

Heunggongyan Forever

Immigrant Life and Hong Kong Style
Yumcha in Australia

Siumi Maria Tam

Yumcha as a form of food consumption is popular in Sydney, Australia, among both Chinese and other ethnic groups. In particular Hong Kong Chinese immigrants who arrived in the last ten years are seen to be ardent supporters of the practice. They believe that authentic *yumcha* originated in Hong Kong, and are adamant that Hong Kong style *yumcha* is the best. Through patronage of restaurants that provide Hong Kong style *yumcha*, Hong Kong immigrants take part in the configuration of a Hong Kong outside Hong Kong and the construction of a *heunggongyan* (P: *xiang gang ren*, literally meaning ‘Hong Kong people’) identity. As *yumcha* epitomizes the Hong Kong lifestyle, *heunggongyan*’s participation in the activity helps to create and maintain a linkage with their place of origin. In the process a sense of a diasporic Hong Kong community in Sydney is constructed and reconfirmed, and a *heunggongyan* identity put into everyday praxis. As a result, *heunggongyan* as a local identity spreads from Hong Kong to Sydney, just as it has spread to other parts of the world where Hong Kong people immigrate. Such globalization of local identity centres around Hong Kong the parent culture which is characterized as inclusive, open to change, inventive, and sophisticated – in other words, a metropolitan culture that prizes diversity, syncretism and adaptability. Ironically, in the process of globalization, the metropolitan Hong Kong identity transforms into an exclusive and enduring tradition to be preserved and guarded by an immigrant community that seeks to dispel a sense of insecurity, alienation and displacement.

In this chapter I examine the practice known as *yumcha*, as well as its various offshoots, against the backdrop of immigrant life for Hong Kong families in Sydney. The study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between July 1996 and July 1997.¹ Observations were done in Chinese restaurants mainly in metropolitan Sydney. I also interviewed Hong Kong immigrants, most of whom arrived after 1990, and took part in

their family activities. Cantonese dotted with English as the lingua franca of Hong Kong immigrants was used throughout interviews. As such I felt that transliterations of Chinese terms would be more appropriately based on Cantonese than pinyin. Transliterations are indicated as Cantonese by (C) using Yale Romanization, and followed by a pinyin transliteration in parenthesis when a special term first appears in the text, which is indicated by (P). Certain terminologies however will follow the conventional usage in order not to confuse the reader. These include place names such as 'Hong Kong' instead of Heunggong (C) or Xianggang (P), and accepted forms of usage such as 'yumcha' instead of *yam chah* (C) or *yin cha* (P), and 'heunggongyan' instead of *heung gong yahn* (C) or *xiang gang ren* (P).

Yumcha and Hong Kong people in Sydney

Sydney is a multiethnic city in multi-cultural Australia. Albeit criticized as superficial and hypocritical, there is a general attitude that the existence of foreign (read: non-English) cuisines is a manifestation of a successful state policy encouraging multiculturalism. Consuming foreign foods is seen to be an act of inclusivity, liberal-mindedness and acceptance of these cultures themselves into Australian life (see for example Australian Women's Weekly n.d.). As a foreign cuisine, Chinese food has been popular and the Chinese people have been accepted as part of the ethnoscapes in Sydney. Among the many types of Chinese food available in Sydney, *yumcha* is considered a representative form of Chinese cuisine. Indeed the difference between regional cuisines from China is seldom articulated among non-Chinese people. So while there are restaurants that specialize in regional cuisines such as Shanghainese and Pekingnese, to non-Chinese people they are all Chinese restaurants. As a matter of fact, these 'specialized' restaurants themselves contribute to the confusion because they emphasize their Hong Kong style *yumcha* service in addition to their own regional menu, even though they do not provide Cantonese dishes *per se* as main courses. This shows that Hong Kong style *yumcha* is the most popular and well-known form of Chinese food consumption among Chinese and non-Chinese alike.

A brief explanation of *yumcha* is in order here. *Yumcha* literally means 'drink tea'. The kinds of tea being consumed are categorically Chinese. Although many Hong Kong people drink 'red tea' (or 'Ceylon tea', such as English breakfast tea) and perfumed teas such as Earl Grey during tea breaks, *yumcha* typically never involves 'foreign' teas. The practice of *yumcha*, in addition, is not limited to just appreciating tea. *Yumcha*, as understood and practised by *heunggongyan*, involves food as a necessary component. The mainstay of Hong Kong style *yumcha* interestingly is not the tea that is drunk, but the food that is eaten. The food involves a wide variety of snack-size food items called *dimsum* (C: *dim sam*, P: *dian xin*).

Restaurateurs believe that there are over two hundred varieties of common *dimsum*. The types of tea consumed in *yumcha*, however, are very limited. Very often *yumcha* goers order one of the two most popular teas: *pou leih* (P: *pu er*) or *sauh meih* (P: *shou mei*). Since the focus of *yumcha* is to eat *dimsum*, the justification for drinking tea during *yumcha* is mainly to achieve a physical balance: because *dimsum* is usually fatty, drinking tea with it helps to neutralize the grease. In addition, the standard of *yumcha* at any restaurant is not judged by the quality of tea that is served, but the quality and variety of *dimsum*. Thus *yumcha* is a misnomer. It is not 'drink tea' *per se* that is practised, but 'eat *dimsum*'.

Although the emphasis on delicate *dimsum* is directly descended from its prototype Canton style *yumcha* (C: *gwong sik yum cha*, P: *guang shi yin cha*), Hong Kong style *yumcha* (C: *gong sik yum cha*, P: *gang shi yin cha*) has developed a distinct identity among southern Chinese cuisines (Chang 1977, Dak 1989, Hu n.d.). This identity today specifically incorporates a metropolitaneity that embraces a synthesis of 'Chinese tradition' vaguely defined, an international flavour characterized by syncretism, and a spirit to constantly invent new varieties of *dimsum*. This is expressed in popular discourse as a combination of the Chinese and the West: *jung sai gaau lauh* (in Cantonese; and P: *zhong xi jiao liu*, literally 'Chinese-western inter-flow') or *jung sai hahp bik* (P: *zhong xi he bi*, literally 'Chinese-western combined jade', implying a perfect fit of the two traditions). But, more importantly, consuming Hong Kong style *yumcha* is in line with a sense of superiority that arises from being *heunggongyan*. When asked what '*heunggongyan*' meant, most interviewees found it hard to verbalize a definition. But overwhelmingly the essence of Hong Kong's success boils down to the common folk's ability to integrate and make the best of what comes available, an ability that goes far beyond just a superficial mixture of Chinese and western traditions. Thus Hong Kong style adaptability is the hallmark of the *heunggongyan* identity, and the perseverance to put this into practice amidst unfavourable situations is what Hong Kong people proudly call the Hong Kong spirit (C: *heung gong jing sahn*, P: *xiang gang jing shen*). The *heunggongyan* identity is therefore a tapestry interwoven with Chinese and western components, but at the same time going beyond them to being truly international. The vibrancy of the *yumcha* setting, together with the inventive, transnational menu of *dimsum*, epitomizes its consciousness of metropolitaneity and its sense of cultural identity that recognizes, but strives to mature from, its Chinese roots (Tam 1997).

Hong Kong style *yumcha* is a relatively new phenomenon in Sydney. Informants who had been living in this city for more than a few years attested to the fact that *yumcha* had become readily available only in the previous two or three years. Rachel Lee² explained this to me while pointing to a row of Chinese restaurants in Castle Hill, a suburb where many Hong Kong immigrants reside. She was a Hong Kong woman who

went to Sydney to study for her bachelor's degree in the late 1970s and had stayed on to start her family.

These restaurants never offered *yumcha* a couple of years ago. You see the influence of *heunggongyan* [who came en masse in the early 1990s]. The new immigrants are wealthy. [Chinese] people who have been here for a long time are thrifter. They have to. They don't have any money to save. Their wages are so little, and tax is so heavy.

In other words, the pervasiveness of Hong Kong practices and customs has gathered significant momentum mainly after the most recent wave of Hong Kong diaspora as a result of the 1989 Tiananmen incident in Beijing. Typical of this wave of immigrants are middle-aged professionals and their children, who are relatively well off and well educated, and are often reluctant emigrants who have to make a lot of economic sacrifices for an Australian passport. They have brought with them a heavy demand for Hong Kong based popular culture including TV melodrama videotapes, weekly tabloids and women's fashion. Indeed every family member in the study had their favourite imports from Hong Kong. The children wanted Cass Pheng and Andy Lau CDs, pirated computer games and VCDs, and most recently electronic pets called tamagotchi. Adults frequented the suburb council libraries to read Hong Kong publications such as the *Eastern Daily*, *The Next Magazine* and Jin Rong's sword epic novels. They would have their hair done by Hong Kong hair-stylists and facial treatments by Hong Kong beauticians. Groceries, fish and meat came from shops with Hong Kong owners, and the family cars were serviced by mechanics from Hong Kong. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the consumption of Hong Kong popular culture and enactment of a Hong Kong lifestyle in a foreign country, combined to maintain a membership in a Hong Kong community. As individuals *heunggongyan* consumed these and many other products of a Hong Kong lifestyle for their everyday needs, and as a group they put their *heunggongyan* identity into practice in the regular ritual of Hong Kong style *yumcha*.

Continuity in discontinuity

A lot of Hong Kong immigrants found in *yumcha* the safe haven that provided the comfort of continuity in a social-cultural milieu of discontinuity in diaspora. Uncle Cheung, an elderly man who reluctantly emigrated with his son's family, remembered the days when he lamented the lack of *yumcha* restaurants (C: *chah lauh*,³ P: *cha lou*):

I didn't know where to go. I had nothing to do. After the young ones left for work or school, I was alone in the house. Yes, I could

take care of the garden and things like that, but what else could I do after that? I'd read the day's newspaper over and over again. Now it's better. I can go to *chah lauh*, have a cup of tea and chat, like I used to do in Hong Kong.

Obviously among the Chinese in Sydney, especially recent Hong Kong immigrants, *yumcha* had gone beyond simply being a form of public eating. It provided a familiar situation wherein one could find a sense of meaning in an isolated, alienated, and 'foreign' environment.⁴ In Hong Kong, *yumcha* is also widely used as an opportunity to reinforce and renew social relations (Tam 1996). But among Hong Kong immigrants, the reinforcement and renewal of relationships among family, friends, ex-colleagues and ex-schoolmates assumed particular importance. This need arose from feelings of insecurity, alienation and displacement which were very much part of the process of migration.

The sense of insecurity manifested itself in various aspects of immigrant life. Recent Hong Kong immigrants who were mostly from middle class backgrounds were used to living in close proximity and high population density. For them, living in free-standing houses with their own backyards was a novelty as well as a sign of upward mobility. However, after the initial curiosity and sense of achievement were over, everyday life posed serious security problems. Smoke detectors, motion-sensing electronic alarm systems, front gates and garden fences were all new to *heunggongyan*. Especially for the so-called astronaut⁵ families in which adult males continued to work in Hong Kong leaving the female-headed households living in Sydney, it was felt that safety was a most important issue. A large house that was impossible to secure entirely, and worry for the physical safety of women and children due to an absentee husband-father were two main sources of anxiety. A major means to tackle the problem of physical danger was to form a network of close friends who lived nearby. Indeed, knowing someone who spoke your language and understood your problems was essential to counteracting the sense of insecurity.

Hong Kong immigrants suffered from a sense of alienation that arose from a physical immobility and a lack of social interaction. A different sense of space and space organization created a sense of isolation for Hong Kong immigrants. The relative abundance of land in Sydney and the spread of residences over a large area caused the necessity to drive a car to go anywhere. Many informants talked of the driving test as a major hurdle to overcome in the initial stages of immigration. Coupled with an entirely different code of traffic conduct including English-only road signs and an inconvenient public transportation system, it was impossible to not go out of the house, but it was impossible to go out freely. *Heunggongyan* seemed to be caught in a double bind in mobility. Often the result was to avoid

mobility to different degrees. Everyday mobility was limited to taking children to school, or, if possible, walking to the supermarket. Aside from physical isolation, social isolation was a serious problem in everyday life. Although most of the *heunggongyan* who were given residence status were screened for English ability, the typical *heunggongyan* did not feel comfortable communicating in English. Living among English-speaking neighbours and an English mass media all contributed to a tendency among immigrants to withdraw from mainstream Australian life. Many would listen only to Cantonese radio programmes run by Hong Kong immigrant based radio stations, and would only watch videotapes of Hong Kong movies and TV melodrama series. Often they lamented that if their English standards were higher they would be more active in Australian life. It was thus inevitable to feel physically isolated and threatened, socially aloof and lost, as *heunggongyan* were disconnected from social support networks and cultural symbols that they had grown up with.

In addition, a sense of displacement was keenly felt. Most immigrant families had sold their apartments in Hong Kong prior to departure for Australia. With the loss of this major personal property came a sense of exile because it had become impossible to return to Hong Kong if there was no guarantee of residence where real estate was a very expensive commodity. They also felt a cultural severance with Hong Kong when their children had become unwilling and/or unable to use the Chinese language. Returning to Hong Kong had become a more remote choice since the children would not be able to adapt to the Hong Kong education system. The idea of being culturally uprooted in one or two generations was most disturbing to first generation immigrants. Paul Wong, a middle-aged former high school teacher, said of his situation:

My children won't go back to Hong Kong. They're studying here... If they go back they'll have to study at an international school. They can't go back to regular schools... I agree with what my neighbour (an elderly Caucasian woman) said. My generation finds it difficult to integrate, but in my sons' generation [assimilation] is already half-and-half. My grandchildren's generation? They'll be totally assimilated...

When I first got here, it was very sad. I had no friends or relatives here. My wife had a former colleague who taught in the same school. He took us in, let us live in his house until we bought our own house. Through him we got to know Kevin, Mei-sheung, her brother-in-law, and his sister... so it's all through friends' introductions, and the [Hong Kong University] alumni association...

The older chambers of commerce, no, you can't get in. They have been here for decades. They have their own language and they keep to themselves.

The importance of networks of recent immigrants from Hong Kong could not be more strongly emphasized. First and foremost they acted as agents of adaptation. Polly Chan, a lawyer's wife whose husband kept his practice in Hong Kong, said of a similar experience, 'It was really the "brothers and sisters" [of my church group] who helped me survive in the first stage. They all immigrated here in the past five years or so. They helped me find a house, took me to church, and even bought groceries for me'. Interestingly, a major venue for meeting these agents of adaptation was overwhelmingly the Chinese restaurant. Many informants talked of bumping into high school friends, former colleagues, even relatives, when they went to *yumcha* on Sunday. Very often they did not even know that these people had immigrated to Australia, that is, their social ties had been remote in Hong Kong and were not defined as necessary. Once these connections were re-activated at *yumcha* restaurants in Sydney, many saw the need to maintain these ties now that they were in a foreign environment. And more often than not, these relationships were maintained through regular *yumcha* gatherings. In many ways *yumcha* offered a means of recapturing a communal feeling and a sense that one belonged to a community that welcomed one's membership. It was a convenient means too. Just by going to a *yumcha* restaurant they could re-immerse in a setting that was familiar, safe and secure, where they would surely run into someone they knew.

Culturally, *yumcha* was constructed in popular discourse as a legitimate manifestation of Hongkongness. The reasons were twofold. First, even before their emigration *yumcha* had been an activity that for Hong Kong Chinese was loaded with localized social symbols and was regularly practised. The resumption of a familiar practice in a foreign country helped to recover a life disjointed by emigration. Thus when gatherings for friends and relatives were organized, the most frequent suggestion was to meet at a Chinese restaurant for *yumcha*. Second, as the larger society had accepted Hong Kong style *yumcha* as the representative of Chinese food, it became easy for Hong Kong Chinese to ascribe *yumcha* with an elevated status in the immigrant-host relationship in which they acted as cultural agents. When a Chinese meal was suggested for lunch, Hong Kong immigrants often invited colleagues to *yumcha*, which helped to explain the numerous tables of mixed ethnic groups in *yumcha* restaurants downtown. *Yumcha* had obviously become an integral part of the Hong Kong immigrants' attempt to identify themselves with their Hong Kong home, and an effective means to rekindle the candle of rootedness which was gradually going out both for themselves and for their children. Thus for many Hong Kong immigrants especially those who emigrated after 1990, Hong Kong style *yumcha* had become the archetypal institution that re-created for them a Hong Kong outside of Hong Kong. As such it helped to globalize the local identity of *heunggongyan* as the Hong Kong diaspora spread to this part of the world.

I must hasten to add that the immigration experience is certainly a much more complex process, and the unintended consequences are many and varied. Indeed for most of my informants, the decision to emigrate was a complicated one, and the process of adapting to the host country was doubly difficult. Many of them recalled moments of regret, especially when they came into contact with complicated bureaucratic procedures in government offices and 'strange habits and customs of the Australians' in their daily life. Familiar things were undoubtedly sources of comfort amidst a socio-cultural environment perceived as unfriendly at best and racist at worst.⁶ This need, coupled with the relative economic affluence of the new immigrants, gradually created a market over the years in which Hong Kong style commodities of all kinds were imported or locally produced, and popularly consumed. This market had so developed that as a newcomer to Sydney in 1996, my real culture shock came from the proliferation of Hong Kong things in this city down-under. Chinese grocery stores and video rental shops not only numerously and prominently occupied Chinatown and its periphery, but also conspicuously permeated suburbs where Hong Kong immigrants congregated. There were local public schools in which Hong Kong children were numerous and Cantonese had become the *de facto* second language. There were churches that provided Cantonese services attended solely by Hong Kong immigrants and weekend Chinese schools that used Cantonese as the medium of teaching, not to mention the real estate advertisements in newspapers presented in typical Hong Kong Chinese usage, the Toyota commercials in Cantonese played daily on TV, and a proliferation of Chinese weekly magazines available in suburban news agencies. These and many other exhibitions of continuity of the Hong Kong lifestyle and values had become part of the cultural landscape, albeit heavily concentrated in pockets of metropolitan Sydney. It was on the basis of these that Hong Kong Chinese immigrants constructed a sense of familiarity, tradition and a pride that they associated with *heunggongyan* identity.

'Everyday yumcha' and Hongkongness

Given the importance of *yumcha* as a Hong Kong Chinese group activity, it came as no surprise to find *yumcha* being the most frequently used index for Cantonese restaurants listed in the Chinese Gold Pages Sydney (Tu 1997), a bilingual yellow page business guide that had a distribution of over 30,000. KY Restaurant was one of the 381 restaurants listed in the guide. It was a small restaurant located in Epping, one of the North Shore suburbs that could be characterized as quiet, white-collar, middle class and young-to-middle aged. I arrived at the restaurant looking for 'Chinese-Malaysian cuisine' as that was how it described itself on the business card, only to find four big Chinese characters posted on its front door – *tin tin chah sih*, meaning 'everyday tea market' (P: *tian tian cha shi*). Each fifteen inches tall and written in black ink with a Chinese calligraphy brush, the characters commanded immediate attention from passers-by. Obviously the restaurant wanted attention from those who could read Chinese, in particular from their potential customers – the Chinese from Hong Kong. 'Every day tea market' is a Hong Kong usage that does not mean the tea trade but rather 'every day *yumcha* service.' It did not take long to find out that Hong Kong immigrants had congregated in this and surrounding suburbs and they needed a *yumcha* restaurant. The owner of the restaurant had shifted his marketing strategy from one offering only noodles and rice porridge during lunch to that of *yumcha*, while the Malaysian part of the menu had dwindled to a few vermicelli dishes. As mentioned in the above section, *yumcha* had as its main clientele the relatively well off recent Hong Kong immigrants, and observations of *yumcha* patrons in KY Restaurant pointed out that it was in fact the case. Many of the customers came as couples or couples with children, bringing with them Chinese newspapers and magazines to read at the table. The presence of men of working age eating as part of a family on a weekday was conspicuous, and my hunch was these were either 'astronaut husbands' coming to visit, or were immigrants who were unable to find a job in the sluggish Australian economy.

Much of what could be observed in this restaurant was very common not only among restaurants in Sydney, but also in other cities such as Brisbane and Melbourne where Chinese immigrants had chosen to settle. From the arrangement of space and the variety of food, to the dress code of waiters and their way of service, all reminded the customers that it was an imitation of the Hong Kong style. In terms of the menu, the *dimsum* available were many and varied, but none the less expected: from *ha gaau* (shrimp dumplings), *siu maaih* (pork balls), *laahp cheuhng gyun* (sausage roll), to *cha siu baau* (roast pork buns). Trays of familiar kinds of *dimsum* served on small plates or bamboo baskets were brought out steaming hot from the kitchen. As in Hong Kong, tables were so closely placed that one could not get up from the table without the back of the chair hitting someone else's at the next table. I would have thought that space was not a concern in Australia and that rent was relatively cheap. The popularity of *yumcha* would partly explain this over-utilization of space, but perhaps more importantly it reflected a consciousness of how space ought to be organized for *yumcha* – if tables were placed too far apart, it was not the *yumcha* way. Then there was the din made up of spoons hitting rice bowls and people trying to out-yell the others that provided the background for the aptly named 'everyday tea market'. Female waiters dressed in white shirts and black skirts were ever busy yelling out names of the *dimsum* they carried. They were also busy convincing customers that the *dimsum* was delicious, and then putting a coloured stamp on the food record sheets for

every dish they sold. Male waiters in white shirts and black trousers squeezed between tables, adding boiling water to teapots at each table and taking orders in Chinese. It was the physical overcrowding and the ultra-hectic organization of social space that was the proper setting for authentic *yumcha*.

With a greater intensity the *yumcha* brunch on Sunday resembled even more closely its prototype in Hong Kong. As in Hong Kong, one needed to be at the restaurant at least an hour before in order to get a table, that is, *to wan waih* (literally to 'find a seat'). So as soon as one entered a restaurant, rows of chairs with customers waiting impatiently were the usual sight, making a most busy, bustling Australian scene, just as in Hong Kong. Even class relations and ethnic divisions on the shopfloor seemed to have been transplanted. In Hong Kong, many of the minor staff were recent immigrants from mainland China. Similarly, in Sydney, those who carried *dimsum* trays were mainland Chinese. Thus whether in space, form and structure, *yumcha* here unmistakably resembled the Hong Kong genre.

The difference between Hong Kong and Sydney could be observed in the availability and use of *yumcha*. *Yumcha* in Sydney started every day at around 11 a.m. and finished at around 3 p.m. There was no 'morning market' (C: *jou sih*, P: *zhao shi*) nor 'evening market' (C: *yeh sih*, P: *ye shi*) for *yumcha*. In other words, *yumcha* was only offered during lunch time. In Hong Kong *yumcha* was available in different time slots – morning, noon, afternoon and night. One could therefore *yum* morning *cha*, *yum* afternoon *cha*, or *yum* night *cha* as well as *yumcha* for lunch. While morning tea and afternoon tea implied a relaxed and leisurely enjoyment, with the intention to chat, take a break or meet up with friends, the practice of *yumcha* for lunch as a meal pointed to a hurriedness for time and the purposefulness of filling the stomach. But, in Sydney, as restaurateurs observed, older folks from Hong Kong seldom knew how to drive, so their mobility was severely limited. Unlike their counterparts in Hong Kong who almost monopolized the morning 'tea market', for the elderly here *yum joh cha* ('drink morning tea') remained wishful thinking. For similar reasons, *yum hah ngh cha* ('drink afternoon tea') was not popular. To *heunggongyan*, then, whether in Sydney or Hong Kong, *yumcha* during weekdays was treated as a form of meal, as a lighter alternative to a full meal with rice (C: *faahn*, P: *fan*) and meat/vegetable dishes (C: *sung*, P: *cai*), and a preferred option to a *gwai lou*⁷ diet of hamburgers, chips and sandwiches. Thus in Sydney where *yumcha* was available to the entire family only on Saturday and Sunday, or 'family days', *yumcha* had become almost synonymous with family gathering.

Perhaps *yumcha* as a specifically Hong Kong practice with a distinct Hong Kong definition could best be understood when contrasted to 'not *yumcha*'. On the periphery of Chinatown, an old, small two-storeyed house

at a busy street corner proudly displayed the sign *joai yam chah* (C) in Chinese characters, written in coloured chalk on a piece of slate on the sidewalk. *Jaai yam chah* (P: *zhai yin cha*) literally means 'vegetarian *yumcha*' because in Cantonese, *jaai* means vegetarian. But it could be extended to mean 'just', 'only' or 'nothing else'. Thus one could call plain noodles *jaai mihn* and plain rice congee *jaai juk*. The word *jaai* here was obviously a pun. On the one hand it stressed the fact that the restaurant was a *jaai* 'vegetarian' restaurant, and at the same time it served *jaai* 'only' *yumcha* and no à la carte menu. On the other hand it implied that *jaai* 'pure' *yumcha* was served, with no artificial additions and preservatives, etc. and was therefore healthy.

The fact that a chalk-and-slate board was used to announce its cuisine gave away the 'unauthenticity' of the restaurant, because as a practice coloured chalk on slate was used by western restaurants in Sydney, while plastic signs were popular with Chinese restaurants. Indeed as I arrived on the second floor of this restaurant I doubted if I really was in a *yumcha* restaurant. I found myself in a hall with no golden dragon motifs on red wallpaper, no red lanterns and no crimson carpet. The furniture consisted of plain black wooden tables and pine folding chairs. Green paint and hemp lampshades dominated the walls, and the wooden floor was a hard, cold black colour. Wooden stems of birds of paradise occupied bamboo vases, while wooden busts of the Buddha smiled kindly on the customers. The dining hall thus created a sense of tranquility, which was a sharp contrast to the joviality expected of Chinese *yumcha*. Imitations of elements of *yumcha* were obvious, such as food record sheets and bamboo *dimsum* baskets, but at the same time adaptations to Sydney customs abounded. Carrying *dimsum* trays around the restaurant were young female staff. But instead of more formal shirt and suit uniform, they were wearing white T-shirts, black jeans, black aprons and black sneakers. If the entire atmosphere was to conjure up a new-age image, then observation pointed to a clientele consistent with this intention as most of the twenty plus customers could be categorized as yuppie business people or young hippie families. Customers and staff alike spoke in a whisper; and there was no banging of spoons against bowls and teacups, no yelling out *dimsum* names. If anything resembled *yumcha*, it was the existence of a variety of *dimsum*. A casual tabulation showed at least 28 vegetarian varieties, including vegetarian versions of *ha gaau*, *siu maaih*, *cha siu baau* and *ngauk yuhk cheuhng fan* (beef wrapped in steamed rice sheets) and so on, as well as miniature vegetarian dishes like cabbage rolls with black moss and mushrooms. Though the restaurant called itself *yumcha*, it was anything but *yumcha*. In terms of food, setting, staff and customer behaviour, it was the diametrical opposite of Hong Kong style *yumcha*. Not surprisingly, I seemed to be the only *heunggongyan* customer there on that day. While all other *yumcha* restaurants in Chinatown were full to the

brim, this restaurant remained unattractive to *heunggongyan* who would find it difficult to define '*jaai Yam chah*' as authentic *yumcha* or to identify themselves with it.

Immigrant life and Hong Kong identity

Certainly to different people the term *heunggongyan* means different things and it should be more appropriate to say that there are many *heunggongyan* identities rather than one *heunggongyan* identity (Evans and Tam 1997). But among my interviewees it was clear that being *heunggongyan* was 'forever' and the identity was something that, as one informant described it, 'could not be washed off' no matter where one emigrated or for how long. The two most frequently mentioned 'characteristics' of *heunggongyan* were adaptability and metropolitaneity. Although interviewees seldom emphasized it, they did allude to the fact that most Hong Kong people are immigrants from the mainland or are their descendants who have been affected by the political upheavals in contemporary Chinese history. This common experience in first adverse conditions, and then in the social and economic development in the 1960s and 1970s, contributed much to the high value placed on the ability to adapt. The economic success in the 1980s and 1990s that Hong Kong as a society has enjoyed greatly enhanced the popular belief that, because of the very hardworking and versatile population of Hong Kong, the city has matured as a metropolis not only in the Asian region but also in the world. Such sense of pride and identity as part of this socio-economic miracle has acquired a mythical aura in the Hong Kong ethos. In effect, then, the identity of *heunggongyan* as a separate group of Chinese was built up in the past 50 years, congealed around the mythical Hong Kong spirit. To the diasporic community in Sydney, a *heunggongyan* community marked by adaptability and metropolitaneity certainly existed. It may be partly imagined but it was real to its members, yet simultaneously it was contingent and ready to be negotiated. This was evidenced by the fact that among the numerous Chinese associations in Sydney, there was no *Hong Kong Association*. In contrast to associations such as the Chinese Australian Services Society which aimed to help Chinese immigrants from mainland China, and the New South Wales Indo-China Chinese Association that served those from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, there was no '*Hong Kong Chinese Association*' that aimed to service *Hong Kong immigrants*. The non-existence of such a *Hong Kong association* attested to the fact that the geographical boundary of the place of origin as a basis for communitas was not considered important. Leslie Ho, an immigrant of five years, once worked as a volunteer in a free information service for immigrants run by the local council. He said,

We were a multi-ethnic team [in the service]. There was a Greek guy who provided service to the Greeks, a Lebanese who helped to answer Lebanese immigrants' questions, and so on. And I was responsible for Hong Kong people. But I was bored to death! I played chess all day at the Centre. No one came to ask me anything. [It's because] Hong Kong people knew everything already. They're too smart, or they just ask their friends, who are often able to help. And they're rich. They don't want to use this kind of service [which makes them look like they're pitiable].

The non-participation of Hong Kong immigrants in these immigrant-oriented activities, however, did not mean that they did not need social networks beyond friends and relatives. Membership in traditionally important associations such as *tuhng heung wui* ('fellow homeowners associations', P: *tong xiang hui*) and *seung wui* ('chambers of commerce', P: *shang hui*) were perceived as inappropriate by recent immigrants. While the former had provided for the financial, material, educational and emotional needs of Chinese overseas for many generations and fulfilled a largely welfare role, *heunggongyan* did not regard themselves as the needy that these *tuhng heung wui* should assist. For the newly immigrated business people, the chambers of commerce had become a closed network monopolized by the *suk fuh* (P: *shu fu*) or 'elders' who had been in Sydney for well over twenty years or even generations. They found that as newcomers they were unable to break into these established systems, and therefore proceeded to form their own connections. To fulfil their networking needs *heunggongyan* decided to organize new associations based on former elite memberships that were Hong Kong specific. These included university alumni associations such as the Chinese University of Hong Kong Alumni Association and the Hong Kong University Alumni Association, and secondary school associations such as the Hong Kong Wah Yan College Alumni Association and Queen Elizabeth Secondary School Alumni Association. These new, exclusive networks based on a common social background have clearly replaced the *tuhng heung wui* whose membership is based on place of origin and is inclusive of people from various class backgrounds. One of the main aims of these associations of Hong Kong people was to organize social activities such as fishing trips and annual dinners for their members, thereby maintaining contact and a sense of belonging. In addition, instead of providing welfare services to their own members, these groups volunteered service to others whom they considered less fortunate, such as the aged and mentally challenged. And interestingly when *heunggongyan* were involved in region-based associations such as *tuhng heung wui*, they were typically the service providers, often acting as Executive Committee members, professional social workers, counsellors or volunteers. So while on the one hand Hong Kong immigrants adapted to

the new socio-cultural environment of the host society by building their own networks, on the other hand they promoted a metropolitan hierarchy of community memberships which fitted well with their sense of superiority.

Contrary to this superiority complex, a sense of loss constituted an important part of the adaptability and metropolitaneity of Hong Kong immigrants. Patrick Lam settled in Sydney under the skilled migrant category and had been working in the local government. He was active in the Australian Chinese Community Association for a while as an executive committee member. Disgruntled as a result of lack of job satisfaction, coupled with being rejected to 'join the club' of old timers, Patrick was contemplating returning to Hong Kong after five years of immigrant life. Although a former colleague in a Hong Kong firm had offered him a two-year contract, he was worried about re-adapting to the workplace in Hong Kong. He rationalized his situation in the following way:

Peter (Patrick's eldest son) will not be able to go to a regular school [in Hong Kong]. He's too slow. Kids here are so slow! They think and write slower than Hong Kong kids. Especially mathematics. Math is so backward here, but it is an important subject. Kids from Hong Kong are good in math, and so they succeed in school here. I think Peter should go to Hong Kong so he gets used to the speed and competition. It will help him in his future. Here in Australia people have no future. The economy has no future because there is no sense of competition. In the workplace, everybody just wastes away their time. In Hong Kong [with this attitude] you won't be able to *wan sihk* (literally 'get food', meaning to make a living).

Patrick did not speak directly of his worry for himself. His concern for his sons really reflected his anxiety and uncertainty because he had been away from the job market in Hong Kong for so long. He was conscious that he might have lost some of the competitiveness that could make him successful. This sense of competitiveness was valued by most parents from Hong Kong even if they were not returning to Hong Kong. In fact Patrick's son Peter was attending a highly competitive primary school. The school was reputed for its heavy load of homework and projects, frequent dictation and tests, high incidence of private tuition, and parental anxiety. Judging by the Asian faces in class photos, it could be safely estimated that about two-thirds of the school's students were of Asian origin, and Hong Kong students were a highly salient group among them. From talking to parents from Hong Kong, I found that the children were sent to the school precisely because of its high level of competition. An incident at the Parents and Citizens Association meeting illustrated this mentality well. The new principal opined that it was unhealthy as well as unnecessary for teachers to be still working in their office at 6 p.m. when school was over at 3 p.m. He

proposed to decrease the amount of schoolwork so that both children and teachers could be more relaxed. This met with overwhelming opposition from the parents. Rachel, whose children were also going to this school, commented on the incident:

The parents send their children there because of the schoolwork and the hope that this will lead to entry to a selective high school. Of course we disagree with the proposal. Some people do not like the competition. They are mainly *gwai lou*. I know a *gwai lou* who transferred his son to another school because he didn't like the competition in our school. We [Hong Kong] parents are very anxious. We even think the work they give at school is not enough. We give our children extra exercises, and take them to private tuition and mental training classes. Sometimes I think it's the parents and not the children who are tense and who are really doing the work.

In fact the main reason Rachel and her husband moved to this suburb was because they wanted their children to study in this school. Together with the other 'anxious' parents, they voted down the principal's proposals to change. Perhaps the sense of competition that formed such an important part of the Hong Kong ethos had a part to play in how this primary school in Sydney was run.

I joined Rachel's family for a *yumcha* lunch one Sunday. It was a very crowded restaurant in Castle Hill. The '*tin tin chah sih*' (every day *yumcha*) characters were prominently displayed on the glass panel at the shop front. We were greeted at the entrance by a female staff member dressed in red and gold *cheuhng saam* ('traditional' Chinese dress, P: *chi pao*). After squeezing ourselves through the maze of tables and toddlers running around them, we settled into a large table which Rachel's husband had *ba waih* (literally 'occupy seat') for 45 minutes. At the table were Rachel's husband's sister Jackie and her two children. Jackie was introduced as an 'astronaut' whose husband remained in Hong Kong in order to keep his well-paid job as a physician. There were also Anita, Jackie's husband's sister, and her only son with whom she lived as an 'astronaut household'. We were joined by Anita's husband Ronald who had come for a six-week stay. He was a secondary school teacher in Hong Kong, and was able to stay longer this time because it was summer vacation in Hong Kong. The *yumcha* gathering was in fact a farewell party for Ronald as he was due to return to Hong Kong in a few days' time. There was a lot of polite talk at the table and ordering *dimsum* in between, all yelled above the din in the restaurant. When lunch was over and the men were scrambling for the bill, Rachel casually asked Jackie if her husband could bring a set of mathematics textbooks from Hong Kong when he visited Sydney the following week. Rachel explained her request: 'the children must do more

math exercises. There's not enough from the school'. Jackie promptly agreed. Rachel then added, 'When your husband comes, I must take him to *yumcha*'.

Hongkongness: Keep Frozen

Yumcha has played an important part in preserving Hong Kong identity for immigrants. But though Sydney has reputedly the best and the most *yumcha* restaurants in Australia, *yumcha* has obviously spread to other parts of Australia. My first encounter with *yumcha* was in Tasmania. I was part of a local tour group. The tour bus pulled over at a cafeteria style eatery some two kilometres from the historic site of Port Arthur, where we were told to buy our own lunch. Everybody decided to try some of the famous crayfish, but my eyes caught sight of something in a metal serving tray, which suspiciously resembled *siu maaih*. *Siu maaih* is of course one of the core *dimsum* in Hong Kong style *yumcha*, and a good one should have a thin egg and flour wrapping filled with tender minced pork, steamed until just cooked. The more upmarket versions may have dried mushrooms, scallops or crab roe in them. I looked up at the plastic illuminated menu board: 'Dimsums \$1'. I looked at the 'dimsim' again: they were deep-fried and four times the size of regular *siu maaih*. They were not served as four pieces together in a steaming hot basket, but rather served as a single piece, and looked as cold and hard as food models of tempura vegetables outside Japanese restaurants. It was intriguing that a common Hong Kong *dimsum* could turn up in Tasmania in this corrupted form. I ventured to ask the Caucasian staff who looked quite Aussie-style friendly: 'So what is inside dimsums?' I remember being given a rather surprised look, and after a few seconds the woman said with a shrug, 'Well, you never know what's in a dimsim'. I was holding up the line of diners and the conversation conveniently stopped. I did not find out what was inside the dimsim.

On another occasion, I was having lunch at the Union Cafeteria at the Macquarie University in Sydney. The venue was designed like a shopping mall food court which had an international theme with various sections serving different cuisines. I was following the line at the section called 'Mac Wok' that sold Chinese fast food. There they were again, 'dimsums' and cost A\$1.20 a piece. This time the student-cum-part-time-worker told me the filling was pork and chicken, and they 'should be pretty good'. Won over by ethnographic curiosity, I bought a dimsim and began to examine it sitting squarely on my plate. I had one bite. I still did not know what was inside a dimsim. Later I discovered that dimsim was in fact a common snack in Sydney. It was readily available as an instant food in supermarkets' frozen foods section, and could be ready in a few minutes by deep-frying. Boxes of dimsim were conspicuously displayed in chain supermarkets such as Franklins, Woolworths and Coles. It was a good example of the

localization of Chinese *dimsum* in Australia where steaming was not a common practice in everyday cooking but deep-frying was. Since portions of food were generally bigger in Australian cuisine compared to Chinese, the size of the dimsim was much bigger, and served singly. I asked my interviewees if they knew what dimsim was, and answers ranged from 'no idea at all' to 'a *gwai lou siu maaih*'. Obviously dimsim was not part of Hong Kong immigrants' regular menu, and it certainly did not exist in Hong Kong style *yumcha* restaurants.

While giving a seminar⁸ at the University of Queensland I brought up this question of what dimsim was. Professor Cheung Chiu Yee pointed out that dimsim might actually be *dimsum* pronounced in the Sei Yap dialect (P: *Ci yi*, an area in Guangdong Province which historically exported many labourers to Australia). He proposed that since there were many *Sei Yap* males among the first waves of immigrant labourers who took part in the gold rush, *dimsum* may have been brought to Australia at that time. It then dawned on me that I was sampling something brought over from Guangdong in the nineteenth century. I recalled images of early Chinese immigrants in Australia among whom old customs, practices, dialects and tastes of food and aesthetics were faithfully frozen.⁹ I wondered if the *siu maaih* then was bigger in order to cater for the labourers' caloric needs, or whether it was the other way round – that rather *siu maaih* was delicatized in the twentieth century.¹⁰ Globalization of Chinese food certainly started well before the Hong Kong diaspora, and the transformation of *siu maaih* in Australia would attest to it. However, the fact that dimsim was not considered *dimsum* and not consumed at all in *yumcha* by Hong Kong immigrants today, showed at least that *yumcha* as defined and practised by *heunggongyan* in Sydney did not accept a 'foreignized' dimsim to be authentic *yumcha* food. What *heunggongyan* in Sydney looked for in *dimsum* was familiarity in form and taste, and not inventiveness and exoticism. Indeed, *heunggongyan* were trying to keep *yumcha* frozen in the particular form and structure, acquired at a time that they considered the golden era of their life – in Hong Kong.

And literally *yumcha* was, in frozen form, ready for purchase in grocery stores. The variety of frozen *dimsum* closely resembled what was available in *yumcha* restaurants, and they occupied a sizable portion of the freezers in grocery stores owned by Chinese and non-Chinese alike. The range of choices was impressive. A casual survey at a Chinese grocery in Eastwood (a suburb where many Chinese and Koreans reside) showed that except for the conspicuous exclusion of dimsim, there were more than 20 different kinds of frozen *dimsum*. These included such core varieties as *siu maaih*, *ha gaaau*, *fuhng jaau* (P: *feng juo*, literally 'phoenix claw', which are chicken feet), *saan juk ngauh yuhk* (P: *shan ju niu rou*, minced beef with beancurd sheets) and *cheun gyun* (P: *chuen juan*, commonly translated as spring roll, which are shredded pork and mixed vegetables in rice wrapping). There

was also an array of steamed buns with different fillings: *cha siu bau* (P: *cha shao bao*, roast pork filling), *naaih wohng baau* (P: *nai huang baau*, duck eggs and custard filling), *mah yuhng baau* (P: *ma rong bao*, sesame paste filling) and *lihn yuhng baau* (P: *lian rong bao*, lotus seed paste filling). To further the list, there were *loh baahk gou* (P: *luo buo gao*, white turnip cake with mixed preserved meats), *jan jyu gai* (P: *zhen zhu ji*, literally 'pearl chicken', a mini-sized dumpling with chicken and rice wrapped in lotus leaves), and *noh maih gai* (P: *nuo mi ji*, glutinous rice stuffed with chunks of chicken, salted egg yolks and dried mushrooms, wrapped in a large sheet of lotus leaf). Sweet frozen *dimsum* included *tong yun* (P: *tang yuan*, glutinous rice balls with fillings such as peanuts, black sesame or lotus seed paste) and *mah laai gou* (P: *ma la gao*, literally 'Malay cake', a steamed raised cake). Frozen deep-fried *dimsum* included *ha do sih* (P: *xia duo shi*, literally 'shrimp toast', shrimp paste on toast sprinkled with sesame seeds), *ga lei gok* (P: *jia li jiao*, curry puffs with beef and onion filling), *siu hau jou* (P: *xiao kou ju*, literally 'laughing date', a crispy cookie that breaks open during frying).

The above list obviously was rather short compared to the number of *dimsum* available in *yumcha* restaurants, but surely most of what could be frozen and conveniently heated up in the microwave was there. Like their counterparts in restaurants, the size, filling, as well as presentation of frozen *dimsum* closely imitated their prototypes in Hong Kong. Undoubtedly these 'oven ready appetisers' tried their best to conjure up the authenticity of Hong Kong style *yumcha* with its red packaging and a decidedly Cantonese brand called Ho Mai, or 'good taste'. Their authenticity was further reinforced by Chinese characters prominently displayed on all six sides of the box. It seemed Hong Kong style *yumcha* had been frozen and transplanted here lock, stock and barrel. The only difference was, as the boldface words on the packet: KEEP FROZEN indicated, the *heunggongyan* who consumed this *dimsum* would be relating themselves to a culture that they were fiercely proud of yet reluctantly severed from, in a form that they remembered and kept frozen in time. Frozen *dimsum* allowed *heunggongyan* in Sydney to freeze, retrieve and consume their Hongkongness at their convenience; though the atmosphere at home is far removed from that in a *yumcha* restaurant and is not preferred.

The complexity of a diasporic psychology was salient in a metropolis such as Sydney, with the Australian government's official multiculturalism policy an everyday euphemism. Even in the frozen foods section of Sydney's chain supermarkets, the multicultural analogy was obvious: bright-red packets of ready-to-eat *dimsum* sat comfortably next to red, white and green boxes of Papa Giuseppi's pizza. Beside them were Sara Lee's carrot cake, Big Ben's Mexican mild lamb and curried rice dinner, Nanna's apple pie, Maggi's satay chicken, Sargent's meat pie and Lean Cuisine's French seafood dinner, and so on. Such a vivid display of multicultural culinary harmony projected a mixed milieu in which ethnic

identities must be constantly characterized, essentialized and authenticated to prevent themselves from being eroded and assimilated. To preserve their *heunggongyan* identity, immigrants from Hong Kong would need to preserve the important identity marker of *yumcha* together with all its characteristic components of form, space and structure. In so doing, the inventiveness, inclusiveness and willingness to change that were indices of a global, metropolitan *heunggongyan* identity were suppressed to give way to a constructed tradition.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have briefly traced the kinds of eating practices related to *yumcha* that could be observed in Sydney. It was particularly intriguing to find that *yumcha* as an identification with Hong Kong culture had its nature almost reversed. Metropolitaneity was obvious in Hong Kong's *yumcha* genre, manifested particularly in the form and content of *dimsum*. In a different paper (Tam 1996) I cited the example of a restaurant in Ma On Shan, Hong Kong, and illustrated with its 60 item *dimsum* order sheet the inclusiveness and inventiveness that came to characterize the Hong Kong spirit. It was the willingness to change and adapt that were emphasized. In Sydney's scenario, it was the traditional and the familiar that were stressed. The authenticity of Hong Kong culture as lived through the consumption of *dimsum*, whether frozen or steaming hot, seemed to provide the emotional stability and the networks that were craved in immigrant life – as a balance against uncertainty, alienation and displacement – in short, a reassurance that one was still rooted in the great metropolis of Hong Kong.

Notes

1 Materials on *yumcha* in Hong Kong are based on findings from the project 'Cooking up Hong Kong Identity: A Study of Food Culture, Changing Tastes and Identity in Popular Discourse' funded by an RGC Earmarked Grant.

2 All names of informants are pseudonyms to ensure privacy.

3 *Chah lauh* (P: *cha lou*, literally 'tea house'), has been one of the major kinds of Chinese eateries where tea and food are served. It is distinguished from *chah sat* (P: *cha shi*, 'tea room') and *chah geui* (P: *cha ju*, 'tea home') which are smaller in scale and emphasize the quality of tea rather than that of food, and they generally do not serve meals. *Chah lauh* is also different from *jau lauh* (P: *jiu luo*, wine house) which caters for banquets and serves alcohol (C: *jau*, P: *jiu*). Today, many *chah lauh*, *chah sat* and *chah geui* have been demolished and substituted with the more general-purpose *jau lauh*. However, *chah lauh* has been so closely related to *yumcha* that whenever *yumcha* is intended, people say 'let's go to *chah lauh*' no matter which kind of Chinese eatery they are really going to.

4 Most of my informants considered all non-Chinese as 'foreign' people and Australia a 'foreign' country, even though they were officially permanent

- residents and citizens of Australia. Thus it was an ethnic boundary built on cultural differences rather than nationality. For discussions of symbolisms and national identities in food consumption see Douglas (1972), Appadurai (1988), Watson (1997), Mintz (1996), and Counihan and Esterik (1997).
- 5 Husbands who travel to the host country where their wives and children are staying as immigrants are dubbed 'astronauts'. The word astronaut in Cantonese is *tai hung yahn* (P: *tai kung ren*), or space person, which aptly describes the husbands' life of shuttling to and from Hong Kong several times a year. The three Chinese characters understood separately have another meaning, which is 'wife empty person', as their wives are absent from the original household in Hong Kong. Their families in the host country, now headed by the wife, are called astronaut families. Increasingly, however, the wives have come to be called astronauts, partly as a short form for astronaut families, partly for want of a comparable term for the astronaut husbands, and also partly because the three Chinese characters can be given a third meaning – 'too empty person', which sums up the loneliness of the astronaut wife.
- 6 The racism issue was widely discussed by politicians and non-politicians alike since September 1996, after the inaugural speech of Pauline Hanson, an independent member of parliament, in which she promoted an anti-immigration and anti-Asian stand. Subsequent media frenzy, government responses and international concern all served to sustain a public interest in the so-called racism debate. Surveys done by the local media and by government bodies such as the Tourism Board pointed to Australia being perceived as 'a racist society' by its Asian neighbours, and a survey by the Chinese newspaper Sing Tao revealed an increase in racist abuse experienced by Chinese in Australia. For a discussion of the historical changes in the social life of Chinese in Sydney see Fitzgerald (1997).
- 7 *Gwai lou*, literally ghost men, is a Cantonese term for westerners. Although it has been claimed that the pervasive use of the term itself has diffused the derogatory connotation and even westerners themselves have started to call themselves *gwai lou*, I am of the opinion that *gwai lou* is still very much a term that conjures up a hierarchical ethnic division in which Chinese call themselves *yahn* (human) as opposed to *gwai* (ghosts), thereby asserting their cultural superiority.
- 8 'Yumcha in Hong Kong: Constructed and Contested Identities', seminar given at University of Queensland, jointly organized by the Department of History, and Department of Sociology and Anthropology, October 1996.
- 9 Diana Giese (1997) reported in her book her Chinese informants' vivid description and photographs of such customs as the dragon dance, parades, and family gatherings practised in Chinese communities in Australia since their arrival in the nineteenth century.
- 10 In another paper 'Yumcha in Hong Kong' presented at the International Conference on Changing Diet and Foodways in Chinese Culture', June 1996, at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, I proposed that *dimsum* has been delicatized as part of the trend of internal involution in the practice of *yumcha* as a social institution.

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