



START OF TRANSCRIPT

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Hello I'm Clement Paligaru and welcome to Ear to Asia, where we talk with researchers who focus on the region, with its diverse people, societies and histories. Ear to Asia is a podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne. In this episode, life at the intersection of nearly everything, especially food.

March 2017 marks a century of Japanese education in Australia. It all began at the University of Melbourne and Asia Institute is throwing a huge celebration of this milestone. It's notable not only in its own right, but is even more significant when we consider the fact that Australia and Japan have weathered major storms in their relationship, particularly during and after World War II. Since that conflict, both nations have gradually forged a strong friendship on many levels.

As part of this celebration, our guest on this episode of Ear to Asia is Adam Liaw.

Adam is a man with many strings to his bow. He is a lawyer, author of five books,

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winner of the hit Australian TV program *Master Chef* in 2010, and a celebrity chef with his own multi-season TV series *Destination Flavour*. Adam is with us to discuss his work, philosophy of life, his love affair with Japan, and how living at the intersection of cultures and nations has shaped him. Adam Liaw, welcome to Ear to Asia.

ADAM LIAW

Thank you very much for having me.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Firstly, how did your relationship with Japan begin?

ADAM LIAW

Gosh, it's always an embarrassing story really because I never really had one until it started. My entire life, up until the age of about 23, my experience and my association with Japan was probably eating sushi at lunch time. Three or four times, I met literally three Japanese people in my entire life. I'd never been to the country, didn't speak any of the language. But when I was 23 I got offered a job in Tokyo with the Walt Disney Company, as a lawyer there. It was such a great opportunity I just basically packed up and went. The first time I set foot in the country was for my job interview, and the second time I set foot in the country was to move there.

So a fairly rough landing I guess, not speaking a single word and having really no understanding of the culture. But it certainly has blossomed from there.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

What struck you in that early period about Japan?

ADAM LIAW

It was just so different. I'd spent a lot of time in Asia before that - China, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand, you name it. But I'd never been to Japan and it was so different to anything that I'd known, and so exciting actually, to be able to see this entire - not even just new way of living, or new way of speaking, or new way of eating - but this entire new way of thinking, just kind of there. I was all of a sudden immersed in it and it was a fairly steep learning curve for a number of years. Very frustrating. But in the end I ended up living in Japan for the better part of a decade, and learning an awful lot about the language, the culture, the food, and about myself in the process.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Language is so important when it comes to immersing yourself in any culture in any country, and you did get right into it. When did you start learning the language?

ADAM LIAW

This is even more embarrassing. When I went to Japan, my goal was to be there for two years, and I actively avoided learning Japanese. My office came to me and said Adam, all the other ex-pats are having Japanese lessons; would you like Japanese lessons? I was like no thank you, I'll be fine. I don't need to learn any more Japanese, because I was actually studying Chinese at the time. But then after about 18 months of being in Japan it was very clear to me that I was not leaving at the end of my self-expressed two year timeline, and so I started just a very simple once a week conversation class with a Japanese language tutor there. And it was excellent. It was the best language learning experience I've ever had.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

There weren't any huge hurdles or anything like that? Did you have a knack for language?

ADAM LIAW

I've studied a lot of languages in my past. I guess that's why I find it so strange that I had no interest in learning Japanese whatsoever. But speaking Chinese, and being able to read and write Chinese in some fashion - not in any way fluently - that helped me an awful lot in learning Japanese. Understanding stroke orders and characters, and rough meanings. And even though they're not entirely analogous, they are fairly similar in many ways.

But I think the reason I had the most fun learning Japanese is because I didn't expect anything from it. I didn't go into it thinking I'm going to all of a sudden want to read literature or do anything. I learnt just the Japanese that I wanted to know, to do the things that I wanted to do. Going to a restaurant and being able to order food, then being able to read a menu, and then being able to buy a cook book, and go to the post office, and live my life in Japan.

But then it snowballed from there and I started getting into all these other different aspects of Japanese culture and life.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

And that's what I'm really curious about, because they say that having another language can mean having another soul. The insights you have. And you just alluded to that. Now, what were these other things that were opened up to you?

ADAM LIAW

I think most people who can speak more than one language will understand how it can be very easy to have multiple personalities. It's not entirely different, but they aren't entirely the same either. You express yourself slightly differently, you think slightly differently. Something that if you were having an argument in English may completely irritate you may not phase you too much if you were having that conversation in Japanese or Chinese.

I guess for me there is this very communal way of thinking in Japanese. Communal in the sense of respect for the people around you, that I found extremely appealing. Respect for history, respect for culture, respect for your own culture, respect for others as well. And I always try and steer clear from in any way trying to explain the way the Japanese people think. I'm in no way qualified to do that, nor is anyone else who purports to. But it can be very nice to be able to express yourself in Japanese, and to have a conversation in Japanese where certain things can be left unsaid, and certain things can be explained with more tact than you may be able to do in English.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Tell us about the earliest experiences you had there. When it came to food, I want to know about the seduction of Adam Liaw.

ADAM LIAW

I've been interested in food for a very long time. My earliest cooking was Chinese food, Indian food, Western food, just drawing on my family background. And growing up in Malaysia and Australia, and the influences that came in there. So with Japanese cuisine it was I guess the continuation of a bit of an epiphany that I was having in food, where it was not about complicating it. It was about simplifying it. And I remember when I was learning to cook Chinese food, back when I was an early teenager, that I was looking for these ingredients that my grandmother would add to a stir-fried dish, that would make it all taste good.

And then I realised in my late teens that she wasn't adding any ingredients. It was all about the simplicity of what she was doing, that made one stir-fried dish taste completely different to another one, and concentrating very much on the seasoning of the food rather than the flavouring of it, I guess. When I got to Japan it was like this is

what I've been thinking about food, but it's already here; it's an established cuisine. Because much of Japanese cuisine is not about making ingredients taste like something else, or adding an extra flavour on top of them.

It's just altering the seasoning of a dish to bring out the natural flavour of the ingredient itself.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Could you give me an example?

ADAM LIAW

Let's talk about nimono, the Japanese stew I guess you would call it. There's a very nice Japanese idiom Sa-Shi-Su-Se-So, and that's essentially part of the alphabet. It's like saying p, q, r, s, t, u, v or something. But it is also an idiom for the instructions for seasoning nimono stew. Sa stands for sato, so sugar. Shi is shio; salt. Su is vinegar. Se is soy sauce in this context; I'm not entirely sure why. Then So is the so from miso. And that takes you through the steps for seasoning a stew.

You start with the sugar, then you move to the salt so as not to over season it, and the sugar takes longer to be absorbed by the ingredients, so you want to start with that first. And then the vinegar towards the end of the dish. Soy sauce to balance the seasoning at the end, and then miso at the very end so that you don't adulterate the miso after you add it. It's always said that you shouldn't boil something after you've added miso to it, to keep the bacteria alive, et cetera.

But what I guess that very old idiom shows is the understanding of seasoning that is so inherent to Japanese cuisine. When I say the difference between seasoning and flavouring, what I'm talking about there is the difference between things that you taste with your tongue and things that you smell with your nose; aromas. If you think about mint, or rosemary, or any of the hard spices that you might have in a shaker bottle in your pantry, those in my opinion are all flavourings. The aroma of mint, rosemary - they don't have too much of an actual seasoning flavour to them.

You put mint or rosemary in your mouth while holding your nose; you won't get too much flavour at all. But when we talk about seasonings, things that you taste with your tongue, they are limited really in terms of cooking to only five things: saltiness, sweetness, sourness, bitterness and then also umami. Umami being that esoteric savouriness that you get in pretty much all cuisines around the world, and first identified by a Japanese scientist back in 1907.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

What about technique? I understand that in some cases there's a rigour to the technique, and in other cases I'm sure you've got to adjust. How important were these, finding out about these, as you started exploring?

ADAM LIAW

There are some techniques in Japanese cooking that are fundamental. I am no chef; I very much enjoy cooking for my family, and hopefully doing that reasonably well. But you have techniques like katsuramuki, which is the way of peeling a fine, nearly transparent sheet of daikon radish or anything cylindrical. You will use your knife to - like peeling an apple or something, to take one very, very thin sheet and turn an entire daikon radish into a 15 metre long sheet of transparent radish paper. I'm not much good at that myself. I can do it, but not particularly well.

But more so than the actual physical technique, Thomas Keller - the famous chef from French Laundry - said something very true about cooking, in that the physical aspects of cooking are actually not very difficult. Yes, there are certain things about technique that you must train your hands to do, but it doesn't take a huge amount of technique to put something into a pan and to take it out again at the appropriate time, or to turn it over at the appropriate time. In Japanese cuisine obviously there is a lot more technique, but it tends to be applied to the most simple things - how you cut a piece of fish to create the right texture in sushi or sashimi.

How you mould the rice into a form that sticks together but doesn't quite fall apart, so you can still see the light through it when you're making sushi. All of these are techniques, but what you use those techniques for is what's all important. The creation of texture in food, the identification of good fish, and preserving its texture and quality all the way from the fishmonger through to the table.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Adam, how about ritual? Because ritual also in Japan, I understand, embodies some of those techniques as well. For you observing them, or just its presence in your cooking?

ADAM LIAW

Cooking is, in my opinion, it's not just a window to culture. It is culture itself. There is nothing else quite like it that combines geography, and history, and people, and practice all together. Language is possibly the only thing that comes even close to that. In terms of the rituals of cooking, I mean you could barely describe it as cooking, but if

you look at the tea ceremony in Japanese culture, there is a lot of - I do not practice tea ceremony, I haven't studied it; I've attended a few as a guest. But this idea of economy of movement and purposefulness of movement is something that I think is extremely attractive, in terms of cooking.

Ritual wise you can also have particular dishes that you would make at particular times, and you have that in every culture. But it's particularly prevalent I think in Japan.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

How about the more innovative? Because in Japan food evolves, and you've mentioned that as well in some of your books and the like. But can you give us an example of a dish that you have created which references flavours but is an entirely new creation?

ADAM LIAW

Is there anything new in cooking? I guess that's the more appropriate question. Just say sushi, for example. I'm certainly no sushi master, but what I love about the innovation in sushi that you're seeing in Japan at the moment is that it builds on a millennium of history in Japan. And yes you can say it's derivative, but in many ways it's also completely new. Sushi originated I guess through preserving methods where rice was used to preserve fish, and those methods originated in Thailand. The same processes that would make fish sauce and things like that in Thailand were applied in Japan to preserve fish for transport.

You go forward a few hundred years from there and people started eating the rice. Then a few hundred years from there again and people started to make the rice the main element, and that's kind of the history of why we sour the rice with vinegar when we're making sushi. And then you go to Edo, what are now certain suburbs of Tokyo, and a period that is not more than 100 years ago now, or just over 100 years actually, and you have all of the nigiri sushi or the edomae sushi that you see in shops and that is popular around the world now. It originated very, very recently in Japanese culture.

And then you see what's happening now with sushi, and the high end sushi, where it's getting three Michelin stars, and this was never what sushi was originally intended. It was very much a fast snack food. People would go door to door selling it as a door to door salesman. But I guess dishes that I've created myself? I cook very simply, and in terms of my innovation in food, it tends not to be what I consider to be the fairly futile task of creating something that no one has ever done before. But I think it's much

better to find a way of doing something that simplifies it, or streamlines it, or makes it a little bit more interesting or fun than it may have been previously.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Have you had people who have influenced you? Do you have mentors?

ADAM LIAW

Very much so. Food and cooking is very much an oral history that is passed from person to person. There's only so much you can learn from a cook book, and I say that as someone who's written quite a few cook books. The meaning that you put behind food, the reasons that you make it, the techniques that you learn from - in my case - my grandmother, and my mother, and my mother-in-law also in terms of Japanese cuisine, and from my wife as well - they are all far more of what cooking is to me than learning a recipe.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

You're listening to Ear to Asia, brought to you by Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne, and our guest on this episode of Ear to Asia is Adam Liaw, celebrity chef and author, sharing his life and thoughts as an Australian who truly straddles cultures and tastes. Adam, earlier we were talking about the influences, and many people are influenced by other things. Trends, for example. Or ratings people give restaurants. I know you've put trends under the spotlight and hold some fairly strong views. Is there a place for food trends?

ADAM LIAW

Absolutely there is. There's a very big difference between actual food trends and the reporting of food trends in the media. I think too often some journalists are asked by an editor, go and write me an article on food trends. And they're essentially just making things up to put into an online publication. I've been asked the same question myself. But food is a constant evolution. Whether you want to call that a trend, or an evolution, or just changing the way that we think about food, certainly even the most traditional of cuisines never, ever stay the same.

And so if you look at what are actual food trends at the moment, you would talk about things like sustainability, and eating less meat, and the revamp of the food pyramid. There's a very big change. All of us who are in the 30 plus range would have grown up with the idea of a food pyramid as being sacrosanct. But that's not quite been turned on its head as is quite often reported, but the tiers of the pyramid have shifted slightly. But

you don't hear much about that. You hear a lot about gourmet donuts, and you hear a lot about paleo. These kind of things that are probably best described as clickbait, rather than as actual food trends that are impacting the way that we eat now and will continue to eat into the future.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

You do express quite a bit of this on social media. You also have a presence on TV, and you mentioned books earlier on. For you, how important is it that you are out there in those spaces?

ADAM LIAW

It's not hugely important to me. It is what I do. I'm very grateful to have an outlet to share my views, whether it is on social media, or television, or in books, or the columns that I write. But I'm not chasing the spotlight or craving it. I feel that the public is always very smart. If you have nothing to say and you're just there to be the person saying it, people are going to see that there is a lack of authenticity and there's a lack of belief behind your words. But if you have something to say, then it's a wonderful thing in this day and age, and the diversity of media that we have, that a voice can often find an audience.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

You mentioned books can be a challenge. You do write quite a bit. How important are books? Why do they appeal to you?

ADAM LIAW

Well you could say that cook books are bordering on obsolete these days. Any of us with an Internet connection has literally tens, hundreds of millions of recipes at our fingertips. But I think the cook books present something very different. It is, by virtue of being a compilation, a snapshot of how food fits together. I think this recipe based approach to cooking, it kind of does food a disservice. All of my books have chapters on stocks, and the process of cooking, and the explanation of why we might cook something. If you wanted any of my recipes, I'm sure you could find them all online.

But once you see them collated together in a book and you can read the context that those recipes fit in, I think that's a far more important and far more valuable thing that a cook book provides. Rather than just here is something simple for you to cook on a Tuesday night.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

You did mention authenticity earlier on as well. How important is family when it comes to keeping you grounded?

ADAM LIAW

Very important. You haven't felt fully appreciated until your son complains while he's watching the TV show that you spent six months of your life making that he wants it to end so that he can watch Horrid Henry on Netflix. But I certainly don't have any delusions of grandeur in what I do. If people want to listen to the things that I have to say about food, and food is something that I spend an awful lot of time thinking about, I am very gratified for it.

But authenticity is important in terms of voice, in terms of what you have to say. It is far less important when it comes to food. Food being something that is constantly evolving, authenticity is fantastic to understand the history of something, or to completely understand why something exists in its current form, you can trace its authenticity back to the beginnings of time if you wanted to. But in terms of cooking something for your family, authenticity is often something very different from that. There is no point making a dish for your family that is exactly how it would have been made in 19th century Japan, or 18th century China, and trying to recreate than in 21st century Australia. That is the definition of inauthenticity I think.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Your grandmother lived through a period of wars, political revolutions, occupation. As a member of the subsequent generation, has this history been significant for you at all? Has it weighed on you at all?

ADAM LIAW

I mean it's not something that I think about every day, but it's something that I have thought about. For my children specifically, their great grandparents will have been variously killed by, or interned by, or imprisoned by, or occupied by their other great grandparents. And that's just part and parcel of being a mixed race child, as my children are, and as I am too. Or at least was, before I became a mixed race adult. But I think in terms of looking at history, it's very difficult to apply the standards of it to the modern day.

The lessons that we learn from it are obviously very important, but it's farcical to think that my children would be in any way conflicted because they have a Japanese side to their family, and an English side, and a Chinese side, and maybe back half a century before they were born, they didn't all get along.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

But for you progress and harmony is important, I understand. How much does the idea of society progressing through shared experiences - food and the like, knowledge - how much does that drive your mission, to give the world food?

ADAM LIAW

An awful lot, to be honest. Like most non-white children, growing up in Australia I experienced racism and to be honest still do to this day. But it's also very heartening to see the changes that have happened in our society here in Australia over the course of the last 20, 30, 40 years. Last year we won an AACTA Award for the best lifestyle television program in Australia, for a series that I did on Scandinavia. And you don't have to go too far back in the history of Australian media and Australian television to get to a point where the idea of an Asian person presenting a TV show for Australia on Scandinavia would have been laughed out of pretty much any major network in the country.

But fast forward, and here we are accepting awards on stage for it. It's a small thing in the grand scheme, but progress is made by a series of small things. You know the next time a conversation like that comes up, for an opportunity for some other young Asian person, or person of colour of any description, the idea probably won't be laughed out of a network office. I'm heartened always by the progress that we take in race relations in this country.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

The upcoming generations, how important is it that they understand the history? Australia itself has a fantastic history of Japanese pearlers in Broome. That history, that knowledge of all of that, how important is it for generations to come?

ADAM LIAW

I think it's fantastic. I actually took my kids to Broome at the end of last year, and Broome is such a fascinating analogy for our own personal culture. I have Indonesian blood, and French, and my children have Japanese blood, and Chinese history, and of course we all live in Australia. So to go to Broome, which is - I've been there a few times now, but for them the first time going there, and they can see traditional Australian dishes.

Things like susame, or chicken vermicelli. Susame is based on sashimi - it's kind of a ceviche type dish that came from the Japanese pearlers. Chicken vermicelli is this kind

of Chinese chicken and shiitake mushroom noodle stew, and it's very familiar to the types of things that I grew up eating and the kinds of things that they are growing up eating right now. It's just - I think it's nice for them to see that their culture is not alien to Australia. In fact, it's one of the oldest that we have here.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Seems like you've got your work cut out for you over the next couple of years. But at the end of all of this, when you're wrapping up, what is it that you hope you would have fulfilled? Or the legacy you'd have left for not just your children but everyone?

ADAM LIAW

Gosh, legacy is always a hard thing because it implies that there's something kind of higher purpose or grand scheme that I'm following. But there is certainly no plan. I am bumbling my way along through life like everyone else is. But I've had some successes. I've had some things that I think I'll be happy for my children to look back on and say that dad did this, or something like that. But certainly giving my children the ability to be proud of their heritage, and be proud of the people that they are, is a very important thing. It's what my parents gave to me and it's something that I hope to hand down through to them as well.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Adam, it's been wonderful having you join us on Ear to Asia. Many thanks for your time.

ADAM LIAW

Thank you so much.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

We've been speaking with celebrity chef, author and lawyer Adam Liaw. Adam is a special guest of Asia Institute, and he's visiting the University of Melbourne to celebrate 100 years of Japanese language education in Australia. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute. You can find out more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on iTunes, Stitcher, or SoundCloud.

If you've enjoyed this or other episodes of this podcast series, it would mean a lot to us if you'd give us a generous rating and write a review in iTunes. Or like us on SoundCloud. Of course, let your friends know about us on social media. I'm Clement Paligaru. Thanks for your company and bye for now.

END OF TRANSCRIPT