat it, we sit together, the noodles evoking considerations of peace and happiness for the New Year ahead. After our shared meal was completed, we visited our wider family and friends to offer them our New Year's greetings. Consequently, xianmian noodles have come to hold deep meaning for me and also signify, how as Han Chinese, we celebrate important occasions, like New Year.

Figure 17: Tea Tree Mushroom Duck Soup.

Source: Author's own photograph (2013).

Xianmian Noodles as an Everyday Food

In Fuzhou, Xianmian noodles are also eaten as an everyday noodle dish. Differentiating their everyday consumption from their ritual and symbolic consumption are two primary considerations: occasion and ingredients. Reflecting the use and consumption of xianmian noodles to signify ritual and symbolic meaning are occasions like birthdays and travel. Then, and only then are the key ingredients of two hard-boiled but shell-less duck eggs consumed as

an integral part of the symbolic meaning of the dish.

For everyday use and consumption xianmian noodles are regarded as a nutritious and healthy food, in much the same ways that Italians consider pasta. At home in China, my mother always keeps a large quantity of these noodles in the refrigerator so that we could make an xianmian noodle soup at any time. Key to the everyday consumption of xianmian noodles is the common belief that the combination of the noodles and a 'broth' constitute a nutritious food that is easily digested.

Consequently, xianmian noodles in broth is a common food for people recovering from illness. Exemplifying that, each time I was ill when I was a child, my mother made xianmian noodles in a stir-fried egg soup (refer Figure 18) with some Fuzhou rice wine (refer Figure 19). That combination is a popular choice for many families in Fuzhou who are caring for someone who is ill. In my own experience, as an adult, when I had my first child in 2015, I ate bowls of egg xianmian noodles to aid my recovery. Consuming them in that way also prompted me to consider eating these noodles when I was sick, as a child in China. Consequently, xianmian noodles, as a dish for everyday consumption, can be realised as not only an everyday dish but a key part of 'comfort food' in China.

Figure 18: Stir-fried Egg with Xianmian Noodle Soup.

Source: Author's own photograph (2021).

Figure 19: Fuzhou Traditional Rice Wine.

Source: Author's own photograph (2021).

Several months ago, I was shopping in a Chinese food store in East Auckland. To my surprise I saw packets of xianmian noodles on the shelf. I was thrilled and recognised their authenticity

immediately. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, I have been unable to return to China. On seeing the noodles, I was immediately transported back to the times, places, and people that had shared these noodles with me, and enjoyed the celebrations and rituals associated with them. I had to buy the noodles! It had been almost two years since I had eaten them.

As soon as I returned home, I cooked the stir-fried egg xianmian noodle soup, just for myself. The noodles provoked my nostalgia and connected me with homeland, and I fell into deep retrospective thought.

CHAPTER 6: Discussion and Conclusion

I begin this Chapter by presenting my considerations of how ontology (Scotland, 2012), epistemology (Buchanan, 2018), the social construction of reality thesis (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934), material culture and actancy (Woodward, 2007), and my choice of methodology and method impacted the effectiveness of my dissertation research. For me, those considerations are important because they encourage me to consider how the choices I made as the researcher impacted the completion of my work. Rounding out this chapter, I present the discussion of my research findings (refer to Chapter 5), cognisant of my literature review (refer to Chapter 3), my introduction and background information (refer to Chapter 1); my theoretical and conceptual frameworks (refer to Chapter 2) and my method (refer to Chapter 4).

Following those discussions, I conclude my research by directly responding to my research questions, and identifying my research limitations and domains for future research. Concluding my dissertation is a brief reflection of my dissertation journey.

Research Implications: Ontology and Epistemology

As I noted in my theoretical and conceptual frameworks (refer to Chapter 2), ontology focusses on the nature of existence and what constitutes reality (Scotland, 2012). Additionally, as Buchanan (2018) observed, epistemology considers how knowledge is created and how we come to understand it. Within my dissertation, my knowledge of xianmian noodles and my lived reality of them permeated my autoethnography about them. Xianmian noodles are key to my lived experiences, particularly within my life in China that I shared with my family. Consequently, xianmian noodles are a significant ‘marker’ of my cultural being and becoming there and also in Aotearoa New Zealand. Xianmian noodles signify my identity, and the important events impacting my life’s journey and how I came to know and understand the world around me.

As my lived experienced changed, particularly when I moved to Aotearoa New Zealand, I have become more aware of the influence of my cultural background in China, and how that

impacted my understandings of reality and knowledge in my new country. Underpinning those influences, and my ongoing realisations of how my own ontology and epistemology have changed, has been my realisations of how theory is part of my everyday life. Now, I realise the significance of interaction, knowledge, and constructs of reality and how they help me to make sense of my world. I have my research within xianmian noodles to thank for these valuable new understandings and insights!

Research Implications: The Social Construction of Reality Thesis, Symbolic Interactionism, Material Culture and Actancy

Reflecting not only the application of theories to my research, but my understanding that our everyday lives are permeated by theoretical constructs, has been my realisation of the impact of the social construction of reality thesis (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934) and Woodward's (2007) theories of material culture and actancy. In combination, these theoretical positions provided the ways in which I came to understanding the symbolic and cultural meanings of xianmian noodles within an academic framework and also within my own lived experience. As I came to consider the impact of these theories, I realised that the symbolic meanings of xianmian noodles are a way in which Fuzhou people, including myself and my family, create and make sense of their world within the rituals these noodles promote. I participated in those rituals when I lived at home with my parents. My birthday celebrations, my travel from home, and Chinese New Year rituals provided exemplars of how xianmian noodles created and reinforced important cultural and symbolic meanings. Additionally, considering what the theories have indicated, the symbolic meaning and rituals within xianmian noodles fostered the repeated interaction and consumption of these noodles that reinforced their symbolic meaning. That interaction not only reinforced meaning but, over time, created ways of understanding the importance of xianmian noodles that, until this research inquiry, has for me gone largely unquestioned. In this way, I have come to understand how ritual, symbolic meaning and interaction, within the social construction of reality thesis (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934) coalesce to reinforce Billig's (1995) banal nationalism within food consumption, ritual, and symbolic meaning. That realisation was brought about by my completion of this dissertation and my reflection and retrospection about

my xianmian-noodle-based autoethnography. Within that combination, the meanings and values that xianmian noodles promoted introduced me to a new word: actancy (Woodward, 2007). Actancy, like the other theories I have discussed, has aided my understanding of how I have constructed meaning within objects, and how that construction aids my understanding of the world around me. Consequently, the social construction of reality thesis (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934) and Woodward's (2007) theories of material culture and actancy have become a meaningful part of my everyday life, and not 'just something' I used within my dissertation. As I have come to know, these theories and the concept of actancy all concentrate our consideration of the interaction and communication that not only construct but help us understand our world.

Research Implications: Methodology and Method

My research methodology and method combined constructs of autoethnography within my considerations of symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934). That combination, as Sparkes (2000) reminded me, reflects the view that autoethnographic writing must be highly personalised because it articulates the author's lived experience. That writing, as Trahar (2009) observed, "engage[s] in intense and transparent reflection and questioning of [the author's] own position, values, beliefs and cultural background" (p. 7). For me, this entailed not only conveying 'factual information' but also integrating my feelings and emotions. I found that to be a great challenge. That challenge was magnified by my supervisor's request that I write my feeling and emotions into my dissertation. Because I am Chinese, I found it immensely difficult to express my emotions in the ways that my supervisor required. Yet, as I have reflected upon my work, and the need to include emotional elements in it, I can admit that the process has deepened my awareness of 'who I am' and why I 'do the things I do'. Consequently, my use of autoethnography has been a liberating experience. I have had to consider 'how' I feel, how I communicate, and have communicated, my feelings in effective and sometime ineffective ways. As I look back on my experience and the use of emotion within my work, I realise in fuller ways how the concept of the dual realm of existence (Bakhtin, 1981/2010) reflects my lived experience, highlighted by my xianmian noodle research. The dual realm of existence, while not reflecting Bakhtin's considerations of the carnivalesque, is, for me, evidenced by the duality

inherent my Chinese life and my life now as a ‘Kiwi’ in Aotearoa New Zealand. In New Zealand, unlike China, I am encouraged to express my feeling and emotions, despite my initial discomfort about engaging my feelings and emotions in more ‘open’ ways. Consequently, my dissertation has not only been about researching xianmian noodles, but more deeply about my understanding of, and coming to terms with, my dynamic identity, personal growth, and development.

Discussing my Research Findings

This section presents the discussion of my research findings (refer to Chapter 5) cognisant of existing literature (refer to Chapter 3) and knowledge. However, before presenting that discussion I revisit my research questions.

My Research Revisited

The purpose of my research was to explore the importance and symbolic meaning within my own lived experience of xianmian noodles. For my research, I chose to compile a personal narrative about the noodles, within a wider autoethnographic framework. Within my autoethnography, I engaged in a ‘to-and-fro’ mindset. That mindset not only explored my own xianmian noodle experiences, but consideration of those experiences within wider Fuzhou socio-culture. That process reflected Sparkes’s (2000) recommendation that an autoethnography explores the author’s experience and that of their wider socio-culture. Facilitating that within my research were my research questions. They were:

- What are the cultural and symbolic meanings of xianmian noodles in Fujian Province, China, especially in the Fuzhou region?
- In what ways have xianmian noodles reflected and been part of my life journey?
- How do my experiences of xianmian noodles compare and contrast with wider notions and understandings of the noodles and with the wider lived experiences of Fuzhou people in Fujian Province, China?

In researching those questions, within my autoethnographical findings (refer to Chapter 5), I distilled several themes. Those themes were:

A. The role of xianmian noodles for birthday celebrations.
B. How xianmian noodles are associated with travel.
C. That xianmian noodles hold symbolic meaning for the Chinese New Year.
D. That xianmian noodles are also an everyday food for many people in the Fuzhou region of China, and beyond.

As I consider those themes, in compiling and writing my Discussion Chapter, I realise their interconnection. That interconnection is evidenced within my revised discussion themes that are now:

- xianmian noodles: as communication and interaction,
- xianmian noodles: reflections of Fuzhou socio-cultural meaning, and
- xianmian noodles: merging culture and self-identity.

My revision of my themes occurred after I paused to consider my findings and how to best present them within my discussion. As I came to realise my themes' interconnectedness, it became a logical step for me to synthesise my initial topics into the three revised themes noted above. My three revised themes constitute the sections of my research discussion.

Xianmian Noodles: As Communication and Interaction

In my findings chapter (refer to Chapter 5), xianmian noodles and their consumption facilitated communication and interaction. Communication and interaction were realised verbally and symbolically within occasions that included my birthdays, the Chinese New Year, and my departures for travel. Within those celebrations, xianmian noodles connoted themes of good-luck, peace, and longevity. In that way, and within those occasions, the consumption of xianmian noodles reflects Douglas's (1966/2003) suggestion that the symbolic meaning of food influences a culture's culinary traditions (Douglas, 1966/2003).

According to literature, the symbolic nature of food interprets, conveys, and expresses emotions and ideas within specific socio-cultural settings and between individuals and groups (Chadwick, 2017; Chevalier, 2018; Miles, 1976; Roy, 2012; Stajcic, 2013). In these ways, foods like xianmian noodles are actant materiality (Woodward, 2007). As such, xianmian noodles help people, within interaction and communication, to make sense of their world (Berger &

Luckmann, 1966; Mead, 1934). Understanding that point reveals how I and other people from the Fuzhou area of China use food as an unspoken language, one conveying deep and spiritual meaning. And, as previously noted, our use of xianmian noodles, and the interactions inherent to that use, serve to reinforce our ways of knowing about and understanding our world (Mead, 1934). Compared with the position that food can contribute to interpersonal communication, as expressed in the literature (Yang, 2011), my personal narrative about xianmian noodles emphasised their emotional link and consequent interaction within my family. As I understand it now, my mother's gift of xianmian noodles to me on those special occasions were also acts of love to support me emotionally. In that way, xianmian noodles not only communicated their wider cultural associations (good-luck, peace, and longevity) but also, more importantly and actantly (Woodward, 2007), my mother's love. Yet, her expression of that love was tempered in reserve. That reserve, at that time, was all I knew. But as I became an adult and travelled more, I realised that, for me, emotions were best enjoyed and displayed not only within material culture, including xianmian noodles, but also verbally and in gesticulation. Consequently, my realisations of communication and interaction within emotional considerations extend well beyond the 'limits' of my childhood into domains of verbal and gestural expression. What I 'saw' in my mother's eyes was her love for me when she gave me xianmian noodles on special occasions. Now I can express my love to others in both verbal and tangible ways. That realisation has been part of my research 'findings', but I feel it best placed within my discussion, because it reflects how completing and considering my dissertation has changed me in positive ways.

Adding to that interaction and communication was the use of xianmian noodles as a way in which my family communicated with the Gods and our ancestors. During the Lunar New Year celebration, for example, xianmian noodles are an indispensable tribute 'food'. That tribute was enacted when my mother visited the temples to worship the Gods and at home when we 'called' our ancestors to join us. On each occasion, xianmian noodles evoked considerations of longevity and auspicious meanings inherent in the recognition of our deceased relatives. As described in the literature, specifically Simoons (2014), the provision of food for the Gods and our ancestors promoted a sense of remembrance because we believe that the Gods, and the spirits of our ancestors, have extraordinary powers that protect 'us' as their future generations.

In my family's Chinese New Year's Eve ritual, when the food is ready, we call to our ancestors to come home and celebrate the New Year with us. Then, we burn paper money and repeat our request that our ancestors and the Gods bless us with safety, health, and good luck, for the year ahead. Our actions reflect Wu's (2018) understanding that material gifts such as food and money, when given to our ancestors, are a way in which we engage in direct spiritual communication with our ancestors and the Gods. In those ways, my experiences concur with Anderson's (2014) observations that the symbolic nature of Chinese food marks rituals, special occasions, and other social occurrences.

Additionally, Douglas's (1966/2003) research reinforces my experiences. Reflecting that, Douglas (1966/2003) correlated social order and the human mind's need to classify 'things', as reflected in food and dining within socio-cultural contexts. Key to extending that position is the link between xianmian noodles and cultural festivals. As Yang et al. (2019) proposed, building upon the work of Douglas (1966/2003) and Finkelstein (2004), the symbolic meaning of food within Han socio-culture is amplified not only within festivals but also in other important life-cycle occasions. In Han socio-culture, different festivals have corresponding symbolic foods. Reflecting that are rice cakes and dumplings for the Spring Festival (Neuman, 2019), sticky rice balls for the Lantern Festival, zongzi for the Dragon Boat Festival, and mooncakes for the Mid-Autumn Festival (Albala, 2012). Within those festivals, as Qu (2011) explained, these foods reflect people's hope for peace, happiness, and a prosperous future. However, Qu (2011) also concluded that, except for celebrations, festival foods rarely hold special meaning in everyday consumption. Those academic observations are reflected within my own personal narrative. Our family all consumed xianmian noodles as their first meal of the Lunar New Year. That consumption reflected their desire for health and happiness in the year ahead. In that way, xianmian noodles demonstrated communication and interaction (Mead, 1934). In those ways, I have come to realise how my family's use and consumption of xianmian noodles not only situates the rituals we celebrate as a family, but also connect us to wider Fuzhou socio-culture and the world around us (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) through the shared understanding of the actant meaning of xianmian noodles (Woodward, 2007). That 'world understanding' extended, for us, into the spiritual dimension.

Xianmian Noodles: Reflections of Fuzhou Socio-Cultural Meaning

My ethnographic research on xianmian noodles not only reflects my and my family's experiences of the noodles' importance in rituals and symbolic meanings, but also those of the wider Fuzhou socio-culture. That observation is congruent with literature (refer to Chapter 3). Specifically, Jones (2007b) proposed that the process of preparing and sharing food, within a series of rituals and communications, constituted the multidimensionality, symbolism, and social relations that food promotes for people, groups, and cultures. Consequently, as an item of material culture, the actancy (Woodward, 2007) inherent in xianmian noodles denotes constructs of luck, longevity and peace within wider Fuzhou socio-culture. However, key to understanding xianmian noodles within Fuzhou culture is a combination of geography, occupation, and symbolic meaning. Those considerations fit with Qu's (2011) literature and are made real within traditional Chinese values of longevity and taiping (太平, peace). As Qu (2011) observed, Chinese people desire longevity. Reflecting that and considering the Fuzhou geographical region and its inhabitants' primary source of employment, the wider consideration of longevity and peace are important considerations.

As previously noted, my hometown is a small island in Fuzhou, southeast China. There, most people make their living in the fishing industry. The blessing of longevity and safety in xianmian noodles and duck eggs assuages people's fear of death by drowning in the region's rough seas. That realisation is consistent with Lai's (2012) interpretation that a bowl of xianmian noodles before travel evokes the wish for a safe journey and return. Adding to that is He's (2017) observation that the connotative meaning of Chinese food is usually associated with homophony in language.

Those connections are realised in two ways. One way is the similarity between the pronunciation of an item name and implied (and actual) meaning. This is exemplified by the pronunciation of xianmian in the Fuzhou dialect. That pronunciation is the same as 'longevity'. Similarly, the pronunciation of duck egg is similar to tai ping (太平, meaning peaceful) and yalang (压浪, meaning less storms). Consequently, connotative meaning within word pronunciation adds a cohesive layer to the interaction between the wider understanding and appreciation of xianmian noodles within Fuzhou socio-culture.

Adding to those domains are considerations of ‘shape.’ Xianmian noodles are extremely thin, and are the longest noodles in China (Goldthread, 2020). The noodles’ length is a metaphoric representation of the desire for longevity. Consequently, and considering xianmian noodles within a psychological framework, xianmian noodles and duck eggs in Fujian socio-culture reflect longevity and safety (Chen, 2020). In these ways, and as Qu (2011) explained, xianmian noodles and duck eggs help to meet people’s psychological need for security, safety and longevity. Thus, positive psychic messages are provided to noodle consumers, assuaging feeling of insecurity. These considerations reflect White’s (2016) understanding inasmuch as food provides a window of opportunity empowering us to understand the ways of being and becoming of an ethnic group. Additionally, that understanding helps people to make sense of, negotiate and interpret the world around them (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Mead, 1934).

Xianmian Noodles: Merging Culture and Self-Identity

While I always knew it, but never paused to consider it, xianmian noodles constitute an important part of who I am: my identity, located within food. That has been revealed within my personal narratives about my birthdays, every time I left home, and Chinese New Year celebrations. Similarly, and as noted above (refer to the section on “Xianmian Noodles: Reflections of Fuzhou Socio-Cultural Meaning”), xianmian noodles are key to understanding wider identity constructs within the Fuzhou region. Consequently, it is little surprise that making xianmian noodles is considered to be a part of the region’s cultural heritage (refer to Chapter 1). Therefore, xianmian noodles are a mark of distinction for the people of Fuzhou, particularly when considering their primary occupations and systems of belief. Yet, for me, xianmian noodles are key to my identity. Consequently, my personal narrative extends ‘the reach’ of xianmian noodles to Aotearoa New Zealand.

That consideration is realised within my newly emerging identity as a Kiwi … a Chinese Kiwi, often referred to as a Chiwi (Neill, 2018). Reflecting that new identity and its connections to xianmian noodles is my role as a mother. Here, in New Zealand, on my daughter’s birthday, I prepare a birthday cake for her instead of xianmian noodles. At Chinese New Year in Auckland, we did not eat xianmian noodles as our first meal of the New Year. Instead, we ate peanut butter and toast. Those changes reflect Koc and Welsh’s (2001) dynamic understanding of identity,

inasmuch as we have come to identify and re-identify ourselves in dynamic and embodied ways. Consequently, my personal narrative reflects my own dynamic identity, albeit bound within a dual realm of existence (Bakhtin, 1981/2010) that straddles my life in China and in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Answering My Research Questions

In concluding my dissertation, it is important that I directly address my research questions. Table 1, below, presents my research questions and their responses, based upon my findings (refer to Chapter 5) and my discussion in the present chapter.

Table 1: Research Questions and Responses.

Research Question	Research Responses:
What are the cultural and symbolic meanings of xianmian noodles in Fujian Province, China, especially in the Fuzhou region?	➢ Xianmian noodles are signifiers within the life cycle of Fujian people, specifically birthdays. ➢ Xianmian noodles promote interaction between people. Exemplifying that were my experiences of eating xianmian noodles before leaving home and when I am sick. ➢ Xianmian noodles provide a vector to communicate with deceased ancestors and religious gods. ➢ Xianmian noodles provide psychological comfort within their connotations of peace, longevity, and safety. ➢ Xianmian noodles are actant materiality signifying meanings (as noted) for individuals and wider Fujian socio-culture.
In what ways have xianmian noodles reflected and been part of my life journey?	➢ Within celebrations of birthdays, travel, spiritual associations, and comfort food for everyday life. ➢ As actant materiality signifying my mother's love. ➢ As a memory and nostalgic item that aids my retrospection on lived experience. ➢ As a measure of my life's journey through childhood and into adulthood. ➢ As a barometer of my dynamic place in time, self-identity and cultural belonging.

How do my experiences of xianmian noodles compare and contrast with wider notions and understandings of the noodles with the wider lived experiences of Fuzhou people in Fujian Province, China?	➢ That my family's relationship with xianmian noodles reflects wider systems of belief, and themes of being and becoming within Fujian socio-culture. ➢ That my experiences in Fujian and in Aotearoa New Zealand are different. In my experience, a new country introduced new ways of being and becoming. ➢ That xianmian noodles provide nostalgic retrospection and realisations of my personal growth, within my cognisance of identity, emotion, and belonging.

Research Limitations

While I have illuminated my topic within my theoretical and methodological scope, as I come to complete my dissertation, I realise its limitations. Table 2 presents an overview of my research limitations and my recommended solutions.

Table 2: Research Limitations and Solutions.

➢ **Research Limitation**	➢ **Solution**
➢ Time and word limits meant that I only explored four themes related to xianmian noodles.	➢ More time, and a larger word count would promote wider exploration (refer to the section on "Suggestions for Future Research", below).
➢ My autoethnography relied on my memory. That memory may not be reliable, or over time may have reconstructed my 'history'.	➢ Research reflecting my family's narrative of xianmian noodles may broaden my research scope, depth and understanding.
➢ My autoethnography reflects concerns about research validity within ethnographic methodology (Chang, 2016; Sparkes, 2000; Walford, 2004)	➢ By combining personal narrative with another research method, like a case study, may alleviate this limitation.

Suggestions for Future Research

In recognising my contribution to research and the limitations previously noted, I acknowledge and recommend the following domains of research that will extend the scope of academic research linking food, ritual, symbolic meaning, and identity:

- Within China, and or other Asian nations, a comparative study might explore the wider cultural significance of various types of Asian noodles.
- Community research would engage a wider socio-cultural understanding of xianmian noodles and their symbolic, and ritualised meanings and use.
- Further research within stratified levels of Fuzhou socio-culture, as defined by different age groups, might provide a deeper understanding of xianmian noodles.
- Future research might explore the meaning of xianmian noodles within migrant Asian and Chinese communities in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- The role of xianmian noodles within festivals, ancestor and spiritual domains should be explored within China and internationally within Chinese migrant communities.
- Future research should explore how Western and other globalised influences are impacting (or not) traditional constructs of xianmian noodles in Fuzhou, China.

Closing Considerations

Throughout my research dissertation, I have reflected on the meaning of xianmian noodles. Part of my reflection has been my increasing awareness of how completing my dissertation has impacted my personal growth. While my research has facilitated my wider understanding of these noodles, it has also focused my attention on a deeper consideration of myself.

While I admit that completing my dissertation was a challenging process for me, one that made me feel anxious and stressed from time to time, as I come to complete my work, I realise my progression. Firstly, English is not my first language. Completing this work has not only challenged my English abilities but also enhanced them. That took time to develop, and I realise that I still have much to do in refining my English language writing abilities. The language barrier prevents me from finishing my work quickly and clearly in English.

I was also challenged by time as a mother and wife undertaking tertiary study. Often, I felt guilty that I was spending time on ‘me’ and not my family, particularly my child. However, in completing my work and considering how I have developed academically and emotionally, I

have come to consider that my dissertation not only marks the end of my master's study, but also the beginning of my 'new life.' For me, completing my dissertation has made me stronger and more emotionally aware. Those benefits are life skills that I never thought would be part of my research journey. For those benefits and my enhanced xianmian knowledge, I am grateful.

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