

Diasporic Connections to Home: Materialisation of Collective Memory through Night Markets (夜市) and Cha Chaan Tengs (茶餐廳)

Michelle Wong

Food is shaped by a multiplicity of factors, from history to culture to geography, enabling it to serve as a reflection of identity and as a means of connecting to identity. For diasporic populations, food can serve as a materialisation of collective memory, and one of the ways in which one can reconnect with “home”. In Canada, and more specifically, Vancouver and the lower mainland, the establishment of night markets (夜市) and cha chaan tengs (茶餐廳) are two of the ways in which heritage identity and cultural connections to Hong Kong are materialised through food and its built environments. This paper explores how food serves as a cultural connector that enables diasporic populations to re-enact their collective memory, and how this connection materialises in diasporic landscapes through a look at two of the most popular images associated with “Hong Kong food”.

Hong Kong Identity and Food

Hong Kong’s pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial history have all had a major impact on the formation of Hong Kong identity, as well as the dominant culinary food scenes of the city. Gordon Mathews characterises Hong Kong identity as this idea of “Chineseness plus”, plus encompassing a variety of meanings, from capitalism to colonialism to democracy (1997, p. 1), and food can similarly be described in the same way. Before the Qing Dynasty, Hong Kong’s cuisine was mainly informed by the dominant Cantonese and Techow cuisines of the area (Wang, 2022). A major turning

point in the food scene comes with British colonisation in the 1800s, which brought in western ingredients, flavours and dishes that have had long lasting effects on the culinary landscape of the city (Chan, 2019; Wang, 2022). The city's development into a global port city and its role as being an "in-between" or "third" space has also introduced a variety of multicultural influences from the city's significant immigrant populations (Chan, 2019, p. 2; Wang, 2022).

The cha chaan teng (茶餐廳), in particular, is one of the most prominent identifiers of a uniquely HongKongese foodscape. The food served in these cha chaan teng's are a uniquely "Hong Kong" cuisine, serving up a large diverse menu consisting of dishes and drinks influenced by both Chinese and Western food, with additions and influences from other East Asian and Southeast Asian cuisines (Chan, 2019, Wang, 2022). Lot's of menu items are flexible, allowing for modifications and "mix and match" to create set meals. Many Hong Konger's associate notions of community and family within their memories of cha chaan tengs, ranging from family meals to friendly gatherings to quick work lunches to sites of regular conversation. The environment of a cha chaan teng is also fast paced, with efficiency being a top feature in the speed of ordering, cooking, delivering and eating (Chan, 2019). According to Selina Ching Chan, this "hybridity, inclusiveness, diversity, flexibility and efficiency" that is found in cha chaan tengs are a clear reflection of Hong Kong's identity (2019, p. 3). In addition to the collective memories of the population, Hong Kong's Intangible Cultural Heritage Inventory List includes a variety of items associated with the cha chaan teng, including milk tea, *yeunyeung*, pineapple buns and egg tarts. The heritagization of these items within a physical, itemised list strongly cements the cha chaan teng and the food they

serve as a prominent and important marker of the heritage and identity of Hong Kongers, as well as the importance of this notion of hybridity, within the Hong Kong identity (Chan, 2019; Chan & Farrer, 2021).

Night Markets (夜市), while not unique to Hong Kong, are another popular part of the Hong Kong socioeconomic and culinary scene. They function as social gathering places and as a culturally specific environment of capitalism in which one can purchase a variety of goods, from clothes to cooked foods. As cited in Pottie-Sherman, the key features of a night market are “Waiting in line, putting up with very crowded spaces, and enduring basic facilities... Queuing is a chance to socialize. Loud voices, blaring peddlers, and distorted music... People are the key component... Participating in the crowd is relationship” (2013, p. 175). This “sensorially rich” (Pottie-Sherman, 2013, p. 175) experience thus forms a social space and culturally built environment that brings together community and consumption, reflecting the sociocultural values and experiences of Hong Kong life that form a part of cultural identity.

Materialization of Collective Memory through Food

Food has often been used as a means of creating cultural connection, and described as having generative qualities that elicit feeling. Senses of sight, taste, smell and touch are all employed when interacting with food, evoking personal and collective memories, culture and identity (Chan & Farrer, 2021; Duruz, 2010). Food nostalgia thus plays a major part in the feelings of “missing home”, as by “tasting home” one is able to reconnect to their “home” within their “foreign home” (Chan & Farrer, 2021, p. 5).

Politically, food can also delineate boundaries or cross boundaries, therefore also playing a role in community building and identity formation as well as creating senses of belonging (Alston-O'Connor, 2011; Chan & Farrer, 2021).

According to Shwartz et al., people during acculturation periods are motivated to “compete directly” and “find creative ways of affirming cultural differences... to establish and maintain feelings of continuity, efficacy, and belonging within their personal and social identities” (2014, pp. 2-22). Lily Cho notes that “diasporic homesickness” consists of questions of what “home” is and idealised “narratives of homeland”, which are connected to feelings of “nostalgia as an ahistorical desire that seeks to produce authenticity” (2010, p. 140). One of the ways in which people creatively maintain the cultural differences of their identities and produce authenticity is to establish restaurants based on their cultural cuisines (Shwartz et al., 2014). The materialisation of food and their built environments within the destination country also provide a way for youth to maintain their bicultural identity by providing a space for connecting with their heritage culture within the geography of their new culture.

In Vancouver, notable landscape changes have been caused by large influxes of migrants from Hong Kong. Monster houses, large malls and new food scenes were all spurred by this influx of people, who brought with them their own cultural experiences, knowledge and wealth that informed their impact in a new landscape (Pottie-Sherman & Hiebert, 2015).

As mentioned before, cha chaan tengs, their menus and their environments have become strong markers of Hong Kong identity. The Lower Mainland in British Columbia

is home to a multitude of cha chaan tengs. In these restaurants, classic menu items are recreated, with milk tea, pineapple buns, egg tarts, satay beef, BBQ pork rice, baked rice, macaroni soups and more staples served with efficiency. Chan (2019) describes cha chaan tengs as a place where “Hong Kongers can trace their daily lives, recall family memories, remember communal relationships, rekindle attachments to food and people, and feel proud of the diversity of food and drinks” (p. 13). For owners, the desire to recreate these “authentic” experiences to spark “nostalgia”, elicit memory, bring together communities and “promote culture” are the driving forces for many of the proprietors of cha chaan tengs (Annai, 2024; Cheng, 2023; Leung, 2022; Xiong, 2023). The desire for an “authentic” environment by visitors is also clear. For example, reviews for Lido Restaurant, one of the most reviewed cha chaan tengs in Richmond, praise the restaurant for its “Zero ambiance... that is exactly the right ambiance and attitude for this type cafe” (Liao, 2024). Other reviews note that the restaurant is “reminiscent of the bustling streets of Hong Kong” (Hung, 2024) with “service [that] is same as in Hong Kong” (Vorona, 2024); another noting that “it’s a typical HK cafe where it’s not about the service, it’s about the amazing food and high turnover. If you’ve ever eaten at a HK cafe in HK, you’ll know what I mean” (Liang, 2023).

The same desire to create nostalgia and authenticity was also echoed by the founder of the Richmond Night Market (Pottie-Sherman & Hiebert, 2015). The Richmond Night Market is one of the most prominent examples of the replication of Hong Kong, or more broadly, Asian, night markets within North America. At this night market, the immaterial, non-tangible qualities of the market hustle and bustle, which can be best encompassed through the term “熱鬧” (jit naau; liveliness), are replicated within

a purpose built space away from the “homeland”. As one walks through the market, they are greeted with the noises, smells and tastes reminiscent of Hong Kong night markets and Hong Kong cuisine. While the extent to which the market is “authentic” is contested and has changed through time, attendees who were interviewed in Pottie-Sherman & Hiebert noted how the market environment provided a “resemblance of home” that allowed them to “connect with their identity” and with memories of Hong Kong nightlife (2015, p.10).

In conclusion, the establishment of night markets (夜市) and cha chaan tengs (茶餐廳) in Vancouver have allowed Hong Kongers to enact their collective memories through food and specifically built environments that house those foods. Notions of cultural heritage and authenticity are reproduced through food to elicit feelings of “nostalgia” and “home”, reconnecting them with their lived memories and/or heritage identities in a space far away from the “homeland”.

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