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The Impacts and Significance of *Yum Cha* for the Cantonese Diaspora

Natalie Chu

Abstract

Across the Cantonese diaspora, *dim sum* establishments have been a critical cultural hub for immigrant communities. *Dim sum* are the foods that are consumed during *yum cha*, a popular Cantonese brunch meal with shareable dishes and tea. Dumplings, buns, noodles, stews, desserts, fried delectables, and other *dim sum* come in a variety of flavor profiles, textures, and shapes, making the *yum cha* process one filled with joy and plentitude. Popularized in Southern China, *yum cha* became a staple morning cuisine for the working class by the mid-20th century. Its popularity and other restaurant innovations elevated *dim sum* from street food to indoor dining food. Labor migrations within the last century have brought Cantonese cuisine to the rest of the world, including Southeast Asia, Australia, the United Kingdom, and North America. For Chinese communities overseas, the establishment, performance, and preservation of native foods becomes a process of recreating home and belonging in the resettlement society. In particular, *yum cha* comes with a formal set of etiquette and customs which emulate cultural values, oral histories, and social hierarchies. From the distribution of tea to the festive dining ambiance, *yum cha* provides a collective culinary citizenship and communal space for immigrant communities. More than a physical recreation of home, *yum cha* becomes a socio-cultural transitory space for the Cantonese diaspora to actively practice cultural traditions and teach future generations.

Introduction

I did not begin to truly miss the atmosphere and flavor profiles of *yum cha* until I began my undergraduate education and moved away from my family home. While moving out and learning how to cook were invaluable experiences for creating my own home, I realized nothing compares to the undeniable comforts and sensation of *yum cha* with loved ones. The nostalgic flavors of pineapple buns, crystal shrimp dumplings, beef rice noodle rolls, and lotus-wrapped sticky rice always remind me of my childhood years between San Francisco's Chinatown and Guangzhou, China. No matter the *dim sum* restaurant, it is the boisterous chatter, delicious sharable *dim sum*, and the carefully embedded etiquette that creates a memorable experience for me. As I have grown older, I have developed an appreciation for the specific customs of *yum cha* as a way of grounding myself, my heritage, and my values within the scope of my community's immigration history.

In a world of global migration and transnational networks, one way to study diasporic communities is through the establishment and transfusion of native cuisine and dining customs. One such regional tradition that has gained popularity in the Western world is the Cantonese custom of *yum cha* (喝茶). While its direct translation is to "drink tea," *yum cha* is the tradition of a morning to early afternoon meal of tea and small shareable dishes known as *dim sum* (点心). *Yum cha* encompasses a long history and tradition of Chinese etiquette, migration, political and socioeconomic shifts, and reunification. This communal form of dining has experienced numerous transformations across the Cantonese diaspora. To my amazement, many dining customs, restaurant operations, and flavor profiles—as well as the overall cultural significance of *yum cha*—are commonly found across the vast Cantonese diaspora, from Guangzhou and Hong Kong to Oceania and the Western world. As evidenced through the origins, dining processes, and

sociocultural significance of *yum cha*, it has the power to create a sense of home, comfort, and joy for diasporic Cantonese communities.

Historical Origins of Yum Cha

To understand the origins of *yum cha*, one must attend to the historical and geographical significance of its origin region: Guangdong, China. Guangdong, the Cantonese-speaking region of China, is located in the southernmost part of the country, bounded by the South China Sea. Guangdong's unique geography has directly led to diverse influences on and the global spread of *yum cha*. This dining tradition is influenced by many cultures and turns outward to inform many other diasporic communities. The coastal region is populated with massive rivers, deltas, fertile wetlands, and islands. By nature of its geography, this microregion has experienced centuries of trade and cultural exchange with other parts of China, Southeast and South Asia, and Europe. Consequently, an extensive network of merchants, sailors, travelers, diplomats, and explorers emerged from the coastal Guangdong Province and Pearl River Delta. By the 14th century, the region developed robust markets in textiles, commercialized crops, mercantile capital, and foreign trade.¹ Where the Chinese traveled, teahouses and other cultural remnants followed. Chinese teahouses have been recorded since the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) and have popped up along the Silk Road.² Extensive trade via the Silk Road and naval routes contributed to widespread culinary influences on *dim sum*. For example, wheat flour became a key ingredient for many *dim sum* staples like dumplings and steamed buns after its introduction to Guangdong from the Middle East and Central Asia.³ Variations of dumplings and steamed buns remained

¹ Ye Xian'en, Chen Chunsheng, and Robert Y. Eng, "Social and Economic History of Guangdong Province: State of the Field," *Late Imperial China* 11, no. 2 (December 1, 1990): 102.

² Maxine Builder, "Dim Sum Is the Original Brunch," MyRecipes, February 2018, <https://www.myrecipes.com/extracrispy/dim-sum-is-the-original-brunch>.

³ Builder, "Dim Sum Is the Original Brunch."

staples of Chinese cuisine through the following centuries into the modern day. Between the early 1800s to 1900s, due to famine and political instability in the Guangdong region, working-class laborers sought to migrate for seasonal employment overseas. Though many emigrated to Southeast Asia, a majority of Cantonese men were directed to the West Coast as cheap laborers for the transcontinental railroad and the California Gold Rush.⁴ These two historical events contributed to the early establishment of Cantonese settlements in the United States by the 19th century. According to Chinatown historian Philip P. Choy, “all [initial] Chinese food in America came only from immigrants [and laborers]” of the Guangdong Province during the 19th century.⁵ Most inhabitants of Old Chinatowns have historically been of Cantonese descent, language environments, and gastronomic landscapes.⁶ Consequently, until the later wave of wealthy immigrants in the 1950s, Cantonese cuisine—including *dim sum*—was the definitive source of Chinese cuisine in North America.

Though shops serving tea and dumplings have existed for thousands of years, this culinary form became a more permanent tradition in Guangdong as rapid urban development necessitated quick and affordable meals. The evolution of the distribution and consumption of *dim sum* represents such socioeconomic changes. Once sold on the streets by people carrying poles, pushing carts, and manning makeshift stalls, *dim sum* dining was formalized when it moved indoors and accompanied tea service. By the 1960s, *yum cha* was a staple in the restaurants of all major Cantonese cities, including Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Macau.⁷ During

⁴ Philip P. Choy, *San Francisco Chinatown: A Guide to Its History and Architecture* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2012), 15.

⁵ Philip P. Choy, *San Francisco Chinatown: A Guide to Its History and Architecture* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2012), 18.

⁶ Kiyomi Yamashita, “A Comparative Study of Chinatowns around the World: Focusing on the Increase in New Chinese Immigrants and Formation of New Chinatowns,” *Japanese Journal of Human Geography* 65, no. 6 (2013): 75.

https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/jjhg/65/6/65_527/_pdf

⁷ Builder, “Dim Sum Is the Original Brunch.”

the Cultural Revolution, the cuisine found a stronghold in Hong Kong.⁸ There, the colonial city preserved and elevated *dim sum* teahouses from simple shops to the restaurants and banquet halls that we know today. Pushcarts and other restaurant industry innovations have also contributed to the modernization of this morning meal routine. Consequently, the overseas migration of laborers, businessmen, and travelers created international recognition for Cantonese cuisine. Interestingly, many beloved street foods such as fried or stewed pork intestine, curry fish balls, custard buns, and braised tofu have remained the same in its preparation, ingredients, and flavor profiles despite their elevation from street food to indoor cuisine.⁹ This parallels a transformative shift for people of the working class, who quickly rose to the middle class with Hong Kong's rapid economic growth.¹⁰ While the socioeconomic status of the laboring class improved, their taste remained loyal to the comfort, affordability, and nostalgia of *dim sum*.

Understanding the Etiquette of Yum Cha

The dining customs of *yum cha* preserve the tradition's social nature and represent key values of Cantonese society. Much of the etiquette is based on respect, social hierarchies, Confucian values, and the embedded cultural significance of daily actions. One of the most foundational rules of etiquette is the distribution of tea. Younger people at the table are expected to pour for elders before themselves. Moreover, to thank the person that poured the tea, individuals can tap two or more fingers on the table several times.¹¹ The practice of finger tapping derives from a classical legend about Emperor Qianlong of the Qing dynasty, who decided to visit a village with his staff, all under the guise of civilians. Upon arriving at the

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Builder, "Dim Sum Is the Original Brunch."

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ka Wing Wong, "Beginner's Guide To Dim Sum In Hong Kong | City Unscripted," City Unscripted, October 7, 2021, <https://www.cityunscripted.com/travel-magazine/how-to-eat-dim-sum-like-a-local>.

teahouse, the emperor began pouring his staff tea, a highly forbidden act. Terrified to kneel and break the emperor's cover, his staff knocked on the table "three times with three fingers curled to signify kneeling [and bowing] three times as gratitude."¹² Though this folklore is not substantiated by historical records, finger tapping has been a well-known dining mannerism for hundreds of years. Such tea etiquette is well-preserved and practiced across all generations throughout the Chinese diaspora. While the individual pouring tea may not be an emperor, finger-tapping remains a subtle way of expressing great gratitude and respect. What may seem like a children's fable can also be seen as an oral history to preserve historical and culturally significant mannerisms. The undercover travel of Emperor Qianlong is a well-versed story even among the second and third generations of the Chinese diaspora. In addition, tea etiquette often enacts Confucian principles, particularly filial piety as expressed at mealtimes toward elders.¹³ This tenet of Confucianism recognizes the value of and respect due towards elders as well as the hardships experienced by them, and is deeply embedded in *yum cha* customs, which emphasize humility, graciousness, and familial hierarchies. Though subtle, finger tapping is a historicized gesture that reflects the culturally specific atmosphere of *yum cha*, in which Chinese immigrants can engage with a community of enduring shared values.

Other *yum cha* customs have deeply embedded meanings related to superstitions and cultural values. For example, elders will remind children at the table not to bang or create sharp noises with chopsticks and bowls. Such sounds are believed to recall beggars who use such methods to gain attention and would thus "bring poverty to the family."¹⁴ Another custom is

¹² Karen Chiang, "The Yum Cha Rules You Need to Know," BBC, February 28, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20190227-the-yum-cha-rules-you-need-to-know>.

¹³ Siti Nuraishah Ahmad and Wan Nur Madiha Ramlan, "In Search of 'Home' in the Transnational Imaginary: Food, Roots, and Routes in Memoirs by Asian Australian Women Writers," *The Wenshan Review of Literature and Culture* 12 no. 2 (June 2019): 119, [https://doi.org/10.30395/WSR.201906_12\(2\).0005](https://doi.org/10.30395/WSR.201906_12(2).0005).

¹⁴ Karen Chiang, "The Yum Cha Rules You Need to Know," BBC, February 28, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20190227-the-yum-cha-rules-you-need-to-know>.

refraining from sticking one's chopsticks vertically in a bowl of food, as this image "resembles incense for the dead and will bring bad luck."¹⁵ Additionally, reaching over the table for food across from oneself is considered rude, referencing a forbidden play in Chinese chess.¹⁶ Likewise, it is common to fight for the bill and leave the last piece of a dish untouched as gestures of graciousness. The last piece of each *dim sum* dish is often left uneaten as a courteous way to offer the final bite to others, signifying concern for other people's satisfaction and hunger over one's own. Thus, many table manners incorporate gestures and visuals that reference inherited superstitions about poverty, good fortune, graciousness, filial piety, and respect for deceased community members. Each dining habit preserves and passes down the cultural values of Cantonese society. *Yum cha* remains a vital tradition through which Cantonese diasporic communities practice and teach such cultural doctrines to younger generations.

The Significance of Yum Cha to the Diaspora

The atmosphere and ritual of *yum cha* are specific and sacred to the immigrant community. Food plays multiple roles in immigrants' negotiations of and reconstructions of home.¹⁷ Notably, the preparation of food and its place of consumption is just as significant in this process as the food itself. The physical recreation of Chinese restaurant spaces aids the transformation of overseas Chinese societies into spaces of belonging and shared heritage. The congregation and consumption of *dim sum* in recreations of Chinese restaurant spaces abroad establishes culinary citizenship and functions as a physical manifestation of home for generations of Chinese abroad. Though outsiders may see *dim sum* restaurants as noisy, chaotic, and

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ahmad and Ramlan, "In Search of 'Home' in the Transnational Imaginary: Food, Roots, and Routes in Memoirs by Asian Australian Women Writers," 106.

crowded, there is a method to the madness. Round tables with lazy susans, pushcarts, and aquariums with live seafood are commonly found in the *dim sum* restaurants of major Chinatown in the Cantonese diaspora, including San Francisco, Los Angeles, Vancouver, Seattle, Philadelphia, and New York City; mimicking that of restaurants in mainland China and Hong Kong.¹⁸ Upon entering these restaurants, their sensory landscape—the loud and frequent orders of *dim sum*, the rattling of push carts, and the snatches of casual gossip—resemble the bustling morning meals and family outings of Guangzhou or Hong Kong.

Participating in *yum cha* maintains a sense of immigrant identity as well. Historically, teahouses have been “centers of Chinese social life” and places of leisure and socialization, particularly for businessmen, bureaucrats, and the elite class, who have the privilege of socializing and entertaining.¹⁹ As such, the reproduction of these spaces in areas of diasporic resettlement has become a key component of immigrant socialization and culinary citizenship. “Culinary citizenship,” described by Anita Mannur, grants subjects the “ability to claim and inhabit certain subject positions” through their relationship with food.²⁰ The consumption of tea and *dim sum* allows members of the Cantonese diaspora to retain core facets of Cantonese social life and heritage, regardless of whether they live in the mainland or in overseas communities. The power of food and dining maintains and activates a sense of identity, community, and “‘home’ across spatial and temporal boundaries.”²¹ With the spread of Chinese immigrant communities across the globe, *yum cha* provides an accessible and safe environment to freely re-engage with native foods and languages in a leisurely setting. *Yum cha* preserves the linguistic

¹⁸ Builder, “Dim Sum Is the Original Brunch.”

¹⁹ Ella-Mei Wong, *Yum Cha: Dim Sims & Other Chinese Delights* (Australia: Angus & Robertson Publishers, 1981), vi.

²⁰ Anita Mannur, “Culinary Nostalgia: Authenticity, Nationalism, and Diaspora,” *Food in Multi-Ethnic Literatures* 32, no. 4 (2007): 13, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30029829>.

²¹ Ahmad and Ramlan, “In Search of ‘Home’ in the Transnational Imaginary: Food, Roots, and Routes in Memoirs by Asian Australian Women Writers,” 106.

and culinary heritage of Cantonese migrant communities and transports the festivities of the original teahouses to all corners of the diaspora.

Finally, *yum cha* can function as a symbol of Chinese immigrants' success in a new society. In an oral interview with my mother, Caiyu Lin, she described how in her childhood, her parents would go for *yum cha* every morning, from approximately 5 a.m. to 6 a.m. After several rounds of high-calorie and hearty *dim sum* with tea, they would rush to work in factories and shipyards. It was later in secondary school, when the Chinese economy had stabilized somewhat, that my mother would recall going for *yum cha* as a leisurely activity on weekends and special occasions.²² First-generation immigrants to the U.S., such as my own family members, see this country as a land of new opportunities and resources. Their "new homeland" in the West offers abundance in comparison to their country of origin's "lack of food."²³ For those who survived starvation and famine due to poverty, war, and political instability, the ability to access comfort foods, like *dim sum*, at their own leisure represents great blessings and good fortune for their families and future generations. *Yum cha* symbolizes this sense of abundance. Dishes are typically served in two to four pieces, allowing diners to rotate between many pan-fried, stewed, deep-fried, steamed, braised, barbecued, and sweet dishes in no particular order.²⁴ The countless combinations of textures, aromas, and flavors create experiences of delight and leisure in an otherwise foreign resettlement society. Moreover, *dim sum* is communal; sharing food with loved ones and friends in a boisterous dining atmosphere contributes to feelings of abundance, good company, nostalgia, and festiveness at an affordable price.

²² Caiyu Lin in discussion with the author, November 27, 2022.

²³ Ahmad and Ramlan, "In Search of 'Home' in the Transnational Imaginary: Food, Roots, and Routes in Memoirs by Asian Australian Women Writers," 119.

²⁴ Wong, *Yum Cha: Dim Sims & Other Chinese Delights*, vi.

Conclusion

Across the Chinese diaspora, the widespread significance and preservation of *yum cha* is fascinating to observe. Within the boisterous environments of loud chatter and delicious shareable meals lies deeply historical etiquette and significant culinary citizenship. For Cantonese immigrant communities, access to this culinary tradition signifies a connection to their homeland through sensory familiarity and memory stimulation. First, immigrants can find linguistic and culinary affinity within the *yum cha* atmosphere; members of diasporic communities who may often face challenges with social, dietary, and language restrictions can experience a sense of belonging and safety. They can also practice core cultural values, such as the tenets of Confucianism and filial piety, by recreating their homeland's codes of etiquette. Moreover, *yum cha* offers a means of transmitting oral and cultural histories to younger generations of the diaspora. Tea etiquette and other dining traditions have deeply embedded societal meanings, typically auspicious references to good fortune and the rejection of poverty, death, and misfortune. Elders can utilize *yum cha* to teach younger generations the pillars of graciousness, humility, responsibility, respect, and the value of family through everyday dining customs. Those born within the diaspora can experience the bustling morning meals of major Cantonese cities thousands of miles away. The preservation of *yum cha* in Chinese overseas communities speaks to a vibrant and steadfast commitment to cultivating belonging and pleasure amidst the difficulties of displacement, resettlement, and cultural assimilation. *Yum cha* is a strong case study of the transformative powers of food and dining to reimagine and re-establish a sense of home elsewhere in the diaspora.

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