



Boba Tea

A surface level exploration Asian youth culture

A piece by Nicholas Isaksson

The process of an individual collecting information for an autoethnography is 'studying a culture's relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences for the purpose of helping insiders (cultural members) and outsiders (cultural strangers) better understand the culture.'

- Carolyn Ellis (1)

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I've decided to embark on a exploration of Asian youth culture, hoping to expand both mine and (hopefully) my readers' understanding, and appreciation for a totally different slice of global culture.

'Bubble Tea, or boba tea, contains tea of some kind, flavours of milk, as well as sugar (optional). Toppings, such as chewy tapioca balls (also known as pearls, or boba), popping boba, fruit jelly, grass jelly, agar jelly, and puddings are often added. (2)'

A sect of Asian culture that has often eluded and intrigued me has been the seemingly underground phenomena of boba tea, with it's thick straws and black beads, spied only occasionally around the Sydney (and even less in Wollongong.)

I have not once in my safe, suburban life ever tasted, let alone set foot in a boba tea bar.

Whilst much of Asian cuisine has made it's way into western culture and become normalised, including many variants of herbal green tea, it seems to me that contemporary cuisine, mostly consumed by Asia's youth,

especially in Australia, has not been as widely received as traditional cuisine.

I went to the authoritative cultural encyclopaedia that is *Buzzfeed Australia* (3,) to try and gain an impression of the Australian consensus. With your typical assortment of gifs and memes, the article goes through the variations of the Taiwanese drink; a combination of jellies, tapioca pods, powdered creamer, mousse and gluten free alternatives to flavour their drinks.

The article however, did not recognise it's status as a contemporary Asian cuisine, nor whether the drink was even popular amongst the Australian community. Whether due to cultural barriers, or simply due to it being plain 'weird' in the eyes of

Australia, Boba tea seems an interesting sect of Asian culture to explore for a set of fresh eyes. I planned to visit a handful of boba tea bars, armed with pen, paper and camera, order one of these drinks, and soak up the atmosphere.

I hope that, through this process, I can assess how contemporary Asian food culture has made a life for itself in Australia; and whether or not it's accepted by myself and my Australian peers.

There's a big chance I will be guilty myself of painting boba tea with the oriental brush, and contributing to the dialogue of *othering* (4.) I guess the first step to addressing bias is to acknowledge it...

四方的叮嚀



As written by Dr. Sarah Wall in *Writing an Autoethnography* (5,) “analysis starts with a personal story...”

I’m battling a combination a headache and the sugar sweats, as a result of two sickly sweet drinks, consumed within the hour. My virgin boba tea experience has me wanting to trade in my laptop for a dark room and midday siesta....

Bubbleberry and Societea are the two Wollongong boba tea bars I decided on. The attendant at Societea took me through variations, and relative popularity of the many options; she chose me a juicy mango.

Beside the strange tactile experience of jellied balls in cold tea, the layout and exotic atmosphere also caught me off guard, saturated in bright colours and glitchy future bass music.

I took a seat at one of the tables, laden with with games and colouring in pencils. My first thought was that these boba tea bars seem to be marketed towards a high school audience; akin to a frozen yoghurt cafe.

Funnily enough, Bubbleberry was a mixture of both. Charisse, my friend from the Philippines laughed at my naivety; boba tea was not, she claimed, some Asian novelty; the experience of a boba tea bar was a cultural phenomenon, extending past Asia.

To exaggerate my virgin boba tea experience (and for a good laugh,) I decided to take two of my friends from Sydney’s northern beaches (the epicentre of Australian monoculture) on the first leg of my expositional adventure. Neither Timothy, nor Connor had ever heard of boba tea, and shared my distaste for the sugary, sickly sweet flavours and sticky jelly at the bottom.

I delved deeper and did a little research on boba tea online, and to my surprise it was well documented and praised. With many publications such *The Australian* (6) promoting Australia’s fantastic reputation for diversity, with particularly good Asian cuisine, I can only see bubble tea growing from cultural novelty status, and grow to a mark of Australia’s increasing cultural diversity.

Furthermore, according to *Franchise Business* (7,) many businesses and individuals perceive bubble tea (paired with the iced tea franchise, valued internationally at \$4 billion) as an Australian growth market, ripe for cultural expansion.

Despite my research however, something was still missing; whether my context, or simply not knowing enough, I probed my friend Charisse with more questions. Familiar with boba tea culture, she explained I would not find an authentic boba in a town like Wollongong; the chains I had visited were not considered of authentic quality. To gain a true impression of the culture, she advised a trip Sydney’s Chinatown.

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I'm sitting by the street on a muggy afternoon in the depths of the city, reminiscing childhood trips to Yum Cha and Paddy's Markets with my parents.

Following my friend Charisse's advice, I've come to Chinatown, asking around after the best boba in town. An attendant in a toy store directs me to No Fail - a small, independent cafe tucked beneath a sex shop, on the corner of Goulburn and Sussex.

After my experiences in Wollongong, I must admit to having been rather skeptical at the prospect of having another boba tea. The sickly sweet, sticky drinks had not left me craving more, but once more I asked the attendant to choose for me.

To my pleasant surprise, he pointed my attention to the sugar scale - with the option of having barely any added sugar. I obliged; and it couldn't have been a better choice.

I ran across the road to sit, observing the comings and goings of the cafe. No Fail doubled as a beauty store, with a whole section devoted to cosmetic products and face creams on display. Not only teenagers, but students, families, and even a balding caucasian tradesman, complete with a rottweiler waited patiently outside for his Asian partner.

I took to strolling the streets, and whilst eating tapioca pods off my straw, couldn't help but notice boba tea is everywhere - every third person drinks from a plastic cup, filled with beads, through a wide straw, with every second cafe advertising various milks and beads. There is even an 'award winning' boba tea bar on Little Hay street, complete with a list of international awards displayed out front.

But I digress; whilst it's all well and good to wander the streets, sipping one of these seemingly novel drinks, it's dawned on me that maybe examining boba tea through it's relationship to Australia runs the risk the of a shortsighted cultural understanding. It was important for me to realise boba tea culture extends beyond George Street - and stands for so much more.



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Birthed out of the old tea tradition in Taiwan, boba tea appeared during the 1980's as a contemporary take on traditional Taiwanese tea culture; an innovation that would grow to develop *global appeal* (8,) playing a part in representing modern Asia in many parts of the West (Germany, Canada and the Middle East to name a handful.)

Taiwan based Liu Han-Chieh (the credited founder of *boba tea* (9,)) was asked in an interview why she chose never to expand into a Starbucks-style transnational business, in line with global demand. She responded with a commitment to authenticity; taking time to build a team of passionate workers who understand and appreciate Taiwanese tea culture.

With this in mind, maybe boba tea stands as a metaphor for something bigger than Asian youth in Australia, or innovating new cuisine; maybe this stands for an assertion, to reject global monoculture, and move away from the cultural imperialism of the West; instead choosing to focus on building on and preserving one's traditional culture.



With all the goings on at the moment, as I watch Western society struggle through a particularly nasty bout of growing pains, it's easy as an Australian to completely disregard our many cultural factions.



The fact remains; the influx of cultural diversity of Australia is showing no signs of slowing down. Maybe, instead of keeping our heads down in our phones, we should stretch our necks, turn the stupid thing off, and spending the afternoon strolling through Chinatown, sticking a thick straw into a small slice of vibrant Asian culture; reminding ourselves that beyond our front door, Australia's vibrant cultural diversity is really quite marvellous.

讓我們促進多元文化社區

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