

# The Accidental Author

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**H**elen Tse is a fan of Shanghai: she loves Shanghaiese dumplings for breakfast, and believes the city compares favourably with Hong Kong, where she has also spent time. "It's different [to Hong Kong]. And though it's bigger, more difficult to get around, and I don't speak much Mandarin—whereas I speak fluent Cantonese—Shanghai's just got a bubbly feel about it. It's as though something's always about to happen."

Tse, the first British-born Chinese author, was in town to promote *Sweet Mandarin*, her book whose release will coincide with Chinese New Year. The book borrows its name from Tse's restaurant, which she runs with her two sisters, in their hometown of Manchester,

there: Tse goes on to describe the struggles of her mother in the backdrop of post-war Britain, and the story of the third generation – Tse and her sisters – as they make their way in a changing society and fulfil their shared dream of re-opening a family restaurant.

Though all three generations have faced adversity, the first – Kwok – had more than her fair share. And the book is dedicated not only to Tse's grandmother, but also to other Chinese people who have faced similar stigmas. "The book is especially for Chinese people who have moved abroad," says Tse. "90 percent of these people have ended up in the restaurant business. It's a big umbrella that frames the cultural

heritage. But it also leads to Chinese people being stereotyped, and I wanted to put the story straight. It's OK to come from the business, you know? And it's a testimony to the people who have done it."

Even so, Kwok's story is singularly impressive, as she was the first foreigner

in the area. Tse takes up the story: "My grandmother's restaurant opened even before there was a Chinatown in Manchester or, indeed, London. There were also no foreigners in the area, so, for most, it was their first taste of Chinese cuisine. For this reason, although grandmother's restaurant was famous for its curry, it served English food as well."

**T**he Tses' restaurant, for its part, is quite different from the Kwok variant. Though much of the motivation to open it stemmed from a desire to return to the family trade, *Sweet Mandarin* is not so much an homage to their grandmother's eatery, but a way to "improve the quality of Chinese cuisine in the UK" and to "give it a trendy twist". The Snake's Blood cocktail, for example, is an aphrodisiac which would be rather out of place on a traditional Chinese menu. But 'untraditional', as *Sweet Mandarin* has proved, hardly equates 'bad'. As Tse herself articulates: "judging by the amount of awards we've won..."

Grandmother Kwok's famous curry makes an appearance on the menu, and it was, in fact, the popularity of the dish that led to the book deal. "Writing the book was an accident, actually," laughs Tse. "My friend is a literary agent, and she approached the publishers (Random House) on my behalf with the idea of a cookbook featuring the recipes used in our restaurant, including the chicken curry. However, the publishers were interested in hearing our story as I am the first British-born Chinese author. Even though it's now going to be published in 33 countries, I still don't consider myself an author. Perhaps, when it comes out in February as the publisher's lead title for the month, it might sink in!"

## Shunde, Soy Sauce and Soul-Searching

The book took shape in 2002 when Tse took advantage of a job assignment in China, using it as a chance to retrace her family's history. "I felt that it was only natural to want to rediscover my roots," she evokes. Highlight of the expedition was a trip to Shunde, the village where her grandmother was born, and where her great grandfather started his soy sauce business: "I saw the small stone farmhouse where my grandmother grew up. There was still no electricity, no water, the fishing pond had dried up...if you closed your eyes, it was possible to imagine exactly my grandmother's upbringing. And it made me think a lot about my heritage. The seeds of the book were already in my mind."

And it's turned into a fulfilling process: "The book has helped to focus and bring all the family history together. I found out a lot about me and what makes me tick. Me and my grandmother are actually very similar: we're both independent, and very determined. Her hard working ethos – which was the only way she could escape poverty – has also rubbed off on me, except that perhaps I'm driven by a fear of a return to poverty. And by a love of my family – I want them all to do well. The book was also written out of gratitude – without my mother and my grandmother, I wouldn't be where I am today."

## Not Just Another Restaurateur, Not Just Another Restaurant

The book appears at an interesting time in the context of the debate on immigration in Britain, where there has been much talk on how best to 'integrate' different cultures into society. Former Foreign Secretary Jack Straw sparked a heated discourse recently when he questioned the necessity of the full veil worn by Muslim women, calling it a "visible statement of separation and of difference". This prompted Prime Minister Tony Blair to call for a "measured and considered public discussion" on the subject as a whole, and consequently Britain's current policy of 'promoting multiculturalism' – rather than 'Britishness' and 'nationhood'.

Tse, though, feels that there is still life in the multicultural approach. "I am proud to be British – Manchester will always be my home," she says. "And I certainly feel more British in Shanghai and Hong Kong than I do Chinese. In Britain, I'm more conscious of being Chinese because I'm in a minority. I think you have to surround yourself with what you are comfortable with. And after all, Britain has become what it is on the strength of its diversity."

Tse took part in a debate on national identity recently, which also included Lord Kinnock, Chairman of the British Council. She spoke specifically about

people who come from dual cultural backgrounds, as Tse herself does, and of their responsibility to act as bridges between home and host countries.

**B**ut this is not the only area in which the Tses give back to their community: *Sweet Mandarin* has partnered with a local college to create a School of Excellence that offers students the chance to learn about Chinese cuisine. "We are the first Chinese restaurant to open up to Western chefs. Now they can learn more about woks, machetes, marinating, and the drama of the Chinese kitchen! And also presentation skills, such as those used in preparing fruit origami. We want them to learn things from us: it helps community spirit. We also have a scheme called 'Meet my

Neighbour', where we invite a nearby block down, and give them discount prices for food and drink. Some neighbourhood watch programmes have been set up from this in the area."

Indeed, the opening of the

*Sweet Mandarin* restaurant gives the book an upbeat ending: in amongst all of the hardships – including the murder of Tse's soy sauce-making great-grandfather; the gambling addiction of her grandmother that led to the closure of the first restaurant; and the family's struggles as foreigners in post-war Britain – a tale of perseverance and success finally emerges. As a result, the book is billed as the "tale of three generations of exceptional Chinese women". And if some consider it rather immodest to describe your own self as an 'exceptional Chinese woman', Tse rather validly asks: "Where else can you find three twenty-somethings opening a successful, award-winning restaurant, having already had three successful careers, and then having a book published about it in 33 countries?" It should sound like a boast, but it's said very matter-of-fact.

And that goes for the whole of the interview: Tse could hardly have been more pleasant, especially as this writer had expected – considering her already substantial success – a brash, outgoing, confident young woman prone to self publicity. What was found, instead, was a bright, reserved, considered person inspired by a deep-rooted sense of family history to share a tale about which she is quite clearly – and rightly – proud.

*Helen Tse's Sweet Mandarin – A Family Autobiography is published by Random House. It will be available online from www.amazon.co.uk as of February 1, and in China in time for Chinese New Year.*



England. All three gave up a great deal to take part in the venture: Tse, 28, was a Cambridge-educated corporate hot shot with previous stints at Clifford Chance and PricewaterhouseCoopers; Tse's twin Lisa was a financier and lead anchor on Asian Sound Radio; while younger sister Janet, 27, has a degree in Electrical and Electronic Engineering from the University of Manchester's prestigious Institute of Science and Technology. Indeed, the story of the Tse sisters is a remarkable one, but not only for their many CV highlights, for the tight bond between the trio overshadows their achievements.

And it is this bond that comes across most strongly when talking to Tse. It was the 'family factor', she explains, that inspired her to take the plunge and open the restaurant: "The three of us are a very close. We never saw opening the restaurant together as taking a step backwards. Food is in our blood: it is the family measure to get us out of trouble. And the three jobs we had prior are integral to running a good restaurant. I was also keen to do something with my two sisters, and also to restore the family name – our grandmother had gambled the family restaurant away, and it was our dream to open a restaurant again."

## Reviving Granny's Curry

Indeed, it is Tse's grandmother who, in fact, proves to be the chief inspiration for her book. Born in Southern China in 1918, Lilly Kwok moved first to Hong Kong in the 30s, then on to Manchester in the 50s. And it is the charting of this journey, and the subsequent opening of the first Chinese restaurant in Manchester, that provides the book's principle storyline. But it doesn't stop