Consuming “Low” Cuisine after Hong Kong’s Handover: Village Banquets and Private Kitchens

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Introduction

Food and eating practices currently, as in the past, function as important markers of cultural identity providing insights into social change, power relations, class structure, gender roles and national ideology, especially in our globalising societies (Mintz and Du Bois, 2002). Early anthropological research on food and eating largely addressed questions of taboo, totems, sacrifice and communion, and employed the approach of cultural symbolism (Douglas, 1966; Lévi-Strauss, 1969). From around the 1980s, however, social and cultural anthropologists expanded the parameters of their studies to analyse food choices and eating practices as indicators of social relations – specifically, food used as gifts in exchanges at special occasion banquets and feasts (Bourdieu, 1984; Sahlins, 1976) – as a symbol of caste, class and social hierarchy (Goody, 1982; Mintz, 1985) and as a metaphor for constructing the self with regard to ethnicity and cultural identity (Gabaccia, 1998; Mintz, 1996; Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993).

On the one hand, it appears evident that food and foodways are powerful indicators of cultural practice and social change (Camp, 1989); yet, it is often difficult to trace the channels through which these entities perform meaning as they are so much a part of the mundane material “stuff” of everyday life. In addition, the same food may have different meanings to different people, depending upon the social interaction in which it is enmeshed. This dynamic characteristic of food and foodways is clearly indicated in the growing scholarship on the changing eating habits of people in Asia generally (see Lefferts, this issue), and specifically of people in Hong Kong, especially since the handover of this region to China in 1997.

In this paper, I argue that an analysis of the current popularity of Hong Kong’s “low” (everyday) cuisine, which includes traditional village food and homestyle eating venues, contributes to understanding how local residents have reacted to cultural,
economic, and political change and how they have refashioned identities in the post-handover society. Investigating the consumption of such low cuisine that encompasses specific regional characteristics, methods of domestic service and local southern Chinese ingredients makes visible how people use its associated traditional roots to craft meaning vis-à-vis *haute*/*high cuisine* – the latter emphasising the use of exotic (often imported or rare) and expensive ingredients, along with cooking techniques and professional high-end service that are globally recognised. At the same time, the subsequent commercialisation of some aspects of low cuisine in post-handover Hong Kong society highlights how this aspect of material culture moves across diverse cultural practices and redefines its meanings for those using it in different spaces.

To this end, I analyse two different kinds of low cuisine – *puhn choi* [basin food] and *si fohng choi* [private kitchen food]. Both food types and practices illustrate why, and the channels through which, such marginal, rural, daily and common foodways have played upon people’s nostalgia for tradition, remembrance of the past and an imagination of the “good old days”; and how, in so doing, this sphere of food practice has moved to the forefront of Hong Kong’s cultural consciousness, increasingly gaining popularity with residents, especially since the late 1990s. I draw on Wu and Tan’s (2001, p. 1) concept of foodways, which encompasses “a way of life that involves food, food habits and food consumption”, as the multi-dimensional framework within which to understand sociocultural and political change in relation to diet and the meanings of eating. Through the lens of food and foodways, I examine the significance of both “presentation and representation”, (Scapp and Seitz, 1998, p. 9), how local contexts reconfigure global systems, and how foods and food practices, in moving between these spheres, change and shift in meaning for those consuming them. The following review of studies on Asian food, in particular, outlines some of the recent scholarship in this field to contextualise the circumstances of Hong Kong’s low cuisine revival. I illustrate how this cuisine has moved to its current central position by analysing two case studies based on my research on *puhn choi* [basin food] and *si fohng choi* [private kitchen food].

**Changing Foodways in Asia and in Hong Kong Society**

Within the last 20 years, a number of studies on Asian material culture have used food to understand changes in the local dynamics of production, consumption and social identity. In this light, many scholars have interpreted the localisation of foreign food from a sociopolitical perspective (Cwiertka and Walraven, 2000; Watson, 1997; Wu and Cheung, 2002; Wu and Tan, 2001). These studies, in fact, confirm what Goody (1982) reminds us of – that the emergence of *haute*/*high cuisine* has developed within a context of growing industrialisation, imperialism and transnationalism through changing social tastes occurring at the everyday level; and demonstrate Appadurai’s (1988) research on how foodways have been altered, and how national cuisine has, in fact, been invented within the colonial context. However, while there is no doubt that we can recognise a general kind of high cuisine formation in societies undergoing significant economic growth or sociopolitical transformation, recently we also observe that there are some local foods, prepared using traditional culinary skills and carrying regional characteristics, that are gaining popularity, but within a variety of venues. Dog eating in South Korea, the Slow Food movement in Italy and the homestyle food of migrant families in Australia are examples of eating practices that play a role in resisting global forces by (re)constructing a
sense of local-to-national identity on the level of the everyday (Duruz, 1999; Leitch, 2003). My research also builds on the work of Cheng (1997) and Tam (1997) who demonstrate the integral importance of “traditional” herbal drink stores and yum cha [to drink tea] restaurants to Hong Kong people’s social life and thus to their constructions of self-identity during the pre-handover era. My investigation of the changing foodways in post-handover Hong Kong society extends these inquiries to analyse how people shift their patterns of consumption and identity politics with such dramatic social and political transformation.

From the late 1970s, foodways in Hong Kong became enormously diversified to serve different interests for expressing status, prestige and power. Hong Kong’s living standards improved with the increase in its economic achievements, and people were able to spend more on imported brand-name products and to travel and dine out more often with their new-found wealth. For instance, the increase in overseas tourism heightened the demand for choice by local residents and for increased variety in distinctive modern city lifestyles; likewise, this new wealth increased expectations for more delicate, exotic and refined foods in the local diet. Throughout the late 1970s, the demand for a higher quality of life, as well as for the development of individuals’ social taste, can be seen through the emergence of nouvelle Cantonese cuisine, which combines exotic taste, expensive ingredients and Western catering. Since the emergence of nouvelle Cantonese cuisine, different foods, such as American fast food, French fine dining, Italian pasta, Japanese sushi, Korean barbecue, Thai spicy food, Vietnamese and other regional cuisines of China, have continued to arrive and significantly influence Hong Kong society, cuisine and foodways. Since the late 1990s, however, among new developments in local food trends, different versions of “country-style cooking”, with an emphasis on local, domestic and traditional culinary skills, have emerged as the most popular of Hong Kong’s cuisines.

Why, then, did such everyday, mundane food become so popular; and with increased demand for such food, how did its subsequent commercialisation affect its association with eating regional/provincial, domestic and nostalgic food to construct a new identity in the transition from pre- to post-handover Hong Kong society? Low cuisine refers to the preparation and consumption of inexpensive, ordinary and local homestyle food as opposed to haute/high cuisine with its expensive, exotic and imported ingredients, served in an atmosphere of “classy” fine dining. In this paper, low cuisine also refers to commercialised regional, domestic and nostalgic foods – these foods are not prepared by people with professional culinary skills; nor are they served through labour-intensive catering services. Low cuisine is prepared simply and served and eaten daily in Hong Kong neighbourhoods. The commercialisation and commoditisation of the tastes and practice of “country cooking”, “mum’s cooking”, “home cooking” or “traditional cooking” inevitably raise the issue of “authenticity”. I argue, like Richard Handler (1986, p. 2), however, that “authenticity is a cultural construct closely tied to Western notions of the individual” rather than any notion implicit in “non-Western” societies such as China. Instead, my analysis focuses on questions regarding the social and cultural implications of the popularity of low cuisine, the construction of “Hongkongeseness”, and the phenomenon of searching for local identity and a sense of cultural belonging in a commoditised world. As most low cuisine dishes are prepared differently each time they are made (different venue, different chef, different ingredients), the ways in which people consider them “authentic” are always rooted in varied local cultural meanings.

My earlier research on food culture and changing eating habits in Hong Kong, conducted in 1995 as part of a four-member research team, examined the relationship
of culinary tradition, dietary rules and consumption trends to the city’s cultural identity in the years leading up to the handover in 1997. The study considered how, with such changes in food culture and eating habits, people’s high expectations to more fully enjoy different foods in Hong Kong would be integrally linked to their interactions in aspects of city life and in their identity formation. Again, the great variety of food in Hong Kong not only means that people make decisions to choose the kind of Chinese, Asian or Western food they want to consume, but their choices determine how this food is consumed; this, in turn, reveals broader social practices and values. The primary objective of the study was to look into different types of food and cuisine in order to develop a holistic understanding of the sociopolitical meanings of food and cuisine in a globalising Hong Kong society (Wu and Tan, 2001). These foods include, for example, Cantonese *yum cha* [drinking tea], hybrid-style Chinese and Western food served in tea cafés, Hong Kong style Hakka food (commonly recognised as simple and inexpensive food in Hong Kong) and *nouvelle* Cantonese cuisine. Although it is clear that the logic behind food choice is different for different people – hence the phrase “one person’s feast is another’s poison” – the study questioned the meanings behind different foods as they shaped different people’s choices on the path to the Hong Kong handover before 1997.

In this earlier research project, I interviewed food critics and journalists to collect up-to-date information on the development of the food industry since the 1950s, concentrating particularly on the study of Cantonese restaurants ranging from inexpensive and “old-fashioned” to middle-class-oriented *nouvelle cuisine* types. I was surprised to find that the popularity and subsequent decline of Hakka restaurants served as a marker of Hong Kong’s drastic social change and economic development from the 1950s to the late 1990s. My study of Hakka restaurants demonstrates 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 job sector that grew significantly from the late 1950s onwards, when light industry and large-scale infrastructure began to flourish in Hong Kong. I also argued in this study that the decline of the Hakka restaurant in the 1980s was related to a dietary revolution that took place in Hong Kong society due to a change in people’s social values and tastes, as well as in foodways in general. Hong Kong people were looking for different ways to represent their new, globally-connected status and to differentiate themselves from their earlier concerns that focused primarily on the economic and nutritional value of food.

Since the late 1990s, however, Hakka cuisine has again become popular, and I suggest three reasons to explain this phenomenon. First, as mentioned earlier, Hakka restaurants witnessed Hong Kong’s industrial development; therefore, they are historically rich with the remembrance of the past social life of older generations. Secondly, we should also consider the fact that economic recession (starting from 1998) in Hong Kong brought a downturn in fine dining in both Chinese and non-Chinese upscale restaurants. Thirdly, travel in mainland China became more popular among Hong Kong people, and “traditional” architecture and village settlements became prominent tourist destinations after the 1997 handover; at the same time, traditional local foodways provided a taste of nostalgia and a localised cultural identity desired by heritage-seeking tourists. This paper builds on the earlier study to trace the subsequent revival of Hakka cuisine; it analyses the channels through which local country-style foodways gained popularity, and explores what this new pattern of consumption tells us of contemporary Hong Kong society.
I investigate this popular trend of embracing low cuisine as part of the social and political changes in Hong Kong after the handover in 1997 to the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Following the handover, people in Hong Kong have continued to express very mixed feelings about this “return” of sovereignty. Part of this ambiguity stems from questions of what it means to be “Hongkongese” and who is “Chinese” – a controversial issue that continues to be debated and contested (Lau and Kuan, 1988). Is one’s identity, and thus one’s shared sociocultural background, rooted in one’s place of birth such as the Pearl River Delta – the area where most Hong Kong families’ parents originated and the area considered the “homeland” by most of the city’s residents? On the one hand, Hong Kong urbanites share some sense of identity such as similarities in language, religion and food. On the other, there are local-born, Western-educated, young professionals who consider themselves “Hongkongese”, established immigrant businessmen who consider themselves “Chinese”, and many who feel that they fall between the two. Thus, a sense of belonging in Hong Kong is not homogeneous, and has never been solidly achieved across all sectors of society. The changing dynamics of food and cuisine, in particular, provide an entry point for understanding how different people identify themselves and their place in society amid such dramatic social and political change.

Village banquet: From sihk puhn to puhn choi

The well-known country-style dish puhn choi [basin food] is a festive food commonly prepared in ancestor-worship rites and wedding banquets among the indigenous inhabitants of Hong Kong’s New Territories. Usually prepared in the kitchen of the ancestral hall, it is the main and usually the only dish served in the meal. All ingredients are served together in one basin, or puhn, from which everyone at the table eats communally. This dish usually comprises layers of inexpensive, local ingredients such as dried pig skin, dried eel, dried squid, radish, tofu skin, mushroom and pork stewed in soy bean paste. The banquet may occasionally have several side dishes, but the main basin dish is always the focus. Among local villagers in the New Territories, the dish is usually called sihk puhn [meaning “eat the basin”], and boasts an oral history longer than that of colonial Hong Kong. Most importantly, sihk puhn’s contemporary manifestation as puhn choi is being similarly promoted in the media (e.g., guidebooks, Web sites and travel magazines) through different stories of its so-called origin. Yet, the tradition of eating puhn choi in Hong Kong appears to have attracted domestic tourists only after their visits to the region’s traditional village settlements and particularly to heritage sites in the New Territories, visits to the latter being more common since the 1990s.

With these legendary, albeit constructed origins, puhn choi is currently considered a re-invented regional country-style food used to represent cultural traditions and the local uniqueness of a lineage-oriented social structure in the New Territories of Hong Kong. There are many different versions of how puhn choi supposedly originated. For example, it has been said that puhn choi began as leftovers from a village banquet and was highly appreciated by Emperor Qing Ch’ien Lung when he was visiting Kwangtung (Watson, 1987, p. 394). Another popular version says that puhn choi was originally the food given to the Emperor Song Bing and his entourage when they moved to the south during the invasion of the Mongolians in the late Song period; it was later named puhn choi because there were not enough containers to hold food for everyone, so washing
basins used by villagers became the containers for the army’s feast (Tang, 2002, p. 4). These stories thus reflect the historical consciousness of the state, but from a local perspective.

Puhn choi, functioning as a local foodways among Chinese family lineages settled several centuries ago, speaks of the “exotic” for most Hong Kong residents who are not familiar with cultural traditions in the New Territories. With its double identity as both local and exotic, puhn choi has been promoted widely in domestic tourism for its “taste of tradition”. Domestic tours and popular package tours generally include local food (usually puhn choi, seafood or a vegetarian meal), rural scenery and a visit to historic pre-colonial villages or temples to reinforce the image of a traditional Hong Kong. Going into the inner rural part of the New Territories is, for urban Hong Kong residents, a journey into their inner selves. This search for a Hong Kong local tradition reflects the identity awareness or crisis felt among Hong Kong residents before the imminent handover of their territory in 1997 (Cheung, 1999).

In addition to history-inspired village traditions, steady “forward-looking” infrastructure development in the New Territories also contributed to the sharp increase in demand for puhn choi in Hong Kong society. Duruz (1999; 2001) similarly observes in Australian society that the history of certain traditional foods is significantly anchored in politics and a nationalistic ideology that valorises earlier eras, and argues that a main determining force in what people expect from so-called traditional foods is a feeling of nostalgia as well as a cultural identification with the past through eating in the present. This may explain why puhn choi has become so popular since the 1990s. Convenient transportation facilitates travel, and thus people can more easily make such voyages of discovery to experience the rural traditions in the New Territories, a region that was considered remote until the 1980s. However, the change from eating the traditional sihk puhn [eat the basin] to the modern puhn choi [basin cuisine] needs further examination. Historically speaking, sihk puhn has been served as banquet food in many local, single-surname villages, marking corresponding ethnic boundaries, and is ceremonially used to signify an entire lineage joined by the way they eat together;1 furthermore, sihk puhn not only reinforces the punti [local] single-surname lineage system, but also seems to exclude Hakka groups from punti Chinese groups within the political context of the New Territories. In other words, sihk puhn is metaphorically considered the real food of the New Territories, dating back to the very earliest inhabitants (Watson, 1987).

From the early 1990s, Hong Kong urbanites who participated in these “discovery voyages” of the New Territories’ local and domestic traditions and their affiliated expectations of exoticism did so, in part, to reassert their Hongkongness within the context of identity crisis involved in the 1997 handover. On the one hand, puhn choi, with an emphasis on local tradition, represented a kind of exotic element in the promotion of domestic tourism. On the other hand, it developed as a metaphor for Hong Kong people’s search for a sense of cultural belonging at the end of British rule in Hong Kong. Carrying a political message, puhn choi moved from its original function as a focus for lineage gathering in the New Territories to a symbol of Hong Kong heritage that anyone could share.

Besides being served the traditional way, “takeaway” puhn choi in a large bowl for ten to twelve people is also popular. Thus, one can enjoy this food with friends and relatives at home instead of at traditional venues – village halls or cemeteries for festive and ceremonial occasions. Most interestingly, during the Lunar New Year in 2003, it was widely reported in the media that puhn choi was one of the best sellers despite the economic
depression; in particular, many takeaway *puhn choi* meals were sold on the second day of
the Chinese New Year, serving as the first family meal of the year at which all family
members were in attendance. In the following two years, the demand for *puhn choi*
remained consistent, and some versions of this dish were served and sold (as takeaway)
in high-end seafood restaurants. Its popularity and unfamiliarity is well-reflected in the
fact that the Hong Kong Government wrote a press release to outline the facts that
people should particularly note when purchasing and preparing *puhn choi* during the
Lunar New Year of 2005 (HKSARG, 2005a; 2005b). Again, in January 2005, the most
popular local Chinese food magazine, *Eat & Travel Weekly*, contributed a special issue
on the varieties of *puhn choi*, ranging from traditional meals prepared in an ancestral
hall to expensive meals with fresh seafood or dried marine products. In still another vari-
ation, miniature *puhn choi* (using a small pumpkin as the basin that contains a few pieces
of chicken, mushrooms and vegetables) was actively promoted by some local fast food
chains and served in single portions as well as in a single dinner set. Conveying an
image of family meals and symbolising Hong Kong daily life in multiple ways (Chan, 2004).

In the summer of 2004, I was invited to co-host a 15-session hourly radio program called
*Hong Kong Foodways* produced by the government channel – Radio Television Hong
Kong. In the program, I conducted interviews with famous chefs, restaurant owners, con-
sultants, food critics and experts. One of the guests for the program was Wing, who is a
prominent promoter of country-style food as well as the local village food of the New
Territories. His restaurant was successful in serving dishes developed from the traditional
*puhn choi* and bringing different local homestyle foods into the commercial sphere.
Besides being a renowned chef, Wing is famous for his television show and enjoys the
reputation of knowing where good food can be found. In his television show, the
viewer follows Wing on his travels to locate high quality ingredients. Unlike other
popular food critics in the media, Wing does not emphasise the use of luxury, high-end,
expensive meals, but rather focuses on traditional country food prepared with care. He dis-
cussed the difference between good and bad ingredients, and how, during cooking, one can
make full use of the tastes, textures and characteristics of local food. Between December
2002 and July 2003, Wing published four books on traditional food: one is a cookbook on
village [or *wai tsuen*] food in the New Territories; the second is about eating in the Pearl
River Delta area; while the third and fourth are cookbooks that include the history of tra-
ditional sauces, hints for choosing ingredients and culinary techniques compiled from a
popular television series on looking for good food in the Pearl River Delta area.
Between August 2003 and July 2004, Wing published three additional books with
similar themes showcasing simple cooking methods and local ingredients, reinforcing
how this aspect of everyday material culture had assumed centre stage in a transformed
cultural practice of the time. Apart from the recipes and illustrations of different kinds
of dishes, Wing also described some of the personal experiences through which he
learned of those dishes, always reminding his readers of the close relationship between
local ingredients and their environment.

I suggest, then, that locally-situated foods such as *puhn choi*, and television programs
and books that focus on the production of local food in different parts of the Pearl
River Delta area, including Hong Kong, encourage audiences to remember not only the
source of their food, but also their Chinese roots through the discovery of food. As
Sutton (2001, p. 161) suggests with regard to the complex relations between food and
memory, the investigation of food and eating can assist understanding how past recollections construct an imagined tradition and identity. These food voyages materialise an identity of Hong Kong heritage through eating habits, linking Hong Kong to the mainland territories and an “imagined” past, rather than isolating Hong Kong from this historical connection within the wave of global capital. Television programs such as the one hosted by Wing, for example, present their audiences with an imagined Chinese identity. Besides food demonstrations and in-kitchen cooking shows, country-style and nostalgic so-called traditional foodways promote awareness of one’s heritage and a sense of cultural belonging by making visible the so-called roots of Hong Kong inhabitants’ eating habits. In so doing, they enforce for viewers a cultural identity with the Pearl River Delta area, an “imagined” homeland.

Private Kitchens: From Underground to Home

*Si fohng choi*, also called “private kitchen food”, another now-renowned example of low cuisine, demonstrates, like *puhn choi*, how material culture can move from the margins to the centre of Hong Kong foodways. The term *si fohng choi* also clearly highlights and identifies this sphere of cuisine with the places in which homemade food is prepared. Further, it emphasises that these dishes comprise homestyle cooking prepared by particular chefs or with particular characteristics that recall domesticity. During a similar time period as *puhn choi*, the mid-1990s, private kitchens became one of the most popular types of eateries in Hong Kong, numbering more than two hundred at their peak.\(^5\) These establishments have gained popularity among both Hong Kong residents and foreign visitors and have attracted the attention of major guidebook publishers and overseas presses (Simonds, 2004; Sterling, Chong and Qin, 2001, p. 148). For example, there are Chinese eateries such as Mum Chau’s Sichuan Kitchen, Da Ping Huo, Yellow Door, Chow Chung, Shanghai Delight and Secret Pantry; and Western eateries such as Plats, Gio’s, La Bouteille, Chez Copains, LIPS and Bo Inno Seki. Each of these home kitchen restaurants places a strong emphasis on unconventional Cantonese Chinese, European homestyle cooking or fusion food. A report, for example, in the *South China Morning Post*, Hong Kong’s major English-language daily, heralded private kitchens as the newest form of localised eatery:

World Food Hong Kong describes private kitchens as “speakeasies”, a term from the 1920s Prohibition era in the US when alcohol sales were banned and drinkers met in illegal clubs . . . owner of a successful operation called Shanghai Delight, says private kitchens are more of an art than a business. “We are selling our identity – it’s in the decoration, the menu, and the cooking. We are sharing our own experience of our Chinese food culture openly with others” (Chan, 2003a) (see also Sterling, Chong and Qin, 2001, p. 148).

In Hong Kong, private kitchens are not just unlicensed restaurants, but underground eateries identified as exclusive eating places among middle-class people. They are generally places with no registered company name, and are located in residential buildings; there are no walk-in customers, and reservations need to be made, sometimes more than one month in advance; there are no menus from which to choose items, because the food to be served is determined by the owners; there is no service charge; and no
credit cards are accepted. Some private kitchens advertise their prices, menu and location through their own Internet homepages. Prices for a meal range from HK$200 to $500 (US$30 to US$60), which is not considered inexpensive compared with other restaurants serving similar food. In terms of location, besides those few that actually serve food in the cook’s home, most of the venues are located in residential buildings in old neighbourhoods where rents are relatively low. The majority of establishments most often serve only dinner, and some open only a few times each week. The interior decor is usually simple, but attempts to recreate an ambience of “home”, albeit artistic in nature, due in part to the fact that some owners and promoters of the private kitchens are practising artists. The domestic atmosphere is created by using dim or soft lighting and stylish rather than industrial furniture, reflecting the individual taste of the owner.

With such underground and seemingly exclusive operations, and with culinary techniques always promoted as homestyle cooking, food offered in such private kitchens carries an image of comfort and “hominess”. The majority of the customers are middle-class, sometimes celebrities and artists, who are attracted both by the homemade food milieu and the distinctive personalities of the hosts and/or owners of these eateries. Despite the fact that a number of these private kitchens ceased operations in 2004, I estimate that more than one hundred such eateries still remain in Hong Kong. Some, however, while still trying to maintain that particular underground image in terms of services and the character of homemade food, have been converted from such underground (and illegal) operations to formal licensed restaurants. Thus, the manufacture of non-Cantonese dishes into homestyle food, the explanation of unlicensed as “private”, the image of being underground yet user-friendly and even tourist-friendly, demonstrates how homestyle cooking can be packaged, marketed and accepted by local and other Asian visitors. This is evidenced in a timely column in the South China Morning Post, an English daily Hong Kong newspaper. The story reported that Japanese and Southeast Asian visitors, in search of an authentic local Hong Kong dining experience, found their way to private kitchens after seeing different promotions in the media. One of the restaurant owners explains that “many tourists dined at his French private kitchen, La Bouteille, after it was featured in a Japanese airline in-flight magazine and in a Japanese TV documentary program” (Chan, 2003b).

One of the earliest private kitchens, for example, established in the late 1990s by a Sichuan couple, is famous for its homestyle renditions of locally-rooted Sichuan food. In this restaurant, the husband, a painter, designed the interior, and the wife, a singer, is the chef. Currently, the restaurant has expanded its hours to serve dinner nightly, rather than the schedule of three times a week to which it adhered when it first opened. However, the restaurant still does not display a sign outside its entrance, and the owners do not advertise in any way; thus it has gained its reputation solely by word of mouth. To augment the restaurant’s personal touch, the owner has decorated the interior with his paintings, each of which combines Western and Chinese artistic techniques and motifs. The restaurant seats up to 60 people (six tables for two to ten persons), and there are two sittings per night, starting at 6:30 pm and 9:15 pm. Following the meal, the chef performs a song to the customers-audience to express her gratitude as the host. To secure dinner reservations against last-minute cancellations, the restaurant owners require a deposit of 50 per cent of the approximate value of the meal at least three days in advance of the reservation. Such expectations highlight the middle- to upper-middle
class status of the regular clientele and the allure of the restaurant’s fare, previously considered local and lower class. The owners emphasise their ongoing practice of avoiding “fancy dishes”, but serving instead dishes that recall traditional and homestyle Sichuan food. Here then food moves across diverse cultural spheres of meaning making the local simultaneously exotic and familiar for adventure-seeking consumers.

Another Sichuan private kitchen established in 2000 was famous for its homemade dumplings, noodles and various kinds of spicy dishes. The owner was not a professional chef by training, nor an artist, but achieved notoriety and immediate recognition through the delicious and innovative Sichuan country food he made for clients and friends. This restaurant, like the one discussed earlier, was located in an older historical building and was very simply decorated, except for a few pictures of the owner’s hometown and several works of calligraphy hanging on the wall. Some typical items on the restaurant’s menu include dumplings, stewed pork, green vegetables stir-fried with salted pork, spicy noodles, “free-range” chicken dishes and plain fried sweet corn. As in other private kitchens serving Sichuan, Hunan and Hakka food, such dining fare clearly illustrates that these establishments showcase low cuisine with an emphasis on rural, country and homestyle food presented in personalised warm and home-like settings.

Apart from non-Cantonese regional cuisines, there are some private kitchens that serve Cantonese-origin fusion food. A comparatively new private kitchen of this kind is aptly located in the older neighbourhood of Sheung Wan or the South North Corridor, a district that houses both commercial and residential areas and that is home to the wholesale trade in dried marine/fish products and Chinese herbal medicine. This private kitchen, operated by a chef who is well known in Japan, especially because of his participation in the popular Japanese television program Iron Chef, serves his unique version of homestyle Cantonese fusion food. He explains that, after his retirement from a Chinese restaurant located in a five-star Hong Kong hotel, his former customers and friends continually encouraged him to open a private kitchen so that they could continue to eat his Cantonese fusion food. Although this chef has pushed the parameters of “low” cuisine by combining multiple ingredients that do not all hail from local roots, he insists that he is recreating domestic-style food, as he is situating the food within a Hong Kong home environment, and grounds the rationale for his service in personalised and attentive relations with clients to make them “feel as if they were dining at home”. In addition, the fact that his restaurant functions as an underground and exclusive eatery, not only for local Hong Kong people but also for international visitors (especially Japanese nationals living in Hong Kong), testifies to the allure of the domestic setting in providing an authentic Hong Kong home experience.

In Hong Kong, private kitchens do not have a direct historical precedent, although some people have suggested to me that the idea of the private kitchen can be traced back to a type of highly-exclusive private club developed during the 1960s. Frequented primarily by bankers and traders, such clubs were renowned for serving such unique local delicacies as snake soup. Instead, private kitchens represent a contemporary conflation of the everyday, homemade food people eat, but within a commercialised rendition and image of home. The personalities of the restaurants’ owner-hosts are well presented in the décor of both the Sichuan and Cantonese fusion establishments. Often, the overall “domestic” arrangement of the interior and the concern with not using artificial substances such as MSG in their cooking – a contemporary concern of the health-conscious consumer – reinforce the image of domestic food in the construction of traditional
homestyle cooking. In contrast to other mainstream restaurants that have more tables and dress their staff in uniforms, private kitchens are recognised for their small size and informal atmosphere. Also, the feeling of being at “home” and enjoying authentic food in a private kitchen is important as it provides comfort and a sense of belonging that most Hong Kong people seek. The popularity of Hong Kong’s private kitchens thus reflects not only the image of being exclusive and underground, but also the most important component – namely, traditional homestyle cooking. This reinforces the idea of belonging – eating at “home” instead of at an ordinary eatery or restaurant that is open to any customer.6

Considering their rather short history in Hong Kong, private kitchens are still undergoing substantial changes as their popularity, at times, fluctuates. The first Sichuan kitchen that I mentioned is no longer as busy as it was at first. My conversations with clients reveal that, throughout 2004, the restaurant was often not fully booked and one could obtain a reservation at the last moment. The owner of the second Sichuan kitchen informed me that he was also serving dinners to large tour groups from the mainland; and customers of the third newly-established private kitchen tended to most often be Japanese rather than local Hong Kong residents. Despite the decline in the number of private kitchens in 2004, the sharp rise in their popularity following the handover of Hong Kong demonstrates people’s initial longing to experience the nostalgia of an earlier Hong Kong – one partly rooted in the tradition of the mainland.

The emergence of private kitchens, then, draws our attention to questions of ambiguity. These establishments gained popularity by providing so-called authentic Chinese regional cuisine, but in an exclusive and underground environment. Following the 1997 handover, Hong Kong residents puzzled over how they wanted to position themselves vis-a-vis their identity and their engagement with the mainland – were they Chinese or Hongkongese? People realised that the new political alliance opened new markets for mainland Chinese traders in Hong Kong at the same time that it provided more far-reaching opportunities for Hong Kong professionals in China. Many local and Western educated middle-class youth explain that they have not yet fully resolved questions regarding their Chinese identity, given the recent political transformation. In the case study here, I suggest that a “homey” private kitchen functions as a metaphor for belonging, albeit an ambiguous one; it is not the experience of “home” for most Cantonese living in Hong Kong, because private kitchens are commercialised, and the food is mostly spicy and exotic non-Cantonese food. However, eating at a private kitchen is an easy way for Hong Kong residents to take a brief “voyage” to China – a stepping stone to safely explore a mainland way of life (see also Scapp and Seitz, 1998, p. 6). More importantly, diners can enjoy the experience with friends who share similar concerns.7

Considering the rapid developments between Hong Kong and the mainland, this transitional function of the private kitchen was rather short-lived and, indeed, the concept of this exclusive yet everyday institution has changed in the last two years. At the same time, I argue that the earlier transitional function of private kitchens has recently been adopted and further developed by new restaurants that focus on regional and provincial cuisine. In 2004, in addition to the revival of Hakka and Shunde (Pearl River Delta area) cuisine in these emerging restaurants in downtown areas, Beijing-Sichuan-Shanghai food chains have also opened in major shopping malls as well as in New Town areas. The interest in such local cuisine, initiated by the earlier private kitchens, has thus set
the stage for the current popularity of eating establishments that feature regional cuisine (with an emphasis on country-style cooking) that have sprung up in Hong Kong during the past year.

Conclusion

In Hong Kong, it is often awkward to respond when one is asked to recommend “nostalgic” food to someone who has not really experienced the past but hopes to construct an experience of the “good old days” by eating “food from the past”; Appadurai (1996, p. 30) terms this “nostalgia without memory”, or people simply recalling “a world they have never lost”. Analysing two types of low cuisine – puhn choi and private kitchens – and the significance of these food choices to people in Hong Kong in the post-1997 era, facilitates understanding the complex social dilemmas that residents faced with such social and political change. On the one hand, the foods are regional, domestic and nostalgic; on the other, they are exotic, underground and entertaining. This discrepancy might be considered the peculiarity of a commercialised low cuisine onto which consumers attached a myriad of expectations, most important among them being how Hong Kong residents identified themselves in relation to the nation-state during the late 1990s.

Some people reacted to the political takeover by celebrating the return to the Chinese motherland; some debated whether or not this change in government should even be considered a celebration. Others explain that they saw this shift as the beginning of “Hong Kong people administering Hong Kong”, “as obtaining a high degree of autonomy”, “as one country, two systems”, as a system of “basic law” and as one of “fifty years unchanged”. Indeed, China’s original political premise – to keep Hong Kong “unchanged” for the next fifty years – was perhaps least understood by local Hong Kong residents, and this led to the feelings of insecurity that many experienced. From the early 1990s, anticipating the end of British rule, domestic heritage tourism developed as a metaphor for Hong Kong people’s search for a sense of cultural belonging. The pronounced identity crisis among city residents materialised in various social activities such as heritage tours and discovery voyages of local tradition, each accompanied by a taste of puhn choi. The continuous search for a nostalgic past was well fulfilled through the consumption of “traditional” foodways which, in turn, prompted the food discovery voyages led by celebrities; these adventures instructed viewers on the origins of their different local foods and provided them with their “imagined” cultural roots in the Pearl River Delta area. The food provided in private kitchens, however, is actually quite different from most Cantonese homemade dishes; nonetheless, the search for the domestic in other-than-domestic spheres as well as a “home” (albeit a commercialised home) atmosphere in which to dine, further reflects the kind of ambiguities Hong Kong’s residents experienced as they tried to fashion modern consumerist lifestyles that simultaneously recalled a secure past.

The life histories and changing situations of these southern Chinese low cuisines – regional, domestic or nostalgic foods – demonstrates how marginal, as well as mainstream, eating habits re-packaged as homestyle food have changed the everyday living and dining practices of Hong Kong urbanites in their search for “home” (see also Appadurai, 1996, p. 33). With the emergence of domestic tourism and the reputations of low cuisine eating establishments spread by word of mouth and media, low cuisine and its employment of homestyle cooking is emphasised as specifically characteristic of the taste of Hong Kong residents. Being traditional, as in puhn choi, exclusive, as in eating
at private kitchens and globally connected through media communication, low cuisine has indeed contributed to the imagination of Hong Kong’s cultural tradition. The image of rich, regional foods and the practice of a domestically-based food production, encased within a rural landscape, have been integral to the construction of a multifaceted heritage among Hong Kong people in the post-handover era.

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Notes

1. Watson (1987) argues that the practice of sikh puhn is an indicator of equality and commonness, and states that: “Each guest collected his own chopsticks from a tray and picked up an individual bowl of steamed rice. The basin was carried to an unoccupied corner of the hall. Earlier arrivals were already eating at the few makeshift tables that had been assembled near the kitchen. I could not help but notice that one of the wealthiest men in rural Hong Kong (an emigrate millionaire) was sitting between a retired farmer and a factory worker... No ceremonies of any kind were performed; no complicated codes of etiquette were observed. No one acted as host for our small group and there was no ranking of diners, nor was there a head table reserved for important guests. People were fed on a first come, first served basis. No speeches were delivered and no toasts proposed. Everyone ate at their own pace and left when they pleased” (Watson, 1987, pp. 391–92).

2. All personal names of individuals and establishments are pseudonyms.

3. In terms of the development of television cooking shows in Hong Kong, I suggest that we can consider it in three phases. In the first and earliest phase, cooking was demonstrated as evidence of competent domestic skills for women. Such presentations were usually performed by an elegant woman who gave tips 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 long-boiling soup and fresh seasonal dishes. This kind of cooking show can still be found in afternoon programming, as part of various housekeeping series; books and video CDs are also available on this topic. The second phase emerged with the rapid rise in Hong Kong’s living standard in which travel abroad, luxurious living and gourmet eating were enjoyed by a growing middle class to express social status; this is especially the case with the consumption of expensive food introduced by popular stars, celebrities and food writers on many of Hong Kong’s television travel programs. Celebrities introduced local foods and cuisines and the famous eateries of particular tourist destinations; they explained how local people prepared and cooked the dishes they ate and, in addition, some exotic ingredients and other aspects of the food were introduced. I consider Wing’s cooking show as the third phase combining travel and food, but the focus is on the Pearl River Delta area including Hong Kong. Instead of expensive and luxurious foods, it emphasised basic traditional cooking, mostly familiar to Hong Kong viewers.

4. The production of food, as shown in such programs, is linked to Hong Kong’s daily life practices as a cross-border cultural entity. In contrast to the modern and commercialised items, salty fish in the Pearl River Delta area, goose in Chiu Chow, freshwater fish in the New Territories, salty duck in Canton, and so on, become the simple and basic elements of our imagination of homeland. In other words, it is the homeland constructed by the origins of people’s daily foodways.

5. The Web site <http://www.eatfamily.com>, which is devoted to exchanging ideas and comments on private kitchens in Hong Kong, lists 42 kitchens in its ranking chart, but in my personal communications with people who are familiar with private kitchens, I was told that there were more than 200 at their peak, and many of them had already closed down when this paper was prepared.

6. In fact, the generation of migrants that has grown up in Hong Kong does not know much of their parents’ home places, and most of them are not interested in learning about the lifestyles in which their parents were brought up. This is also true of foodways. According to my daily observations, local culinary skills are no longer passed down from parents to their children. The younger generations in Hong Kong, for
example, do not often prepare or cook traditional festive foods, such as Lunar New Year snacks and seasonal specialties, at home. In many cases, among middle-class families, domestic cooking is done by immigrant maids/helpers, so the idea of homestyle cooking and traditional domestic food is often based on an “imagined” domesticity constructed by television dramas, movies, advertisements and urban myths rather than actual life experiences. A commercial setup conveying a warm atmosphere, family management and homemade food, accompanied by a residential environment and private location, gives an illusion of “home” for which customers are willing to pay.

7. I have also seen customers enjoy describing how many places they had visited on the mainland, and what kind of hot spicy food they could tolerate.

References


