

**MAN EATING SHARK: UNRAVELLING THE
DEBATE ON THE (UN)ETHICAL CONSUMPTION
OF SHARK'S FIN IN SINGAPORE**

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(B.Soc.Sc (Hons), NUS)

A THESIS SUBMITTED

**FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF SOCIAL
SCIENCES**

DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

2015

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is my original work and it has been written by me in its entirety. I have duly acknowledged all the sources of information, which have been used in the thesis.

This thesis has also not been submitted for any degree in any university previously.



Teo Li Gek Pamela

08 January 2015

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Completing this long journey would not have been possible without the support following people, to whom I would like to express my gratitude and deepest appreciation:

My supervisor, Dr Harvey Neo, for his advice, encouragement and guidance through every step of this journey. His boundless patience and unwavering support have been more than I could have asked for. It has been an honour to have him as a supervisor since my undergraduate years.

The following people were of great assistance to the research process: Jonn Lu, Shark Savers, Jennifer Wong, Project:FIN, the ACRES staff, especially Rani, and all other “Save the Sharks” advocate groups. Thank you for sharing your knowledge and insights into the shark fin trade and your experience in the shark conservation movement.

All my respondents, especially the wedding couples: Thank you for taking the time out of your busy wedding preparation schedules to assist me in my research.

The extraordinary group of current and former graduate students of the Department of Geography at NUS, as well as several former undergraduates of the Department. Their friendship, encouragement and advice have kept me going through graduate student life, and particularly through the final stages of writing. Thank you to the staff of the Department as well, especially Pauline, for patiently attending to my requests and queries.

My friends, for patiently listen to my academic mutterings and generously supplying me with much needed coffee and sanity to tide me through the past few years. Thank you for your concern and encouragement and in helping me to the best you can.

My last and deepest thanks are to my family for their care, support and understanding throughout the entire process. Family dinner debates over the ethics of shark fin consumption may be bad for digestion but on a whole, they have been good for the soul.

SUMMARY

This thesis investigates the debate on shark fin consumption in Singapore. Animal advocacy groups have attempted to construct shark fin as a form of unethical food, persuading consumers to be more ethical and responsible consumers by forgoing its consumption. Yet, not all consumers remain convinced, problematizing the notion that consuming shark fin is a form of unethical food consumption. Through analysing the discursive framings of the anti-shark fin movement and drawing on focus group discussions and semi in-depth interviews with consumers and non-consumers, this thesis unravels the reasons behind the impasse in the shark fin debate and examines the complexities underlying consumer choice and consumption practices surrounding shark fin. It reveals how consumption practices are a more-than-human achievement, in which consumers' choice to consume ethically is contingent on the multi-faceted associations between animals, humans and space. It proposes that understanding animals as 'consumed subjects' instead of 'consumed objects' when analysing consumer-consumed relationship, will provide a better understanding of consumption choices and practices. Drawing on conceptual ideas from animal and hybrid geographies, the thesis provides an alternative approach towards analysing ethical food consumption practices, by illuminating the potential strength of considering animals as key epistemic actors that are inextricable to the social and political processes of food consumption practices.

Keywords: Ethical Food Consumption, Animal Geographies, Animal Advocacy, Human-Animal Relations, Animal Subjectivities, Sharks

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACRES	Animal Concerns Research & Education Society
AVA	Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority of Singapore
CITES	Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora
CMS	Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals
CoP	CITES Conference of Parties
FA	Fisheries Agency, Republic of China Council of Agriculture
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations
IPOA-SHARKS	International Plan of Action for the Conservation and Management of Sharks
ICCAT	International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NTUC	National Trades Union Congress
RWS	Resorts World Singapore
Sharks MOU	Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation of Migratory Sharks
TRAFFIC	Trade Records Analysis of Flora and Fauna in Commerce
UN	United Nations
WWF	World Wildlife Fund for Nature

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Beware the Man Eating Shark

“Don’t tell me that eating shark fin is cruel. Eating other animals is also equally cruel. Why just focus on sharks? There’s nothing wrong with eating shark fin.” (Bernard, Personal Interview)

“If you think about it, man can live without shark fin soup, but a shark cannot live without its fin. Isn’t it unfair? It doesn’t make sense to eat it.” (Leon, Personal Interview)

The “Save the Sharks” movement has risen in prominence in the animal welfare scene following concerns that high market demand for shark fins in East Asia has been pushing certain species of sharks¹ to extinction. The demand for shark fins is largely attributed to the demand for shark fin soup in Chinese communities, a Chinese delicacy that is traditionally served and consumed during Chinese festive celebrations and in important social contexts, such as corporate dinners, weddings and banquets, for its culinary and symbolic significance². For most consumers, the gustatory value of the fins resides primarily in their “chewy”, “sinewy” texture, which consumers claim provide a unique culinary experience, rather than its taste.

In addition to concerns over the sustainability of shark populations, a related concern regarding the welfare of sharks has also been raised. As the market value of shark meat is significantly lower than that of its fins (Lack & Sant, 2009), non-

¹ In this thesis, I use the term “shark(s)” to refer to shark species involved in the “fin trade”. While I acknowledge that using the term “shark(s)” masks “a heterogeneity of the living” (Derrida, 2008; Ritvo, 2007), or in this case, masks the diversity of shark species, I chose to continue utilising the term, as it is predominantly used by NGOs and the general public. Nevertheless, I do not ignore the power dynamics of the term and it will be the focus of my critique in Chapter Seven.

² For more information about shark fins, please refer to Chapter Two.

governmental organisations³ (NGOs) assert that this difference promotes the practice of “finning” – a fin harvesting technique that involves slicing off the fins of *live* sharks upon being caught, with their bodies then tossed overboard to conserve space on the fishing vessel. Images and videos depicting finless sharks sinking into the depths of the ocean, while bleeding profusely, have generated an overwhelming visual impact that has provoked much protest and emotional outrage from NGOs for subjecting sharks to what they argue is not only an abhorrent, morally objectionable process, but also a wasteful one.

NGOs have taken action at various points of the shark fin commodity chain to combat the looming threat facing shark populations drawn into the “fin trade”⁴, with the bulk of advocacy activities focused on the consumption end. These campaigns are oriented towards persuading consumers to “Say No to Shark Fin”, which involves halting their consumption of shark fin soup and/or choosing more “sustainable” and “ethical” options instead. Many of these campaigns have been launched in places that are prominent nodes in the fin consumption network such as China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore. Central to these “Say No to Shark Fin” campaigns is the construction of shark fin soup as an “unethical” food, whose commodity chain is replete with ethical quandaries. Consumers are informed that their decision to consume shark fin has not only created and fuelled an industry that threatens shark sustainability and ocean biodiversity, but has also driven the unrestrained killing of sharks through the morally suspect process of shark finning. Aside from educating consumers on the consequences of consuming shark fin, “Say No to Shark Fin” campaigns also attempt

³ The non-governmental organisations referenced in this thesis refer to a coalition of organisations involved in campaigning against the “shark fin trade” to some degree. These include established international organisations such as the World Wildlife Fund to marine conservation groups to small local-based volunteer groups.

⁴ The “fin trade” is placed in quotation marks, as it is not an established trade due to its illegal status.

to dispel popular conceptions of sharks as “fearsome man-eaters”, in hopes of elevating the ethical status of sharks as beings worthy of conservation and protection.

To make it easier for consumers to engage with and understand the problems of shark fin consumption, NGOs emphasize how the shark fin issue does not solely concern the welfare of sharks but also that of humans. As some shark species function as apex predators, their bodies contain a higher level of toxic chemicals from biomagnification, posing a health risk to those who consume shark fins on a regular basis⁵ (Coelho *et al.*, 2010; Mull *et al.*, 2012). NGOs also draw attention to how the “shark fin industry” exploits shark fishermen in rural villages, compromising the health and safety of these fishermen by encouraging them to pursue sharks for a living (Shark Savers, 2014).

As such, subsumed within the campaigns’ messages is the rhetoric of *responsible consumerism*. Since consumption choices directly influence the welfare and lives of various actors in the shark fin network, consumers are exhorted to consume responsibly and “be part of the solution” (WWF, 2013) to eliminate the “unethical” practice of consuming shark fin soup. The consumer, or more specifically his/her consumption choice, is thus a vital ingredient in ensuring the success of anti-shark fin campaigns. On an individual level, choosing not to consume shark fin reflects the commitment of the consumer in carrying out one’s moral responsibility to nonhuman animals, while on a collective level, one’s choice provides evidence of support and legitimacy for NGO advocacy efforts. In retrospect, these campaigns open up new spaces of action that offer people an opportunity to engage with animal welfare, as well

⁵ This is ironic, as one of the reasons of consuming shark fin soup is for its supposed health benefits (see Chapter Two).

as bring into being a place for human-animal interactions that enables humans to rethink their ethical relations with animals.

1.2 To Eat or Not to Eat? A Provocation for Research

While anti-shark fin campaigns have been simmering for some time, 2013 marked the year that NGOs witnessed a breakthrough in their efforts. In the legal sphere, five highly traded shark species were added to the Convention on International Trade on Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Fauna (CITES) Appendix II list to ensure that exports of these species are sustainable and legal (CITES, 2013). Meanwhile, shark fishing regulations have tightened, with Taiwan becoming the first Asian country to implement a regulation that rendered it illegal for fishermen to cut off fins and dump shark bodies overboard, as part of efforts to prevent “finning” (Fisheries Agency, 2014). At the consumption end, shark fin consumption in the top consuming locations has declined, with China, the leading consumer market of shark fin, observing a decrease in fin consumption by 50-70% (The Guardian, 2014); Shark fin imports in Hong Kong, the largest trader and consumer of shark fin, have also seen import levels decreasing by 70% (South China Morning Post, 2014). Surveys conducted in these countries reflect this trend, revealing that a sizeable number of people would support a ban on shark fin and are willing to give up the dish (WildAid, 2014).

Yet, amidst the positive outlook for shark protectionists, it is questionable if decreasing consumption and trade figures are indicative of a shift towards ethical consumerism. For instance, declining consumption in China and Hong Kong has been attributed to reasons other than environmental concern and animal welfare, namely that of government intervention and health scares from consuming artificial shark fin⁶ (The

⁶ Artificial shark fins are commonly made from mung bean starch, gelatine, sodium and various chemicals to give the characteristic mucilaginous appearance of shark fin. There are concerns that the chemicals used to create artificial shark fins are poisonous and possess the risk of damaging the consumer’s lungs and other organs (South China Morning Post, 2013).

Washington Post, 2013). An investigative report conducted by China Central Television (CCTV) on shark fins served in restaurants across several mainland Chinese cities had been particularly influential in igniting debate on shark fin nationally and internationally, after revealing that some restaurants have been serving chemically-made shark fin at premium prices to consumers who were made to believe they were consuming the real thing (CCTV, 2013).

Additionally, it is uncertain if expressed sentiments will translate into action. As fieldwork conducted among Singaporean consumers in this thesis evince, many stated that although individually they would not order shark fin for their own consumption, they would still serve it at special occasions and consume it if served to them by others. The “Say No to Shark Fin” campaigns and the broader issue of shark fin consumption have also received a fair share of criticism and opposition from consumers in the country, with some accusing NGOs of being culturally imperialistic and denying their human rights to consume what they wish.

On a whole, the shark fin issue, as reflected by the two opening quotes in this chapter, has garnered a mixed response from the public, becoming the source of a polemical public debate over the (im)morality of consuming shark fin soup that dominated Singapore’s news headlines and public attention between 2013 and 2014. NGOs assert that consumers continue to consume shark fin as they are unaware of the consequences of their consumption. Yet, contrary to what NGOs “believe”, consumers in general are actually relatively aware of the issues surrounding shark fin consumption. However, they remain apathetic towards taking action in changing their consumption behaviour and are uninterested in taking personal responsibility for the problems that emerge (AsiaOne, 2013). Understanding this apathy, along with the points of debate that emerged, eventually provided the impetus to undertake a thesis research project,

addressing the basic questions of: what are the origins of shark fin consumption? Why does shark fin feature so strongly in Chinese food culture? More importantly, how does the shark figure into the story of shark fin consumption?

1.3 Thesis Aims and Objectives

The debate on shark fin consumption raises a series of questions revolving around two intersecting themes:

- i) ***The politics of ethical food consumption and responsible consumerism:*** Is consuming shark fin *necessarily* unethical and a form of “irresponsible” consumerism, in light of the socio-cultural context that the dish is served and consumed? What makes an animal ‘good’ or ‘bad’ to eat? How do NGOs mediate human-shark relations and what are the impediments that hinder NGO activities? Is educating consumers on the consequences of their consumption sufficient to motivate ethical and responsible consumerism? Is mobilising consumer choice as a medium for initiating political action on the shark industry ultimately effective? How do consumers make sense of anti-shark fin discourses and manoeuvre these discourses to justify their consumption of the dish?
- ii) ***Human-animal ethical relations:*** How do consumers navigate between moral responsibilities owed to humans and non-human animals in their consumption practices? How do human-animal relations influence consumers’ consumption choices, particularly in their decisions to consume ethically or not? More specifically, how does the shark’s “animality” reinforce and/or subvert calls to forgo its consumption?

In this thesis, I utilise the debate on shark fin consumption in Singapore as a site to investigate these themes, unravelling some of the reasons why NGO advocacy efforts to persuade consumers to stop consuming shark fin soup have evoked an ambivalent response from consumers. Through delving into the social intricacies of shark fin consumption, I draw attention to how consumption practices are a more-than-human achievement, in which consumers' choice to consume ethically is contingent on the complex and multi-faceted associations between animals, humans and space. In other words, consumption practices are not only dependent upon human social relations and the material infrastructure that such practices take place in, but also dependent on humans' relation to the food-animal being consumed.

Actor Network Theory (ANT) will be adopted as a lens to guide the course of my investigation. With its emphasis on relationality and the fluidity of analytical categories, I utilise ANT to illustrate how sharks are potent agents in both their corporeal and representative forms that “make a difference” in shaping attitudes towards its consumption. In doing so, I aim to provide an alternative approach towards analysing ethical food consumption practices, by illuminating the potential strength of considering animals as dynamic subjective beings that are inextricable to the social and political processes of consumption choices and practices.

At its broadest scale, this thesis aims to provide academic attention on the issue of shark finning, particularly on the politics of shark fin consumption. In addition to highlighting how ethical food consumption studies can benefit from a consideration of how the consumed product – the animal – is inextricable from consumption practices, it also seeks to make an empirical contribution to a growing body of animal geography research centred on human relations with non-mammalian animals (see Chapter Three).

1.4 Charting a Course: Thesis Roadmap

Having sketched out a broad overview of the research impetus, the remainder of this chapter will expatiate on the objectives of the study and outline the direction and organisation of the thesis. **Chapter Two** foregrounds the origins and context of shark fin consumption in Chinese communities. **Chapter Three** appraises relevant literature in geography and related disciplines on ethical food consumption and reviews recent debates within animal and hybrid geographies on animal subjectivity. Here, I draw a theoretical connection between these subfields, highlighting how ethical consumption research can benefit from engaging with the epistemological and ethical concerns of animal and hybrid geographies. Following which, the chapter concludes with the theoretical-conceptual framework guiding the thesis' analysis. **Chapter Four** outlines the methodological approach undertaken for this study and reflects on the methods utilised and on ethical issues encountered during the research process. **Chapter Five** charts the growth of anti-shark fin campaigns, drawing attention to the politics and economics that have given rise to the "Shark Crisis", setting the foundations for why NGOs have shifted their advocacy activities towards one that is consumer-oriented.

The next two chapters comprise the empirical discussion of the thesis. **Chapter Six** elaborates on NGO's rationale in advocating anti-shark fin consumption. The chapter will then contextualise the research in Singapore by charting the development of NGO activities and their "Say No to Shark Fin" campaigns. Following which, it examines how the socio-cultural context of shark fin consumption in Singapore problematises the concepts of "choice" and "responsibility" used in "Say No to Shark Fin" campaigns. I begin by examining the narratives mobilised by NGOs in their campaigns. In analysing the discourses and discursive framings embedded within anti-shark fin messages, I explicate the limitations of the framings and the tendency of the campaigns in providing i) a monolithic presentation that consuming shark fin soup is

an unethical act of consumption and ii) the reductive and homogenized portrayal of the shark fin consumer as an “irresponsible” consumer. Drawing upon empirical material taken from interviews and focus group discussions conducted with Singaporean consumers, I unveil the complexities surrounding consumer choice and consumption practices. In doing so, I build upon ethical food consumption research, which has critiqued the tendency of NGO campaigns in celebrating consumer autonomy and rationality, and in focusing on the consumer in isolation, neglecting the fact that consumption choices and practices are socially and geographically embedded.

In **Chapter Seven**, I suggest that ethical food consumption practices need to be understood beyond the consumer and the socio-spatial context of consumption practices, but also to consider the consumer-consumed object relation. In particular, I focus on the role that the consumed animal plays in influencing consumption choices and practices and examine how a shark’s “animality”, or its “nonhuman charisma” (Lorimer, 2007), may reinforce shark fin consumption and may potentially be the cause of consumer apathy towards adopting ethical and responsible consumerism. I propose that acknowledging and analysing how the consumed object, or the consumed animal-subject, influences consumption practices may provide a better understanding and enable a broader conceptualisation of how consumption choices and practices are constituted. The consumed animal-subject, much less the relationship between the consumer and the consumed animal, has been less of an explicit concern within ethical food consumption studies, often being framed as static components in their processed forms as a commodity to be consumed. Yet, without dissecting how animals themselves are central to consumption choices and practices, only a partial picture of the socio-politics underlying consumption choice is presented. My key contention is that how people understand their moral obligations to animals and by extension, their attitude towards campaign messages on ethical food consumption, is fundamentally connected to how human-shark relations are constituted. Hence, the ambivalence of

some consumers towards the “Say No to Shark Fin” campaigns and shark fin consumption is dependent on how these consumers relate to the subject being consumed – the shark. In tandem with the turn towards exploring nonhuman subjectivities and the inseparability of nonhumans from the constitution of human sociality, as embodied by work within hybrid and animal geographies, this chapter demonstrates how sharks are visible potent agents both in their corporeal and representative forms that “make a difference” in shaping consumption practices. Finally, **Chapter Eight** concludes by laying out the empirical and theoretical contributions of this thesis to ethical food consumption research.

CHAPTER TWO: OF SHARK FIN AND CHINESE CULTURE

2.1 Overview

Before proceeding to discuss the multi-faceted politics of shark fin consumption, this chapter provides a contextual framing to the origin and importance of shark fin to Chinese food culture, which is essential to situating later chapters in a broader socio-cultural and political-economic context. Specifically, I discuss the reasons behind why shark fin has come to be regarded as a high-value food (Section 2.2) and why it is a key fixture in Chinese wedding banquets. In Section 2.3, I trace how shark fin consumption became established in Singapore, followed by elaborating on the intricacies of the Chinese wedding banquet. I argue that the reason why shark fin consumption persist in the present is because its consumption is deeply entwined with histories, cultural beliefs and traditions – what Haraway calls their *pastpresents*, a “material-semiotic tool” Haraway uses to think about how ‘the past, present and future are all very much knotted into one another’ (2008: 292). In other words, the present (and future) politics of shark fin consumption is very much knotted with the past and understanding the *pastpresents* of shark fin consumption may hold the key to resolving present (and future) problems concerning its consumption.

2.2 The Rise of Shark Fin in Chinese Food Culture

“...that great delicacy of the modern cuisine, shark fin, appears to have become popular at this time [Song Dynasty]” – Freeman (1977: 155)

Throughout the ages, the Chinese have considered shark fin a high-status food (Anderson & Anderson, 1977), one of the eight treasured foods from the sea⁷, which

⁷ The eight treasured foods of the sea are shark fins, oysters, abalones, Beche-de-mer (sea cucumbers), roe, fish maw and fish skin.

accounts for its popularity at banquet settings. The consumption of high-value food throughout Chinese history is part of the Chinese “foodway” – ‘...a way of life that involves food, food habits, and food consumption’ (Wu & Tan, 2001:1). More importantly, the “conspicuous consumption” of high-valued food in Chinese foodway represents a person’s taste and is a demonstration of social standing (Wu & Cheung, 2002). In the case of shark fin, being able to serve and consume the dish is seen as an indicator of economic success, as well as economic progress.

2.2.1 *Constructing a High-Value Status*

The association of shark fin as a high-value food in Chinese food culture is an embedded historical and cultural phenomenon. The consumption of shark fin occupies a long history in Chinese food culture, originating during the era of the Song dynasty (960-1279CE). Its status as a high-value food emerged when it was institutionalized as *haute cuisine* as a part of banquets prepared for emperors during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644AD) (Rose, 1996, cited in Clarke *et al.*, 2007: 307). As fins at most comprised only 5% of a shark’s body, the fact that only so little could be obtained from the body of a shark made shark fins noble and precious – food befitting of those in upper social classes, such as the emperor. Indeed, shark fins were listed as articles of tribute when officers of coastal regions visited the Chinese emperor (Yang *et al.*, 1997).

The high-value of shark fin is also partially attributed to the elaborate process involved in processing its raw form for cooking. According to Steve, a chef from one of the restaurants I interviewed, making shark fin soup is “...a long, tedious and costly process... [that] can take up to a week to prepare”. Fins are obtained from any variety of shark species but the shark fin market tends to focus on around fourteen species, such as the blue shark and the scalloped hammerhead (Eilperin, 2011). For most traders, it is the *size* rather than the species that matters when it comes to price. Shark fins can sell for US\$880 per pound on the Hong Kong market, and a single fin from a basking

shark – the second largest fish in the world (and also an internationally protected shark species) – was once sold in Singapore for US\$57,000 in 2003 (Eilperin, 2011). The pectoral and caudal fins are preferred from an economic standpoint, since they yield a higher percentage of fin needles – the key part of the fin that contributes to the texture of shark fin soup (Vannuccini, 1999).

The first stage of fin processing involves removing the denticles of raw fins by immersing them into lukewarm water, with some fin types requiring heat treatment over slow fire for up to eight hours. Once the skin and denticles are sufficiently soft to work with, workers use a knife to remove the denticles manually, along with the main bone, by cutting each fin from the broad edge to loosen the fin needles on either side of the cartilaginous platelet. Following this, workers will trim the fins to remove any undesirable waste material and to give it a tidy appearance. At this point, fins can be sold in the market as “wet fins” or they can be dried in the sun for a few days for later use. Fins are also usually bleached either through smoking with sulphur overnight (Liu *et al.*, n.d., cited in Vannuccini, 1999) or treated with 3% hydrogen peroxide for about thirty minutes to give them a more desirable whitish colour (Subashingha, n.d., cited in Vannuccini, 1999).

Preparing the shark fin for cooking also requires a significant amount of effort. Kitchen workers rehydrate fins by placing them into cold tap water for half a day to soften them, after which they are transferred to hot water infused with ginger and spring onions. Once the shark fin and needles are tender, workers will soak them in tap water for four more hours, before boiling them for six to eight hours with chicken stock and Chinese ham to produce the shark fin soup base. Since the fins do not contribute any flavouring to the soup, chefs will add various ingredients, such as ham, pork and crab meat, to enhance the taste of the soup.

2.2.2 Cultural Ideas on Shark Fin

Shark fin, along with other seafood products, were and are consumed by the Chinese partly because of their links with a range of culturally derived ideas and behaviour. Food and medicine have long been integral parts of the Chinese food system, and many Chinese identify their food items, develop cooking methods and create local cuisines with a particular concern for health promotion and longevity (Wu & Tan, 2001). One important cultural perspective of Chinese seafood consumption is linked to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). Of particular relevance is the concept of *bu fa* (補法) (Tonifying Method) foods, which are believed to possess a strengthening or tonic-like property (Anderson, 1988; Simoons, 1991; Newman, 2004). These foods are typically exotic and unusual in appearance (Anderson, 1988), and linked to this exoticism is a preference for rare foods (Klein, 2007) and the desire for “wild” foods, which are considered to be more *bu fa* than non-wild foods, as they are seen as “unpolluted”, “precious” and “special”.

Ideas related to sexual potency are also associated with *bu* foods. While many *bu* foods may not have the sole or primary purpose of being an aphrodisiac, by virtue of being *bu*, they are seen to promote sexual potency and virility (Anderson, 1988). Shark fin, or sharks more broadly, are believed to embody these properties due to their physical and symbolic productions, and are commonly held to promote general health, enormous benefits for men’s potency, women’s complexions, life energy and cardiovascular well-being, among other things. Ancient texts on food and medicine have alluded to the health benefits of shark fin. In *The Addition of the Outline of Chinese Materia Medica*, it is stated that shark fin can help build up one’s health (Vannuccini, 1997). Yet, while many consumers may view shark meat and fins as nutritious, scientific studies have warned that the high levels of toxins - methylmercury⁸

⁸ Methylmercury is a neurotoxin that can cause severe neurological and heart problems.

(Escobar-Sanchez *et al.*, 2010) and BMAA⁹ (Mondo *et al.*, 2012) – some shark species accumulate in their bodies can pose a potential threat to human health.

Beliefs held on the potential health benefits of shark fin are particularly prevalent amongst the older generation. Across my focus group participants, those who stated that they consumed shark fin because of health reasons tended to be those aged fifty and above. As Cheng, the parent of one of the three wedding couples involved in the inter-generational focus group, claimed:

“... [Shark fin] is good for you. Have you ever heard of sharks getting cancer? No right? That’s why we should eat them, so that we can be strong and healthy like them.”

When his son (the groom) pointed out that there was no scientific proof on the cancer-resistant properties of sharks, Cheng retorted, “You youngsters don’t know anything. Why do you think Chinese people live so long? It’s because we always eat what’s good for our bodies!” From the case of Cheng, as well as others who share his beliefs, the combination of traditional knowledge (TCM) and symbolism arising from some aspects of physical association have enrolled together to reinforce the notion that consuming sharks is “good” for health. This is partially one of the reasons why NGOs struggle to convince the older generation not to consume shark fin, a point I return to discuss in Chapter Five and Six, as well as why the target of their advocacy efforts has been directed towards the younger generation.

“The younger generation is the future. If we educate them, hopefully... we will [soon] have a generation of non-shark fin consumers.” (Michael Aw, Marine Photographer and leader of “No Shark Fins Singapore” campaign)

⁹ BMAA is a neurotoxin that is linked to increased risk of Alzheimer’s and other degenerative brain diseases.

Considering the close relationship between food and health in Chinese food culture, the perceived health benefits of consuming shark fin coupled with its status as a high-value food, it is not surprising to find that shark fin soup is a much sought after dish to be served during wedding banquets, which I now turn to discuss.

2.3 Shark Fin Consumption in Singapore

Shark fin soup originated as a regional delicacy in the Southern provinces of China, predominantly in the coastal areas of Guangdong and Southern Fujian, where seafood consumption is a core essence of Southern Chinese cuisine (Anderson, 1988; Simmons, 1991). Its spread beyond China can be largely attributed to highly dispersed and effective trading networks among international Chinese diasporas, many of whom originated from this region of China, which has had a strong role, both historically and in the contemporary world, in seafood trade and consumption (Yifeng, 2002; Anderson, 2007; Tagliacozzo & Chang, 2011). Hong Kong for instance, is the centre of the global shark fin trade. Approximately half of the world's shark fins moves through it at any time, and it serves as a gateway for both the mainland Chinese market and other Asian countries that consume shark fin soup.

As most Singaporean Chinese's ancestors hailed from Southern China (Chua & Rajah, 2001), it is unsurprising that shark fin would feature so predominantly in their gastronomic culture and inherited cultural practices. In Singapore, shark fin soup is frequently served and consumed in social contexts, such as corporate dinners or important social events, but for most Singaporean Chinese, the Chinese wedding banquet remains the one occasion that they encounter the dish most.

2.3.1 *Sharks Fin and the Chinese Wedding Banquet*

For the Chinese, weddings are one of the key points in the ceremonial life of an individual. Chinese wedding ceremonies are often lengthy elaborate celebrations and colourful affairs replete with many symbolic meanings. Although contemporary Chinese weddings have evolved considerably from the past and have become increasingly divorced from Chinese tradition, “tradition” continues to play an important part in the wedding, and the performances of various customary rites remain important to Singaporean Chinese (Hoon, 1997). For instance, while the wedding couple’s parents and members of the older generation no longer control celebrations, the rites and displays at weddings are still carried out to uphold the “face” (reputation) of the families involved. The wedding banquet in particular, remains a key and expected component of Chinese weddings rites, which incorporates the bride into her new status as a member of her husband’s family (van Gennep, 1960, also see Freeman, 1957; Yeh, 1969). It is a ‘consumption-oriented rite of passage’ (Boden 2003: 50) and a social performance that exhibits the social status of the families involved usually through extravagance.

One of the key concepts associated with weddings and banquets is that of developing social relationships and representing one’s social commitments and adherence to cultural norms. Within the worldview of most wedding couples I interviewed, the wedding banquet is likened to an obligatory formality every wedding couple has to undergo and primarily held to “please” their elders and seniors.

“I think for the Chinese, the wedding banquet is a *must*. We have *never* thought of not having one. Anyway, our parents won’t let us do that too.” (Celine, Personal Interview)

“If you ask me, whether we hold one [wedding banquet] depends on the parents and in-laws. It may be our wedding but sometimes it’s not up to you. We might be laid back when it comes to

tradition, but this kind of thing depends on the parents. Really, whatever they want, we would just go along.” (James, Personal Interview)

Food served at a wedding banquet is one means of conveying and commemorating status, as it has a uniquely important place in the social scheme of things – it is a marker of ‘social status, ritual status, special occasions and other social facts’ (Anderson, 1988: 201). There are complex social rules involved with food at a wedding banquet, where even the number of courses served has a symbolic significance; every Chinese wedding banquet consists at least an eight-course dinner, as the Chinese believe that eight is a lucky number, and certain dishes are always served during the banquet. Each dish is specially selected¹⁰ for its symbolic meaning – happiness, prosperity, longevity or fertility – usually to bless the newlywed couple and their marriage. For example, scallops are a symbol of fertility as the Chinese pronunciation of scallops (帶子) is a homophone for the phrase “raising children”. Including scallops into a wedding banquet menu would bless the couple with plenty of children. Shark fin on the other hand, owing to its expensive nature, is a symbol of wealth and prosperity, thus wishing the newlywed couple prosperity in their new marriage. Given that the Chinese wedding banquet is a consumption-oriented rite of passage, serving shark fin soup also reflects the economic and social status of the host as one who belongs to the upper echelons of society.

The banquet itself is also a symbol of reciprocal respect between the wedding couple and guests. From most guests’ perspective, the type of food served is an indicator of the quality of the wedding banquet.

“For people who attend the wedding, their friends and relatives, to judge whether the banquet is good, they’ll look at the menu... Especially the older folks... they’ll expect good expensive food

¹⁰ The menu for the wedding banquet is usually fixed by the hotel or restaurant. However, wedding couples are free to negotiate for different dishes to be included in the banquet.

like *bao yu* [abalone], *yu chi* [shark fin], *hai shen* [sea cucumber]...” (Sarah, Guest Relations Officer with Ocean Hotel¹¹, Personal Interview)

Serving shark fin soup reciprocates a way of expressing a complete and respectable menu, and its non-appearance may lead guests to feel they are being “cheated” or not receiving value for money, because they would have already given a wedding gift prior to the banquet, usually in a monetary form. As Chris notes:

“For me, wedding dinners are the only time I get to eat shark fin, so if I don’t get one, I feel a bit short changed after paying so much.”

To the older generation, the presence of shark fin at wedding banquets is to be expected, as a sign of filial duty.

“Shark fin is special because you don’t eat it all the time. It’s like a treat. We used to treat our children to shark fin, so it’s expected that they treat their parents on their special day, right?”
(Joyce, Personal Interview)

The notion of respect is also expected on part of the guest to consume what is served to him/her. “Silly girl,” my grandmother once chided me upon noticing that I did not touch my bowl of shark fin soup at a relative’s wedding banquet a few years ago. “This is good soup. It’s not cheap. If you don’t eat it, people will think you’re ungrateful.” To pacify my grandmother, I reluctantly picked up the spoon and finished the bowl. “Good girl. Don’t waste food and people’s generosity. That’s bad.” Seen this way, shark fin stands as a measure of respect not only in terms of its economic value, as mentioned in the previous section, but also in its symbolic meaning.

Shark fin, and by extension the shark, is thus entwined and entrenched in Chinese food and ritual. Seeing the role and importance of shark fin in Chinese food

¹¹ In accordance to the interviewee’s wish, the original name of the hotel was replaced with a pseudonym.

culture as a pastpresent presents a way for thinking differently about the politics surrounding the ethics of its consumption, one where the sustainability of shark populations, concerns of cruelty from fin harvesting are not the only things at stake, but also of responsibilities towards others through social performance and rituals. In response to anti-shark fin campaigns, one of my older respondents had this to say:

“All this talk about saving sharks, what about saving Chinese culture? Nowadays young people have forgotten their roots. If you stop eating shark fin, you take away more Chinese culture. Is that right you tell me?” (Wong, Personal Interview, translated from a local dialect)

Wong’s point encapsulates one of the main points of contention advanced by proponents of shark fin consumption, in that animal activists are practicing cultural discrimination by telling the Chinese to give up a food that is “central” to their consumption practices. These contentions will be discussed further in the empirical chapters.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has foregrounded the socio-cultural-historical significance of shark fin in the Chinese foodway and in the Chinese wedding banquet, as well as delved into the intricacies of Chinese wedding practices in Singapore. It is essential that context underlying the consumption of shark fin be known, in order to understand why its consumption continues to pervade Chinese society and why advocates of the anti-shark fin movement in Singapore face an uphill challenge in convincing people, particularly those of the older generation, that shark fin is an “unethical” food and should not be consumed. It is against this contextual background that the debate over the consumption of shark fin and the nuances on how people make sense of the anti-shark fin movement can be thrown into sharper relief in the empirical chapters.

CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Overview

This chapter reviews selected bodies of academic literature to flesh out the theoretical intersections underlying my critical analysis of the shark fin debate in Singapore, as well as the theory underlying my methodology, which is discussed in the following chapter.

My theoretical approach is informed by two sets of literature: ethical food consumption research and more-than-human geographies. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the topic, the literature reviewed, while predominantly situated within human geography, also include contributions of scholars beyond the discipline. I begin by discussing the agenda behind research on the ethical consumption of animals, as well as geography's interest and role in ethical food consumption research in Section 3.2. Following this, I explore the three main dimensions of ethical food consumption research relevant to the thesis: the commodity chain approach (Section 3.3), the socio-cultural context of consumption (Section 3.4) and the politics of ethical consumption (Section 3.5). While the scope of review is wide, I argue that engaging with these aspects of the ethical consumption literature can help to reveal the tendency of existing ethical food consumption literature in neglecting the role of the consumed object. Building on this, I propose in Section 3.6 how engaging with the sub-discipline of animal geographies and post-human theories reviewed in Section 3.7 can provide an additional dimension of understanding and analysing the complex ethical relations between consumer and the consumed. I argue that reframing the consumer-consumed relationship to take into consideration the role of the consumed subject can be productive, in understanding how animals themselves are implicated in the construction of moral orderings and ethical relationships within the field of consumption.

3.2 The Agenda behind Ethical Consumption of Animals

In recent years, the notion of ethical food consumption has gained traction in public consciousness, invoking people to consider the broader environmental, social, personal and moral implications of their everyday consumption choices and practices. Research on ethical food consumption had emerged from ethical consumption research in general, which in turn was an outcome of the broader ‘moral turn’ in geography in the early 2000s (see Smith, 1997; 2000; Wilk, 2001).

The phenomenon of ethical food consumption has emerged largely in tandem with initiatives and movements campaigning around ‘ethical’ issues defined as fair-trade, animal welfare and environmental sustainability to name a few, attributed to concerns surrounding contemporary systems of food production. These concerns encompass labour standards in the food production chains, anxieties and concerns on food safety and (in)security, such as the disquieting implications of eating GM foods and environmental implications brought on by intensive agricultural and animal farming.

One dimension of food consumption that has received much attention and debate amongst scholars and campaigners has been the production practices and consumption of food animals both terrestrial and aquatic. The intensification of animal breeding and rearing brought about by the rise in factory farming to meet the expanding global demand for meat, as well as the widespread depletion of fisheries, and other aquatic species indirectly, by current fishing technology in the fishing and whaling industry, have created pervasive social and environmental problems. Increasingly, there has been an explicit interest in engaging with the ethical dilemmas raised by animal-linked food production and moral choices revolving around the ethics of eating the flesh and bodies of animals and animal products (Stuart, 2009; Cole *et al.* 2009). Ethical questioning about eating animals is predominantly linked to concerns

encompassing the lives of animals in factory farming, particularly animal death, suffering and the processes of slaughter (Ilea, 2009), and on the objectification of animals – the loss of an animal’s “animality” as it is commodified into mere inanimate objects (Emel & Wolch, 1998; Franklin, 1999; MacLachlan, 2005).

Concerns over animal physical and mental welfare associated with contemporary systems of production can be attributed to the growth in the acknowledgement of animal sentience, and increasing consciousness concerning animal rights and animal welfare. Responding to wider debate in moral philosophy, society has increasingly regarded animals as having a status as morally considerable subjects as they are attributed with characteristics such as sentience or sapience, meaning that they can experience pain, stress and boredom and can be attributed with rights, which give them a moral status equivalent to humans (Singer, 1975; Regan, 1983). The emergence of these concerns and growing animal activism reveals the erosion of lines that historically divide the animal world into those worth protecting because they were seen as either part of nature (wildlife) or the human community (pets) and those not worth protecting because they were neither (farm animals) and constituted sources of profit and value. The status of commodified domestic animals such as cattle, sheep, pigs and chickens, once excluded from spheres of moral concern and legal protection, is being re-evaluated.

As such, these animal-related issues have catalysed a wave of social movements and scholarly pursuit in generating an agenda advancing the ethical consumption of food animals. The ethical consumption of animals can be understood in two ways. Firstly, it relates to consuming food that is more ethically produced than its conventional counterpart, measured in terms of their reduced negative impact on the environment and on animal welfare and well-being. Secondly, it refers to consuming “alternatives” or substitutes of the originally consumed animal, where its consumption is intrinsically unethical in itself regardless of how or where it is produced. For instance,

the very idea of consuming companion animals such as dogs or cats is generally viewed as “abhorrent and morally corrupt” (Podberscek, 2009). The case underlying the agenda for the ethical consumption of sharks falls predominantly under the second category, in which shark consumption is considered unethical in itself.

3.2.1 Placing Animals in Ethical Food Consumption Research

Against the background, and acknowledgement, of the consequences of animal-linked food consumption and production practices, recent work in geography and other disciplines has become increasingly interested in investigating how to change these practices from both production and consumption ends. This has been a prevailing interest in ethical consumption research, where scholars have examined the conditions and motivations underlying why consumers choose to consume, or not to consume, ethical products; critically analysing the factors that facilitate or limit ethical consumption and investigating the discursive processes and interventions involved in increasing traceability to consumers and getting consumers to consume more ethically.

The theme of ethics and consumption has occupied a central place in geographical scholarship, where consumption has come to serve as an entry-point for thinking about ethical and political responsibility (Hartwick, 2000), following the discipline’s “moral turn” towards considering morality, ethics and responsibility as an avenue of geographic inquiry (Sayer, 2003). A large body of work has been dedicated to critically analysing the relationship between ethics and consumption, in which consumption is approached as a medium for moral action. Geographers have investigated how space and place affect the ethics of consumption and how particular socio-spatial configurations influence ethical relations between the consumer subject and the consumed object embedded within the networks of consumption (Goss, 2004). In the following section, I review research examining the pragmatics of invoking ethical responsibility amongst consumers and in getting people to adopt “ethical”

consumption behaviour. Given the interdisciplinary character of the field, apart from reviewing geographical literature, I will also make links to both wider social science literature, as well as consumer behaviour studies.

3.3 Reconnecting Consumers and Producers through Knowledge

Modern geographies of food have arguably distanced consumers, both spatially and cognitively, from producers, as well as concealing the very social relations and environmental impacts underlying food production (Duffy *et al.*, 2005; Hudson & Hudson, 2003). This “disconnection” between food production and processing spaces and consuming spaces has meant that the kind of activities in the former is far removed from consumers’ everyday experiences and knowledge. Moreover, food production has become increasingly complex with the involvement of new technologies of production, such as genetic modification (Brom, 2000), which are even further from the everyday understanding of most consumers, generating a form of cognitive division. Hence, consumers may feel ‘increasingly alienated from the way their food is grown and processed’ (Duffy *et al.*, 2005: 17-18). In addition to obscuring consumer knowledge, this disconnection also reduces consumer awareness on the consequences of their consumption behaviour, and has thus been thought of as a barrier towards the adoption of more ethical means of (food) consumption, as well as an impediment towards enacting ethical responsibility to distant others (Smith, 2000).

In the case of animal-linked food production, the globalisation of animal food economy has rendered animals both spatially and morally invisible. Scholars have noted how animals are in many cases absented within contemporary food practices (see Franklin, 1999; Serpell, 1996; Vialles, 1994). Hidden behind factory farm gates or spatially dislocated from the aquatic realm, the process of disembodiment, processing and converting animals and their parts into food has reconstituted the material attribute of animals beyond recognition of their animal origins. Food is thus disconnected from

the animal, or to put another way, the animal is made invisible – the animal is made not to “matter” within the physicality of the food. In their case study of the chicken industry, Jackson *et al.* (2009) discuss how the scale of the modern chicken broiler industry and the fact that it takes place behind closed doors allow producers and consumers not to dwell on these potentially unpalatable aspects of the industry. At the same time, the objectifying nature of animals in contemporary “animal-industrial complex” (Noske, 1997) has rendered animals as “things” associated with rationalised, modernised, industrialised food supply system (see Emel & Wolch, 1998; Franklin, 1999; Wolch & Emel, 1995), and the resulting disconnection has been argued to exempt animals from the category of phenomena suitable for moral evaluation.

In light of this, academics have emphasised the importance of information, or what has been termed the “knowledge agenda” (Hudson & Hudson, 2003), as the key to countering the disconnection invoked by modern food systems and enabling a “politics of reconnection” (Hartwick, 1998: 433) or “thickening the connections” between consumers and producers (Crang, 1996: 56). This will empower consumers to make informed choices on their consumption practices and reorient their consumption behaviour and patterns towards similar products that are produced more ethically. In turn, consumers’ decision to consume products that are more “ethical” would pressure and encourage producers, corporations and governments to react and take action in improving the ethicalities of labour conditions and environmental performance.

Seeing a role for geographic knowledge in bridging separate sites and moments of production, distribution and consumption, geographers have utilised frameworks drawn from agro-food chains, rural geography and political economy, undertaking a production-oriented focus that emphasises how food is produced (Goodman, 2003), processed, and distributed. Work on commodity chains has been a crucial element in the project of provisioning knowledge on conditions of production and distribution of

commodities. Inspired by the critical theory of David Harvey (1990), geographers have employed commodity chain analysis in an attempt to defetishise the commodity (the consumed object) allowing consumers to recognise their entanglement in complex networks of commodification and accumulation, and understand ‘the social, cultural and environmental consequences of their otherwise casual act of buying commodities’ (Hartwick, 2013: 39). The moral charge of commodity chain research lies in the claim that reconnecting locations of production, networks of distribution and acts of consumption can expose the alienating effects of modern capitalism in concealing the hidden unethical production process of products, forming the first step to convincing consumers to purchase ethically and motivating practical action towards ethical consumerism.

A great deal of geographic scholarship exists on exploring issues of consumption and commodity chains (Goss, 2004; Hughes 2005; Watts *et al.* 2005; Kneale & Dwyer, 2004; Mansvelt, 2005). These works are dedicated towards ‘following the thing’ (Cook *et al.*, 2004), unravelling and tracing complex and trans-local geographies of commodity production and exchange – the “geographical lives” of commodities (Bridge & Smith, 2003), or the “social geography of things” (Jackson, 1999). Studies of coffee, papayas (Cook *at al.*, 2004), vegetables (Friedberg, 2003), organic produce (Clarke *et al.*, 2005) have made critical insight into the social relations and conditions of production that escape the notice of ordinary consumers. Apart from raising consumer awareness of food production, the knowledge agenda is also strongly reflected in generating awareness on ethical food consumerism and “alternative” food networks, manifesting in the material forms of food labels and food assurance schemes (Watts *et al.*, 2005; Morris & Young, 2004).

3.3.1 *Limits to Information Provision*

While the provisioning of information remains one of the key practical strategies utilised by advocates of ethical food consumption to unveil the purported unethical processes underlying the production of a commodity or simply the immorality of consuming particular products, knowledge provision has been increasingly problematized. Geographers, among other scholars, have criticised the implication of information (e.g. geographic knowledge) as an effective means of promoting ethical consumption (see Hughes & Reimer, 2004). Eden *et al.* (2008: 1047) problematized what they termed as the ‘knowledge-fix’ in consumption, highlighting how ‘information about food can be re-interpreted, validated, received, resisted and outright ignored’. This is not surprising given that information is often presented to consumers via intermediaries that may possess their own agendas and withhold or disguise information. Another critique is founded upon the assumptions that: i) people can know the consequences of their actions; and ii) people can adjust their actions in the light of such knowledge. These assumptions are based on two further assumptions: that people act autonomously (and so can adjust their actions relatively easily in response to knowledge); and that people unquestioningly accept personal responsibility for what are often thought of as ‘global problems’. Barnett *et al.* (2005: 4) have argued that privileging knowledge as the key factor motivating responsible conduct tends to underplay a range of other considerations that might play a role in shaping people’s ethical disposition towards others and the world around them. Furthermore, they noted that spatial distance need not necessarily diminish a ‘felt responsibility or practical capacity to care for others’.

Empirical studies have documented that people may not necessarily lack information and may actually seem very aware of the consequences of their consumption behaviour, and possessing requisite knowledge may not necessarily result

in consumers that display more ethical consumption behaviour. This was highlighted in Miele and Evans (2010) study, where they explored whether and how food labels carrying information about the lives of animals are used by consumers while shopping for meat and other animal foods. Extensive literature documenting how consumers engage with campaigns around sustainable consumption, ethical consumerism or environmentally responsible consumption, circle around an apparent conundrum that people despite being aware of the problems wrought by their consumption, fail to change their consumption habits, and may knowingly choose not to do what they know is ethical – a form of moral-cognitive dissonance (Eden *et al.*, 2008). Even if consumers often express support for various “ethical” objectives like conservation or fair trade, their actual consumption behaviour tends not to reflect these expressed preferences.

These critiques thus call to attention the importance of moving away from production-oriented focuses, providing less detail on individual commodities, but to provide more detail on the general processes applied by consumers to make sense of and judge information. The knowledge paradigm takes for granted that consumption is a socially embedded process, where ‘consumer’s choices are not isolated acts of rational decision making’, but is related to meaning, status and identity (Jackson *et al.* 2006). In a similar vein, researchers have found that rather than providing information to autonomous individuals, the more successful of these organisations tend to approach people as socially and geographically situated beings, with a capacity for moral reasoning about their own roles and responsibilities in relation to these concerns (Barnett *et al.*, 2005).

3.4 The Sociality of Consumption

Recent theoretical and empirical scrutiny has proposed that consumption practices are rarely the practices of rational, autonomous, self-identified consumers,

recognising the degree to which people's consumption practices are embedded in networks of sociability (Jackson *et al.*, 2006). Insights from sociologists and anthropologists on consumption practices have been particularly influential in this aspect (see Groncow & Warde, 2001; Shove, 2003; Warde, 2005). Miller (1998) ethnographic research on consumption practices has been especially instructive in drawing attention to the ways in which consumption is embedded in everyday practices and routines through intimate relationships and deeply ingrained habits. He revealed that people had a predilection to talk and justify their consumption habits and behaviour based on their commitments and relationships – not as a consumer but rather their role as consumers as an attribute of their identities as a parent, a friend, or a spouse.

In pointing out that consumption practices are underscored by obligations, duties and expectations towards and from others, this approach has unveiled how consumption is inherently built upon our moral and ethical obligations to others within our social networks – what Barnett *et al.* (2005) terms the “ordinary ethics of consumption”. Hence, this poses a challenge in getting consumers to expand their ethical considerations towards distant and absent “others”, especially when such considerations conflict with their “ordinary” ethical responsibilities. It is unsurprising that in weighing competing ethical concerns, the wellbeing of consumer’s immediate and proximate circle would be more significant than that of others. In their qualitative study on shopping practices, Miele and Evans (2010) showed how shopping for food is rooted in maintaining relationships and accommodating the desires of their loved ones and not about making statements about the lives of animals on the market. Jackson *et al.* (2008) notes how very local concerns for the health and well-being of the family may conflict with our wider responsibilities for the environment or the needs of distant strangers. This is affirmed in a later study by Miller (2001), who notes consumers are likely to act morally towards their immediate family members than they are to demonstrate a wider ethic of care since this would involve subsuming the interest of

their own household members to those of distant stranger. A more contemporary study by Adams and Raisborough (2010) similarly aligns with Miller's arguments on a multiplicity of circulating ethical concerns in the context of consumption.

Another related strand of research acknowledges that consumption behaviour is social, habitual, and therefore difficult and resistant to change (Warde, 2005). Consumers are effectively "locked-in" to certain patterns of consumption by the material infrastructures of modern, urban living, and that the commitments that people have to certain consumption behaviours might be deeply held emotional, affective ones that cannot be changed easily. Thus, a great deal of consumption practices is embedded in material infrastructures and affective practices that are not appropriately described as matters of individual "choice" at all. Consumer choice is wrapped around with all sorts of collective and inter-subjective responsibilities and consumer behaviour is thoroughly social, involving questions of status, distinction and social position (Bourdieu, 1984).

The emphasis on the social aspects of consumption can be seen most clearly with regard to consumption of luxury animal food products, which has surprisingly seen little attention in ethical consumption literature. The consumption of shark fin largely takes place in the social context of banquets and its consumption is central to establishing and maintaining relationship and respect, as well as a display of social status. Hence, it is also vital to recognise how the consumed object itself is central to the social context of consumption. This involves recognising consumption as 'the meaningful use people make of the objects that are associated with them... the ways objects facilitate social relationships and define social identities' (Carrier, 1996: 128). As Jackson *et al.* (2003) argue, research on sustainable consumption initiatives need to acknowledge the important symbolic role that consumer goods play in social relations. Such a perspective highlights how behaviour change is more complex than is often

assumed by ethical consumption initiatives that focus on the provision of information about cost and risks of ‘conventional’ consumption.

3.5 Politicising the Morality of Consumption

Geographers and other social scientists have reconfigured their analysis of ethics and consumption, calling to attention the political character of ethical consumption. In this approach, ethical consumption acts as a medium for advancing politico-ethical agendas, where acts of ethical consumption (shopping, purchasing and consuming ethical foods) are “politicised” acts of connection between distant places and across spaces (Barnett *et al.*, 2005; Clarke *et al.*, 2006; Clarke, 2008; Whatmore & Clark, 2006).

The work of Barnett *et. al* (2011) into the subjects and spaces of ethical consumption has been particularly salient in this line of research, arguing that the emergence and growth of contemporary ethical consumption is very much a political phenomenon, and have drawn attention to how ethical consumption is organised and mobilised by social movements and other organisations. They argue that so-called ethical consumption practices are rarely detached from organizations and their political activity attention, calling for more attention to be paid to intermediaries such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In adopting a political perspective to analyse ethical consumption, ethical consumption practices are thus examined as forms of political mobilisation, campaigning and lobbying. Social movement organisations actively lobbying consumers to adopt “ethical” consumption behaviour, followed by speaking for the “ethical consumer”, representing and lobbying their interests to policy-makers at national and international levels or lobbying buyers in retailing corporations (Malpass *et al.*, 2007). For instance, Freidberg (2004) notes how environmental and animal rights/animal welfare NGOs and the popular media joined

in exerting pressure and succeeded in making top supermarkets, such as Walmart, undertake “ethical” reforms of their global supply chains.

This parallels critiques made on studies whose approaches tended to fixate on the agency of “the consumer”, often failing to give credit to the influence of broader institutional processes and intermediaries in shaping ethical consumption behaviour. Jacobsen and Dulsrud (2007) argued it is necessary to shift attention towards actors and interests that try to impart ethical responsibilities onto consumers, suggesting that the conceptual focus on consumer agency and attitudes gets in the way of understanding how collective actors frame and mobilise people as 'ethical consumers'. In this context, the “ethical consumer” is conceptualised as something that is assembled by market forces (Lockie, 2002), or by social movement organisations (Barnett *et al.*, 2005; Clarke *et al.*, 2006; Harrison *et al.*, 2005), or by a combination of national authorities, business interests and non-governmental organisations (Jacobsen & Dulsrud, 2007). Hence, the key actors in ethical consumption networks are – instead of the stilted figure of the consumer and the overly economistically conceptualised act of consumption – these intermediaries comprising of activist organisations, policy makers and other organisations. In other words, intermediaries are thus seen as the prime movers in encouraging and actively lobbying consumers to adopt ‘ethical’ consumption behaviour.

Recognising the political nature of ethical consumption has many implications on thinking about ethics, consumption and the moralisation of consumption in general. Firstly, I argue that such a perspective not only draws attention to how the “ethical consumer” is assembled, but also to how the “ethical food product” is defined and discursively constructed. The moralisation of food consumption has indubitably drawn attention to the inescapably ethical/moral character of food. While all food has ethical implications, some food has taken on connotations of being in particular ways, more

“ethical”. Constructed as “good”, “better”, and “alternative” – most often through the materialities and vocabularies of “organic”, “local” or “fair trade”, many have seen these foods as working against the social, ecological and economic excesses of the conventional food system. In this context, what constitutes ethical consumption or an ethical product is often variable and not fixed – it is defined relationally. As noted by Barnett, *et al.* (2005: 27), ‘ethical consumption might be defined in relation to particular *objects* of ethical concern’. Recognizing the complexity of ethical subjectivities, Clarke (2008) suggests it might be more fruitful to re-define the object-subject relationship as “political”, rather than “moral” and analyse it as such.

Furthermore, these ethical alternative types as Guthman (2003: 56) asserts, throw up numerous complications with respect to their “care-full” nature, finding them overtly morally troubling on issues of access, labour conditions and ecologies by which organic food is produced. ‘To posit one assemblage as unwaveringly good and the other as altogether bad de-politicises a potentially powerful politics of consumption’. Taking “alternative food” as an example, Goodman (2003) argues that the concept of “alternative” food is inherently problematic due to its vague definition and what it is alternative to, stating that the idea of “alternative” food tends to idealise and promote certain forms of production and consumption uncritically. In her study on organic agriculture, Guthman (2003, 2004) asserts how beneath its seemingly counter-cultural image resides a host of unethical practices such as poor labour conditions. Moreover, many so-called “ethical” foods have expanded into the “mainstream”, becoming equally a part of more conventional food systems, bringing into question whether such “mass” production can match the same standards of “alternative” production (Low & Davenport, 2006; Goodman *et al*, 2011, Raynolds, 2009). For instance, Goodman notes that one of the largest purveyors of organic food is Wal-Mart in the world. Hence, the dichotomy of “good” and “bad” is complicated, when the “alternative” begins to become what it opposes, necessitating a need to re-consider the characterisations of

“alternative” foods as uncritically and uniquely “ethical”, and conventional foods are “non-ethical” (Holloway *et al.*, 2007). As noted earlier, foods labelled as “conventional” and “ordinary” have their own implicit moralities and ethical relationships and meanings embedded in them. The “ethics” of consumption can thus be ambiguous, slippery and consist of a number of interwoven layers and illustrates a politics of “goodness” and “badness” in the foodscape that is worthy of investigation, exploration and critique.

The ethical/moral nature of food has thus been the subject of much scholarly discussion. Goodman *et al.* (2010: 2) astutely puts it, ‘[w]hat is of interest, then, are those questions about what we should and should not eat, what becomes regarded as “good” and “bad” food and how these constructions are intimately situated and contextualised, what sets of criteria define “good” and “bad” meanings embedded in particular foods, who decides on how these criteria are defined’. Geographers in particular have examined how constructions of food are intimately situated and contextualised, and how the differential, shifting and contextualised ethicalities of food work to make and re-make the place(s) and space(s) of food. These debates thus raise the fundamental question of how and why in the first instance, are the consumption of some food or animals considered to be immoral. Why should certain food or animals be subjected to moral consideration? How are their moral statuses defined and why are certain food/animals regarded by animal rights groups as ethically superior and drawn into the circuits of ethical food campaigns, worthy of protecting from the jaws of consumption. As shown in the empirical chapters of this thesis, many consumers have questioned why should the shark be placed in a position of a stronger, higher moral status as opposed to other animals.

Secondly, acknowledging the politics of ethical consumption may help to shed light on the ethical dilemmas experienced by consumers highlighted previously in Section 3.2.3, as it problematizes the “ethical” within ethical consumption. As

mentioned earlier, issues surrounding care of self, care of the family and the care of “Others” circulate and are entangled fully and can work to contradict themselves across the terrains of production-consumption. This concerns how to make “good” or “right” choices in a world of multiple and sometimes incompatible models of ethics (Barnett *et al.*, 2005; Cafaro *et al.*, 2005). The degree of complexity involved in consumption activities calls into question the simple evaluation of what making the “ethical” choice is. Ethical consumption is considered costly, complex and difficult, placing unrealistic demands on people as consumers by ignoring other identifications and obligations. This necessitates a consideration of whether the choice to engage in ethical consumption can be entirely “ethical”. Choices that are coded as “ethical” might turn out to be less “ethical” than they appear, while “unethical” activities might possibly be less blameworthy than the moralistic register of ethical consumption discourses often suggest. More often than not, there is no clear agreement on what the “ethical” thing to do is in any particular case, raising the question on whether consumer choice can ever really be entirely “ethical”. These ethical dilemmas are not easy to resolve and this poses a problem to ethical consumption, in terms of getting people to commit to a particular ethical food campaign.

These implications outlined above bring to attention the need to understand how consumers make sense of the subjectivities of ethical consumption. As noted by several scholars, more work needs to be done to correct the ‘serious neglect of consumers’ (Goodman, 2003: 6; Winter, 2003; Ilbery & Maye, 2006). Secondly, the above discussion also draws attention to how more emphasis is needed in investigating the relationship between consumers and the consumed object.

3.6 Enlivening the Consumed Subject

As the previous sections have illustrated, existing scholarly work on ethical (food) consumption has extensively excavated the myriad influences shaping and

constraining the assimilation of ethical consumption behaviour in consumers. It is instructive to note how there has been an epistemological shift in how consumption practices have been conceptualized by scholars in Geography and other disciplines researching on consumption. Rather than simply focusing on the consumer, attention has been diverted towards interrogating how consumer choice to consume ethically is complicated and deeply intertwined with their socio-cultural setting, embedded in social relations and the revelation of multiple actors and networks involved in constructing their consumption patterns. The shift in focus from educating the rational and autonomous consumer to consumption practices, social networks, material infrastructures and organisations, and the acknowledgement that ethical consumption practices are rarely detached from organisations and their political activity, have had implications on the field of consumption research.

Against the background and acknowledgment of the politicisation of consumption and in shifting focus away from “the consumer”, I suggest extending this line of theoretical inquiry towards a critical and underexplored strand of investigation in ethical food consumption research – the relationship between the consuming subject and the consumed object. In particular, I am interested in examining how the politics between humans (the consumer) and food animals (the consumed product) influence how consumers’ choice to consume ethically or not. In addition, I am interested in reflecting on and making clear how the animal (consumed object) is also complicit in shaping ethical consumption behaviour. I argue that existing research has paid much less attention on the consumed object as a valid subject of critical analysis in determining the extent of its influence on consumer predilection towards adopting ethical consumption behaviour. Moreover, analysis has tended to remain resolutely anthropocentric, inadequately confronting the complexity of human-food relationships; nonhumans appear as inert objects rather than as living labourers in their own right. This has been raised by Haraway (1997) and actor-network theorists (Latour, 1993;

Law, 2004), who promptly note that commodity chain approaches have tended to discount the role of nonhumans (see Faier, 2011; Yeh & Lama, 2013). My theoretical intervention into this topic is centrally inspired by a range of multifarious scholarship challenging the primacy of humans in our understandings of politics and social life, where scholars argue nonhumans have been rendered ‘a mute and stable background to the real business of politics’ (Hinchliffe, 2008: 89). Such scholarship has manifested in many strands, including relational ontologies and more-than-human geographies (Braun, 2004; Whatmore, 2002), actor-network theory (Latour, 1999; 2005), nonrepresentational theory (Latham & McCormack, 2004; Lorimer, 2008), and animal geographies (Philo & Wilbert, 2000; Wolch & Emel, 1998). These literatures form the second component in my theoretical approach, in serving as a lens of analysis to interpret my observations on shark fin consumption.

Having signposted some of lacunae in geographical literature on ethical food consumption, I turn to review the literature on posthuman theories and animal geographies to highlight how perspectives from these fields can be valuable to providing a more-than-human analytical approach to understanding ethical food consumption, showing how nonhumans play a key role in influencing ethical consumption. In doing so, I wish to examine how the politics of human-animal relations structure and influence the ethics of food consumption, in terms of how uneven power relations across species hinders the adoption of ethical consumption behaviours; and how the consumed object/subject – the animal – can be considered an affective analytical subject in analysing ethical food consumption.

3.7 The Rise of the Non-Human Animal Subject

Interests in researching on non-human animals and understanding human-animal relationships occupies a long history in geographical scholarship, from its

beginnings in zoogeographies (Newbigin, 1913), to an early cultural geographies of animals inspired by a Sauerian cultural-geography paradigm (Bennett, 1960). However, these approaches were thoroughly anthropocentric, tending to represent animals in objectifying ways, which suggest that they are simply there, and neglecting to account for the ways in which animals possess the agency, capacity and subjectivities to shape human-animal relations in multiple geographic contexts.

In the past two decades, a “new” animal geographies, influenced from the discipline’s “cultural turn” and critical social thought, has urged a profound rethinking of culture and subjectivity within areas of human-animal relations (Wolch *et al.*, 2003). At the same time, it has called for nonhuman animals to be accorded a status as subjects and to engage with them on their own terms (Philo, 1998; Philo & Wilbert, 2000), thus moving away from anthropocentric perspectives dominating earlier animal geographic studies. This renewal has also grown alongside a rapid growth of interest in what has been called “more-than-human geography”, which seeks to de-centre the human subject. Collectively, these approaches build on and work to extend the “posthuman turn” in geography, through directing attention to the ‘important role [of nonhumans] in natural cultural practices, including everyday social practices, scientific practices, and practices that do not include humans’ (Barad 2007: 32). These new perspectives have consequently opened up theoretical space that elevates the political significance of animals ‘as central agents in the constitution of space and place’ (Wolch & Emel, 1998). Animals are not merely “passive surfaces” onto which humans can project their values and meanings, nor are they simply mapped onto the pre-existing human world – their representations and physical presences co-create the histories, moralities, political subjectivities and places taken as natural and cultural (Philo & Wilbert, 2000).

Apart from reintroducing animals into the research agenda and reworking how animals are conceptualised, the work of animal geographers have provided a renewed accommodation of animals in the analysis of human-animal relationships in a variety

of geographical dimensions. These works sought to confront the complexity of animal and human relationships, teasing out the myriad economic, political, social and cultural pressures shaping the intricacies of these relations and exploring how these interactions make a difference to the spaces and places in which they occur in politically powerful ways (Philo & Wilbert, 2000).

3.7.1 Uneven Human-Animal -Animal Ethical Relations

A central theme in animal geography has been to examine the politics and ethics of human-animal relationships, showing the ways in which animals have been deliberately excluded from certain spaces (Philo, 1995). Animal geographers have critically interrogated humans' treatment of animals in diverse places and contexts, focusing on the ways in which discourse and material practices, along with the dynamics of power that these entail, serve to place animals physically and metaphorically. These inquiries have unmasked previously unproblematised power relations between humans and animals, revealing a diverse world of ethically relevant non-human beings.

Ethical relations between humans and nonhuman animals have been noted to be deeply uneven in which non-humans have generally been excluded from normative ethical considerations (Jones, 2000). Despite a growth in the acknowledgement of animal sentience and greater awareness of animal welfare and rights, most people continue to perceive animals as resources that exist solely for the benefit of humans. As Philo (1995) notes, there is a tendency to consider nonhuman animals as marginal "thing-like" beings devoid of inner lives, apprehensions or sensibilities, and this has served to place them outside the boundaries of humanity's moral community, rendering them as ethically inconsiderable. Moreover, many animals and other nonhumans are in the unfortunate position of being ethically invisible, while being only too visible as bodies comprising economic resources of some kind or another in modern societies.

Serpell (1996) shows how rendering nonhumans ethically invisible is central to contemporary animal-linked food production to absolve people from blame in subjugating, dominating and manipulating animals and their bodies in its system of operations. In turn, this enables humans to justifiably ‘manipulate, exploit, displace, consume, waste and torture non-humans with impunity’ (Jones, 2000: 279), licensing mass nonhuman animal death and ecological destruction on the pretext of meeting global food demands. What is more troubling for purveyors of ethical food consumption is aptly encapsulated by Weston (1999: 189), who states ‘[as] far as I know, there are no worked-out ethical defences of factory farming; it is hard to escape the conclusion that it is a practice sustained by silent collusion, by the “wish not to know”’. The spatial and moral invisibility of nonhuman animals in modern systems of food production, coupled with the fact that consumers are disconnected from the realities of food production, have undoubtedly posed a challenge to getting consumers to acknowledging the ethical consideration of animals in their consumption practices.

Considering the ethical dilemmas encountered by consumers in consumption, it is hence unsurprising that consumers may simply not care enough about their moral responsibilities owed to others, both far (Eden *et al.*, 2008) and near (Renting *et al.* 2003). In the case of an ethical issue such as animal welfare, where the focus is on moral responsibilities that consumers owe to nonhumans, consumers may be less inclined to consume ethically. As I will point out in later chapters, many consumers are reluctant to change their consumption patterns for the sake of an animal; consumers are unable to empathize with, and hence attribute rights and moral obligation to animals as opposed to humans.

Complicating the ethical consideration of animals is the characteristic features of the animals themselves, as well as the context in which they exist. As Lynn (1998: 284) notes, humans ‘tend to direct their attention and affections to “charismatic

megafauna"... subjective creatures like ourselves... [as] it is easier for people to appreciate the moral value of a highly subjective creature'. In light of this, warm-blooded, terrestrial animals that share analogous characteristics with humans, such as well-developed nervous systems, a commensurate (if different) degree of consciousness and emotional authenticity and complex social groupings, tend to receive greater ethical consideration and attention, as compared to aquatic animals. Mullan and Marvin's (1987: 73-4) contend that 'fish are completely "other", and live in a totally alien environment'. Jones (2000: 286-288) makes similar arguments about the 'alien' spaces they inhabit, contrasting water environments with the 'airy' spaces that we humans inhabit'. Meanwhile, in terms of their bodily characteristics, Scruton (2000: 111) draws attention to their 'cold-blooded and slimy' nature, their bodies being alien to humans.

In spite of attempts to 'bring the animals back in' to geography (Wolch & Emel, 1995), the animal geographies literature still includes some animals more than others (Whatmore, 2005), focusing largely on warm-blooded animals and terrestrial settings and paying little attention to aquatic animals and their watery environments. Existing work on aquatic animals has tended to concentrate on aquatic mammals such as cetaceans, neglecting other aquatic species such as fish (but see Bear & Eden, 2008). In view of this neglect, scholars have called for further emphasis to be given to non-mammalian life forms (Bear, 2011). It is somewhat surprising that human-fish relations and aquatic spaces have been understudied, considering the wide spectrum of human activities, such as anthropogenic changes to the marine environment, commercial fisheries, recreational angling, aquaculture, ornamental fish keeping and scientific research. In attending to human-shark relationships, I seek to open up animal geographies to a greater range of environments, such as consumption-scapes (Popke 2006), and bodily forms and address a considerable gap in the existing literature, which has side-lined such 'alien' creatures.

3.7.2 *Animal Agency and Subjectivity*

My theoretical and conceptual approach is grounded in recent scholarship that analyses relations between humans and nonhumans through a post-humanist lens. Posthuman theories acknowledge that what are commonly held to be human achievements are in fact produced within heterogeneous assemblages of entities, human and nonhuman (see Castree *et al.*, 2004; Castree & Nash, 2006; Panelli, 2010). The work is diverse, but of interest to this thesis is the work of Latour (2005) and others on the “agency of things” (Pickering, 1995; Law 1994, 2004; Barad, 2007). These scholars argue that humans are not alone in having the capacity to become agents; agency is a capacity to produce an effect that is spun within heterogeneous assemblages of entities that are not all human. Agency is, in other words, relational; it occurs in networks.

Work on posthuman theories and recent work on relational ontologies within human geography that have argued for a performative and “fleshed out” conception of sociality and politics (Philo, 2005). Influenced especially by the relational and hybrid ontologies of authors such as Latour (1993) and Ingold (2000), there has been a greater acknowledgement on the role that nonhuman play in shaping the conceptual and material aspects of the world. The posthuman decentering of the human subject meant that the human and nonhuman spheres could no longer be thought of as exclusive, but are mutually co-constituted. Humans and nonhumans are enmeshed in a collective network of actants, opening room for the inclusion of subjective agencies of nonhuman in shaping human identity (Fox, 2006). Here, the nonhuman is thoroughly present in the formation and enactment of the messy business of living together’ (Hinchliffe & Whatmore, 2006). The human and nonhuman, rather than fixed objects or identities are deemed as iteratively constituted through ensembles of institutions, procedures, materialities, calculations and tactics that dissolve the differentiation. On the other hand, animal geography literature has also drawn on recent human geographical work on the

subject as performative and relational within specific networks of practices. Increasing work by geographers on embodied and performative experiences (Thrift & Dewsbury, 2000; Nash, 2000) have turned attention towards the material and social aspects of human life, as they relate to the ‘fleshiness’ and corporeal aspects of animal bodies (Wilbert, 2009: 126).

To begin with, it is imperative to view the players in the politics of ethical food consumption not as individuals, or persons, but rather relationally, as ‘iteratively constituted through ensembles of institutions, procedures, materialities, calculations and tactics’ (Hobson, 2007: 257). Under such a view, the influence of agency of those involved is also formed relationally; agency is not an inherent attribute of something or someone; it does not flow from human autonomy or purpose or values, but rather is made in negotiations, alliances, and conflicts between a much wider array of actors, both human and nonhuman. This widens the suite of political actors as all entities are “imbued with the capacity for affect – the capacity to be acted upon, and the capacity to act” (Braun, 2004: 1354). The shark is not an inert, passive object that is merely an object of consumption, but a nonhuman whose presence influences the relationships it has with various groups of people, giving shape to the politics of ethical food consumption geographies. Hence, the affective materiality of sharks is part of the explanation of why consumers decide to consume ethically or not, where the shark’s nonhuman charisma, its anatomical and aesthetic properties, contribute to the way humans perceive, relate to and care for them (Lorimer, 2007).

3.8 Conclusion: Conceptual Framework

This chapter fleshes out the literature supporting the two dimensions of my theoretical approach into understanding the politics of shark fin consumption in Singapore.

First, a socio-cultural-historical approach that investigates the multiple dimensions of shark fin consumption in Singapore's Chinese community. To begin with, existing work on ethical consumption is largely situated in an Anglo-American context and analyses on ethical consumption in Singapore emanate mainly from marketing studies (but see Neo, 2014). This means human attitudes towards ethical consumption of animals is the result of specific histories and relations, namely a binary relation between the human and the animal.

Second, drawing upon ideas from animal geographies in acknowledging animal agency and utilising the “practice based perspective” of ANT (Johannesson & Baerenholdt, 2009: 15), which takes both human and non-human seriously as actors/actants constituted by and capable of enacting heterogeneous networks of relations and practices. In particular, employing an ANT framework will demonstrate a departure from earlier works on ethical consumption through moving away from an exclusive emphasis on the consumer. Instead, it will give weight to the consumed subject, in terms of how the raw materiality and performativity of animal bodies, and the resulting “non-human charisma” emanating from animals' corporeal affordances assert an affective agency that is both manipulated by and yet mediate human encounters and sense of affinity towards animals. In other words, this acknowledges how animals are both enrolled and accorded substantial agency as critical linkages and equal participants in making or undermining relationships between humans and animals.

In combining work from ethical consumption research and animal geographies, this thesis seeks to conceive a more holistic approach in analysing ethical food consumption choices, through providing an alternative perspective of factors governing consumption choices and in appreciating the potency of animals in shaping the ethics of shark fin consumption, as well as sustaining networks of trade, consumption and conservation.

CHAPTER FOUR: CASTING THE METHODOLOGICAL NET

4.1 Overview

This chapter provides an overview and justification of the research methodology employed in this thesis and confronts the practical methodological challenges that arose in the course of the fieldwork. While this chapter discusses the research methods undertaken, the chapter as a whole is concerned with the methodological approach, in terms of how specific methods were assembled not only to answer key research questions highlighted in the first chapter, but also how they ally themselves with the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis as outlined in the previous chapter. As Crang (2009: 457) describes, methodology aligns ‘the ontology of a study, how it conceives of the world, with its epistemology, how it claims to know things about the world.’ Yet, choosing an approach – how to research and subsequently making sense of that research – is always challenging, and in the case of researching human-animal relations, the challenges are further elevated by several factors, which I will detail in Section 4.2, before stating my ethical position on the shark fin issue in Section 4.3. Following this, I outline my research methodology and methods employed in Section 4.4, before reflecting on key research challenges I faced in Section 4.5.

4.2 Conceptualising Animals

An enduring anthropocentrism occupies academia and beyond, limiting the range of available theories and methodologies that animals researchers can use. Philo (1998: 54) critiques anthropocentrism within Geography, arguing that geographers have ‘investigated them [animals] only insofar as they have an impact upon the lives of human beings’. Researchers also constantly have to be mindful of the tendency to anthropomorphise animal behaviour and characteristics – an inherent challenge, given the complexity of animal behaviour, which prompts researchers to use terms that are

familiar from everyday descriptions of human behaviour. The idea of animal agency has also been brought to question, as it is ultimately being couched in anthropomorphic discourse (Hovorka, 2008). More critically, the categories of analysis deployed in research – categories such as “human” and “animal”, which as I argued in Chapter Three, are constructed rather than given, and there is a tendency to refer to “animals” as a distinct group, blurring differences not only between animals of different species but also of the same species (see Derrida, 2008). The latter point is of concern in this thesis, as across the 465 species of sharks, not all are threatened by the international “fin trade”; using the aggregate category of “sharks” to discuss and analyse the issue would essentialise shark diversity, as well as overlook individual shark subjectivities. Decisions about categories are methodological decisions, which is why they should be considered as framing the entire research. The challenge for many researchers thus lies in overcoming the epistemological ‘categorical delimitation of the human animal boundary’ (Davies & Dyer, 2007: 260) and in subsequently thinking how ‘the beastly, embodied presence of nonhumans might be researched and written in a way that does not silence, overlay or tidy them’ (Johnston, 2008: 640).

What did this mean for my research framework and for research practices in the field? Especially given that one of the core aims of this thesis is to call for the acknowledgement of sharks as active agents in shaping the politics of ethical consumption and in giving some consideration of their subjectivity (Gullo *et al.*, 1998; Seymour & Wolch, 2010). First, there was a need to conceptualise a critical qualitative research framework that questions how ‘competing epistemologies and underlying assumptions about particular ways of knowing’ might intersect productively in examining animals in diverse human contexts (Elwood, 2010: 95-96). This meant that I had to be critically attentive to the ways people discussed about sharks and consider the social contexts in which these discussions are founded upon, for all participants, whether individual or organisation representatives, will have formal and informal

perspectives and attitudes towards sharks, informed by institutional and group agendas, societal norms and other factors.

The second point involves conceptualizing sharks as active participants in the research fieldwork. It is perhaps surprising that for a thesis championing the agency of sharks, sharks were absent and largely silent in the field research process, depending on humans to speak on their behalf. However, following discussions on posthumanism and ANT in the previous chapter, I echo the view of Donna Haraway (2003; 2008) in that we should accept our inextricable entanglement with human and nonhuman others, and that our knowledge of sharks is the product of relations between multiple actants/actors. Rather than considering animals as ‘good to think with’, as Levi-Strauss famously commented, I endeavoured to foreground sharks as subjects in their own right, whose corporeal and incorporeal materialities are intimately entangled with human beings and have an affective influence on human ontological and epistemological understandings of them. In other words, sharks are not merely objects of discussion in the shark fin debate; they are subjects, whose encounters and relationships with humans generate agency, or the capacity to influence the course of events, to have an effect. In terms of field research, this meant that I had to structure my questions and discussions in a way that inserts sharks as active participants.

4.3 Animal Ethics

Initially, the stakes of the research and of this thesis were personal, in that I had moral and political obligation to understand the intricacies of the “shark fin trade” and its consumption, so that I might offer in return an argument for why humans should not consume shark fin soup. Yet, over the course of the research, my ethical position on the issue evolved from one that was aligned with the most forceful of shark activists’ arguments, which states that shark fin consumption should be permanently banned on the grounds of animal rights/welfare infringement and sustainability reasons, to a more

“moderate” position occupied by some activists, which states that it is acceptable to consume shark fin *only* if the trade is made sustainable. The change stemmed largely from the fact that as I researched the topic in greater depth, it was made apparent that the issue of “shark fin trade” and consumption was more complex than I had originally conceived, as the empirical chapters will discuss.

Moreover, adopting an animal rights perspective would conflict with the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis. The call for human rights to be extended to animals has been one of the most enduring and prevalent not only in the anti-shark fin movement, but in the animal movement broadly. However, there are many objections to the rights-based approach, of which I will outline one main argument relevant to the body of this thesis – the suggestion that the human rights framework cannot provide meaningful or long-term regard for animals because it is fundamentally humanist. Mitchell (in Wolfe, 2003) argues that the very idea of human rights is inherently incompatible with animals’ rights, as it is built upon a human/animal binary. In other words, humanism precedes the concept of animal rights and it conceptualises the human as that which has transcended and has control over the nonhuman (Anderson, 2007). The application of human rights to animals therefore cannot be used to provide a means of meaningful ethical consideration for animals (Wolfe, 2003; Calarco, 2008), as animal rights theory retains at its core the liberal individual humanist subject (Landry, 2011).

Thus, while the animal rights movement seeks to widen the circle of morality to include nonhumans, it proposes doing so through an anthropocentric notion of moral value (Hudson, 2011). As Calarco (2008:9) aptly puts it, ‘It is paradoxical to say the least, that animal rights theorists have used the same anthropocentric criteria that have been used to exclude animals from moral concerns to include only certain animals within that scope and to draw only a new, slightly different exclusionary boundary.’ Adopting an animal rights approach and utilising a model of rights based on extension

to those “similar to us” only ends up reinforcing the very humanism that grounds discrimination against nonhumans in the first place (Wolfe, 2003).

In view of these critiques, coupled with the posthumanist underpinnings of the theoretical approach undertaken, I chose to situate my ethical position in the sphere of objectivity in both the process of the field research and in discussing the issue in the written thesis.

4.4 Research Methodology and Methods

The chosen methodological route was largely qualitative in nature, drawing on a variety of methods, including semi-structured interviews; focus group discussions; participant and spectator observation; and discourse analysis and database querying. Qualitative research methods are apt for the objectives of this thesis, as they facilitate ‘an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience’ (Seidman, 2006: 9), enabling me to tease out any moral ambiguities and ethical entanglements that might emerge over talk on the consumption of shark fin soup. This allows me to be attuned to the non-representational, ‘extra-linguistic elements of communication’, such as corporeal gestures, facial cues and ‘sonic inflections’ infused with intonations, amplitudes, disharmonies and silences that take place during the shared spaces of interviews and focus group discussions (Kanngieser, 2012: 337). The merits of a qualitative animal geography have also been affirmed by Seymour and Wolch (2010: 316). They expound that a qualitative approach can ‘elucidate both the societal structures that influence the ways that animals live out their lives, and animals’ individual or group experiences of places and events, as well as human experiences of “animated” places’, and is invaluable in understanding both subjective experience and social forces that shape them.

Research participants comprised of several groups: Chinese wedding couples, consumers and non-consumers of shark fin soup, members of NGOs and marine

conservation groups involved in the anti-shark's fin soup movement (Table 1), representatives of hotels and restaurants, and seafood traders¹². The type of questions directed towards research participants during field research revolves around two broad themes that are connected to the aims of the thesis highlighted in Chapter One. The first theme relates to how participants conceive and talk about human-shark relationships. The second theme concerns animal welfare and ethics, including – the provision of information about animal welfare; “political consumption” and participants’ levels and means of involvement with animal welfare issues; and barriers and ethical dilemmas associated with the consumption of shark fin.

4.4.1 Interviews

Thirty-seven interviews were carried out, of which twenty-five interviews were with wedding couples and twelve were with people involved in the “shark fin trade” in multiple capacities: NGO representatives, representatives of hotels and restaurants and seafood traders. Only interviews with wedding couples and some NGO representatives were recorded with their consent. Many of these interviews were quite informal and only semi-structured. This was important because the topic interviews addressed – sourcing shark fin, trading shark fin – can be quite sensitive and required a flexible, even conversational, interview format. My interviews with representatives of NGOs, hotels and restaurants were more formal and structured, and were carried out to obtain information about trade trends, seafood purchase and dining trends, information which is often not readily available. Where possible, interviews were arranged face-to-face and subsequent contact was facilitated through email correspondence.

¹² The names of the hotels, restaurants and seafood trading companies interviewed will not be released, as representatives spoke on the condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the issue at hand. Persuading this group to participate in my research was rather difficult due to their schedules, as well as the topic of the research, so I am truly thankful to those who did participate.

Table 1: Profile of NGO representatives interviewed

Name	Affiliation	Brief Description of NGO
Jonn Lu	Regional Director, Shark Savers	Shark Savers is an international non-profit membership organisation dedicated to saving sharks through building awareness, education and grassroots actions. It has various branches around the world.
Jennifer Lee	Founder, Project: FIN	Project: FIN is a marine conservation group based in Singapore.
Durga Rajaindern	Assistant Director of Outreach, Animal Concerns and Research Society (ACRES)	ACRES is a Singapore-based NGO that focuses on wildlife issues and on industrialised animal cruelty issues in Singapore and in Southeast Asia.
Rachel Tan	Project leader, Save Our Sharks (SOS)	SOS started as a school project focused on convincing family and friends not to consume shark fin soup. It has since widened its activism activities by collaborating with other NGOs to educate the general public.

The interview sessions with NGO representatives helped me to glean a better sense of their agenda in the anti-shark fin campaigns, and helped to elucidate the role of sharks within the circuits of activism. Working with NGOs also provided opportunities for greater involvement in the anti-shark fin campaigns, and posed as a gateway to connect to other actors in the shark fin debate such as businesses and trading information that would have been otherwise difficult to access. Moreover, the methodological impracticalities of following the movement of shark fin made these conversations with NGOs invaluable in illuminating aspects of the trade.

For wedding couples, I approached those who were in the midst of planning their wedding banquets and those who recently had their wedding banquets within the year or late last year to ensure that the planning process remained relatively fresh in

their minds. A non-random sample was used, and two types of sampling strategies were adopted: snowball sampling and purposive sampling. My sampling was purposive, as it had to be biased towards persons whose attributes I was focusing on in my research – Chinese people who are getting and are married. The first few couples were drawn from my social network and subsequent couples were enrolled into the research through a snowball approach. This was managed through tapping on the networks of couples whom I interviewed, to identify those who would be willing to share their experiences. While this approach might raise concerns of producing a biased sample, I ensured that the snowball had rolled sufficiently to engage a spectrum of wedding couples from different socio-economic backgrounds, as well as different levels of adherence to Chinese traditions. Ultimately, the emphasis is on understanding and highlighting the stories of these people rather than generalising the findings.

Where possible, couples were interviewed together to allow each to weigh in their perspective on the wedding banquet. As explained in Chapter Two, Chinese wedding banquets tend to be large social events that involve complex social performances. Interviewing both parties would reveal the social obligations and tensions at hand in necessitating the serving of shark fin soup. Each interview lasted from an hour to two hours and the semi-structured yet open-nature of these “conversations” allowed my informants the flexibility to articulate their sentiments freely, while allowing me the chance to probe deeper into issues that required further clarifications. I began the interviews by asking wedding couples to discuss the wedding banquet preparations. This helped to root the discussion firmly within the factors that they considered vital to a successful wedding banquet as they deliberated on the planning process and helped to enlighten the kinds of consumption practices at work. Inter-generational group interviews were also conducted with three wedding couples and their parents to tease out any divergent views on the necessity of serving shark fin soup at wedding banquets. While English was the standard medium of communication

with most of my informants, older informants expressed themselves through a mix of Mandarin, English and dialect, necessitating translation where necessary. It was interesting to note that it was the parents that dominated the interview, providing insights into the social hierarchy behind wedding planning.

4.4.2 Focus groups

Three focus group discussions involving eighteen participants between 25 and 60 years old were carried out amongst consumers and non-consumers of shark fin (Table 2). The first group consisted only of consumers; the second group was exclusive to non-consumers; and the third group involved a mix of consumers and non-consumers. Each group consisted of not more than six participants and each focus group session lasted for about an hour.

Table 2: Profile of Focus Group Participants

Focus Group	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Consumer Typology
Consumers	Alex	Male	42	Regular consumer
	Alice	Female	27	Event consumer
	Huipeng	Female	33	Event consumer
	Junxiong	Male	28	Event consumer
	Joseph	Male	29	Event consumer
	Zhen Ling	Female	38	Regular consumer
Non-Consumers	Christine	Female	24	Sympathetic non-consumers
	Hong	Male	30	Anti-shark fin soup non-consumers
	Gwen	Female	29	Anti-shark fin soup non-consumers
	Mabel	Female	28	Anti-shark fin soup non-consumers
	Rachel	Female	35	Sympathetic non-consumers
	Qingsheng	Male	32	Sympathetic non-consumers
Mixed – Consumers and Non-consumers	Ben	Male	56	Event consumer
	Chinkiat	Male	54	Event consumer
	May	Female	53	Sympathetic non-consumers
	Ming	Female	52	Event consumer
	Peiyee	Female	49	Sympathetic non-consumers

	Zoe	Female	50	Anti-shark fin soup non-consumers
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By the term “consumer”, I refer to individuals who consume shark fin soup. In view that “consumers” are not a homogenous group of people, in terms of their consumption practices, I found it necessary to employ a consumer typology for the purpose of differentiation. They are: ex-consumer (used to consume shark fin soup but not anymore), regular consumer (consumes shark fin soup on a regular basis) and event consumer (consumes shark fin soup only during special occasions such as wedding banquets). This general distinction was to ensure a good range of consumers for this research, though I am aware that these representational categories are not discrete or mutually exclusive; they may overlap and change over time. For non-consumers, they were also typified into different categories – sympathetic non-consumers (understands the cultural significance of shark fin soup but chooses not to consume) and anti-shark fin soup non-consumers (firmly against the consumption of shark fin soup and advocates a ban for it).

The purpose of organising the focus groups in this manner serves two purposes. Since the participants of the all-consumer and all non-consumer groups were not familiar with one another, organising them into their respective groups allowed them to be at ease in discussing the issue on “the same grounds”. At the same time, this allows for a deeper discussion on their attitudes towards shark fin consumption and on the anti-shark fin movement. On the other hand, participants of the mix consumer and non-consumer group were familiar with one another, which allowed them to be comfortable with debating the topic. Of interest in this group was observing the points being contended and sort of (counter) responses that participants provide.

4.4.3 *On-Site Fieldwork: Participant and Spectator Observation*

Participant observation research at Chinese wedding banquets and spectator-observation at forums and debates on shark fin consumption allowed me to immerse myself in the action and experience events in a multi-sensory fashion. For all these sessions, I took descriptive field-notes and engaged in informal conversation with those who participated in these sessions to complement the on-site observations made.

Participation Observation at Chinese Wedding Banquets

Between December 2013 and January 2014, I attended the wedding banquet of three couples in Singapore to gauge the reactions of guests to the menu offered via participant observation and informal in-situ conversation. The purpose of the interviews was to explore the subjective values, beliefs and thoughts on the consumption of shark fin soup. In accordance with the wishes of the wedding couples, interactions with wedding banquet guests were limited to those who sat at the same table as me to minimise disruptions to the banquet. Since a core component of the research is interested in unravelling and understanding the various perspectives on shark fin soup consumption, these sessions provided an excellent opportunity to observe how people engaged with the controversial debate surrounding its consumption, especially since the table was occupied by both consumers and non-consumers. Inadvertently, most guests began commenting on the dish the moment it was served, initiating a short discussion on the topic of shark fin consumption. The organic nature of the discussion and the subsequent acts of consumption or non-consumption has indubitably been vital in complementing primary fieldwork conducted, through adding an enriched understanding of how one's decision to consume or not to consume may be influenced by elements within the site of consumption, affecting their original attitudes and ethical stance on shark fin consumption.

Participant observation also led me to a ‘critical sympathetic introspection’ (England, 1994: 82) of my own situated positionality, as I negotiated intersecting identities as researcher, banquet guest and shark fin (non)consumer, becoming aware of my own problematic entanglement within the consumption of shark fin soup. Instances where I chose not to consume the soup invoked a passing comment that I was ‘wasting “good” food’, while instances where I chose to consume the soup inflicted a sense of guilt in providing silent consent of shark fin consumption.

Spectator Observation at Public Forums and Debates

The rise of the anti-shark fin movement in Singapore has been the subject of much debate within the public sphere, largely over the ethicality of consuming shark fin soup. A particular topic of interest that had been raised and contested in these debates is the question of whether banning shark fin would serve as an effective mechanism to curb the demand for fins.

On 16 February 2012, a public forum – “*Shark’s Fin Soup: To ban or not to ban?*” was held at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies to discuss the viability of banning shark fin in Singapore as a means of reducing consumption rates. The forum featured four speakers from organisations that were involved in the issue to some degree. Speakers were given about thirty minutes to share their “expert” opinions and perspectives on the issue, before opening the discussion to the floor that was attended by members of the public. The points raised by the speakers aptly encapsulate the main points of contention raised over the consumption of shark fin soup and reflect the dominant sentiments and themes echoed in many online blogs and forums, as well as those of my respondents. Table 3 provides a summary of the notes I took as a participant of the event. The comments made by the speakers will be referenced and analysed in the respective empirical chapters.

Table 3: Personal Field Notes from Forum

Speaker	Excerpts from Speaker's Speech
<p>Dr Choo-Hoo Giam, Alternative Representative of Asia of the Animals Committee at CITES</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 70% of shark catches are from developing countries, taken mostly by artisanal fishing 2. Sharks are not endangered <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"Saying sharks are endangered is like saying birds are endangered"</i> • Several species of sharks that are abundant such as spiny dogfish and blue sharks • Out of the 400 species, only six have been considered endangered by CITES 3. 'Live' finning is rarely practised, misrepresentation by activists <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Most fins are humanely taken from landed, dead sharks" • Activists have misled the world into thinking live finning is common and pervasive • Activists' claim of 73 million sharks finned per year impossible in terms of manpower, would require millions of fishermen 4. Anti-shark fin campaigns are a form of cultural discrimination – 'Sinophobia' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Shark's fin soup is culturally discriminatory" – there have not been similar high-profile movements against caviar or Atlantic blue fin tuna. Activists are unfairly targeting Chinese consumers 5. Shark fin industry is not to blame <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 80% of sharks killed each year are caught accidentally and overwhelmingly in developing countries • 25% of shark catch comes from India and Indonesia, countries that are home to 'mostly poor' fishermen who will eat every part of the shark and then sell the fin to eager buyers • "fin trade" is unrelated to fishing of sharks • Media hype is responsible for 'misconceptions' about the shark-fishing industry 6. Banning shark fin soup is not a solution <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fins from bycatch will be wasted • hurts livelihood of millions of fishermen in poor countries
<p>Hank Jenkins, President of Australia's Species Management Specialists</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Critique on tactics used by shark activists <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exaggeration and manipulation of facts – claims of extinction are fallacious • Simplifying the solution – if Chinese communities cease consumption of shark fin soup, sharks will be saved • Vilifying Chinese communities for their consumption of sharks fin • Misinformation in anti-shark fin campaigns – activists fail to differentiate live and dead

	<p>finning, claiming all sharks are live finned. Live finning is illegal and condemned by the industry</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Images used by activists are orchestrated <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Questions benefits of ecotourism for local populations 3. Banning sharks fin deprives poor communities of income
Steve Oakley, Chairperson of Shark Savers Malaysia	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Shark populations are declining <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Sabah, shark populations have fallen by 98 per cent in 16 years • sharks declining in direct proportion to prosperity in China 2. Cultural and ethical issues on shark fins are important but what matters is that sharks are dead 3. Singapore has no regulations on the fin industry compared to other countries 4. Sharks as top predators are important ecologically and for ecotourism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case study of North American scallop industry – overfishing of sharks led to the proliferation of cownose rays, which cumulated in the crash of scallop populations • Shark fin soup not worth as much as live sharks – live sharks invaluable to ecotourism • Money mostly goes to traders and not local fishermen
Louise Ng, Director of ACRES	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sharks vital for ecotourism, diving operations 2. IUCN based on scientific data, more reliable than CITES 3. Several shark populations are threatened and unsustainably fished 4. Economics of finning – Shark meat not lucrative, so fishermen have strong incentive to fin 5. Debatable value of consuming shark's fin <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shark fin as tasteless, • A restaurant in Singapore was fined for serving fake shark fin for years and consumers were unable to discern, why not take the ethical alternative? • Potential harm from consuming fins due to mercury 6. Focus on making trade in fins and meat sustainable before consider eating

Although sharks were relegated to a silent subject being discussed, the forum did allow me to observe the means of how sharks are articulated into various circuits of power, knowledge and capital. These platforms of discussion also provided a means of access to individuals that are otherwise difficult to approach. Giam for instance, is a prominent

figure in the shark fin debate and requests made to arrange for an interview with him were turned down. However, through participating in this forum, I was able to obtain his perspectives on the issue, which aided greatly in some of the discussions in the empirical chapters.

4.4.4 *Off-Site Fieldwork: Discourse Analysis*

Discourse analyses of a range of print and online materials were carried out to supplement my research findings from on-site fieldwork. These materials included press releases from hotels and restaurants declaring their position on the shark fin issue, official government statements and speeches to non-official sources including newspaper reports – mainly from Singapore’s main newspaper Straits Times (ST), online blog postings and forums and campaign materials from various NGOs that were actively campaigning against the consumption of shark fin. These sources aided in providing an avenue of access to information that was otherwise challenging to obtain, such as official trade data of shark fin and revenue. They also help to elucidate the role of sharks and their fins within various circuits of public and political discourse online and in mainstream print media. In analysing these sources, I not only paid attention to textual constructions but also the embedded social context, through discerning the way language was utilised in ‘the performance of social activities... [of humans] within cultures, social groups and institutions’ (Gee, 1999: 1).

4.5 Research Challenges

The “shark fin trade” operates largely on the grounds of secrecy, of which certain aspects breach the borders of legality. Research on illegal activities suffers from a host of challenges – safety, lack of access, inability to trust information – with the result that academic research rarely tackles illegal industries. In an interview with Jonn Lu, the Regional Director of Shark Savers, he told me that the “shark fin trade” is a “hard trade to uncover” that requires one to either have extensive connections to figures

involved in the trade or “a Gordon Ramsey disposition¹³” in order to “get behind the scenes”. One possibility in response to access issues is to conduct undercover research, but there are clear risks. For starters, majority of shark fishing activities occur offshore, with some operating in deep waters, raising clear safety concerns. The operations of these fishing vessels are also structured along racialised, classed and gendered labour distributions that would be difficult for a female researcher to situate herself in. Even if I were to confine myself to land-based research and investigate port landings of sharks, the “dubious” nature of shark fishing and rumours that the “shark fin trade” is operated by gangs are also a cause for safety concerns. These difficulties limited the scope of primary fieldwork I could do and meant that I had to rely on anecdotal information from NGOs and traders, as well as confine my fieldwork to the consumption side of the shark fin commodity chain.

The sensitivity of the issue also posed a challenge through restricting the types of qualitative field techniques I could employ such as in-depth interviews. As the issue of shark fin consumption captured national attention with the scales tilting in favour to proponents of anti-shark fin consumption, seafood traders, hotels and restaurants were hesitant to speak to me, as they were concerned that I was an undercover shark activist. Susan, a guest relations officer of one of the hotels I approached, informed me that her colleague had experienced an incident where an activist pretending to be a potential customer had obtained information about the hotel’s seafood source and had subsequently added the hotel to a blacklist. For those whom I was able to secure an informal interview, I had to be particularly cautious in probing them for information and had to be mindful of their reservations about responding in ways that would leave a negative impression of their establishment. Meanwhile, NGOs were similarly

¹³ In 2011, Gordon Ramsay, a celebrity chef, conducted an investigative report on the shark fin trade in London, Taiwan and Costa Rica. His investigations took him to multiple sites along the fin trade, from restaurants to landings ports to fin processing facilities and even boarded a long-line fishing boat to observe shark fishing.

concerned that I could be working for shark trading groups, trying to uncover how much knowledge NGOs had procured on shark trading activities.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has documented how I approached my research methodologically, as well as some of the justifications behind methods used, and the dilemmas and challenges arising from the research process. The interview and focus group discussion portions of my research were helpful in generating information, and in bringing multiple perspectives to bear on the contentious topic of shark fin consumption. Participant and spectator observation meanwhile provided a means of experiencing first-hand how wedding banquet guests negotiate the controversy over shark fin soup, and the politics between NGOs and supporters of the “shark fin trade” as they debated over sharks. Collectively, the qualitative research design is aligned with an ANT-inspired conceptual framework that considers sharks as part of the networks and sets of relationships that influence the course of the shark fin debate. Finally, although the data were collected from only a reasonably small number of participants, I argue that the discourses contained within the data, in terms of the perspectives and opinions on shark fin consumption, are embedded within a wider social, cultural context. Moreover, to compensate for the small numbers, I ensured that the qualitative data obtained were in-depth to enable a comprehensive analysis.

CHAPTER FIVE: POLITICAL-ECONOMICS OF THE SHARK FIN INDUSTRY AND TRADE

5.1 Overview

This chapter provides an overview of the political economies of the global shark fin industry and trade, and explores how and why shark fins have come to be considered a form of unethical food. In Section 5.2, I examine how the anti-shark fin movement has emerged as part of the broader “Save the Sharks” movement to combat the demise of shark populations. Next, I detail in Sections 5.3 and 5.4 how the growth of the “fin trade” incited by strong market demand from China and other Chinese communities around the world, along with ineffective management of shark population and insufficient international regulations of the “fin trade”, have complicated and undermined attempts to conserve sharks. Consequently, this has incited the anti-shark fin coalition to shift their attention towards consumer-oriented approaches (Section 5.5), which the following chapter will examine through using Singapore as a case study. By anti-shark fin coalition, I refer to the collective of environmental and animal welfare and rights non-governmental organizations, local and international, that have taken interest in the issue.

5.2 The Shark Crisis

The “Save the Sharks” movement has proliferated over the last decade in response to growing concerns that global shark populations have been rapidly declining over the years and an increasing number of shark species are facing an elevated risk of extinction (Dulvy *et al.*, 2014). NGOs involved in the movement have latched onto such findings, publishing alarming statistical information on the status of shark populations on their Internet sites:

“In 1996 only 15 shark and related species were considered threatened. This has soared by 12 times in over a decade and by 2010 over 180 species were considered threatened...” (World Wildlife Fund, 2014)

“Some shark populations have declined by up to 98% in the last 15 years and nearly one third of pelagic shark species are considered threatened by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.” (WildAid, 2014)

As certain species of sharks function as top oceanic predators, NGOs and marine scientists are concerned that the decline of these predators can create shifts in marine biological communities that may result in systemic biodiversity losses and trigger a trophic cascade that will erode established marine food webs (Jennings & Kaiser, 1998; Myers *et al.*, 2007). As such, NGOs assert that the population depletion of sharks is a serious environmental issue, for what is at stake are not just sharks themselves, but also the sustainability of the marine ecosystem.

While one might argue that such claims are part of NGOs tendency to exaggerate the crisis facing sharks to enrol support for their cause, scientific data have also provided increasing evidence that some shark populations are dwindling and facing increased threats from anthropogenic factors. Working collaboratively with 300 scientists globally, Dulvy *at el.* (2014) conducted an unprecedented systemic evaluation of the relative extinction risk for more than 1000 species of *chondrichthyes*, a taxonomic class under which sharks are designated. Using the Red List Categories and Criteria of the IUCN, the study estimated that out of the 468 species of sharks assessed, 74 species have been classified as threatened with extinction, with larger species and those that dwell in shallower waters having the largest risk. Although geographic range is closely linked to extinction risks in many groups of animals, it is largely unrelated to the extinction risk of *chondrichthyes* – shark-fishing activity is now

so ubiquitous and technologically advanced that only species with broad depth ranges can escape from fishing gear.

While changes in the marine ecosystem caused by a host of anthropogenic drivers such as habitat degradation, pollution and climate change have pressured shark populations to some extent, it is overfishing and overexploitation of sharks that are emerging as the principal threat to shark populations (Bascompte *et al.*, 2005). The globalised “fin trade” in particular, has caused the most vocal concern amongst the anti-shark fin coalition as being the main driver of unsustainable shark fishing, whether through targeted shark fisheries or as incidental catches (bycatch) of fisheries targeting other fish species (Clarke *et al.*, 2007). Nevertheless, while some studies have indicated that *chondrichthyan* numbers have declined because of overfishing induced by shark fin demand (Jackson *et al.*, 2001; Myers & Worm, 2003), there is still insufficient data on the relationship of the “fin trade” to shark population depletion, largely due to the complex and legal ambiguity of the “fin trade”.

5.2.2 The “Fin Trade”

The “fin trade” is a global industry with specific and complex geographies of production and consumption. From sites of capture in Indonesia, India, Spain, Taiwan and Argentina – the world’s top five shark producing countries – shark bodies are transformed into commodities (meat and unprocessed fins) that circulate worldwide to trade hubs in the United Arab Emirates, Hong Kong and Singapore, where they are exported to processing nodes such as China for recommodification. The processed fins are re-exported into trading networks, the vast majority of which are destined for consumption in a relatively small selection of countries and cities in East and Southeast Asia such as China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam (Fong & Anderson, 2002).

The “fin trade” is believed to have accompanied the rise of East Asian economies over the last several decades, growing rapidly in response to increased demand and rising market prices. The emergence of the Chinese middle class and growing affluence have been identified to be the principal factor driving increased demand for shark fin soup – a traditional and expensive Chinese delicacy, a symbol of affluence and luxury, a mark of prestige and the *sine qua non* of banquets (see Chapter Two). Woodard (1999) reported that shark landings in Hawaii saw a 20-fold increase between 1991 and 1998. Prior to 1980, less than 5% of sharks caught were finned, but following the surge in demand for fins saw a correlated rise in blue shark finning to more than 60% (He & Laurs, 1998; Schindler *et al.*, 2002). Hong Kong, in addition to being one of the largest consumer markets for shark fins, has historically been the most important trader of shark fins in the world since the incipient stages of the fin industry. It has accounted for the majority of recorded import volume and value since data became available, and established itself as the world’s largest exporter from the late 80s onwards, increasing shark fin imports more than 214% from 2648 tonnes in 1985 to 8323 tonnes in 1998 (Fong & Anderson, 2002). The rapid economic growth in China is of particular concern for shark conservationists, for the rise in demand for shark fins parallel to increased affluence is likely to have profound impacts on shark populations and the marine environment, as well as the political-economic landscape of the “fin trade”.

Annually, the total number of sharks killed and circulating through the “fin trade” has been estimated to be between 26 to 73 million, with the median estimated to be about 38 million (Clarke *et al.*, 2007). Although shark catches are reported to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), the number recorded is often not a true reflection of the true total catch and an underestimation, for it does not account for illegal catches or shark bodies discarded into the sea after fin removal. For instance, the FAO documented that approximately 73 million sharks were caught

and killed in 2008. Yet, an analysis of the flow of shark fins through Hong Kong suggests that approximately 1.21-2.29 million metric tonnes of sharks are killed each year for the “fin trade” (Lack & Sant, 2009), which means that the biomass of sharks in the “fin trade” is three to four times higher than catch statistics. Coupled with the difficulty in monitoring the “fin trade”, the anti-fin coalition is concerned that many more sharks are being killed to supply the market for shark fins.

The main controversy surrounding the “fin trade” lies in the economics of the trade. Shark fins are among the world’s most economically valuable seafood commodities and the worldwide value of the trade has been estimated at a minimum of US\$400-550 million per year (Clarke *et al.*, 2007).

“People have said that the most lucrative trade in the world is illicit drugs at number one, number two is human trafficking and number three is actually the ‘shark fin trade’.” (Jonn Lu, Regional Director of Shark Savers, Personal Interview)

Most sharks are caught incidental to the targeted fishing effort for productive teleost fish species such as tunas or groundfishes, and were formerly regarded a “nuisance” catch. However, the “fin trade” has effectively transformed sharks, particularly their fins, into a lucrative commodity and has made this bycatch increasingly welcomed. Since shark meat has low commercial value, priced US\$0.85 per kilogram, as compared to the value of their fins, valued at US\$450 per kilogram on average (FAO, 2014), fishing operations perform the morally contentious practice of “finning” – a process where the fins of sharks are sliced off before discarding the rest of the body at sea.

The “finning” of sharks has become a morally charged issue, raising an important ethical debate over the ethics of killing and that of conscience versus connoisseurship. The anti-shark fin coalition has widely protested the brutal profligacy of the practice, asserting that sharks are often “finned” while alive, what is termed “live

finning”, and then tossed back into the sea to suffer a “slow death” from asphyxiation – an act of extreme cruelty and an infringement of animal welfare. On the other hand, there are those who claim that sharks are usually finned when dead, absolving claims of cruelty, while others argue that how they are finned is not relevant because they are still inadvertently killed for human consumption. While the ethics of killing is a grave issue, the more pressing issue to most conservation biologists is the sustainability of the “fin trade” for shark species involved in the trade. The removal of large-bodied predators in particular can cause entire food webs to collapse (Stevens *et al.*, 2000; Mumby *et al.*, 2006; Heithaus *et al.*, 2008), which would result in potential deleterious effects on the marine environment. Given the morally debatable production process of shark fin and the product itself, it is unsurprising that shark fins have been rendered a form of unethical food.

5.3 Combating the “fin trade”

Efforts to regulate and monitor the “fin trade” face significant challenges and are contentious and complicated. Under fisheries management, bans on “finning” have been enacted in a number of shark fishing countries and rules to limit finning such as fin-to-carcass rules¹⁴ have been implemented (see Jacques, 2010). However, these regulations are often too riddled with loopholes to be effective and enforceable and these measures have not significantly reduced shark mortality or risk to threatened species. Moreover, illegal shark fishing and trading are also rampant and has been identified as a major threat to sharks for its very nature avoids any monitoring that may be in place.

¹⁴ The fin-to-carcass rules were implemented by ICCAT (the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna) in 2004 to strengthen enforcement in ensuring that finning does not occur in ICCAT fisheries. Under those rules, the total weight of shark fins cannot exceed 5% of the total weight of shark carcasses landed or found onboard the fishing vessel.

Shark conservation occupies a tepid place on the international political map. To date there is not and has never been any shark-centred international binding agreement, protocol, amendment, treaty or convention (Mitchell, 2003). However, there are non-binding and indirect shark institutions such as the International Plan of Action for the Conservation and Management of Sharks (IPOA-SHARKS), a *voluntary* program that encourages nations with shark fisheries to implement shark conservation plans (FAO, 2014). As Vandever and Dabelko (2001) note, IPOA-SHARKS is *not* a regulatory institution, but rather a capacity building institution. There are therefore no shark-centred enforceable international institutions for active shark conservation. Presently, the only institutions with legally non-binding agreements on sharks are the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

In March 2010, CMS founded the Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation of Migratory Sharks (Sharks MOU), the first international instrument for the protection, conservation and management of migratory species of sharks, and launched a Conservation Plan in 2012. The Plan aims to ‘achieve and maintain a favourable conservation status for migratory sharks’, which is attained when the abundance and structure of populations of listed sharks remain at levels adequate to maintain ecosystem integrity (Sharks MOU, 2014). Currently, seven species of sharks have been listed in Annex I of the MOU¹⁵. While the Sharks MOU is a monumental progress towards enhancing shark-centred conservation on an international level and in ensuring the sustainability of directed and non-directed fisheries for sharks in states that are a Signatory to the MOU, only 36 states are signatories to it presently, of which only one of the top shark-catching states, Spain, is involved. In contrast, CITES with

¹⁵ These species are the basking shark, great white shark, longfin mako shark, porbeagle, shortfin mako shark, spiny dogfish and whale shark.

180 'Parties', is better positioned to counter the "fin trade" and it is legally binding on the Parties.

Other geopolitical complications include a rise in organised crime syndicates that are suspected to have infiltrated the shark fin industry. WildAid (2007: 23) reported that the 'lucrative and unregulated nature of the trade [of shark fins] attracts involvement by criminal elements, with fierce competition for shark fins leading to widespread corruption, gangland wars and contract killings', citing how drug dealers in Columbia use the "shark fin trade" as a way of laundering drug money. The documentary film, *Sharkwater*, also drew attention to the exploitation and corruption of the shark hunting industry in the marine reserves of Cocos Island, Costa Rica, and the Galapagos Islands, Ecuador. It exposed how Taiwanese organised crime controls the shark fin industry in Costa Rica, and although shark fishing is illegal in these areas, fishing continues unabated and corruption ensures fishermen are provided protection when illegally fishing for sharks. Similarly, Gastrow (2001) documents how Chinese organised crime groups from Hong Kong and Taiwan have entrenched themselves in South African harbours where they operate the "shark fin trade". These groups control shark-fishing fleets operating in the South Atlantic Ocean and export large quantities of dried shark fins from Cape Town via Johannesburg to Hong Kong, as well as other destinations in Southeast Asia. Unfortunately, the "fin trade" remains poorly monitored and there are no international regulations in place to ensure that the trade is carried out sustainably. Presently, the only semblance of international shark trade regulations is that of CITES, which is mired in powerful political-economic forces that erect a formidable barrier to enacting policies to regulate the trade of endangered sharks as illustrated in the following section.

5.4 Politics of Shark Conservation and Governance

CITES is currently the only international body that regulates the trade of threatened and endangered species. It is an international agreement between governments, whose primary aim is to ‘ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival’ (CITES, 2013). As Sollund (2013: 73) emphasises, ‘the purpose of CITES is *not* to prevent trade and trafficking, but to *regulate* it’. Under CITES, trade is used as a tool to safeguard animal populations and animal conservation and protection amounts to ensuring their numbers are not overexploited by trade. CITES uses three lists of species, each affording different levels of protection from over-exploitation. Appendix I lists species that are prohibited from commercial trade because they are threatened with extinction. Appendix II species can be traded if appropriate permits are obtained and Appendix III species can be traded but require cooperation with member states to prevent unsustainable or illegal exploitation. Even if a species is listed under Appendix I, which identifies the species as threatened with extinction, it does not mean its trade is banned; trade is still permitted but only in exceptional circumstances.

However, decisions regarding which listing species belong to, which species can be traded and in what amount is inherently political. During the CITES Conference of Parties (CoP), state representatives (“parties”) examine a set of biological and trade criteria to determine whether a species should be included in Appendices I or II, and submit proposals based on those criteria to amend those two Appendices. For a proposal to be passed, it requires a two-thirds majority vote by member countries for any species to be included in the appendices. Parties may examine the science but decisions made are not based purely on science, as they have to take into account other factors, such as the states’ ability to enforce the rules (see Chapter Six for an instance of this).

Determining the trade status of a species is subject to a great deal of political influence from powerful countries. During the CITES CoP15 in Doha in 2010, protective regulation for sharks failed to pass because countries such as Japan and Canada were keen to protect their seafood trade profits and therefore exerted enormous political pressure on other nations to vote against trade restriction motions (Adam, 2010; Milius, 2010; Platt, 2010). Similarly, the recent CITES CoP16 in Bangkok in 2013 saw oppositions from member countries such as China, Japan, and Singapore against proposals to list five commercially valuable shark species on Appendix II – the oceanic whitetip, scalloped hammerhead, great hammerhead shark, smooth hammerhead shark, and the porbeagle. Even after the proposals were voted in favour, these countries requested to re-open the debate on the listing, citing a spectrum of reasons. In the case of Singapore, the justifications given for voting against the listing pertained to the difficulties and cost in implementing enforcement measures, concerns that listings might lead to the inclusion of other species that resemble listed species, socio-economic implications of the listing, and it argued that CITES is not the right forum to regulate and manage marine species.

Nevertheless, the motion to re-open debate was rejected and proposals to list those shark species were adopted. This means that they will have to be traded with CITES permits and evidence will have to be provided that they are harvested sustainably and legally. These listings mark a milestone in the battle against the “fin trade”, for it is the first time species whose fins are in demand and of significant commercial value on the international market were listed. Interestingly, it was reported that it was the European Union’s offer of financial aid to help poorer countries change their fishing practices that might have played a crucial role in the votes (BBC, 2014).

Advocates for shark protection thus argue that CITES has conflicting trade and conservation interests and that the CITES appendices are not a definitive listing of which species are endangered, believing that the IUCN should be the appropriate

organisation to advise and deal with conservation matters. Conversely, there are those who question the validity and veracity of IUCN's research and findings. Giam, the alternative representative of Asia in the Animals Committee at CITES, asserts IUCN is fundamentally an NGO, and it 'should not be trusted to issue impartial scientific advice... preferable to use CITES as a guide to whether or not a species was endangered'. On the topic of sharks, he adds that, 'Based on CITES itself only one shark is endangered and that is the sawfish... The rest are not endangered so of the rest anybody can eat anything they want of any species they want'. As such, according to the CITES appendices, only sawfishes have been classified as threatened with extinction (Appendix I), while the basking shark, whale shark, great white shark, oceanic whitetip shark, porbeagle shark and three species of the hammerhead shark (scalped, great and smooth hammerhead) may not necessarily be threatened with extinction (Appendix II). In contrast to CITES meagre listing, there are 74 species of sharks classified as threatened (critically endangered, endangered and vulnerable) on the IUCN Red List. For those involved in the "shark fin trade", the CITES listing is preferred to that of IUCN:

"Predictably, activists thump the IUCN Bible, while fin traders beat the CITES gong." (Joyce Hooi, Straits Times, 2012)

Hence, even if certain species are considered threatened under IUCN but are not listed on CITES, they are traded without restrictions, while CITES-listed species require permits. The blue shark, for example, has the most commonly traded fin, yet it is perfectly acceptable for CITES while deemed "near threatened" by IUCN. Wildlife trade regulations are thus a complicated political sphere and the conservation status of animals is amorphous, more often than not caught up in human political processes.

Shark protection advocates are also concerned that CITES, unlike other multilateral UN treaties such as the World Health Organisation and the Food & Agriculture Organisation, does not have a conflict of interest policy. The credibility of

CITES came into question when a controversy had emerged surrounding Giam, on a potential conflict of interest over his role as a member on the CITES Animals Committee, which provides scientific evaluation and guidance on trade of endangered species, and his purported association with the shark fin industry (The Straits Times, 2012). In her book “*Demon Fish: Travels through the Hidden World of Sharks*”, Juliet Eilperin (2011:88) mentioned that Giam had introduced himself as a representative of the shark fin industry in Singapore. NGOs, led by Sea Shepherd Conservation Society¹⁶, protested his involvement in CITES, citing a report by an independent investigator that Giam may have been using his position of power to influence and lobby those within CITES against protection of shark species. In an interview with Frank Pope, Ocean Correspondent for the London Times, on 14 March 2012, Giam was noted not to deny his association with the Marine Products Association¹⁷ and for his ‘long-running campaign of technicalities, procedural complaints and stalling for time [that] had been designed to keep sharks off the CITES listings’.

Moreover, in CITES and conservation initiatives, scarcity and population numbers are always key in determining which species falls within or without consideration. What determines whether a species should receive protection is one constructed around calculations of populations. The mechanism that CITES uses to determine if trade should be restricted account for whether or not the trade can be sustained at its current levels, not for the effect of trade on individual animals. Consequently, there is little to no room within the framework to consider ethical or animal welfare dimensions of trade, let alone any conversations on whether or not trade should even exist at all. This is a concern for shark protection advocates, as the consequences of “shark fin trade” for the individual shark are as profound as those

¹⁶ Sea Shepherd Conservation Society is a non-profit, marine conservation organisation that is based in the United States. Its operations are global, utilisation direct action to protect marine life.

¹⁷ The Marine Products Association is a seafood trading company based in Hong Kong that was formerly known as the Shark Fin and Marine Products Association.

facing populations, particularly when taking into consideration the unethical process of harvesting shark fin.

Nevertheless, although CITES has been criticised and its effectiveness has been called into question (Sollund, 2013), it remains the only formal means for regulating international wildlife trade, as it is empowered to designate which species are in sufficient danger of extinction to warrant protection from trade. The appendices also matter, as they are an important tool available for governments to regulate trade. All governments that are members of CITES¹⁸ adhere voluntarily to its legally binding resolutions and are required by the treaty to enforce it and to have laws that penalize those who break the rules. The appendices can thus have profound material effects on the shark populations they dictate, in terms of the levels of acceptable and permitted trade and the legality surrounding them, which more often than not, can lead to tensions between traders, governments and shark conservation advocates as these group contest over which species appear on the appendices.

5.5 Conclusion: Moving Towards Consumer-Oriented Approaches

The paradigm of economism dominating the political environment and regulatory processes, and intense financial interests for fins at stake in legal and illegal markets complicate the geopolitical possibility of effective conservation. It is perhaps unsurprising that shark conservation NGOs have shifted their attention towards tackling the consumption end of the “fin trade”, placing increased emphasis on reducing consumer demand for shark fin through social marketing and awareness raising campaigns. This is predicated on the rationale that without demand for shark fin, there would be no incentive to fish and trade sharks. The practice of consuming

¹⁸ Only State governments can be member of CITES. To join the Convention, the State makes a formal declaration to the Depositary Government, which is the Government of Switzerland. Once the declaration has been received by the Depositary, the Convention enters into force for the State concerned 90 days later and the State will now be called a Party to CITES.

shark fin amongst Chinese communities in Asian countries has received mounting criticism and has become the subject of formal campaigns to end the practice. These campaigns have taken root in places identified as top shark fin consumers – Hong Kong, China, Taiwan and Singapore. As with any environmental and animal welfare campaigns, the anti-shark fin campaigns have attracted their own share of detractors. In the next chapter, using Singapore as a case study, I examine the development of the anti-shark fin movement in the country and explore the tension between supporters of shark fin consumption and the anti-shark fin coalition.

CHAPTER SIX: THE ANTI-SHARK FIN MOVEMENT IN SINGAPORE

6.1 Overview

Singapore occupies a prominent node in the global “fin trade” network as a regional trading centre, second only to Hong Kong, with minimal domestic production and is involved in fin processing to some degree. A 2013 report by Trade Records Analysis of Flora and Fauna in Commerce (TRAFFIC¹⁹), an international wildlife trade-monitoring network, showed that Singapore was one of the world’s top four exporters and third largest importer of shark fins from 2000 to 2009. Over the last five years, the country’s shark fin exports experienced an increase from 1,800 tonnes in 2007 to 2,300 tonnes exported in 2012, rising by 44% to 2,600 tonnes in 2013, according to data supplied by the Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority (AVA). At an average price of SGD\$40 per pound, last year exports were worth almost SGD\$230 million. In terms of consumption, Singapore is the second largest consumers of shark fins per capita in the world (WWF, 2014). The consumption of shark fin soup is almost exclusive to the Chinese community in the multicultural nation. As highlighted in Chapter Two, shark fin is predominantly served during Chinese festive celebrations, corporate events and important social events, of which wedding banquets remains one of the most popular occasions for serving it. Naturally, Singapore’s status as a major trade and fin-consuming nation has attracted the attention of international NGOs that have anchored themselves in the country to advance the anti- shark fin agenda.

Having established how Singapore’s role in the global “fin trade” network has flagged the country as a hotspot for the anti-shark fin coalition to advance their anti-

¹⁹ TRAFFIC is a NGO established in 1976 as a specialist group of the IUCN Species Survival Commission. It is dedicated to ensuring that trade in flora and fauna is not a threat to the conservation of nature.

shark fin campaigns, the chapter will now proceed to provide a contextual framing to the rise of the shark-fin consumption debate in Singapore. Drawing from various textual sources including newspaper reports, Internet websites, social media platforms and field research, Section 6.2 traces the development of the anti-shark movement in Singapore. This is followed by a focused discussion from Section 6.3 to 6.4 on the debate over shark fin consumption that has taken place in the country, examining the competing discursive positions that have emerged from the debate on the issue. Here, I pay particular attention to the conceptual place of sharks within public and government discourse. In concluding, I argue that much of the debate has tended to remain in anthropocentric territories and suggest that locating the shark in the debate and considering human-shark relations would provide a sharper analytical context to understanding the politics that has emerged over the consumption of shark fin.

6.2 The Anti-Shark Fin Movement in Singapore

The anti-shark fin movement in Singapore remained relatively muted until 2009, when the Animal Concerns Research & Education Society (ACRES), a Singapore-based NGO, took the lead in launching a number of initiatives to raise public awareness about the impact of shark fin consumption on marine ecosystems. On 18 April 2009, ACRES organised the country's first ever gathering for animal issues at Hong Lim Park to initiate their campaign against shark fin soup. The event, "*When Sharks Die, The Oceans Die*", drew attention to the impact of the "shark fin trade" on marine ecosystems, ingeniously utilizing a giant "Jenga"²⁰ to illustrate symbolically how removing sharks (represented by the bottom blocks of the tower) from the marine ecosystem would eventually lead to its collapse. In October 2009, in commemoration of World Animal Day, ACRES held a three-day event entitled "*Break the Tradition*,

²⁰ Jenga is a game where players take turns to remove one block at a time from any level of a tower constructed of 54 blocks. Each block removed is placed on top of the tower, creating a progressively taller structure. The game ends when the tower falls or if any piece falls from the tower other than the piece being removed by the player to be placed on the top.

Spare the Sharks”, which featured members of the public breaking soup bowls as a representative gesture of “breaking” the habit of eating shark fin and as a pledge to leave sharks fin out of their diet.

However, in 2010, ACRES’s attention was directed towards another animal welfare issue that had urgently arisen in Singapore – the death of two bottlenose dolphins that were destined for display in the country’s latest oceanarium project, the Marine Life Park in Resorts World Singapore (RWS). The issue provoked a heated debate between RWS management and a consortium of environmental and animal NGOs, as well as amongst the members of public, over the ethicality of capturing and keeping such marine animals in captivity for the purposes of conservation, human entertainment and economic functions. Some of the themes that emerged in the captivity debate resonate with the shark fin consumption debate, specifically that of nature versus economics and extending ethical considerations to animals. With the dolphin captivity issue occupying national consciousness between 2010 and 2011, the anti-shark fin movement slipped out of public spotlight.

Nevertheless, other local and international NGOs continued to raise awareness on sharks and the impact of shark fin consumption, primarily in the form of educational outreach efforts through talks and roadshow displays in educational institutions and public venues. While not specifically directed at sharks, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) launched the WWF Sustainable Seafood Campaign in 2010, directed at promoting awareness and encouraging consumers to choose sustainable seafood that are fished and farmed responsibly. The campaign saw the creation of the Singapore Seafood Guide that categorized seafood into three categories – “Recommended”, “Think Twice” and “Avoid” – based on the assessment of their sustainability, and all shark species were listed under the “Avoid” list.

In 2012, the anti-shark fin movement experienced an unexpected revival, reignited by a single Facebook comment made by an employee of a local seafood supplier, Thern Da Seafood.

“Screw the divers! Shark’s fin & Mola mola will also be launched at all NTUC Fairprice²¹ outlets during CNY [Chinese New Year] 2012! Exact date for launching will be out soon!”

The comment was posted as an online promotional message for a new product that was to be launched at Fairprice outlets during the upcoming Lunar New Year, and was apparently directed at diving enthusiasts campaigning against the “shark fin trade” (The Straits Times, 2012). However, its incendiary nature ignited an instant uproar amongst animal activists and the public the moment it entered public consciousness on 5 January 2012, resulting in a flurry of social media activity on Facebook and Twitter. Within a few hours, the comment had generated over 200 shares and 150 comments and calls for a boycott of the supplier and supermarket chain were made, while others complained to NTUC, calling on it to be socially responsible and stop selling shark fins.

It is interesting to note that nothing was said of the *Mola mola*²². Similar to sharks, the *Mola mola* are considered a delicacy in some parts of the world, including Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, and some parts of the fish are used in traditional medicine. The *Mola mola* are frequently caught as bluefin and swordfish bycatch and as they are regarded as nuisance and bait thieves, it has been reported that some fishermen would ‘fin’ the *Mola Mola* out of spite before throwing the body back into the sea (Large Pelagics Research Lab, 2011). Although the *Mola mola* has been categorised as “vulnerable” under the IUCN’s classification, to date, there is no

²¹ NTUC Fairprice is Singapore’s largest supermarket chain

²² The *Mola mola*, also known as the ocean sunfish, is an unusual fish with a truncated, bullet-like shape, whose body come to an end just behind the dorsal and anal fins, giving it a “half-fish” appearance. It is the heaviest known bony fish in the world despite possessing the fewest vertebrae of any fish.

regulation of the fishery or bycatch of ocean sunfish²³, nor any conservation groups campaigning on the *Mola mola*. This thus calls into the question the “specialness” of sharks and their non-human charisma in triggering people to campaign on their behalf.

In less than 24 hours, NTUC released a statement it would withdraw all products from Thern Da Seafood and it would cease the sale of shark fin products by April 2012, becoming the second major supermarket chain to initiate a “no shark’s fin” policy. At that point, the only supermarket chain that had adopted the policy was Cold Storage, which joined the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Singapore Sustainable Seafood Group in October 2011. Within two days of NTUC Fairprice announcement, a third supermarket chain, Carrefour, followed the lead, announcing it would stop the sale of shark fins on 7 January 2012. The rash of supermarkets’ decision to halt the sales of shark fin products became the effective focus of public debate centred on the ethics of consuming shark fin. News articles published on the Internet, specifically those pertaining to the withdrawal of shark fin from supermarket outlets, saw a vociferous online debate within the comment section of the article, with people arguing for and against the consumption of shark fin.

The controversy was thus a tipping point for the anti-shark fin movement and a momentous victory for the anti-shark fin coalition. Not only did it result in removing a key retail supplier of shark fin to consumers, it had also catapulted the issue of shark fin consumption into public discourse. As Michael Aw, founder of the “No Sharks Fins Singapore” campaign, conveyed, ‘That was the moment... to take it to the next level... and we went viral within the week’. Capitalising on the currency of the issue, NGOs and animal activists began aggressively pushing forward their anti-shark fin campaigns

²³ The EU however, has regulations banning the sale of fish and fishery products derived from the *Molidae* family, which the ocean sunfish is part of.

in Singapore between late 2011 and 2013. Table 4 charts some of the notable anti-shark fin campaigns that emerged in the country.

Table 4: Overview of Anti-Shark Fin Campaigns in Singapore

Organisation	Campaign	Brief Description
World Wide Fund for Nature	“Say No to Shark Fin” (2012)	The campaign aims to reduce shark fin consumption by targeting individual and corporate consumers to take a “Say No to Shark Fin” pledge and a ‘No Shark Fin Dining Policy’ respectively. To date, WWF has collected more than 15,000 individual pledges and has convinced thirteen companies to stop serving shark fin at corporate functions.
Shark Savers Singapore	“I’m FINished with FINS” (2012)	Shark Savers has ran the most visually prominent campaign in collaboration with well-known local personalities launched “I’m FINished”, a campaign aimed at changing mindsets, as well as the legal landscape, concerning the fin trade in Singapore. It is a campaign designed to ‘urge individual action, personal conviction and promote respect for personal choice’.
Ocean Geographic	“No Sharks Fins Singapore” (2013)	Launched in April 2012 at the Asia Dive Expo, this ambitious campaign aimed to make Singapore shark fin-free by calling for a complete ban on the sale of shark fin products by 2013. It began by raising awareness and gathering support for the cause, followed by lobbying the Singaporean government to veto the import and sale of shark fins.

As seen from the line-up of shark conservation campaigns, the anti-shark fin movement in Singapore is predominantly a *consumer-oriented* phenomenon, where the *individual consumer* serves as the main intervention level to staunch the demand for shark fin. The reason why the individualisation of responsibility dominates the contours of the anti-shark fin movement in Singapore is attributed to the country’s historical baggage in dealing with issues concerning animal welfare, which the next section will detail.

6.3 Legal Status of Sharks in Singapore: Flight from Politics

The extent of the Singapore state's involvement in shark conservation is limited to its compliance with CITES listings. AVA²⁴, the Management Authority responsible for the implementation and enforcement of CITES regulations, frequently invokes that Singapore abides by the CITES agreement, and that it strictly regulates the trade of listed shark species, allowing only licensed fish dealers to import shark fin and shark-related products. While there have been efforts by certain Singapore government agencies not to serve shark fin during corporate functions and grassroots events, the government has taken a relatively neutral position with respect to the issue of shark fin consumption, steering clear of the debate publicly.

Yet, in the recent 2013 CITES meeting, the Singapore government, represented by AVA, voted against proposals to afford several endangered shark species trade protection. AVA justified their decision on the basis that they did not believe it is appropriate for CITES to regulate commercial marine species and that shark products are difficult to identify and it will be an administrative burden and paralysis to the legitimate fishery trade.

The anti-shark fin coalition voiced their disappointment with AVA's decision and subsequently raised the issue with the Minister of Law and Foreign Affairs, K. Shanmugam, during the Singapore Animal Welfare Symposium 2013 and Public Forum on Animal Welfare Policies on 13 July 2013. The following is an excerpt from field notes taken during the event during a question and answer section.

“...I am disappointed with AVA's decision to vote against most proposals meant for conserving endangered species... rejected all proposals to list endangered sharks and rays up for trade

²⁴ AVA is Singapore's legal authority in enforcing regulations relating to animal welfare and trade.

restriction... I think it tells a lot about our nation – that economy and worse of all, convenience, supersedes our conscience and responsibility towards the environment... I feel ashamed that not only did we vote against protection, but when sharks won majority vote for trade protection, Singapore even joined a party to appeal for a round of revote, in an attempt to further prevent these endangered shark species from receiving the protection that they need.” (Jennifer Lee, founder of marine conservation group, Project: FIN)

In response, the Minister Shanmugam replied:

“...this is where an organisation like AVA does have to take into account the *majority's* view. It cannot go on basis of the *minority movement*. If you ask the majority of Singaporeans today... they are *not* supporters so you also need some societal changes. There is no point criticising AVA for *reflecting the will of the people*... You go to the restaurant and you see, you look at what is being served... On this issue, we have to go for education... but it depends on persuasion, it depends on NGOs working around it, it depends on society coming together... *It is difficult for government agencies to take up positions*... the position to take in CITES... our approach in international issues is two-fold... we may look at the country's interest, other pinned by an ethical approach but it has to be supported and supportable by our population. Any elected democratic has got to do that. ”
(Emphasis added)

It is evident from the above exchange that the state has clearly extricated itself from any forms of responsibility over changing the attitudes of people towards shark fin soup. On one level, the rhetoric reveals the tepid place that sharks occupy on the state's political stage. This is unsurprising given that the Singapore government generally adopts a pragmatic and utilitarian approach towards managing animals in Singapore. Although there has been a marked interest in the willingness of the state in recent years to engage in issues of conservation and animal welfare, the state still predominantly

subscribes to an anthropocentric script guiding animal welfare. This was reflected in how state agencies resort to culling animals in human-wildlife conflicts (see Yeo & Neo, 2010 and Teo, 2010), instead of adopting more “humane” solutions, indicating the low importance state agencies place on such issues and that anthropocentric interests ultimately take ascendance over concerns of animal welfare and conservation.

On another level, this reiteration reveals that the state has displaced the responsibility of “saving sharks” onto consumers and NGOs and that the state will only take interest in the issue if a significant population of Singaporeans support the anti-shark fin movement. Furthermore, in stating that the decision made by AVA in CITES reflected “the will of the people”, not only is responsibility for issue radically reassigned from the state to consumers, it also implies that the “problem” of shark fin consumption is the product of individual consumer choice. Although the rhetoric implies that NGOs and consumers possess the power and capacity to effect change in the political landscape of shark fin, the efficacy of a bottom-up approach is questionable, given the fact that Singapore is a “developmental state”, where the state’s legitimacy is largely derived from its ability to develop the country (see Neo, 2007). In developmental states, emphasis is placed on physical and economic development over (nature) conservation matters. Neo (2007) discusses the difficulty of environmentalists in supplanting the hegemonic developmentalist ethos of the Singapore state, where “nature” is inadvertently a resource to serve the economic well-being of humans.

As such, the ethical status of sharks in Singapore is contingent upon their legal status as embodied by CITES and their legal status is translated by the state to justify the appropriateness of their trade, as well as (non)actions over the consumption of shark fin. In view of the state’s position on the issue and its reluctance to take action unless supported by the populace, shark activists have turned towards consumer-oriented approaches as the primary means of reducing demand for shark fin and in combating the “shark fin trade”.

6.4 Anti-Shark Fin Discourse: Mobilising the Consumer

“It is far more efficient to work on consumers.” (Jonn Lu,
Regional Director of Shark Saves, Personal Interview)

On its “Say No to Shark Fin” website, WWF calls on consumers to ‘Be part of the solution! Take action now’, where taking action refers to making an online pledge declaring one’s intention to cease consuming and serving shark fin. Similarly, Shark Savers also urges the individual that ‘[w]e can do our part by not eating shark fin soup and encouraging our family and friends not to eat it’, providing a link on its website to ‘take a pledge’ that one will ‘never eat or serve shark fin soup again’.

Such framing mobilises the consumer as the key (moral) agent in the anti-shark fin movement and that the responsibility of “saving sharks” is dependent on the individual – what Maniates (2001) terms as “the individualisation of responsibility”. By individualising responsibility, it characterises the proliferation of the “fin trade” as the consequence of *consumer choice* and it is hence through *choice* that the “shark fin problem” can be resolved. The assumption underwriting the choice paradigm is that each consumer possesses the power to shape demands, and a sea change in the choices individual consumers are making would reverse the shark fin problem. NGOs employ “choice” as a tool of social action and provide individuals a simple, cleanly apolitical means of “doing their part” by making a pledge or signing petitions. In turn, the pledges are used to reflect collective support for the anti-shark fin movement, serving as evidence to persuade businesses to respond accordingly to such demands and to stop selling shark fin.

Through mobilizing grassroots support, NGOs hope to convince businesses that consumers prefer to spend their dollars at socially responsible businesses, as evinced from the Fairprice incident described in Section 6.2, and call upon businesses to restructure their operations beyond profitability and efficiency to take into

consideration issues on social responsibility, environmental sustainability and conservation. In other words, serving or retailing shark fin, an “unethical” and “irresponsible” product, would be a detriment to their profits. At a legislative level, NGOs seek to engender public support for their cause, so as to enable collective political action through alerting the government on how people are uninterested in shark fin and subsequently pressure the government into acting. As Minister Shanmugam said, should the majority of the population support the anti-shark fin movement, the government would then support the majority’s view.

In embracing the notion that reducing shark fin consumption can be resolved through uncoordinated consumer choice, *education* is a critical ingredient in this view – enlightened consumers will change consumption behaviour and make altruistic and responsible choices with the larger public good and environment in mind. A core and fundamental aspect of the anti-shark fin movement is thus predicated upon awareness and educational campaigns, for it is believed that people consume shark fins because they are unaware of the impacts of shark fin consumption on shark populations and/or are not aware of the “importance” of protecting sharks. Through arming people with knowledge, NGOs seek to empower individuals to make informed choices, as well as to ensure that their choices are being exercised responsibly. In turn, NGOs hope that the knowledge gleaned would arouse the public into taking action, whether through simple actions on an individual level such as avoiding shark fin, educating family and friends, signing a petition or becoming shark activists themselves.

Consumers are informed that continued consumption of shark fin would further impinged upon dwindling shark populations, which would destabilise the marine ecosystem and result in detrimental impacts for humans.

“As a top predator in the food chain, sharks feed on fishes which in turn feed on smaller fishes or plankton. When sharks become extinct, this irreversible change will cause populations of other

fishes to go unchecked, exhausting the supply at the start of the food chain. Soon, fish stocks that are essential to our survival will be depleted.” (WWF, 2014)

Such discourse places the consumer as bearing responsibility for the effects of their choices not only on sharks and the wider environment, but also on themselves. Rather than consuming and/or serving shark fin, consumers are encouraged to 1) consume “more ethical” alternatives to shark fin and 2) “consume” sharks via ecotourism. In the first instance, NGOs argue that there are other food of equal economic worth to shark fin soup such as fish maw soup or abalone. As for the second point, ecotourism is promoted as a more ecologically enlightened way of “consuming” sharks that is simultaneously a means of conserving sharks through ecotourism dollars. These embodied encounters would also expose individuals to the “liveliness” of sharks and perhaps encourage individuals to form a bond with sharks that would strengthen individual resolve to protect sharks.

While the provision of knowledge is an important step towards promoting awareness and perhaps spurring action, considerable faith is being invested in the role that information can play in changing consumption behaviour. Moreover, the provision of knowledge underwrites the individual consumer as a “rational” actor who uses new knowledge to avoid detrimental outcomes. However, the translation of knowledge into action is not a simple process and by focusing on the consumer, the wider social context of shark fin consumption is overlooked. Given that shark fin consumption, as alluded by Chapter Two, is a thoroughly social phenomenon, the mobilisation of “choice” and the “individualisation of responsibility” as the primary mean to promote the ethical consumption of shark fin becomes inherently problematic.

6.5 The Problem of ‘Choice’ and ‘Individualising Responsibility’

Persuading individuals to alter their consumption behaviour is a much more complex process than simply providing information, for there are a host of

(ir)rationalities governing consumption choices and patterns that inhibits the conversion of knowledge into action.

First, individuals may not respond rationally to new knowledge and may make conscious choices to evade information. As the following excerpt from the consumer focus group discussion show, consumers would explicitly raise doubts on whether their individual choice would make a difference amongst the sea of individuals consuming shark fin, and question whether ending the “shark fin trade” should even be part of their territory of responsibilities.

Joseph: Even if I stop eating, other people will continue to eat, so what’s the point?

Junxiong: Exactly... If say I choose not to eat, someone else will take my bowl and eat it anyway. Might as well just eat right?

Zhen Ling: I tell you, if you really want to cut shark fin demand effectively, the government should just outright ban it like chewing gum.

Junxiong: Yeah, the simplest way is just to ban. If you just keep telling people don’t eat, nothing will happen. The only reason I eat it is because it is served to me during wedding dinners, otherwise I usually don’t eat and wouldn’t bother about it.

In the above dialogue, apart from voicing the futility of their individual choice in making a difference to the overall shark fin consumption scene, the one who should be responsible for reducing shark fin demand, as both Zhen Ling and Junxiong remarked, should be the government, rather than the individual.

The proliferation of “choice” in NGO discourse does not go uncontested. In public debates, consumers have argued that it is their choice to consume what they wish and that those campaigning against the consumption of shark fin should respect their individual choice.

Huipeng: ...Don't eat this, don't eat that. What I eat is my own choice.

Alice: It's not like we eat shark fin every day... at most a few times a year during wedding dinners.

Some have also questioned the choice of NGOs in pursuing the anti-shark fin campaign.

Alex: Why only now then all these activists make noise about shark fin? People have been eating it for a long time...

Me: Researchers have found that shark populations have been declining recently, of which the Chinese demand for shark fin soup is the main driver behind it.

Joseph: But it's not confirmed that it's shark fin soup causing sharks to die right? It can be anything... like climate change. The ocean becoming too hot and sharks die. Anyway, these activists should go campaign in Hong Kong or China especially. Singapore so small, you think will make much difference *meh*?

Huipeng: Can I also say I don't think it's right to only blame Chinese people for eating sharks. I read that people in Europe eat shark meat. Aren't they at fault too?

Alex: Exactly. What annoys me is that they keep saying it's the Chinese's fault. Another thing is, they keep talking about cruelty to sharks but please *lah*, what about other animals? Isn't it also cruel to eat them? Why is no one campaigning for chickens, pigs and cows?

Apart from disassociating themselves once again from any form of responsibility in the shark fin issue, the above exchange also highlights some of the other counter arguments commonly made by consumers, namely that of the notion of animal cruelty, which is part of the anti-shark fin discourse. Alex not only questions the cruelty discourse but also questions the "specialness" of sharks that warrants the necessity to campaign on their behalf. This relates to an earlier point made in Section 6.2 on how the *Mola mola* had escaped the purview of animal activists.

Second, the assumption underwriting information-led approaches is that choices are independent and made at an individual level, but as writers such as Jackson *et al.* (2003) have noted, consumption behaviour is influenced by social-cultural context and consumer behaviour is “thoroughly social” (see Chapter Three). The cultural context of Singapore is largely collectivist, where individuals are more inclined to conform to social norms and personal interests are often subdued in favour of the interests of the group. Although individuals on a personal level may express support for anti-shark fin campaigns, such support may not translate wholly at the dining table or during the wedding banquet planning process. Empirical observation and fieldwork conducted have indicated that some Singaporeans choose to serve shark fin because they are entrenched in social obligations.

“Since it’s my own wedding, I should be free to decide how I want it to be, but I need to make sure my parents and in-laws are satisfied with how it is. Plus, you don’t want to get off the wrong foot with your in laws, so I usually would give in.” (Charlene, Personal Interview)

“My mother was afraid that if we don’t serve shark fin, we would lose face.” (Rachel, Personal Interview)

Here, choice is wrapped around other responsibilities: being a filial child and being a good host. When confronted with the decision of being responsible to distant sharks or being responsible to immediate family members, it is perhaps unsurprising that individuals would gravitate towards prioritising their responsibilities towards those in their proximate circles of care.

NGOs campaigning on the issue increasingly recognise that it is not the lack of information that is constraining consumers to alter their consumption behaviour but rather social pressure.

“One of the biggest challenge[s] facing shark conservation today is really, *pressure*. Pressure from parents over serving shark fin

at weddings, and pressure from business partners to serve shark fin at business lunches.” (Jennifer Lee, Project: FIN, Personal Interview)

“...a significant number of people... are aware of the problems associated with shark fin soup. They want to stop or curtail their consumption. But our study also found that despite their willingness to stop eating shark’s fin soup, they continue to eat and even serve it because of *strong social pressure* to do so.” (Shark Savers, 2014)

Despite recognising the degree to which an individual’s consumption choice is not individualised but is subjected to social forces of expectations and obligations, most campaigns still continue to prioritise information-led approaches and remain thoroughly *anthropocentric*. The overt attention placed on the consumer, educating and finding ways of motivating consumption behaviour change have neglected to consider how the consumed subject in question – the shark – and that of the relations between humans and sharks, also constitutes another social force that might influence attitudes towards shark fin consumption, as well as shark conservation.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a broad overview of the anti-shark fin movement in Singapore and has identified the main challenges facing shark activists in advancing the anti-fin agenda. First, the anti-shark movement is constrained by the lack of political interest on part of the Singapore state. With the majority of the Singapore population seemingly “supportive” of shark fin consumption, albeit by silent collusion, the state asserts that it does not have the legitimacy to support the anti-fin agenda. Second, the inherently social nature of consumption practices in collectivist Singapore and intricate social rules governing the performance of Chinese wedding banquets mean that the efficacy of focusing on the individual as an ethical agent and medium of change is brought into question. Already burdened with responsibilities towards human

others, the anti-shark fin movement adds an additional dimension of responsibilities to nonhuman others that some argue should not be within their ambits of responsibility.

Yet, amidst these challenges, it is clear that discussions on shark fin consumption have tended to remain in the territory of economics and politics and have been resolutely anthropocentric. In response to this, I seek to show is that debates around the consumption of shark fin are not merely the result of debates and discussion between policy-makers, NGOs, and the public. Rather, they are co-produced by a heterogeneity of actants and forces, including the object of contention themselves – the sharks. In the following empirical chapter, I draw on geography’s animal turn to show the potency of sharks in shaping human-shark ethical relations, through using the shark as the focal point to demonstrate how they are part of the politics involving their consumption.

CHAPTER SEVEN: A SHARK'S TALE: ANIMATING ETHICAL FOOD CONSUMPTION CHOICES

7.1 Overview

The previous chapters have shown how sharks are embroiled in powerful political-economic networks and institutions, which have impeded efforts by the anti-shark fin movement to accord sharks necessary legal protection to avert their “cataclysmic” fates. Moreover, ensuing debates over the consumption of sharks fin have tended to reduce the shark to a lifeless abstraction, where the shark is a commodity to be traded, an object of conservation campaigns and a culinary delicacy. Building on Hobson’s (2007: 251) argument that ‘animals can be considered affective political subjects’, I illustrate in this chapter how the shark is not an inert, passive object in the debate, but rather a nonhuman whose (im)material presence, nonhuman charisma influences the state of affairs, helping to give shape to the politics surrounding the ethicality of its consumption. By nonhuman charisma, I refer to the shark’s “animality” – its anatomical, aesthetic and ecological properties – which contributes to the ways that humans perceive, relate to, and care for them (Lorimer, 2007). In examining how the shark’s nonhuman charisma serves to both impel and repel justifications made over its conservation status, I seek to highlight how the politics surrounding shark fin consumption is *more than* a conflict or compromise between economic, socio-cultural and environmental priorities.

7.2 A Shark’s Tale

7.2.1 *The Sharks’ Shark*

According to taxonomic classification of animals, sharks are a group of fish that belong to the class *Chondrichthyes* (cartilaginous fishes), one of the three extant

classes of fish, which possesses several biological characteristics that differentiate them from the conventional idea of fish²⁵ (see Dulvy *et al.*, 2014). There exists a great ecological diversity across the known 468 shark species (Compagno, 2001), differing in size, behaviour, biology and abundance, as well as residing in a wide range of habitats. Yet, despite this immense diversity, most humans' awareness of sharks tend to draw from a select few well-known species, such as the great white shark, hammerhead shark, tiger shark and whale shark. Understanding of sharks is also often conflated into the singular of “the shark” – a fictional generic shark that embodies the prominent traits of various shark species. This is observed in the ways respondents generalised shark appearance and behaviour as they talked about sharks in the interviews and focus group discussions conducted (Table 5).

Table 5 Terms and phrases describing shark character/behaviour

Positive terms/phrases	Negative terms/phrases	Neutral terms/phrases
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mysterious and majestic creatures • Beautiful • Magnificent • Graceful swimmer • Amazing, awe-inspiring • Fascinating ability to regenerate their teeth • Misunderstood animals • Stereotyped creatures • Curious creatures • Endangered creatures that are victims of humans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Man-eaters • Dangerous and scary sea monster • Observant, lurking suspiciously under the water surface • Determined and relentless • Cold and silent • Streamlined, fast and sneaky • Strong and vicious • Hungry, always on the prowl for food • Strong jaws and sharp knife-like teeth • Jaws of death • Gluttony, eat everything 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fishy creatures • Predators • Massive yet swift moving • Strange looking • Wild creatures

²⁵ Of the 28,000 known extant species of fish, the vast majority are *Osteichthyes* (bony fish) – an extremely diverse and abundant group with over 27,000 species that forms the general impression of what a fish is. Meanwhile, *Chondrichthyes* consists of 970 species, while *Agnatha* (jawless fish) comprises of 108 species.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carnivorous and bloodthirsty • Menacing, aggressive • Powerful killers • Large and terrifying • Lone stalkers • Emotionless, black eyes • Unpredictable movements 	
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Examining the range of descriptors used by respondents reveals the archetypal image of a shark is a massive yet streamlined, white creature with wide jaws and rows of sharp teeth, with negative descriptors dominating shark descriptions. Traits unique to particular species are thought to be shared by all shark species, while shark behaviour conformed to particular generic patterns of behaviour. Differences between species of sharks were not ostensibly of interest. For instance, the notion that sharks are “carnivorous” is inherently false, as species such as the basking shark and the whale shark predominantly feed on plankton. Moreover, these species do not possess “strong jaws and sharp knife-like teeth”, a common description of sharks, but rather tiny teeth and filter pads that are used to filter feed – their predominant mode of feeding. The classic view of sharks as “lone stalkers” and “solitary hunters” is also constrained to few species, with most leading relatively social lives whether in small groups with established social hierarchies or in large schools as demonstrated by scalloped hammerhead sharks (Jacoby *et al.*, 2012; Mourier *et al.*, 2012).

Conceptualising sharks as “the shark” has significant implications for the ethics of human-shark relations. Treating sharks as a collective creates ethical problems, as not only does it encourage people to ignore or devalue the distinctiveness of each species, it also propagates the assumption that all shark species bear similar traits whether negative or positive. The question then, is: how did such characterisations come to be established as the dominant representation of sharks? In the following

sections, I examine the processes by which human ideas about sharks are shaped, paying particular attention to how sharks themselves, in terms of their (im)materialities and their “animality” in the form of nonhuman charisma, are active constituents in influencing the formation of these ideas.

7.2.2 *Encountering Sharks*

While there are sharks in Singapore waters, sightings are rare and largely confined to the country’s southern islands’ reefs (AsiaOne, 2012). It is possible to personally encounter black tipped reef sharks foraging around submerged reefs at low tide, but most species remain relatively inaccessible and hidden from view unless one were to dive. As a result, it is not surprising that for most Singaporeans, encounters with sharks often take place in captive settings such as aquariums or through virtual mediums such as popular media. These intermediaries, the latter in particular, are highly influential in shaping knowledge on sharks, and subsequently, attitudes towards sharks.

On questioning respondents over what had influenced their impression of sharks, most cited the media as their main source of knowledge.

Peiyee: Most of what I know is from when I watch National Geographic Channel or news on shark attacks... comments from peers.

Zoe: Same. Actually, I don’t know much about sharks. Are there even sharks in Singapore waters?

Chinkiat: In Singapore, sharks are either in your bowl or in Underwater World²⁶. They got those small sharks you can pet but I’m too scared to touch them. You know, every time I see sharks I can’t help but hear their theme song.

²⁶ Underwater World is an oceanarium located in Singapore.

May: Sharks have a theme song?

Ben: The one from that shark movie *sings the main theme from *Jaws**

For most people, the archetypal image and impression of a shark is that of the great white shark depicted in Peter Benchley's novel, *Jaws*, and its subsequent 1975 film adaptation, directed by Steven Spielberg.

"You know the thing about a shark, he's got... lifeless eyes, black eyes, like a doll's eyes. When he comes at ya, doesn't seem to be livin'. Until he bites ya... you hear that terrible high pitch screamin' and the ocean turns red... they all come in and rip you to pieces" (Quint, *Jaws*, 1975)

The above quote from the film discursively constructs great whites, and sharks by extension, as mindless hunters prowling coastal waters for hapless swimmers, where the very scent of human blood whips the animal into an insane frenzy. To the dismay of many marine biologists, *Jaws* has single-handedly cemented the very image of a shark and has left an indelible impression on their behaviour, bestowing upon them the reputation of being "man-eaters", "fearsome predators" and "nature's ultimate killing machines".

"It [*Jaws*] perpetuated the myths about sharks as man-eaters and bloodthirsty killers... even though the odds of an individual entering the sea and being attacked by a shark are almost infinitesimal" (George Burgess, Shark Biologist at the University of Florida, cited in Lovgren, 2005)

This is despite the fact that not all shark species pose a threat to humans. Of the 468 known species of sharks, only three species in particular are responsible for fatal unprovoked incidents with humans – namely the great white, tiger and bull sharks (International Shark Attack File, 2014). Certain species of sharks, such as the whale

shark and the basking shark, are regarded as being harmless to humans, with the former widely renowned for being a “gentle giant” and a popular diving attraction.

NGOs similarly lament the influence of *Jaws* on shark conservation efforts, asserting that the film has been responsible for perpetuating negative stereotypes and misconceptions about sharks, consequently making it considerably harder to convince people that sharks should be protected and afforded conservation status. As Gullo *et al.* (1998) have shown in their study of the cougar controversy, the media served as an influential vehicle in perpetuating negative images and ideas about cougars, which then shaped and reinforced the exclusionary attitude and behaviour humans have towards them. In the case of sharks, news and entertainment media have been widely credited for perpetuating negative portrayals of sharks and for amplifying public fear and anxiety through newspaper stories and documentaries with sensationalistic headlines and imagery (Philpott, 2002; Peschak, 2006). Negative perceptions about sharks and shark-attack risks have been identified as one of the greatest barriers to shark conservation efforts (Ferguson, 2006). As Jonn Lu, the regional director of Shark Savers, told me in a personal interview:

“Sharks have a bad reputation... it started from the movie, *Jaws*. After the movie came out, there was mass hysteria. People were afraid to get into the water, and there were a lot of game fishermen who went out on a quest to get rid of this menace, this crazy man eating machines. For a good many years since the seventies, *Jaws* set the tone for sharks...”

The significant influence of the film can thus been seen in the way it has affirm the discourse of sharks as “man-eaters”, a threat to human safety and “vicious killers” set out to inflict pain and death on people. Such a discourse works to construct them as the “dangerous other”, sending an implicit message about how sharks should be dealt with and is the key rationale and justification behind the extreme treatment of death. The eradication of sharks is impelled by the project of producing “biosecurity”, what Buller

(2008: 1583) defines as ‘a traditional, almost visceral understanding of the notion of biosecurity within human societies, that of not being eaten by big and ferocious wild animals’.

The fact that sharks are capable of consuming humans shows a lack of capacity to reciprocate a moral regard for humans, which in turn impacts the moral value of sharks in the eyes of humans. According to Lynn (1998), moral value is imperative to locating animals in our moral landscape and at the same time, the key to remapping our moral community. Without moral value, sharks are left outside the boundaries of our moral community. What matters is that sharks can kill humans and such an insecurity is subsequently resolved by simple eradication, or in the context of shark fin consumption, consuming sharks is justified as a “noble cause”:

Joseph: Isn’t it good that we Chinese people eat shark’s fin? We are helping to reduce the number of shark attacks.

Junxiong: Exactly. If you don’t eat them, they will eat you.

Interestingly, shark attacks in Singapore are exceedingly rare, with only four recorded shark attacks since 1580, of which three were fatal, and the last fatality was in 1954.

7.2.3 *Aesthetic Charisma*

“Sharks are predators, so it is *only natural* they are built by Mother Nature to be equipped with sharp teeth to hunt their prey effectively.” (Dennis, Personal Interview, emphasis added)

Indeed, culture has largely mediated our impression of sharks, shaping human-shark relations in powerful ways. Yet, we cannot discount the influence of sharks in forging their image. As the opening quote indicates, impressions of shark behaviour are usually based on inferences made from their perceived image. The reputation of sharks as “fierce predators” is partially grounded in their natural characteristics – a shark’s anatomical and aesthetic properties. Across the diverse species of sharks, there

are distinctive features and characteristics shared by most shark species. Some of these common features include their wide jaws, fusiform, torpedo-shaped body and cartilaginous skeletons. These physical properties and aesthetic qualities contribute to the shark's non-human charisma, what Lorimer (2007: 921) terms as *aesthetic charisma* – ‘the distinguishing properties of an organism's behaviour and appearance that trigger particular emotions in those humans it encounter’. Aesthetic charisma has particular affects and is capable of triggering both positive and negative emotions, affections and motivations.

Humans, as bipedal, warm-blooded, terrestrial mammals, stand in stark contrast to sharks and their cold-blooded²⁷, fishy bodies. As advanced by Levinas and subsequently Jones (2000), “face” is a vital medium through which all (un)ethical interactions occur. Nonhumans that possess the characteristics of a human face are capable of triggering human emotional response and concern that places them within the ambits of ethical consideration.

“It's [sharks] quite different from other animals. Like you know those bear bile campaigns? You see those photos and videos and you can see from the bear's *face* it's in pain and they make crying sounds. But when you see those videos on sharks getting finned, you can't tell whether they are in pain or not. They just flop around... Can they even feel pain?” (Ben, Personal Interview, emphasis added)

“I once watched this documentary on sharks feeding on a dead whale and they were just mindlessly devouring the poor whale. Some people poked the shark with a harpoon and the shark didn't even know it was being poked! It just kept eating and eating.” (Celine, Personal Interview)

²⁷ Not all shark species are cold-blooded or poikilothermic. Sharks belonging to the *Lamnidae* family, such as the shortfin mako shark and the great white shark, are homeothermic, which means they maintain a higher body temperature than the surrounding water.

Evident from the first quote, humans are capable of empathizing and communicating with animals that bear similar physical qualities, as humans are able to relate to them to a certain degree. On the other hand, sharks and humans share little analogous characteristics, commensurate (if different) degree of consciousness and emotional authenticity that parallels humans, and the lack of a communicative competence between humans and sharks makes it challenging for humans to relate to sharks. Both Ben and Celine acknowledged that between a campaign to end bear bile farming and campaign to end shark finning, they would be more inclined to support the former, as the sight of bears suffering engendered more sympathetic affections. As such, it is evident that the anthropomorphic criteria for ethical consideration operate most powerfully in the case of animals that display a form of reciprocity to human action and concern.

The radical alterity of sharks hence makes it difficult for humans to make sense, and humans find it challenging to empathise with sharks. At the most, humans can only imagine what it is like for them to be a shark, in their attempts to bridge the cognitive gap. This is illustrated in the following exchange during a focus group discussion.

May: "I came across some videos on shark finning in YouTube. I could feel the pain when they sliced out the fin of the shark alive. From then on, I quit shark fins"

Zoe: "But you don't have a fin"

Ming: "Just imagine your arms and legs chopped off and thrown into the water"

Zoe: "Aren't fins just cartilage? I don't think there's pain receptors."

Peiyee: "It's not the same."

It is unsurprising then that NGOs find it challenging to get the wider public to be sympathetic and understand the plight of sharks, and their efforts to frame "finning"

as a brutal practice is contested. Creating a sense of relatedness is vital to the cause of including animals within the human moral landscape and extending human ethical considerations to be more inclusive of nonhuman others.

The otherness of sharks also means that they are unlikely to encounter humans. Humans and sharks do not share geographic environments. As aquatic animals, sharks inhabit spaces profoundly different to the ones that humans generally occupy. As Jones (2000) notes, water constructs forms of life spaces that are markedly alien to the “airy” spaces that humans inhabit. To ‘live in it must present utterly differing ways of embodied being’, in which ‘bodies and senses are exclusively adapted’ to it (Jones, 2000: 288). He suggests that the human ethical imagination finds water ‘a hostile impenetrable space’, consequently rendering many of the lives dwelling within it to be ethically invisible to humans. Furthermore, the spaces of shark catching and the finning process take place in the ocean, closed from view and away from ethical gaze, rendering sharks ethically invisible to most people. As such, stressing subjectivity, care or integrity in ethical deliberations not only depend on the characteristic features of animals themselves, but also the context in which they exist.

7.3 Sharks are Friends, Not Food: Embracing Shark Charisma

Due to their different aesthetics, ecology, physiology and modes of social organisation, their alterity further enhanced by popular culture, sharks are radically different to anthropocentric norms. Although they may not possess the sort of “anthropomorphic cuddly charisma” that is frequently found in as the subject of conservation endeavours, sharks can be considered a charismatic species, possessing several vital characteristics that elevate them in the eyes of researchers, activists and certain people, even shark fin consumers (see Chapter Two). They can be regarded as possessing a form of *feral and transgressive charisma* (Lorimer, 2007).

Feral charisma stands in contrast to anthropomorphic cuddly charisma. While the anthropomorphic ethics of cuddly charisma is founded upon an ethical register of *human extensionism* – developing a sense of care and extending rights to nonhumans who are most like humans (Whatmore, 1997) – the ethics of feral charisma is “grounded in a sense of respect for the other and for its complexity, autonomy and wildness” (Lorimer, 2007: 920).

Recognising that sharks’ aesthetic charisma may not appeal and compel people to join the cause against shark finning, NGOs increasingly turn towards capitalising on the feral charisma of sharks to emphasize their importance to environmental conservation more broadly. In doing so, NGOs attempt to deconstruct sharks’ image as “man-eaters” and instead reframe them as sentient creatures with responsibilities towards the environment. By arguing for animal subjectivity, NGOs position sharks as sentient beings, showing that they are legitimate recipients of human moral considerations, as well as demonstrating their moral value, so that their well-being can be considered for moral reasons. This approach has proven successful in whale conservation. In Wapner’s (1996) study, he demonstrated that one key tactic in whale conservation was Greenpeace’s successful campaign to re-frame whales from “resources” to “sentient beings”, altering the ethical context and rationality used to (re)make policy to favour less whaling.

7.3.1 *Sharks as Keystone Species*

The role that sharks play in maintaining the health of marine ecosystems becomes increasingly consequential to NGO campaigns against shark fin consumption and political negotiations over the need to conserve sharks. Examining shark conservation groups’ materials on sharks reveal that it is commonplace to mention the critical role of sharks in maintaining the environment.

“Sharks play a critical role in the ocean environment. Where shark populations are healthy, marine life thrives; but where they have been overfished, ecosystems fall out of balance” (Jill Hepp, Global Shark Conservation Manager for the Pew Environment Group.)

“As a top predator in the food chain, sharks feed on fishes which in turn feed on smaller fishes or plankton. When sharks become extinct, this irreversible change will cause populations of other fishes to go unchecked, exhausting the supply at the start of the food chain. Soon, fish stocks that are essential to our survival will be depleted.” (World Wildlife Fund, 2014)

“Sharks play a very important role in the oceans in a way that an average fish does not... Sharks are at the top of these [food] webs and are considered by scientists to be ‘keystone’ species, meaning that removing them causes the whole structure to collapse... Where sharks are eliminated, the marine ecosystem loses its balance.” (Shark Savers, 2014)

Both quotes strongly emphasize the relative importance of sharks to the marine ecosystem. The term *keystone species* used in the second quote refers to species whose presence is vital in maintaining the organisation and diversity of their ecological community, as well as emphasising their exceptional importance in relation to the rest of their community (Mills *et al.*, 1993). Given the assumed importance of keystone species, conservation biologists have advocated that they be special targets in the efforts to maximise biodiversity protection – what is termed as *focal species*, as their well-being can tell us about ecosystem health more generally. Focal species, as defined by conservation biology, are those species whose protection, as a group, concurrently protects all or at least most other native species in the region or area (Lindenmayer *et al.*, 2002). Conservation biologists argue that focal species are needed, because of the

sheer complexity of many ecosystems, which make it ‘practically impossible to determine the ecological needs for every species resident in the region’ (Jeo *et al.*, 1999: 23). In short, by concentrating attention on focal species, conservation biologists would simultaneously be able to ‘encompass the needs of all other species’ (Lambeck, n.d., cited in Lindenmayer *et al.*, 2002: 339).

In identifying sharks as keystone species, NGOs utilise the significance of the concept to draw attention to the importance of conserving sharks, and in doing so, elevate its (moral) worthiness for protection amongst the public and policy makers. Yet, it is important to note that not all shark species qualify as keystone species. NGOs continuously stress the importance of sharks to maintaining healthy oceans, drawing upon an oft-cited modelling simulation study conducted on the Hawaiian coral reef that the removal of tiger sharks led to a ‘total and rapid crash in the abundance of tuna and jacks’, due to the explosion in seabird population, of which sharks are their main predators. However, the same study also notes that the removal of reef sharks from the same ecosystem had ‘very small effects on the biomass dynamics’ (Stevens *et al.*, 2000: 489) and concluded that the effects of removing large numbers of top predators like sharks are still largely unknown.

The approach of marketing sharks as keystone species in conservation campaigns acknowledges sharks’ feral charisma, deviating from campaigns that utilise the concept of *flagship species*, where animals selected as flagships tend to be popular, charismatic animals, usually vertebrates, that are used to anchor a conservation campaign because they are capable of arousing public interest and sympathy owing to their anthropomorphic cuddly charisma. The Giant Panda, is perhaps the most famous iconic flagship species, adopted by the WWF to operate as ‘highly visible icons of conservation’ (Lorimer, 2007: 13) campaigns on not only the species but also for global biodiversity, serving as symbols and rallying points to stimulate conservation awareness and action (Heywood, 1995). In the case of sharks, drawing emphasis on

sharks' ecological roles also constructs the campaign along more scientific lines, providing a more rational and objective argument when negotiating with those who critique the anti-shark fin campaign as being founded upon subjective concerns (see Chapter Five).

7.3.2 *The Responsible and Curious Predator*

To make the concept of sharks as keystone species more accessible and relatable to the general public, NGOs articulate their feeding habits as that of being “responsible” predators and in doing so, reframe the negative image of sharks as “fearsome” and “mindless” predators.

“Through intimidation, sharks regulate the behaviour of prey species, and prevent them from overgrazing vital habitats. Some shark scientists believe that this intimidation factor may actually have more of an impact on the ecosystem than what sharks eat. For example, scientists in Hawaii found that tiger sharks had a positive impact on the health of sea grass beds. Turtles, which are the tiger sharks’ prey, graze on sea grass. In the absence of tiger sharks, the turtles spent all of their time grazing on the best quality, most nutritious sea grass, and these habitats were soon destroyed. When tiger sharks are in the area, however, turtles graze over a broader area and do not overgraze one region.” (Shark Savers, 2014)

“Sharks tend to eat very efficiently, going after the old, sick, or slower fish in a population that they prey upon, keeping that population healthier” (Jennifer Lee, Project:FIN, Personal Interview)

The discourse of sharks as protectors of the sea can be read as an attempt by conservation groups and activists to ascribe a form of agency to sharks by virtue of the ecological roles they perform, as well as to anthropomorphise them. In other words, the narrative not only highlights the need to ensure the continuation of the species for the

purposes of environmental protection and the overall health of the marine ecosystem, but can also be understood as a means of to foster a connection between humans and sharks by infusing sharks with qualities that humans can relate to.

Other instances of anthropomorphising sharks include attempts to deconstruct and subvert the misconception of sharks as “man-eaters”. Many NGOs frequently explain that sharks approach humans not with the intent to eat them, but rather as a consequence of their “curiosity” and inherent nature to take “test bites”.

“They come in and take a test bite, make sure you are edible and after the test bite they realise we are skinny meat and go away... but some of these bites, that is the main cause of the fatalities when it comes to shark attack, loss of blood, not so much they eat you up [sic]” (Jonn Lu, Shark Savers, Personal Interview)

Attempts have also been made by some NGOs to organise a series of encounters between humans and sharks. These encounters expose individuals to the sharks’ enchanting nonhuman charisma and agency in a controlled setting and encourage them to form a bond with the sharks.

7.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have highlighted how human ideas of sharks are a mediated characterisation represented by “the shark”, which takes root from cultural influences and the innate nonhuman charisma of sharks. In other words, “the shark” or sharks more broadly is a ‘relational achievement spun between people and animals’ (Whatmore, 2002: 37). Sharks’ nonhuman charisma has complicated efforts to advocate ethical justification for sharks. In particular, I draw attention to how the shark’s negative image and human (mis)understandings of sharks have been instrumental in ascertaining their moral value and consequently whether sharks should be entitled to ethical consideration.

Although sharks' nonhuman charisma can be magnified through marketing and is open to a degree of construction by NGOs, it is constrained by the ecological characteristics, corporeal properties, aesthetics, and particular agencies of sharks themselves. Taking into consideration the nonhuman charisma of sharks opens analysis of conservation politics and ethical consumption politics to nonhuman difference and the agency potential of the consumed subject in influencing the politics surrounding it. Ontologically, taking into consideration sharks' nonhuman difference, their charisma and their agency provide a new approach to understanding animal politics. This recognises sharks as not simply objects in the debate over their conservation status and rights to ethical consideration, but also as political subjects that have affect. In turn, such understandings would have implications on ground-level conservation approaches and the political landscape of institutional decision making, as they illuminate how human-animal politics are essentially a conflict over nonhuman difference.

CHAPTER EIGHT: TOWARDS NEW WATERS FOR THE ETHICAL PLACE OF SHARKS

8.1 Summary

The imperative to write this thesis emerged from ongoing debates in Singapore on the ethics of consuming shark fin soup and the concomitant growth of the “Say No to Shark-Fin” movement. From an academic perspective, this thesis was motivated by the desire to speak to ethical food consumption research about the need to examine nonhuman animals as key sites and subjects of food animal ethics, as well as demonstrating the value and importance of acknowledging human-animal politics as an element of analysis when researching ethical food consumption choices.

Research in ethical (food) consumption has predominantly focused on the consumed object, neglecting to consider the “lived” experiences of the consumed subject (**Chapter Three**). As Robbins (2007: 59) remarks, ‘Beginning explanation and exploration with objects as social/physical actors and part of human/non-human networks better helps us to understand the geography of political economic relationships’. Ultimately, the question that this thesis sought to address was – does seeing the shark as a player ‘change how we understand the processes and outcomes of political struggles?’ (Hobson, 2007: 258). In other words, does conceiving sharks as active political constituents in the politics of ethical consumption shed new insights into thinking about how and why certain animals are excluded from the realm of ethical concern, and if so, in what capacities do they actively influence the ways people attribute ethical sensitivities towards them?

As **Chapter Five** elucidated, vested political and economic interests, bolstered by the banner of “cultural” practices, as well as rising living standards in Chinese communities have fuelled the growth of the shark fin industry, posing formidable barriers to the efforts of NGOs in championing shark protection and conservation.

Sharks are ensnared into the circuits of an economy in which their lives are valued economically but have little to no political or ethical value, and often times, the networks of the industry render sharks ethically invisible, de-animating them as they are transformed into inanimate products for consumption and infused with new meanings and representations. Undoubtedly, powerful political-economic forces have undermined the efforts of activists in advocating for greater protection of various shark species and in calling for a ban on shark-fin soup consumption.

However, my analysis has pointed to how the politics surrounding the ethical consumption of shark fins is more than a conflict between economic, social, or between the human actors or institutions sitting around a negotiating table, determining the fates of animals through utilising the principle of economics to maximise gain and minimise loss. It also involves the politics of human-animal relations. Yet, the consumed object/subject is often glossed over, as attention is instead drawn to the usual actors with easily recognisable “power” and influence. To holistically understand the story of shark fin consumption, one has to look beyond the political-economy, the development and change of societal values and beliefs that frame consumption values, and consider the prominence of sharks and their fins. Consuming shark fin has indeed been historically and culturally prominent in the Chinese community, largely because of the strong belief in associated health and symbolic ideals and production related to sharks. It is imperative to probe at how the consumed subject influences ethical food consumption choices. Focusing on the object and analysing it as the subject provides critical insights to explaining the ambivalence of consumers towards the alleged ethical or unethical nature of certain food animals. It is evident from the debate, along with interviews and focus group discussions with the public in preceding chapters, that sharks are more than inanimate objects meant for consumption. The shark might not have a tangible presence during deliberations on its consumption, but the perceived

“animality” of the shark does have an influence on the ethics governing consumption choices as elucidated in **Chapter Seven**.

NGOs’ framing of shark fin consumption as a form of unethical food consumption is difficult to articulate due to multiple interpretations and understandings on what comprises “ethical consumption”. The ethics of ethical foodscapes is “ambiguous, slippery”, and consist of a number of interwoven layers (Goodman *et al.*, 2010). The moral justification for not consuming shark fin predicated upon animal welfare/rights considerations have been widely contested in the debate. As several respondents had pointed out, why should the shark claim moral superiority over other food animals consumed? Moreover, arguments on whether shark finning is less cruel when a shark is finned dead or alive are irrelevant as ultimately, a life is taken:

“Involving food ethics is a fatal mistake. It doesn’t matter whether the shark is finned alive or dead. We are saving sharks because we need them.” (Jonn Lu, Regional Director of Shark Savers, Personal Interview)

The moral justification put forth by activists that shark fin consumption is inherently cruel is thus challenged based on the notion of the sanctity of life. The apparent difficulties in framing shark fin consumption as an infringement of animal rights have thus seen the movement shifting towards utilising the discourse of sustainability and a focus on elevating the moral status of sharks to that of a sentient being, through actively reshaping the moral and ethical terrain by contesting and deconstructing the image of sharks as “man-eaters” (**Chapter Seven**).

Shark fin consumption as a “normalised” aspect of social life further complicates shark conservation advocacy. As explained in **Chapter Two and Six**, the consumption of shark fin is largely undertaken in a social context, enmeshed in networks of social responsibility, ethics of care and respect. Though there are

alternatives available, the socio-cultural-historical symbolism of serving shark fin soup at social events means that it is challenging to disregard the inherent value of sharks to Chinese food culture and tradition more broadly, as conceded by several wedding couples interviewed. At the same time, this brings to the foreground a more fundamental discussion of what is *truly* “ethical” when referring to ethical food consumption, which was one of the main points of contention in the public debate. Even if individuals were to extend their personal ethics of care towards sharks, they would still be placed in a predicament of having to negotiate between their social and ethical obligations towards other humans, and extending their ethics of care to encompass nonhuman animals might come at the cost of these social relationships.

The case of shark fin consumption illuminates how educating consumers and providing more information on the issues surrounding its consumption and trade—the information gap narrative—do not sufficiently explain why consumers continue to consume shark fin despite being enlightened (**Chapter Six**). However, that is not to say that information is negligible in influencing consumption choices and effecting consumption changes. Rather, it is imperative to consider the relationship between the consumed object/subject and the consumer—the emotional/affective connection between the shark and the consumer. This remains a relatively unexplored avenue in the anti-shark fin movement not just in Singapore, but also globally. NGOs not only have to acknowledge the complexities of modern subjectivities mentioned previously, but also have to consider how sharks “actively” intervene in the discourses that produce them.

8.2 The Geographical Bait

This thesis has constructed its arguments by stitching together work from animal geographies and ethical consumption research, two sub-disciplines that unfortunately have rarely intersected. In bringing these together, the conceptual move

of this thesis has been to argue for bringing animals into theorisations of how consumers understand and debate ethical consumption, appreciating that agency, or in this case, the ethics of shark consumption is relationally co-constituted by both humans and sharks. By doing so, this thesis builds on the theoretical foundations of contemporary work in Geography exploring such dimensions of analysis. As such, sharks, their fins, their physical appearance and their biology are as essential ingredient as all other components of the story. That said, in taking such an approach, I am not arguing that sharks, or animals in general, possess political agency in affecting the political-economic processes that govern that their fates through spurring activism on their behalf. Instead, the aim is as Hobson (2007) asserts, in arguing, that '[a]nimals are already part of the heterogeneous networks that constitute political life'. As **Chapter Five** has alluded, sharks are already tied up in politics, through the billions of dollars, via their bodies and body parts that circulate the globe, exported for consumption markets; and the multi-level frameworks that (attempt to) regulate their movement and conservation.

More broadly, beyond representations and usual spaces and places of analysis, geographers can contribute further to ethical food consumption research, particularly in understanding human-nonhuman interactions that occur in taken-for-granted, mundane spaces such as "consumption-scapes". Furthermore, aquatic non-mammalian animals have to date received less attention in the discipline than relations with terrestrial animals, and more charismatic others, such as companion species (see Lorimer 2007). Sharks arguably lack the charisma of their terrestrial counterparts though there are increasing interests in these marine animals as evident by Shark Week²⁸. As **Chapter Seven** has highlighted, using the analytical toolkit of cultural geography can unravel the discourses and representations underlying attitudes,

²⁸ Shark Week is an annual, week-long programme broadcasted by the Discovery Channel. It was originally developed to raise awareness and respect for sharks, but has since evolved into a more entertainment-oriented programme.

knowledge and practice towards nonhuman others. Meanwhile, environmental and political geographers can illuminate policy, politics, and governance processes involved in regulating human-nonhuman interactions. These and other sub-disciplines of geography can contribute to public debate and decision-making over the futures of these animals. At the same time, this research signals the fact that research on animal within the sub-discipline of animal geography has remained largely terrestrial (but see Bear, 2011; Bear and Eden, 2011). Animal geographers certainly have much to offer to emerging interests in “Ocean Geographies” (see Bear, 2013; Lehman, 2013; Anderson & Peters, 2014), and in contributing to debates involving human-nonhuman interactions and encounters.

8.3 A Fishy Future

Returning to the issue of shark fin consumption, while it appears that consumers in general have displayed a sense of apathy towards sharks and their plight, this does not necessarily paint a bleak outlook for the future of shark activism. At the time of writing, the anti-shark fin movement in Singapore has made progressive inroads into convincing major retailers to take the product off the shelves, as well as convincing a growing number of hotels and restaurants to remove the dish from their menu. Reports have also indicated that an increasing number of corporate diners and wedding couples are opting to serve alternatives such as abalone and fish maw soup during their wedding banquets (The Strait Times, 2013). Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that there is a possibility that this may simply be part of a gradual shift away from traditional-cultural perspectives (Leong, 2011).

Despite announcing that they would withdraw shark fin soup from banquet menus, its removal does not necessarily imply that businesses have completely halted sales of the dish; the dish is still available on demand. In empirical research with wedding couples, some have cited that although the dish was absent from banquet

menus offered to them, hotels were generally “more than happy” to acquiesce to their request for the dish to be served. Moreover, not everyone, including consumers and even non-consumers, are convinced that the consumption of shark fin should warrant so much attention, let alone be a subject worthy of ethical consideration. In the words of one of my interviewees:

“There are other important issues to worry about. I don’t understand why people are making so much noise about eating shark fin. It is just a dish and it’s not like we eat it every day.”
(Shaun, Personal Interview)

As many activists note, a change in mindset cannot be accomplished overnight, but the declining demand may be indicative of a shift in the tides over shark fin soup consumption.

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