



**External
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Soba's Corner: A Chinese-Canadian Cooking Show

Snack Witch aka Joni Cheung

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Essay by Ramolen Laruan

One of the most memorable class experiences I had while completing my Undergraduate degree was when in my third year Cultural Studies class, each student was tasked to bring or cook food that “speaks to their identity in some shape or form.”

Eager to share a comfort food, I decided to bring *arroz caldo* because it was a dish that made use of classic Filipino ingredients that were easily adaptable in the case that I do not find the Asian ingredients needed and must substitute them with the narrowed (or I should say “specific”) produce section of the nearest grocery store. *Arroz caldo* is a rice soup that is mixed with garlic, ginger, and chicken; it is finished with boiled egg, scallions, and a squeeze of calamansi on top. *I could talk about migration and adaptability*, I thought.

When I was young, I accompanied my grandmother to church every Sunday because after the service finished, she would take me to the *palengke* for some *arroz caldo*, always with a boiled egg on top. To be frank, this sentimentality was enough reason for me to share this dish. Yet the more I thought about the dish, I realized that *arroz caldo* was personally sentimental and a dish that reflects the Philippine's national identity. I knew that in the

name, “arroz” means “rice” and “caldo” means “broth” in Spanish, so it *must* have been influenced by over four-hundred years of Spanish rule over the Philippines. At the time, I was making it in Kingston, Ontario for a predominantly white and English-speaking class. My geographic location’s limited access to Asian ingredients prompted me to use lemon instead of calamansi and skip on the scallions; and since it was most people’s introduction to Filipino food, I used a lot less ginger than I would have liked. Is my *arroz caldo* authentically Filipino?

This very act of adaptation felt, to me, one of the most intrinsic elements of identity and culture. It is in the act of overcoming obstacles, of continuous revisions, and, often, with delusional vigor that the fantasy of the golden sour Mediterranean lemon no longer mimics but is transformed into the sweet vibrant tart of a small and mighty calamansi fruit undeniably indigenous to the tropics of the Philippines. That is, perhaps carrying on our respective cultures is not in whether we possess the correct ingredients or act on traditional methods, but that it carries on slightly altered, slightly less spicy, but that it carries across land, water, and generations of i-don’t-know-what-my-grand-mother-put-in-here-but-let-me-try grandchildren. What will people in the diaspora create if we keep waiting for the right place, the right temperature, the right ingredients, the right tools, or the right circumstance to prove some sort of authenticity—and in extension—worth?

Unbeknownst to my minimal understanding of countless occupations by different nations in the Philippines, a classmate of Chinese descent tastes my *arroz caldo* soup and yelps, “Mmm just like *congee*!”

The first episode of *Soba’s Corner* starts with “It’s in all Chinese restaurants here so it must be legitimately Chinese” subtitled on a video of Joni Cheung, also known as Snackwitch. In the show, named after Cheung’s sous-chef, their cat Soba, Cheung is in their kitchen with the camera focused on the kitchen counter and Cheung’s hands. At the corner is Soba, noodling in and out of the frame. Cheung cites “Binging with Babish” as an inspiration for the format of the video. Like in the internet’s most popular food videos with a headless

host, Cheung seldom shows their face; instead, they center what they are doing in front of the camera. They are cooking Montréal peanut butter dumplings while a voice over of their voice recites the preparation methods. Peanut butter dumplings are only found in Chinese restaurant menus in Montréal, while the Alberta ginger beef introduced in the second episode is the pride of Chinese-Albertan establishments. Both dishes include non-traditional Chinese tastes such as peanut butter and sweet sauce on beef. Neither dish is known to Chinese people in China and known only to some Chinese in Canada.

Soba's Corner came out of a transformative time in Cheung's life, having just moved to Montréal from Vancouver to pursue their MFA at Concordia University. Shortly after, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the loss of their studio and a loss of connection to the outside world. They had access to a camera, wifi, and grocery delivery. Without a studio, there was no longer a need to purchase sculpture supplies; instead, the budget for art supplies was allocated on feeding themselves well. In *Soba's Corner*, Cheung invites classmates and fellow artists to tell them about a Chinese-Canadian staple dish from their province and their memories of it while they cook the dish "in real-time"—Peanut Butter Dumplings from Montréal and Ginger Beef from Alberta. Through food, *Soba's corner* aims attention towards the communal aspect of food sharing that fosters care and generosity as it questions the strict notions of authenticity within communities. In pursuit of survival, their practice adapted to different ways of presenting their work, reimagining the extent in which we consider food as physical nourishment; and its origins and traditions, expanding ways to collaborate, share and find connections to the histories and futures of food.

Soba's Corner can be found on YouTube, an artistically unconventional and democratic space for the public to come across art throughout its endless library of content. Cheung welcomes surprise visitors, interrupted in their everyday doomscroll—or perhaps commuters and passersby of Xpace's exterior space. Through video and disseminated on the internet, *Soba's Corner* is a disguised recipe vlog that corrupts the ways in which we expose ourselves to new food, and therefore, new cultures. Joni invites further curiosity

through seemingly random subtitles and 26-page recipes that inform accidental audiences that this particular cooking show offers much more beyond the how-to videos.

“Food brings me joy,” says Cheung about their project. In an Asian household, food is loving, food is generosity, food is memory. “We did not talk about things a lot, but we always had meals together and that was where conversations happened. A way of showing care and apologizing.” Apology morphs into a bowl of freshly cut fruits delivered to your room, your favourite dish for dinner, or even going to your favourite restaurant. The tenderness imbued in Asian dining tables is carried by Cheung across their new community in Montréal and extends to their artistic practice. *Soba’s Corner* provokes emotional thirst and physical hunger to remember all of that which gives us joy and pain as peoples living within diasporic communities. To share a meal—irl or pre-scheduled online—especially during the on-going pandemic, is an extraordinary reciprocal relationship of trust, hope, and devout friendship that was once, without caution, unremarkable.

The recipe videos are filmed during conversations with the guests; Joni later transcribes and slates these conversations as the written recipe of the dish. Whilst the videos show how to create the recipes, the interviews provide personal, social, political, and economic context to the dishes over a conversation with their guest. Host and guests chew on present relations between Canadian provinces; hyphenated Chinese-Canadian-Canadian-Chinese dishes and identity; family immigration stories; family food and dining traditions; food court and oil sands; of authenticity and originality in having just the right ingredients, the correct brand, the correct crispiness. These conversations do not attempt to historicize the dishes, instead they reminisce on memories created around the food. These are the texts that appear as subtitles on the video:

all those feelings were coming back

feelings of familiarity, of comfort
all at once

it might not be
“authentic”
“traditional”

but it means something
to me,

The text floats across the screen, almost a distraction from the images and sound. They are not in sync. Although it might seem like it at first, this is not a YouTube glitch. Cheung intentionally withholds information by creating added layers in which the viewer might decide to move further and willingly seeks what the texts are and where they came from by clicking on the links in the description. *Soba's Corner* demands a slow watch, a rewatch, seeding doubt to which aspect of the video and our senses can be trusted. Neither text, image, sound, nor recipe is more important than the other; they are treated equally, demanding a horizontal-looking contrary to how our attention is fought over online. With at least three different timelines in the video, overlapping stories exist simultaneously, diminishing capitalist notions of originality, a single truth, and sole authorship.

One may stumble on *Soba's Corner* on Youtube, a gallery space, or a monitor in a public site, yet such accidental encounters, nevertheless, encourage that the audience must mutually share their time to begin peeling the layers of complexity in the work. Cheung allows the viewer to decide whether to dig deeper on their own accord. If this exchange is accepted, the viewer might start to recognize the variety of approaches utilized in peeling back layers of generational, colonial, imperial, and capitalist legacy through stories of and around food. Cheung does not ration. Sustenance is afforded beyond ingredient lists, preparation methods, and traditional dishes. The promise of *Soba's Corner* is that you find nourishment in generosity.

Soba's Corner explores notions of authenticity through a multi-layered experience with image, text, sound, and movement while staying committed to the intimacy of what it means to be in relation. The experience is akin to seeing your first Magritte painting but with sizzling beef, sticky dumplings, clanking chopsticks, and sifting flour instead of a pipe that is not a pipe. In Rene Magritte's *Treachery of Images*, viewers might latch on the image depicted or the text written. However, Magritte defies rational thought because it was never about the text. Not the image either. Through this glitch, Magritte explores how our mind easily accepts what is perceived through the sign, signified, and signifier, and encourages viewers to question reality itself. In *Soba's Corner*, Cheung layers identity, food, geography, and memories that their relationships flutter beyond our understanding of signs such as "Chinese", "Canada", "authentic", "traditional", "recipe", and even "art". Joni Cheung's work challenges existing conditions that do not and cannot hold a complexity of flavours carrying thousands of years of history. Akin to Magritte's pipe and my *arroz caldo*, if the food made in *Soba's Corner* cannot be described using these words, then what are they?

- Ramolen Laruan