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FM 97: Ethnography

Abide Means Stay Longer: Investigating Boba's 21st Century Ascent and Appeal

I have a handful of vivid, pleasant memories loitering in the California sun and counting the number of customers waiting in an endless, unwavering line. Strutting up to the line's end, I don't balk at the one hour wait for a five dollar drink. Instead, engulfed by eager and thirsty customers, I feel energized by our shared goal. We all want to buy a drink, boba, and it's certainly worth the wait.

For the longest time, I've wondered how certain foods earn and retain their hype in America. In particular, I noticed that boba, one of my favorite drinks, became increasingly popular during the past few years, despite being founded in the late twentieth century. Following a hunch, I conducted scholarly and ethnographic research into boba's present day popularity, which exploded from two distinct trends in United States history.

Boba first emerged in the American food scene in the late twentieth century when Taiwanese and Chinese immigrants and restaurateurs flocked to the United States and opened boba shops. Because of boba's newcomer status in America and convenient locations in Chinatown, the first wave of immigrant-owned boba shops attracted mainly Chinese and Taiwanese American families. This statistic has changed dramatically within the past ten to fifteen years. With the influx of boba shops in new and often gentrified neighborhoods, the rising numbers of second and third Chinese and Taiwanese Americans opening up restaurants, boba's social media prevalence, and the boundless creativity associated with craft tea drinks, boba has reached more diverse audiences. At the same time, boba has wrestled with its portrayal as a

bizarre ethnic drink. As boba's popularity continues to surge, more businesses will adopt boba onto their menus in the future, expose new crowds to boba, and refashion boba recipes for a diverse customer base. Despite this mounting progress, boba will continually be referenced from an Orientalist perspective unless boba businesses and consumers spark intentional conversations about the problematic portrayal of boba and other ethnic foods. As I soon discovered, boba's acceptance into American food culture parallels the Asian-American plight for accepted, assimilated identity in the United States.

With boba as my scholarly subject, I initially hoped to immerse myself in various boba shop locations. But after discussing these plans with my advisor and realizing my limited time and funding, I decided to narrow my focus to Abide, a boba shop in the heart of Central Square in Cambridge. Fortunately, this decision allowed me to establish rapport¹ with the shop's employees and owners, a key fieldwork strategy I internalized from Bruce Jackson's *Fieldwork* guide (Jackson 68). In my initial research and interactions with the owners and employees, I jotted down field notes and sound bites from employees in Abide. Occasionally, and sometimes unintentionally, I found myself recalling and documenting past trips to Kung Fu Tea and Royal Tea, boba shops in Boston Chinatown, and my childhood memories of San Francisco iconic boba chains (Boba Guys, Quickly and Tpumps). My extensive experience with boba on both coasts of the United States helped me chronicle boba's adaptations and overall progression in food culture. I documented these experiences and scenes to the best of my ability and hope that my forthcoming depictions accurately capture present day attitudes about boba.

¹ According to Jackson, "if your relationship with an informant continues over a period of time, you're less and less a stranger and you sense more and more the unspoken restrictions on the kinds of questions that can be comfortably asked" (Jackson 70). Unsurprisingly, I saw this phenomenon materialize during my fieldwork at Abide during my conversations with Jamie, Jeffrey, Dan, and other employees!

Creating a Boba Sensation and Fueling Its Temptation

Boba, also known as bubble milk tea, has steadily entered the minds, hearts, and mouths of foodies. The endless permutations of teas, toppings, and flavor profiles have conjured a dedicated cult following for a drink that appeals to people of various backgrounds and ethnicities. While its popularity now spans continents and cultures, boba's initial craze soared in Asia, after its inception in Taiwan's municipalities during the 1980s. Boba's country of origin is largely undisputed; however, the specific shop that claims to have founded boba remains controversial². In one report by the Taipei Times, the owner and founder of Hanlin Tea Room, Tu Tsung-ho, concocted the drink after seeing white tapioca pearls at a supermarket and sensing its harmonious addition to milk tea³. A conflicting story by rival boba shop Chun Shui Tang provides compelling evidence that their owners are the true founders. According to a Goldthread news report, Chun Shui Tang's founder Liu Han-chieh revolutionized the tea industry by serving milk tea with ice mixed in a cocktail shaker in 1987. In 1988, product development manager Lin Hsiu-hui brought fen yuan, a sweet tapioca pudding, to a company meeting and added the tapioca to her Assam black tea. According to this account, this combination of tea and tapioca balls earned her celebrity status, helped bolster the company's sales, and paved the way for boba's trajectory in other countries. Even with competing stores vying for the title of first boba drink, many boba drinks have strayed from Taiwan's first traditional boba.

Depending on the country, state, or even city where boba is served, people recognize boba by different names. In Taiwan, locals have long debated over the drink's official name. One

² First Account found at <https://www.goldthread2.com/videos/who-invented-bubble-tea/article/3001018>

³ Second account found at <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2018/11/13/2003704115>

of the earliest pronunciations of boba, zhen zhu nai cha (珍珠奶茶), refers to the actual ingredients Lin added to her Assam tea in 1988. In order to stand out from their competitors, the shop Chun Shui Tang added bigger tapioca balls to their drinks, which launched the English pronunciation for boba. This less formal pronunciation, bo ba nai cha (波霸奶茶), combines Chinese characters meaning pearls or bubbles with characters meaning big breasted ladies. In English, the word for boba changes depending on the country, state, and city where it is served. Along with boba's direct translation, bubble milk tea, people also call boba by the following names: tapioca ball drink, pearl milk tea, QQ, and BBT. Depending on the population and community that makes and consumes boba, people's understanding of boba can dramatically shift.

Tapioca balls, also referred to as boba, are often one of the most popular drink additions in boba shops. Boba's famous chewy texture comes from a nutty plant with many names: cassava root, Manihot Esculeta, or Yuca. Cassava root contains an essential starch that creates a firm, yet squishy texture. The original boba color is more white than the final product normally served in boba shops. Only after adding brown sugar, caramel, water, and food coloring, tapioca bobas can change shape, texture, and color. While brown colored tapioca balls remain a constant favorite in boba shops, especially in the boba shops I've visited, many stores have experimented with other forms of tapioca balls including multicolored tapioca balls, popping boba, and crystal boba.

The variations with boba drinks do not end with the tapioca balls. Some boba shop owners have created playgrounds for employees to test new craft drinks, mirroring how baristas concoct drink masterpieces from an unlimited supply of juices, sodas, and alcohols. Boba shops

have offered drinks from Matcha lattes, a traditional Japanese green tea, to Horchata, a popular Valencian cinnamon and spice rice drink, to Banana milk, a South Korean supermarket specialty. Beyond serving regional drinks from other countries, boba shops even mix ingredients such as coffee and chocolate to create perfect recipes for drink lovers. With a thirst for creativity, boba shops have debuted innovative boba drinks, much different than Assam milk tea's original taste, that soar in popularity and continue to please customers.

Teenage Years with Boba in the Bay

Ask me about my favorite city, and I'd say there's no competition with San Francisco. And sure, I might be biased considering San Francisco is and always will always be my hometown, but this answer rings especially true as a Chinese-American with a penchant for aimlessly walking around city streets and a love for all Asian foods. According to the 2010 Census, Asian-Americans make up 33.3% of the San Francisco population, landing San Francisco on the top ten list for cities with the highest percentages of Asian-Americans or mixed Asian-Americans. Without a doubt, the diverse Asian-American community was central to my upbringing and how I learned about different Asian cultures. I stomped around streets lined with Chinese snacks stores and restaurants, Vietnamese delis and Korean markets, and boba shops. Recognizing Chinese characters on signs and awnings, discerning languages spoken by cashiers greeting loyal customers, and parading around these Asian enclaves made me feel at home.

San Francisco Chinatown, the oldest Chinatown in the United States and a popular tourist destination, became one such hub for Chinese festivals, parades, and restaurants I frequented with my grandma and close friends. We waltzed down hilly Clay Street with egg custards and

boba drinks in hand, munching happily to the tune of firecrackers sizzling on the rugged concrete. Despite many fond memories, I only spent a fraction of my childhood in San Francisco Chinatown, which was over forty minutes away from my house. Instead, streets religiously known by name to locals motivated my more serious explorations with Chinese culture. Tucked away between quiet residential streets⁴, I strolled past and stepped into an abundance of locally owned Chinese businesses. In these smaller Chinatowns, spread all across the city, I sketched mental maps of my favorite dim sum delis, dessert shops, and supermarkets. And so from a young age, I learned how to navigate Irving, Clement, and Noriega Streets crowded by a sea of elder Asian woman aggressively pushing their red folding carts. I learned how to mix and mingle my broken Chinese and English into vaguely comprehensible sentences. Most notably, I learned about boba.

I can't remember the exact moment I first tasted boba, but I remember I was not immediately impressed. The chewy boba balls and the strongly brewed milk tea did not appeal to my ten-year-old evolving taste buds. It would take me a few months until I was reintroduced to boba. This time my first sip left me astounded by this complex, yet simple drink. I soon became enamored by boba chains, including the national boba chain Quickly. Since I passed Quickly on my path from school to home, I came to know the location and its patrons quite well. I memorized their circular orange logo, my favorite drinks, their phone number, and the exact number of minutes it would take for me to leave school and return with my order. Close, cheap, and nostalgic, I turned to Quickly to celebrate my greatest accomplishments and drown out my rejections and stressful days.

⁴ Also known as the San Francisco suburbs, which are unfortunately not as well documented and photographed as other monuments in the city

But I was not the only student in San Francisco starting to drink more boba. When Tpumps, a boba chain originating from San Mateo, California, opened on Irving Street, customers stormed their storefront. Even months after their grand opening, one-hour lines formed around the block for a one three dollar boba drink. In what was a particularly compelling and transparent business decision, Tpumps capitalized on the craze for natural, unprocessed foods not previously seen in many boba shops. Instead of shielding their ingredients and teas behind opaque windows, they proudly displayed their freshly brewed teas and syrups to customers. As their business thrived and customers marvelled at the range of choices with boba drinks, preferences in the Bay Area shifted towards fruit teas and unorthodox drink creations.

My fascination with boba shop openings escalated when Boba Guys opened its doors in 2011. Their pop-up boba shop story, dedication to quality and local ingredients, and the two second-generation Taiwanese American founders' relationship with boba intrigued me. Friends and classmates joked about Boba Guys as the new hipster boba shop, and they were not entirely wrong. Employees, also referred to as "bobaristas," served boba and tea out of clear handle mason jars, handed out logo stickers with the famous Star Trek Vulcan salute⁵, and promote Organic Strauss Family Farms milk and vegan-friendly Oat milk. This was one signal of big boba shop changes: similar allergy and dietary accommodations would not have been available at Quickly or even Tpumps. When Boba Guys debuted their strawberry matcha latte drink, boba shops in the Bay Area tried to emulate this delicious drink. The drink's flavor combination—creamy, bitter, and fruity—absolutely blew me away and challenged how I

⁵ Commonly known as the alien hand gesture, this gesture connects the pinkie and the ring ringer and the middle and pointer finger.

previously conceived and visualized boba. I knew that when I moved to the east coast in August 2017, I would miss out on the dynamic boba culture in San Francisco.

Present-Day in MA, Boba Three Thousand Miles Away

Even three thousand miles away, boba inevitably trickled into my life as a college student. Rather than wishing for late night dining hall Brain Breaks, ice cream from J.P. Licks, or Insomnia Cookies, my friends and classmates expressed weekly urges to drink boba. To my surprise, these friends, who usually never ventured beyond Harvard Square, routinely suggested boba adventures thirty minutes from campus in an inconspicuous street near Central Square. When I discovered this Cambridge boba shop mirrored the trendy, millennial aesthetic I encountered in Boba Guys, I absolutely had to learn more.

It's only a two-minute detour from the construction and clamor of Central Square, but this stretch on Massachusetts Avenue, between State and Village Street, is noticeably quieter. Besides the occasional bike and fluttering sign, most people shuffle quickly across the pavement to avoid lingering in the harsh winds. On closer inspection, each business on this street boasts an enormous window, sometimes two, which flicker inside with energy not immediately visible from the sidewalk.

Abide was one of the street's first businesses that enticed me. A pop-up opened by brother and sister Jeffrey and Jamie Yu in September 2017, Abide dishes out a variety of caffeinated drinks, from Ethiopian sourced coffee to Asian teas that rival high-grade tea shops, all day long. Since the Yu's do not officially own a brick and mortar, Abide operates out of Middlesex Lounge, a night club promoting underground DJs and dance music, which makes this

shop's dark, lusty ambiance quite different than the fast food, white tile vibe in many bubble tea shop chains. After visiting for the first time in October 2017, Abide quickly became a favorite stop to visit, and subsequently a captivating site for cultural and social exploration. Although I didn't completely recognize at the time, visiting Abide provided a space on the opposite coast to remember and deepen my bonds with San Francisco.

On March 18th at 11:03 am, I pedal against the spring winds and dash around cars to arrive on this peaceful street in Central Square. After yanking open the door to Middlesex Lounge, Dan Schumaker, an Abide employee, greets me with an enthusiastic wave. I trot slowly to the bar area, which resides nearly 20 feet from the door. Dan asks me for my order and I whip out my phone to Venmo @AbideCambridge the precise amount. As the first customer of the day, I claim one of the three empty wooden stools for customers at the bar, a low rectangular table with flower patterned cloths covering the alcohol, and watch Dan pour tea, fruit, and tapioca balls into a clear plastic cup.

Dan, a recent MIT graduate and Abide employee, makes the first attempt at small talk. Almost immediately after I sit down, he starts rattling off his self-described "hippie hobbies": his enduring love for jamming to music, knitting, and painting his current bedroom walls with "monsters pained by their own existence." I am surprised that he feels comfortable revealing this information even though it's my first time interacting with him. I paint him as a sociable person, which is why I'm so surprised when he casually mentions his struggle with social anxiety disorder. Though, whenever he works at Abide, he remarks that he does not notice it. After his comment, I begin to take note of his subtle ticks. Whenever Dan talks, he gazes into the street or looks pensively at the floor as if he's searching for an object in space, rather than making direct

eye contact with me. Since his immediate openness flusters me, I wonder if Dan reveals personal details to any customers at the bar that engage with him.

While Dan and I chat, I notice Jeffrey preparing the boba and fruit puree in the back kitchen. Jeffrey is one of the two owners of Abide and as well as a Chemical Engineering consultant on the side, which requires him to travel frequently. Tired with working uninspiring hours in industry, Jeffrey tells me that his fond childhood memories at southern California boba shops with his sister Jamie motivated him to open a food business. After three years of conceptualizing and researching coffee, tea, and food service, the sibling duo opened for business in fall 2017. Jeffrey remembers Abide starting out as a coffee project, but after testing their menu items with customers, teas and boba became their central menu item.

As Jeffrey ruffles through wads of cash, I ask him about Abide's boba sourcing. I'm taken aback when he says, "Abide is not a boba shop. It's a specialty drinks shop." As Jeffrey explains, Abide wants to entice customers who have never tried Asian teas and toppings such as boba, almond jelly, and mochi. He mentions that the term boba shop suggests a hangout spot for a younger crowd and that Abide hopes to target a more diverse audience. This comment strikes me as odd, especially when I continue to observe a majority of customers, both young and old, order boba and ask for the "boba drink menu."

Jeffrey's choice to champion Abide as a "specialty drinks shop" rather than "boba shop" has defined the business's aesthetic and customer base. In contrast to other boba shops in Boston Chinatown and San Francisco, Abide's interior and simplistic marketing do not emphasize boba's connections to Japanese, Chinese, or Taiwanese culture. This doesn't come as a surprise to me. Restaurants and businesses opened by second and third generation Asian-Americans, such

as Abide, parallel modern American businesses more than the storefronts owned and operated by first generation Taiwanese Chinese-Americans. While Jeffrey and Jamie are ethnically Chinese, they tell me that didn't encounter boba in Taiwan or mainland China, where most of the original boba shop owners in the United States call home. Rather, the brother-sister duo habitually consumed boba as kids living in Los Angeles suburbs and developed a love for the drink surrounded by a melting pot of cultures. The owners' experiences of growing up in America have informed many of their business decisions from their minimalistic interior to their millennial targeted, Instagram-driven marketing campaigns.

Abide's modern aesthetic, and even the pop-up concept, speaks volumes about how this new Asian-American generation has diverged from the more traditional business model championed by Chinese immigrants. Along with the hip bar and the rotating disco ball, loud pop and rap music blasts through speakers and Spongebob episodes project onto a large screen on the right side of the room. Abide's menu offers more hints about Jeffrey and Jamie's newer vision for boba shops. While Abide offers classic milk teas, their Oat Milk substitutes show a willingness to accommodate allergies and lactose intolerance and wild flavors such as Passion Orange Guava (POG) reveal an awareness of seasonal ingredients. The English only menus also insert quirky, niche references to famous American movies and books⁶. On my many trips to Abide, I note that a majority of the customers do not come from Taiwanese or Chinese American backgrounds. Abide's racially diverse clientele further reflects the rise of boba and premium teas within the non-Chinese and Taiwanese communities. With its hip interior and chatty employees, Abide's ambiance resembles the gourmet coffee shop Darwin's Ltd. next door more closely than

⁶ Abide calls their blueberry ceylon black tea mix Violet Beauregarde! More fun drink names: The Godfather (Appendix Picture 3), Black Widow, Yaddle the Wise, and Green Gables.

other boba shops in Cambridge and Boston. And much like Boba Guys and Tpumps, the additional customer choices for boba make Abide stand out from its competitors and further cements the business in the second wave of boba shops.

Boba shop names offer further insight into the differences between boba shops started by immigrant families and boba shops owned by second and third generation individuals. The most popular boba chains in the United States include Quickly (快可立), Gong Cha (貢茶), Cha Time, and Kung Fu Tea. By incorporating Chinese characters, Pinyin or Chinese character pronunciations⁷, and aspects of Chinese culture such as Chinese martial arts, these boba shops do not attempt to veil their connections to Chinese culture. Newer boba shops, on the other hand, such as Abide have shop names that do not immediately link their business to Chinese and Taiwanese culture, signalling a concrete transition to the second wave of boba shops.

This second wave of boba shops led by second and third generation Taiwanese and Chinese Americans parallels the historical movement when academics reevaluated their studies and descriptions of the Oriental or East Asian continents. When Western and European scholars first took interest in East Asian countries, they assumed an imperialist perspective by employing condescending terms to describe the people and the products living in and coming from East Asia. Such scholars used socially constructed terms such as ‘exotic’, ‘alien’, and ‘Far East’ in their papers, which commodified and denigrated Asian people and their culture (Said 51). During the late twentieth century, which coincided with increased immigration from Asia to the United States and boba’s introduction to the world, new scholars started demanding more conscious language and approaches for discussing East Asia. Heralded as a chief conversation starter in this

⁷ The Chinese character pronunciation for tea is Cha (茶)

scholarly language overhaul, Edward Said's 1978 book *Orientalism*⁸ documented the problematic period when Western scholars patronized the image of the Easterner or Orient. Said refers to Western scholarly studies of the Orient as inherently domineering:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.” (Said 3)

Orientalist literature circulated by Western scholars portray boba as alien, unhealthy, and unworthy of consumption. Academics exploited their prestige in order to project their negative opinions about boba to American masses and influence its perception in society. During this period, many Chinese and Taiwanese immigrants did not have the language or access to scholarship to retaliate against Orientalist studies. Echoing Said's views on Orientalism, scholars Shun Lu and Gary Alan Fine define the dynamics of “ethnicity” which they believe to be a socially constructed term: “many of the transactions by which ethnicity is made ‘real’ are economically grounded: festivals, restaurants, art galleries...ethnicity often becomes a marketing tool, part of an entrepreneurial market” (Lu and Fine 535). With academics, scholars, and media correspondents referring to boba through an imperialist food lens and perpetuating the language of their peers, boba's chances of escaping this Orientalist cycle remain depressingly low.

Unfortunately, this trend has continued with media outlets publishing questionably framed stories about boba from writers with non-Chinese and Taiwanese backgrounds. In 2017, The New York Times published a feature tracing the rise of boba shops in America. However, many readers, especially Chinese and Taiwanese American readers, felt that The Times

⁸ According to Said, “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” (Said 2).

incorrectly portrayed boba as a new, undiscovered food. The article's misinformed angle prompted a flurry of reactions, most notably comments from Bo Hee Kim:

The language used in this article, from 'exotic' to 'Far East' and the unappealing nature of the word 'blob' to describe a drink well-known to many Asians and Asian-Americans unintentionally alienates this population from reading this article. It highlights otherness rather than uniqueness, defines familiarity through a nondiverse lens, and for me evokes the unpleasant feelings of being the kid in a nondiverse neighborhood bringing 'weird' lunches to school.

The article's diminishing description of boba evokes memories where Kim felt uncomfortably alienated from his peers. The parallels between boba's confused identity and Kim's struggle to find acceptance during his childhood are uncanny, and speak broadly to boba as a symbol for finding acceptance in Asian American identity. Although *Orientalism* denounced sensational language about East Asia in the twentieth century, recent articles with similarly patronizing language from the past provide evidence that boba, and Asian-American, continue to reckon with an outsider status. Perhaps this may be one reason why newer boba shops such as Abide have gravitated towards making boba universally enjoyed and regarded as an integral part of American culture rather than emphasizing its Taiwanese origins.

And yet, unlike previous articles that exotified boba and East Asian culture, misguided portrayals of boba have galvanized national attention and elicited hefty amounts of criticism. Boba certainly has an opportunity to reach diverse audiences in the United States and redefine how people view ethnic foods. However, in order to change boba's perception, readers must call out media companies and research firms to deconstruct Orientalist adjectives to describe ethnic foods.

On my last day visiting Abide, Dan shares his experience hosting a recent taste party for a company social. In the session, he recounts offering customers three drink samples: The

Godfather, the Fleur De Lis, the Monarch. He discloses his confusion for those particular choices since The Monarch, which contains black sesame, has an “unpleasant, unfamiliar, and chalky” taste. While I know he spoke with the best intentions, I also recognize that his choice of adjectives revealed his inherent Orientalist perspective views on boba and Chinese, which never came up in our previous conversation. I know that conversations that patronize boba and its ingredients continue to occur across the United States, but I am hopeful that an energized population of second and third generation Chinese and Taiwanese Americans and increasing exposure to boba will create meaningful dialogue about boba’s ultimate importance to food culture.

Tea-riffic Parting Thoughts

I never imagined that I could plunge into boba and study its immense effect on sparking conversation about authenticity, ethnicity, and orientalism in American food culture. My forays into scholarly articles about boba, trips and conversations with Abide owners and employees, and tasty sessions with friends prompted me to reexamine my own presumptions and biases as a third generation Chinese American with consuming boba and evaluating boba shops. With hours of ethnography under my belt and a continued interest in documenting the drink’s transformation, I am more than confident that I will (and even currently!) witness boba history in America.

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Appendix



Picture 1: Abide's Exterior, which shares a storefront with Middlesex Lounge



Picture 2: Abide's service counter



Picture 3: Abide's most popular drink, The Godfather (Matcha, Milk, and Strawberry Puree)



Picture 4: A fun selfie with Dan Schumaker, one of Abide's employees



Picture 5: Abide's Matcha Counter