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ARBEITSVORHABEN

Shark Fin in China: A Cultural History

How did a tasteless, nutrient-poor part of a marine predator become one of the most prized symbols of status and refinement in early modern China and beyond? This project traces the cultural ascent of shark fin from an overlooked by-product to an elite delicacy deeply embedded in the rituals and social imagination between the fourteenth and early twentieth centuries. While shark fin soup had little culinary merit, it came to signify wealth, hospitality, and moral cultivation. Its prestige was not driven by merchants or imperial decree, but by scholars, poets, and physicians who encoded it with symbolic and medicinal value.

Through literary praise, gastronomic writing, and ritual etiquette, shark fin became a marker of social distinction. Its presence at banquets was expected; its absence, a subtle breach of decorum. This history offers a window into how cultural meanings are shaped and sustained, and how oceanic life was drawn into the fabric of Chinese society through an expanding foodscape.

This project does not, of course, advocate for the continued consumption of shark fin. On the contrary, it uses history to interrogate tradition. Beyond cuisine, it rethinks “maritime China”—not merely as trade or naval design, but as a realm of meaning, porous and entwined. As George Orwell wrote, “it could plausibly be argued that changes of diet are more important than changes of dynasty.” In this spirit, the project reflects on how traditions are made—and just as powerfully, unmade.

Recommended Reading

Po, Ronald C. *The Blue Frontier: Maritime Vision and Power in the Qing Empire*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.

—. “Qing China and Its Offshore Islands in the Long Eighteenth Century.” *The Historical Journal* 67, no. 3 (2024): 430–462.

—. *Shaping the Blue Dragon: Maritime China in the Ming and Qing Dynasties*. Liverpool University Press, 2024.

KOLLOQUIUM, 30.09.2025

From Luxury to Crisis? A Cultural History of Shark Fin in China and Beyond

Until earlier this year, global shark populations had continued to dwindle under the pressure of overexploitation.

Today, almost 40% of shark species are in danger of going extinct because of unsustainable fishing and the demand for shark fins. Central to this crisis is shark fin soup, which has been valued in China as a luxury since the early modern era. Why did shark fins, an ingredient with little flavour and no proven health benefits, come to signify wealth and social distinction, first in China and then across Asia and beyond, persisting even into the present day? This Kolloquium will examine how this transformation unfolded, who facilitated it, and by what means. Through the prism of foodscapes and conspicuous consumption, it will also reexamine the concept of "maritime China," which has long been associated with trade, migration, and naval warfare. Finally, it will examine the effectiveness of recent shark finning bans and raise the question of whether certain customs derived from past prestige should still be relevant in modern society, whose fate is inseparable from the fragility of the blue ecology.

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Cambridge oceanic histories

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