

Hong Kong Matters

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Hong Kong Foodways

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Introduction: Hong Kong Foodways

According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, the term ‘foodways’ is defined as ‘the eating habits and culinary practices of a people, region, or historical period’. Eating habits are complicated because they are collective experiences instead of individual choices, while culinary practices can also be taken further to include relevant production, processing, distribution, consumption, and so on. Therefore, foodways significantly affect not only what we eat but also how, why, and under what circumstances we make our food choices both in the past and present. Since the 1970s, the term ‘foodways’ has been widely used by folklorists and anthropologists when food is addressed for the understanding of the cultural and socio-political meanings embedded in the practices of eating. Folklorist Jay Anderson argues in his PhD dissertation that foodways encompasses ‘the whole interrelated system of food conceptualization and evaluation, procurement, preservation, preparation, consumption, and nutrition shared by all the members of a particular society’ (Anderson 1971).

This background on the history and definition of foodways encompasses the scope of what I discuss in this book: the circumstances of production and consumption of food in Hong Kong society in the last century. I also highlight all the ecological, international, diasporic,

and socio-political aspects of how our society has been developing with the involvement of its people in Hong Kong foodways. When one thinks of what makes Hong Kong different from other cities in the world, the colours of neon lights in the streets, crowds in the restaurants, and people's passion for eating and drinking with friends and families may come to mind. People's high expectations of fully enjoying food in Hong Kong may best be expressed in the old saying: 'A Heaven of Eating and Drinking'. However, the great variety of food in Hong Kong does not only involve decisions that must be made to choose the kind of Chinese, Asian, and Western food to be consumed; it also complicates relations with people's lifeways and values. How do we determine the meanings of food embedded in Hong Kong society, and how do they differ from those found in other Asian cities such as Tokyo, Taipei, Seoul, Singapore, and Beijing, where many different choices are also available? Apart from eating the basis for acquiring nutrients and satisfying the human instinct for survival, as in many societies, people in Hong Kong strongly regard food as one of the markers of their social status.

Today, in Hong Kong, there are many kinds of food ranging from cheap to expensive, ordinary to rare, and local to global. Apart from popular food such as Cantonese seafood, American fast food, Japanese sushi, and Korean barbecue, there are also various snacks sold as street food, luxurious high-class restaurant food, traditional festive food, and exotic foreign cuisine. Recounting the common types of food available in Hong Kong is not sufficient to even sketch the relations between food and culture in Hong Kong. Instead, it is necessary to understand what kinds of food are consumed by whom, and why? Although it is obvious that the logic behind food choice is different for different people, as one person's food can be another's poison, it is important to examine the meanings behind various kinds of food because they shape different people's choices. For example, we can see that some food items are well

accepted by most people in many countries, while some food items are rejected in specific contexts (Martin 2001; Liu 2015). Regarding the reinvention of tradition in contemporary Hong Kong society, Cheng (1997) argues that the emergence of the modern herbal tea shop, with its strong emphasis on a sense of nostalgia, should be understood as part of the 'process of construction, maintenance, and negotiation of Hong Kong identity' (70–71). And, in a study of the meaning of Chiu Chow cuisine in Hong Kong, Lee (1997) suggests that popularity was achieved because of the success stories of the hardworking Chiu Chow people, who were well accepted by the Hong Kong public. They accepted an upgraded Chiu Chow cuisine serving as a metaphor for upward social mobility. Again, if *yumcha* can show how urban communication works in a Chinese restaurant with the enhancement of families and social networks (Lum 2013), then a tea café is definitely another kind of unique eatery model developed from the social and cultural needs of those from the grassroots (Chan 2019). Through the varieties of pineapple buns found in Hong Kong, Wang (2021) further demonstrates the ethnic and cultural complexities developed along the awareness of local identities from British colonization to the present.

Back to the history of the discipline, anthropological research in earlier studies on food and cuisine centred largely on questions of taboo, totems, sacrifice, and communion, shedding light on the approach of cultural symbolism, with an emphasis on how food reflects our understanding of humans and their relations with the world (Mintz 1996; Mintz and Du Bois 2002; Watson and Caldwell 2005). Previous structural anthropological research on edibility rules emphasizes not only why food is a symbol through which the *deep structure* of humanity can be investigated but also how corresponding concepts of commensality, edibility, body, and spatial territories can be discerned (Lévi-Strauss 1969; Douglas 1966; Tambiah 1969). More recently, scholars have broadened the studies on food, demonstrating it as an

indicator of social relations, as gifts given at marriage banquets and other special feasts (Watson 1987; Kerner, Chou, and Warmind 2015), as a symbol of caste, class, and social hierarchy (Sahlins 1976; Goody 1982; Mintz 1985; Harris 1986), and as a metaphor through which the mechanism of self-construction can be discerned, particularly with regard to ethnicity and identity (Tobin 1992; Ohnuki-Tierney 1993; Wilk 2006b). Most importantly, among various ethnographies regarding ethnicity and identity in Asian countries, food is understood as a dynamic part of the way people think of themselves and others. During the last several decades, many studies on Asian material culture have used food to understand changes in the local dynamics of production, consumption, and social identity (Wilk 2006a; Cheung and Tan 2007; Klein 2007; King 2019).

In this light, many scholars interpret the localization of foreign food from a socio-political perspective (Watson 1997; Cwiertka and Walraven 2000; Wu and Tan 2001; Wu and Cheung 2002). These studies, in fact, confirm what Goody (1982) notes, that the emergence of *haute*/high cuisine developed within a context of growing industrialization, imperialism, and transnationalism through the changing social tastes occurring at the everyday level. Appadurai's (1988) research also demonstrates how foodways have been altered and how national cuisine, in fact, was invented within the colonial context. While there is no doubt that we can recognize a general kind of high cuisine formation in societies undergoing significant economic growth or socio-political transformation, we also observe that there are recently some local foods, prepared with traditional culinary skills and carrying regional characteristics, gaining popularity within a variety of venues. Whale meat consumption in Japan, the eating of dog meat in South Korea, the crayfish craze in mainland China, the Slow Food movement in Italy, and migrant families' homestyle cooking in Australia are examples of eating practices that play a role in resisting global forces

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The Rise of *Nouvelle* Cantonese and International Cuisines

In Hong Kong, food can be used as an important indicator of different ethnic groups. By comparing the staple foods, rice and congee, the ethnic differences between the Cantonese and the Fujianese can be examined. For example, Guldin (1979, 233–234) points out that:

[o]lder Fujianese women will often subsist on little more than spinach, peanuts, and congee (rice gruel) and the other fare typical of the poorest in Fujian: sweet potatoes and salty melons. Older women will eat these foods on preference even in Hong Kong and even if the family can afford better. These older Fujianese firmly believe Fujianese food to be the best cuisine and rank Guangdongese only third in choice. . . . The traditional Fujianese custom of eating congee three times daily is yielding to the Guangdongese preference for rice, especially during lunch times on the job when congee is often unavailable.

This demonstrates both the varieties and ever-changing aspects of foodways in Hong Kong; Cantonese is the mainstream cuisine and there have also been various regional cuisines brought to the city by non-Cantonese migrants since the 1950s. Apart from the Shanghaiese foodways mentioned in Chapter 2, Fujianese foodways can also be found in the same neighbourhood.

In the study of the North Point community that was taken over by the Fujianese after the Shangainese, Guldin (1979) points out that another difference between the Guangdongese/Cantonese and Fujianese is their frequency of having *yumcha*. *Yumcha* (飲茶) literally means 'drinking tea' and is a Cantonese-style breakfast taken outside the home with dim sum, or various kinds of snacks, as its principal feature. The origin of this eating style was from Guangzhou. Customers were mostly merchants and traders, and its main purpose was social rather than to simply satisfy hunger. *Yumcha* came to Hong Kong in the early twentieth century and was not widely popular at first. During the post-war era, especially in the 1950s and 1960s when Hong Kong experienced an influx of refugees from mainland China, *yumcha* was largely an activity of single men who met over their breakfast tea to socialize or exchange tips about job-seeking and bird rearing. At that time, men brought birds with them in small bamboo cages and chatted with other customers. This was the backdrop in Hong Kong tea houses (茶樓 or 茶室) and most were closed in the 1990s. Tea houses are different from the restaurants (酒樓 or 大酒樓) where we now go for *yumcha*. First, restaurants are usually bigger in size and located in crowded or busy areas. Some of them are even chain stores such as Maxim's, Treasure Seafood Restaurant, and Hon Po Restaurant. Some provide wedding and birthday banquet feasts for up to one hundred tables. Other restaurants also provide entertainment, and these are called restaurants with night clubs (酒樓夜總會). *Yumcha* has changed from being a venue for men to socialize to a gathering place for the entire family. Since *yumcha* restaurants are flexible enough to accommodate different numbers of participants, who can spend varying amounts of time, *yumcha* serves to draw together family members who may live and work in different parts of Hong Kong and hence reinforces the institution of the family. The changed function of *yumcha* reflects the

full indigenization of a whole generation of early immigrants in Hong Kong society.

Another point to observe is the change in the *yumcha* menu. Much of the food eaten at *yumcha* was originally street food. It was made and eaten in the street rather than in restaurants. For example, fried rice rolls (煎腸粉), fried bread in rice rolls (炸兩), fried peppers/eggplant/tofu with fish meat (煎釀三寶), fish balls and pig skin (魚蛋豬皮), curried squid (咖哩魷魚), sweet sesame or red bean soup (豆沙糖水), and bean curd flower (豆腐花) all began as snacks sold in the street but have become popular dishes served in *yumcha* restaurants. This reflects an interesting underlying structural change in Hong Kong society; that is, there has been a large upward mobility of the lower working class and they have attained the so-called middle-class status within a few decades. Ironically, the food that people choose reveals the fact that even though people's taste moves from the street to the restaurant, the content of the food may not differ at all.

In contrast to *yumcha*, another unique Hong Kong-style eating establishment is the café, which is a typical example of Hong Kong's East-meets-West character. Tea cafés (茶餐廳) are small restaurants that sell both Western and Chinese food. They can be found in every Hong Kong neighbourhood and have a reputation for providing a wide range of food choices that are cheap and fast. Tea cafés are not only typical of Hong Kong as a melting pot for different cultures, they also produce characteristically Hong Kong foodstuffs which reinforce a unique Hong Kong identity that belongs to neither the Chinese nor the English cultures (Wu 2001). Drinks such as 'boiled coke with ginger juice' (薑汁煲可樂) and *yin yeung* (鴛鴦; the former is a special combination with a reputation for curing cold and influenza, and the latter is a mixture of coffee and tea with milk) both serve as good examples representing Hong Kong's complicated mixture of Western and Chinese characteristics. Toasted bread with omelette for breakfast,

congee and noodles, barbecue pork/roasted duck on rice, and bakery goods among others form the unique combination of food being served in tea cafés. Most of the tea cafés are independent and small sized, but recently more tea café chain stores have appeared with their own market niche. From the drinks and food served in tea cafés, one can see a localization of Eastern and Western cuisines that rejects authentic food and drinks of both cultures in favour of a new, uniquely Hong Kong flavour. In other words, the localized Western food has always been a question when people start thinking about Hong Kong as a cosmopolitan city. For example, the most popular Hong Kong breakfast sets can be congee with fried noodles or scrambled eggs with sausage, but they can also be macaroni soup with ham (火腿通粉), or Japanese instant noodles with luncheon meat and fried egg (午餐肉煎蛋公仔麵 or 餐蛋麵). It might not be possible to know the origins of each hybrid food item found in the society; however, from a macro perspective, I see three significant trends for the incoming of Western foodways. Since the last decade, because of the increasing number of non-Cantonese as well as mainland customers, some tea café chain stores have been offering famous regional spicy items such as Sichuan boiled fish (水煮魚), chilli fried chicken (辣子雞), and fish with pickled vegetable (酸菜魚) in their lunch and regular menus. Apart from those regional spicy foods, Japanese eel with rice, Taiwanese minced pork with rice, and all-day English/continental breakfasts are available as well. Therefore, there is no doubt that all these changes in the menu show the flexibility and characters of tea cafés in Hong Kong.

The first trend of the incoming Western restaurants took place in the 1930s, and Tai Ping Koon (太平館) restaurant is representative of the influx. Tai Ping Koon was a family business founded in 1860 in Guangzhou. Because of the British and French culinary influences, they provided upscale Western dishes such as steak served with soy sauce-based gravy, deep fried pigeon, and smoked fish. Their Hong

The Awareness of Food Heritage

While traditional food items may have been used for survival and to keep families alive, commercialization has discredited their authenticity from the perspective of preservation. In Hong Kong, we know that we are not going to bring back life foodways from the past, which have not been cooked or eaten in modern times. Yet we still face the dilemma of preserving traditional foodways that have been modified for market interests or paying more attention to hybridized foodways that are highly popular and commercially sustained. This makes us consider how to evaluate intangible heritage that has undergone transformation for the sake of survival. According to the UNESCO 2003 *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, intangible cultural heritage is defined as:

[T]he practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts, and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense

of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. (UNESCO 2003, 4)

Five domains of cultural heritage are listed: ‘oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; performing arts; social practices, rituals, and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; and traditional craftsmanship’ with the obligations on the state to put efforts into preservation processes (UNESCO 2003), and has a strong emphasis upon:

[the] processes of globalization and social transformation, alongside the conditions they create for renewed dialogue among communities, also give rise, as does the phenomenon of intolerance, to grave threats of deterioration, disappearance and destruction of the intangible cultural heritage, in particular owing to a lack of resources for safeguarding such heritage. (UNESCO 2003, 1)

There is no doubt that many countries have attempted to get their foodways listed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. For instance, French gastronomic meals and traditional Mexican cuisines were listed in 2010 respectively. Making and sharing kimjang as well as kimchi (泡菜製作及分享) from both South Korea (2013) and North Korea (2015), transnational submissions such as the Mediterranean Diet (2013), Washoku (和食) from Japan (2013), and hawker culture in Singapore (2020) have all been successfully listed. From 2010 to 2020, there were altogether twenty-two food-related items listed and they were linked to thirty-two countries. For individual countries, whether they are UNESCO members or not, there is no doubt that various food-related practices have been recognized and promoted as both regional and national cultures. Apart from these champion examples that represent relevant

national cultures, there are many more food-related cases with similar concerns that we might have neglected.

We may never find the right moment for intangible heritage preservation. In other words, we are either too late to rescue the extinguished items or too early to include modified or commercialized items for preservation. Thus, it is important that we should try to pass down traditional foodways to the next generation, and yet we also have to accept that some of these traditions have already undergone transformations due to commercial interest and might have already, or mostly, disappeared. And I am sure Hong Kong is not an exception.

Among the 480 items listed as Hong Kong intangible cultural heritage (ICH), there are a good number of food or food-related items, such as the techniques for making bean curd, soy sauce, milk tea, *ying yang* (a mixed drink with tea and coffee), egg tart, and pineapple bun, along with *sik puhn*, sweet potato cake, herbal tea, oyster cultivation, and fishing methods. I think these are all important for the understanding of our history and culture and could be recognized as ICH.

However, I think we also need to establish certain global values, instead of placing so much significance on local traditions. Just like the hawker culture in Singapore, we might want to consider the tea café (茶餐廳) as a total concept, instead of an eatery that serves a list of items. We might want to emphasize its inclusive atmosphere for people of different classes, ages, gender, and social status, and the diversity of dishes that the tea café serves. These dishes are with characteristics from many places and specially adapted in terms of forms and taste. Before giving further critical views on the existing ICH list, I would like to discuss the differences between culture and heritage. Making use of Hakka food for comparison, I argue that the post-war Hakka food served for the working class should be part of the Hong Kong culture because it has been part of the city's substantial eating habits since the

1950s. Hakka food reflects not only the dietary practices but also social values and relationships. However, I consider the Punti Hakka food a significant part of the intangible cultural heritage because it has evolved from a specific environment and has been developed in alignment with people's living experiences over a few hundred years. As discussed previously, the Punti Hakka cuisine has been passed down from the older generations and is in danger of disappearing because of the influences brought by urbanization and industrialization. Apart from the comparison of two kinds of Hakka food, I would like to introduce some of my concerns on food heritage in this chapter.

My earlier study of Hakka restaurants led me to take interest in changes taking place at different levels of production, distribution, and consumption. I examined freshwater fishpond cultivation not only as a traditional primary industry but also as a part of regional development in the context of the longer-term history and social formation of the fishing community in the Inner Deep Bay, Hong Kong. I investigated the local community's relationships with the government, developers, and environmentalists in a cultural-political context, and was able to identify their problems in maintaining the traditional practice of freshwater fish farming. In particular, I realized that freshwater fish farming did not receive enough technical support from the government, and fish farmers could only survive with a good sense of the market need. In other words, some of the costly species, such as grey mullet fed with peanut residue and mud carp, are no longer locally produced. I became concerned about resource maintenance in relation to heritage safeguarding because of these issues.

In order to enrich our understanding of foodways as intangible heritage, attention should be paid to the roles that institutions and instruments—such as state policy, institutional monitoring, communal tradition, and individual commitment—play in preserving foodways. Based on my studies on fishers of freshwater fish cultivation and the life

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Concluding Remarks

This book is my personal voyage as well as a food expedition in understanding Hong Kong. I hope that readers, who have had similar journeys in other countries, will find parallels because Hong Kong foodways are most likely not alone in the ways they have developed.

In my earlier research on Hong Kong foodways regarding influences from regional Cantonese food, I suggested that the popularity and subsequent decline of Hakka restaurants served as markers of Hong Kong's drastic social change and economic development from the 1950s to the late 1990s (Cheung 2001). My study of Hakka restaurants demonstrated that Hakka cuisine initially became popular because it was tasty and rich in meat protein, an important consideration for those employed in the energy-intensive industrial sector during the 1950s when Hong Kong's large-scale infrastructure flourished. I also argued that the decline of the Hakka restaurants in the 1980s was related to a dietary revolution that took place in Hong Kong due to a change in people's social values and taste, as well as in foodways in general. Hong Kong people were looking for different ways to represent their new, globally connected status; they wanted to differentiate themselves from their earlier concerns that focused primarily on the economic and nutritional value of food.

There are countless daily examples about changes in foodways during the post-war era and how traditional kinds of food have remained the same yet changed. Meanwhile, new kinds of food have been introduced and localized in contemporary Hong Kong society. Indeed, the emergence of *nouvelle* Cantonese cuisine served as an important indicator of the social construction of Hong Kong society. By the late 1970s, a visibly cosmopolitan Hong Kong with generations of Western-educated citizens was firmly in place. Parallel to this post-war transformation, the modified Cantonese cuisine reflected how Hong Kong's social values were constructed. The transformation gave rise to the *nouvelle* Cantonese cuisine in the late 1970s, which combined exotic or expensive ingredients and Western catering. Taking advantage of fast transportation, this style of cuisine was characterized by exotic ingredients, new recipes, adventurous cooking techniques, excellent catering service, and outstanding décor and ambience. *Nouvelle* Cantonese cuisine was a taste deliberately created and pursued by the local and foreign middle class. This process of culinary invention may reflect broad social and cultural trends in the late 1970s when Hong Kong's increasingly wealthy and new middle-class were attracted to a more glamorous lifestyle that stressed greater refinement.

With the incoming of various kinds of cuisines in the 1970s, Hong Kong people also became more interested in travelling abroad. South-East Asia, mainland China, Taiwan, and Japan were probably the most common destinations among the general public. However, it was probably about the same time when Hong Kong people tried not to stay with Chinese food but were willing to get the taste as well as eating experience at the place they visited. Here, I can share an episode about a friend who visited me when I was studying in Tokyo in the 1980s. This friend joined a tour from Hong Kong and visited Tokyo for a few days. He told me that most of the meals arranged by the tour company were Chinese food. Those who were interested in Japanese food such as sushi

Concluding Remarks

and sashimi (mainly raw sliced fish) would have to pay extra for a special meal in the evenings. The rationale behind that kind of arrangement was because the majority of Hong Kong people were not familiar with Japanese food (especially raw fish, which is not common in the Chinese diet). However, some tour members might want to try while travelling in Japan. From this shared personal experience, I suggest that Hong Kong people have been changing, but the conventional practices will not disappear overnight, and the new diet has been introduced in alignment of the society's development and interactions with the outside world.

Hong Kong has become economically advanced and culturally international since the late 1970s; individuals have sought to identify themselves with society by varying means. By looking at food and cuisine as a cultural marker of the identity and status of people, international cuisine in restaurants serves to identify a means for people to compete as equals in the international arena. However, food consumed at home is by far more traditional and conservative, with concerns for safety, health, traditional hot/cold balance, and ritual taboos. A boundary is maintained and well defined between eating at home and outside. Nevertheless, this negotiation between traditionalism and globalism in relation to domestic issues can be wholly observed in Hong Kong. Furthermore, the ingredients used are highly similar in most families, and cooking styles seldom vary. For example, boiled soup, steamed fish, fried seasonal green vegetables with small pieces of meat, and bean curd are all typical family dishes, and rice is almost always the staple food in Hong Kong homes. The difference between eating habits inside and outside the home is a telling one and reflects the dichotomy of Hong Kong itself. Hong Kong is a cosmopolitan city boasting international sophistication on the one hand, while on the other hand, it is an extension of Chinese culture with long-standing Cantonese traditions. Looking for nostalgia and the homemade became popular in the early 1990s, and the related cultural and political influences should not be

overlooked. I hope the popularization of *puhn choi* and private kitchens brought insights into the societal changes; in particular, *puhn choi* is not only a kind of nostalgic food in the postcolonial context but also a dish that demonstrates the significance of commensality in Hong Kong society. In other words, from the practice of *puhn choi* consumption both in family festive gatherings (做節) and social networking events, we can understand the importance of eating together among families and friends. This practice can justify the phenomenon of ‘mobile phones eat first’ (手機先食, meaning that we take pictures of our food before we eat it) and can be explained as a kind of media-oriented commensality. Again, with the recent increased interest in local Hakka dishes, homemade dumplings, and snacks among Hong Kong people, I would say that it is well on its way to becoming a new trend towards the demand of local traditions in the context of cultural engagement in countryside conservation.

Another area that I have not covered, albeit a significant one, is the use of food in media and communication. Modern mass media can influence consumption habits; for example, advertisements and TV programmes give guidelines for or teach people how to choose and purchase goods and services. The mass media bombards the public with all sorts of images via advertisements in television, newspapers, magazines, mail, the internet, radio broadcasts, and posters on the subways. If we look at the development of Hong Kong television cooking shows during the last several decades, we can easily divide them into three phases. In the first phase, cooking was demonstrated as evidence of competent domestic skills for women. Such presentations were usually performed by an elegant woman who advised on what to cook on particular days and shared her personal experiences about how to keep everyone in the family healthy by serving traditional Cantonese simmered soups and fresh seasonal dishes. This kind of cooking show can still be found in afternoon programming as part of