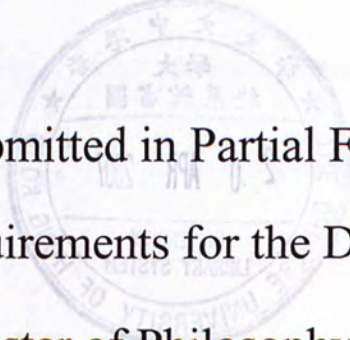


Restaurants, Class and Consumption in Hong Kong  
– A Study of a City Block in East Tsim Sha Tsui

So Wan-suen



A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Philosophy  
in  
Anthropology

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August 2005

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Abstract of thesis entitled:

Restaurants, Class and Consumption in Hong Kong –  
A Study of a City Block in East Tsim Sha Tsui

Submitted by So Wan-suen

For the degree of Master of Philosophy in Anthropology  
at The Chinese University of Hong Kong in August 2005

The objective of this research is to explore how middle-class and working-class social identities in Hong Kong are constructed and demonstrated by restaurants and their customers through the dining process. Social class is usually interpreted in terms of economics; yet, as a kind of identity, it should also be understood culturally. This research takes a micro perspective, investigating restaurants and customers' dining habits to examine how cultural factors contribute to social-class formation, and how our social-class identities influence our consumption.

I have engaged in extensive participant observation in a representative block in East Tsim Sha Tsui, one of the most popular and variegated restaurant areas in Hong Kong. Through observing various restaurants' decorations and settings, the services they provide, the food they offer, the customers who visit, and all of the various behaviors involved in a variety of different types of restaurants, I examine how restaurants construct and present their class image. I also conducted in-depth interviews in order to learn my informants' opinions about restaurants and social class in order to understand how class identities are established and how these

identities influence their food consumption. Through this research, a detailed picture of class distinction in Hong Kong's restaurants can be formed, a picture that can teach us much about social class and its Hong Kong subtleties.

社會身份和消費選擇本身以及在其中消費之類都被加到。同時，亦希望探討此類研究在學術實踐過程中被建構。我們探討社會階級的研究能讓我們從食物這方面，更進一步，社會階級作為一個身份亦應包含了一些文化因素。因此，我們亦嘗試從文化內涵去嘗試瞭解身份。本研究採取一個顯微的角度的——研究香港飲食業，具體言之飲食服務——去探討文化因素如何在階級結構中發生作用，藉此了解階級身份如何影響我們消費。

本人於大學期間那一時期在滬經營的地產公司參與工作，對當時的社會結構、環境、意識、食物、服務、顧客，以及各人在其內的行為，我們可看到各種身份的界定及展現其階級形象。此外，深入的談話亦為我們提供有關的資料。因此，我們想藉此一書了解在消費者對於飲食活動及其服務、環境、意識等身份的關係以及此身份對我們在消費上的影響有更多的認識。為此，本研究方法，我們亦將根據社會的在階級上的階級分析，藉此一書，亦希望探討其在全香港不同階級社會的變化。

## 摘要

本研究旨在探討在出外飲食的過程中，香港的中產階級以及工人階級的社會身份如何透過食肆本身以及在其中消費之顧客被展現。同時，亦希望探討此身份如何在這消費過程中被建構。我們對社會階級的研究通常都以經濟角度着手。然而，社會階級作為一個身份亦應包含了一些文化因素。因此，我們亦需從文化角度去嘗試理解階級身份。本研究採取一個微觀的角度 — 研究香港的餐廳以及食客的飲食習慣 — 去探討文化因素如何在階級建構中發生作用，藉此了解階級身份如何影響我們消費。

本人於尖沙咀東部一各類食肆雲集的地區展開參與觀察。通過觀察各食肆的裝璜、佈置、食物、服務、顧客，以及各人在其內的行爲，我們可看到各食肆如何建立及展現其階級形象。此外，深入訪談亦為另一搜集資料的途徑。通過訪談，我們能夠進一步了解被訪者對於各食肆以及階級的看法，從而對階級身份的建構以及此身份對我們在消費上的影響有更多的認知。通過以上種種方法，我們可探索香港食肆在形象上的階級分野，從而進一步了解社會階級以及其在香港所扮演的微妙角色。

## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

This thesis is about how middle-class and working-class social identities in Hong Kong are constructed and expressed in the process of dining out, including the restaurants' management and the customers who dine in the restaurants. In this study, I investigate the decoration, setting, food and service of both middle-class and working-class restaurants in Hong Kong. From these various elements that contribute to the establishment of restaurants' images, I explore the restaurants' presupposition of their customers' preferences in dining out according to their class background, and thereby seek to understand the elements which help to form different social classes in Hong Kong. I also examine the dining habits of customers in various restaurants in Hong Kong and how such behavior relates to social-class identity.

In studies of social-classes formation in Hong Kong, the majority of analyses have focused on how different social classes are formed in terms of social structural changes and the forms of economics production. These kinds of study adopt a largely economic and macro perspective in examining social classes. From this angle, people's class identity states in an economic sense. While the class identity that comes out of such analyses is rather objective and easy to define, it is nevertheless confined to external factors. Yet, should class, as a kind of identity, be looked at from



such an external, economic perspective only? This study takes another approach, by adopting a micro perspective, examining restaurants and dining habits of Hong Kong people to investigate the internal and subjective components of the construction and formation of class identities. I intend to apply this approach to the analysis of the dining-out process of the middle class and the working class in Hong Kong to see how cultural factors work in the class-establishing process. I believe that this micro and cultural analysis approach can complement existing studies, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of social class identity in Hong Kong.

Individuals are often classified into different social classes with reference to their economic standing and related factors, including wealth, income, occupation, education, family background and so on. In Hong Kong, as a capitalist society, an economically based social class identity is definitely fundamental. Identity is important to us because it is the “properties of uniqueness and individuality” (Barnard and Spencer 1996: 292), which help to distinguish ourselves from others. Yet, it is also the “qualities of sameness” (Barnard and Spencer 1996: 292), which, based on some common feature, classifies us in groups. Our behavior is inevitably guided by our social class-consciousness, so that we can construct an image that can suit our social status and fit us into the social class which we feel that we belong to. In light of this, the concept of social stratification is one of the underlying principles

which determines what people do. By binding people into certain status groups, social class also helps to consolidate the society to a certain extent. Social class, thus, is not only inseparable from an individual's life, but also link the individual to the structure of the whole society.

However, even if social class seems to be so important, people are not always aware of the impact of social class on their daily lives, I have observed. They tend to overlook the power that social-class identity holds over them. Some of my informants admitted that they were aware of their social-class identity more or less; yet they seldom talked about it, and therefore regarded it as something not important in their daily lives. When we went out on interviews in different restaurants, however, I found that their evaluation of restaurants, to a clear extent, guided by their social class awareness. As I found in the interviews, the factors that influenced my informants' evaluation of restaurants, for instance what kind of decoration the restaurants used, were usually linked to my informants' perception toward different social classes. For example, one of my informants, a twenty-four-year-old teaching assistant, downgraded a lower middle-class restaurant, as she at first classified it, due to the "unsuitable, *Chàh-chàan-tèng*<sup>1</sup>-style picture" hung on the wall. She said, "The

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<sup>1</sup> *Chàh-chàan-tèng* (茶餐廳), or tea café or fast-food restaurant, is a very popular eating-place in Hong Kong. Customers of all ages, occupations, and income will also visit *chàh-chàan-tèng*. It provides a wide variety of food, from Chinese style to Western style, even Thai or Japanese style sometimes. It offers breakfast, lunch, tea and dinner everyday in a low price. *Chàh-chàan-tèng* is

pictures are bad. This is a middle-class restaurant, I suppose. The customers of this kind of restaurant will not like this kind of picture. These pictures are in bad taste.” Her comment clearly showed her awareness of social class differences in terms of taste. (We will further discuss the taste differences of different social classes in Chapter 4 “Social Class and Social Taste in Restaurants”.) In this sense, my informants seemed to have little conscious awareness of how much they are influenced by their understanding of social class differences. Through investigating the elements that help to construct the class image of restaurants and how customers respond to restaurants’ environments, I aim to unveil the influence of social classes on our usual practice, so that we may be able to free ourselves from some of this unawareness.

Social classes are largely established on the foundation of economic ability. Consumption patterns may thus be considered as a perfect starting point for us to investigate social class. Consumption is not merely an exchange of money-for-goods activity; as Douglas and Isherwood have stated: “goods are coded for communication” (1996: xxi). In the consuming process, certain patterns, including what to buy and how to buy, occur as a kind of language between people. These

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regarded as a typical working-class restaurant generally. There are difference kinds of *chàh-chàan-tèng* in Hong Kong. According to their setting or decoration, they can be put in different ranking but are all still in the working-class category.

patterns not only reveal our economic condition but also our identity in relation to others.

Finkelstein stated, “By dining out, individuals show a willingness to cultivate and transpose the act of eating into a more socially complex and meaningful activity” (1989: 2). Dining out is an activity which takes place in a public domain. When we dine out, we directly demonstrate our consumption pattern in front of others, while at the same time interacting with others. Dining out is thereby a social occasion. When we dine in a restaurant, we are linked with this social domain; “the interweaving of the personal with the practices of the social domain is characteristic of a bourgeois sensibility concerned with the presentation of self, the opinions of others and the appearance of wealth as a sign of being in control of the material world” (Finkelstein 1989: 3, quoting Featherstone 1982). So, dining out is no doubt a good starting point for the investigation of the presentation of class identity and social class formation as well as its construction.

While food is an important element in a restaurant, what people consume is indeed much more than food; they consume the atmosphere and the eating process as well. Hence, in the study of dining out, we need to examine food, but also factors beyond food in a restaurant’s setting, for example, how does the restaurant’s operator manage space, how does he or she create a certain atmosphere for the restaurant,

what and how food is served, as well as how customers behave within different dining atmospheres. This will enable us to understand how social-class identity is expressed and created in the consumption patterns of eating in restaurants.

### **Literature review**

In this review, I will first discuss food and restaurants and theories of social class; then I will discuss additional theories that I used in my analysis.

### **Food and Restaurants**

Food is a very often-discussed topic of anthropologists. Food, including its production and consumption, is linked with various aspects of a society, for example economics, culture, power distribution, social structure and gender relations can all be revealed in the study of food. To study what we eat can no doubt help us to have more understanding of our society. Yet, beyond food itself, where and how we eat in public venues in society can also show other aspects of our society and culture.

When we eat in restaurants, we usually eat with friends or family; at the same time, we eat with other customers in restaurants. Therefore, we are interacting with others, known or unknown, through sharing a similar dining experience. Some social and cultural elements are clearly involved in this interaction, creating a common language that most, if not all diners understand. That is why restaurants also gain

attention from scholars who are interested in studying food consumption as well as social classes. Let me briefly discuss some previous studies of both food and restaurants in order to provide a background for further discussion.

Eating, according to Mary Douglas, is something more than filling up one's stomach; it involves social interaction since we seldom eat alone. This is much more obvious when we eat out. She writes, "Like sex, the taking of food has a social component, as well as a biological one. Food categories therefore encode social events" (Douglas 1997: 36). She believes that food, like language, has its own "grammar" in terms of, for instance, the sequence of eating, the component of a meal and so on. By deciphering these codes, we can look into the social relations within a society. For example, in her article "Deciphering a Meal" (1997); she perceives meals and drink as two contrasting food categories according to the social meaning they bear. The meal, she argues, is regarded as something reserved for family, close friends and honored guests; whereas drinks, in contrast, are more likely for those who are less intimate; the meal, therefore, should be ranked higher than drinks in social terms. Her argument reminds us of the social role of food, which might provide us with a key for understanding the social and cultural background of a society. In Chapter 5, her argument about "the grammar of a meal" will be used to investigate the food order in restaurants, and therefore to understand how the correct

use of the grammar of a meal helps in legitimizing a restaurant's class status.

The work by Jack Goody entitled *Cooking, Cuisine and Class* deals with the emergence of "new cuisine" and class distinction in food by looking into the food systems of Africa, Asia and Europe. He argues that the political and social changes of a society are greatly linked to the change of cuisine. As he notes, "Food and sex must both be related to the central human process of production and reproduction ... The analysis of cooking has to be related to the distribution of power and authority in the economic sphere, that is, to the system of class or stratification and to its political ramifications" (Goody 1982: 37). Goody's study of "haute cuisine" directs our attention to how the production of food, including its ingredients, influences the social class of cuisine. As he argues, "For it [culinary differentiation] is linked to a particular kind of hierarchy, with distinct 'style of life', a hierarchy that is in turn based upon a certain type of agricultural system" (Goody 1982: 105). Therefore, food, on the one hand can reveal the hierarchy of a society, and on the other hand, helps to construct its class structure. He shares the idea of "food as a symbol" with Douglas; however, he proposes that the symbolic meaning of food in social relations is related to a society's economy, and the meaning of food shifted from the "meal" to the food itself as its ingredients are taken into account. In light of this, "exotic" food will be easily regarded as a "higher" cuisine, which may, thus, be used as a way to show

class status. His argument can fit Hong Kong's food consumption as well. As I have found in this research, consuming exotic cuisine as well as traditional cuisine can indicate a higher social-class status. The restaurants that offer these kinds of cuisines can thereby obtain a higher-class image. We will examine this in more detail in Chapter 5 – "Social Class and Food in Restaurants".

Another anthropologist, Sidney Mintz, has written, "Food and eating afford us a remarkable arena in which to watch how the human species invests a basic activity with social meaning – indeed, with so much meaning that the activity itself can almost be lost sight of" (1996: 7). Like Douglas and Goody, Mintz agrees that food bears symbolic meaning. He writes in his book *Sweetness and Power* (1986) that sugar to English people symbolized relaxation from busy life, which made both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat like it. This conveyed the complex idea that "one could become different by consuming differently" (Mintz 1986: 185). Due to the symbolic meaning that sugar bore, the proletariat was eager to imitate the bourgeoisie's dietary habits; thus the consumption of sugar shifted from the bourgeoisie to the proletariat. Indeed, rich and powerful were able to control the choice of the proletariat in consuming sugar since they were, to a certain extent, able to determine the price of sugar. Therefore, Mintz believes that the rise of the consumption of sugar in England in the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> century was indeed "an



artifact of intra-class struggles for profit” (Mintz 1986: 186).

Furthermore, he believes that the symbolic meaning of food can make it a marker of membership. In Mintz’s article “Food and Eating: Some Persisting Questions”, he writes, “social groups characteristically employ food to draw lines, confirm statuses, and separate those who do, and do not, belong” (2002: 26). This means that food not only bears a symbolic meaning but also a social meaning. Consumption of food, to Mintz, can thus also be a consumption of self-identity. Since this identity is related to economic power, it should be related to social class as well. In Chapter 5 “Social Class and Food in Restaurants”, we will investigate how the symbolic meaning of food helps to draw class boundaries.

Some scholars have been specifically interested in studying Hong Kong’s food consumption. Eric Kit-wai Ma discussed his research on the hierarchy of alcoholic drinks in Hong Kong. His chapter, “The Hierarchy of Drinks: Alcohol and Social Class in Hong Kong” in *Consuming Hong Kong* (2001) examines the alcohol-drinking habits of Hong Kong people as well as the advertisements of various kinds of alcohol in order to work out how alcohol consumption is related to social classes. The hierarchy of alcohol comes from people’s cultural imagination. People impose a cultural meaning on alcohol and reconfirm this meaning and position through consumption. Yet, they are at the same time confined by this

meaning in their consumption since they want to consume the social class image that the specific alcohol bore. This cultural imagination makes alcohol a symbol to signify a certain social class image in Hong Kong. Like Douglas, Goody and Mintz, Ma too is concerned with analyzing the symbolic meaning behind eating and drinking. His discussion concerning the linkage between food and social class in Hong Kong leads us to the discussion of how social-class identity is related to food consumption and how much we are confined by this identity in the consuming process.

Food itself bears certain meanings. When we consume food, we are consuming that meaning as well. Yet, how we take the food and where we take it can also influence the meaning of the whole consuming process. Dining out, thus, should be able to reveal another level of meaning in food consumption. Alan Warde and Lydia Martens have discussed in their book *Eating Out: Social Differentiation, Consumption and Pleasure* (2000) the consumption of food outside the home in England in the 1990s. Dining out they perceived, is a kind of entertainment for customers; at the same time, it is a way to express someone's taste and status. Since people mostly dine out with family and friends, restaurants provide an arena for strengthening social bonds: "the practice of eating out provides a context for sociability and the maintenance of social networks of close relationships" (Warde

and Martens 2000: 227).

Dining out, therefore, is an activity combining the fulfillment of biological needs and social interaction. In so doing, restaurants provide not only places for eating, but also a stage for us to perform a social role. Joanne Finkelstein argued in her book *Dining Out: A Sociology of Modern Manners* (1989) that diners are involved in the sociality of dining out. Through out the dinning process, as she believe, there is an intentional exchange between restaurateur and diners which create certain civility. The civility of dining out can be used to reinforce diners' status boundaries. Yet, diners are taken a relatively passive role in this exchange. The restaurant manages certain environment, through its decoration, atmosphere and service. This environment is always linked with certain kind of social prescription. This environment therefore restrains diners' behavior in the restaurant. For example, if a restaurant creates a middle-class ambience, diners are supposed to behave like a middle class in order to be fit in this particular circumstance. The staffs in restaurant also help to guide the diners to follow certain civility by giving suggestion, for instance, on what should be included in their meal. So, restaurants exercise certain power over our behavior. Under this pressure, while dining out, the diner might have to imitate others around him or her in order to fit into this particular social arena. Therefore, Finkelstein stated, "dining out, like other contemporary leisure activities,

demonstrates a strengthening of the consumer ethic and the importance of commodities in the mediation of interpersonal relations” (1989: 6).

On this foundation, Finkelstein further considers restaurants as institutions which can allow their customers to pick roles or postures that they may desire as long as they can follow the socially-accepted norms of the restaurant. In other words, by understanding the civility required in certain restaurant, diners can at least temporarily pretend to be someone they want to be without crossing social boundaries in any enduring sense. Finkelstein regarded this as one of the most striking features of dining out.

Finkelstein exposes the invisible control of restaurants over customers, and she seeks to explore how individuals are subordinated to the environment in restaurants. Yet, I do not fully agree with her argument. When customers dine out, I believe that the interaction between restaurants and the customers is more balanced than Finkelstein maintains. The decorations, service, and atmosphere of a restaurant are constructed based on a socially agreed pattern, which means that customers can definitely influence the pattern. Without this general agreement, it is not possible for a restaurant to exercise power over customers without perhaps losing them. Therefore, when we dine out, the interaction is two-sided; customers are not simply passively receiving the restaurant’s conception of social-class performance, but are

themselves helping to shape that performance. We will discuss the interaction of restaurants and their customers more deeply in Chapter 6 “Social Class and Behavior.”

### **Theories of Social Class**

In the analysis of social class, Karl Marx has played an essential role. Marx thinks that social class is so influential that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Marx and Engels 2001: 15). Social class, to Marx, can primarily be divided into two: the bourgeoisie, those who own the means of production, and the proletariat, who must sell their labor to the capital owners in order to survive. Karl Marx is a founder of social class discussion. He points out the essential linkage between social classes and production in capitalist society.

On the foundation of Karl Marx, Max Weber put forth a more subtle differentiation of social stratification: social class, social estates and social blocs. These three categories were formed due to the power distribution in society. We will further discuss these categories in the following chapter. Unlike Karl Marx, Weber think that the power differences do not necessarily lead to a contradiction between different social classes. Social stratification in his view involves various factors, including, for example, a person’s occupation, reputation and educational background. Social classes in his theory covers more aspects of individual’s life as

compared with Marx's theory. However, Weber's interpretation still stays in a largely objective rather than inter-subjective level. How social class, as a kind of identity, works in people's minds is still left out.

Pierre Bourdieu in his book *Distinction* (1984) describes how the distinctions of social classes include something other than only economic power or occupation; it also includes something internal —“taste”. Taste refers to someone's life-style and aesthetic disposition. Bourdieu believes that taste is indeed determined by those who are in power. Taste can indicate what social class we belong to, and in return, what social class we belong to can influence what taste we may have. Taste disposition is something one needs to learn, from both formal and informal education. Bourdieu did not directly define who was middle class or working class in his book; his study involves analyzing the abstract and subjective factors of “taste” in class distinction. We will see how restaurants demonstrate taste differences in Chapter 3 – “Social Class and Social Taste in Restaurants”.

Hong Kong's social-class formation has also drawn the attention of scholars such as Lu Dale, Wang Zhi-zheng and Zhang Bing-liang, all of whom have been studying Hong Kong's social-class structure for decades. Their studies focus mainly on the formation, construction and development of Hong Kong's middle class. For example, the book *Xianggang zhong chan jie ji chu jing guan cha* 香港中產階級處

境觀察(Hèung góng jùng cháan gài kǎp chyū gíng gun chaat; *The observation of Hong Kong middle class' situation*) by Lu Dale and Wang Zhi-zhang<sup>2</sup> (Lu and Wang 2003) provided the information about the middle class' present situation, including their orientation in society and their political intention, as well as the history of its rise and formation, based on changes of social structure and social mobility in Hong Kong. Zhang Bing-liang (Zhang 1998) discussed the definition of middle class and new middle class in Hong Kong in his article, “Xin zhong chan jie ji zai tan – shun hui ying Lü Dale xian sheng 新中產階級再探 – 順回應呂大樂先生” (Sàn jùng cháan gài kǎp joi taam – seuhn wùih yǐng Lui Tai-lok sīn sàng; *The re-exploration of the new middle class – in response to Mr. Lui Tai-lok*). He emphasize that it is important to study social classes through comprehensive analysis, and understand Hong Kong's production mode and social structure as a whole.

Along with the development of economic structure, some scholars also put forth some new classes formed in this particular circumstance. Yang Qi and Tang Ming (Yang and Tang 2002) discuss a newly risen class – the intellectual class in Hong Kong in their book, *Xianggang zhi li jie ji : yi ge qian tu wu xian de xin xing jie ji* 香港智力階級：一個前途無限的新興階級 (Hèung góng ji lihk gài kǎp: yǎt go

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<sup>2</sup> It is a bit odd to use the Mandarin pronunciation of these people's names, as I know their names in Cantonese. However, since this is how the CUHK library officially gives their names, I stick to the library system of address.

*chìhn tòuh mòuh haahn dīk sàh hǐng gài kǎp; Hong Kong intellectual class: a newly risen social class with a boundless future*). They remark that the intellectual class was not equal to the middle class, yet it is clearly related to the new middle class; we can interpret this as a kind of new middle class. Their study show how education is becoming more and more important in creating new middle class in Hong Kong, and this new middle class may challenge the influential position of the old rich in society. In their book, they also discuss the history, structure and political intention of Hong Kong's working class. Even though there are still arguments over the definition and formation of the middle class and the new middle class among scholars, their extensive studies of social classes provide us a key to understand social classes' structure in Hong Kong.

I have given a brief introduction of previous social classes studies. We will further discuss this in the following chapter – “ Social Class and Restaurants”.

### **Additional Theories**

In this thesis, I have also used some theories which are not directly related to social class, food and restaurants – theories concerning human behavior. In dealing with consumption habits in restaurants, we cannot avoid investigating human behavior. Through behavior, we express who we are and evaluate who others are. Behavior therefore is very much related to our identities. In restaurants, customers'



class identities can be shown and established by their manner. Many anthropologists and social scientists are interested in investigating the formation of human behavior and how it is related to ourselves as well as the circumstance we are in. Erving Goffman is one of those who try to interpret the nature of our behavior and why we follow certain rules of behavior.

In “Performances” a chapter in the book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman argues that every individual is carrying out a performance every day and every instant. In other words, we all have a “front stage” and a “back stage” while we interact with others. This front is institutionalized by “the abstract stereotyped expectations to which it gives rise” (Goffman 1959: 24). We choose to be someone we want to be, yet what we choose is not really under our control since we are playing a social role. What keeps us picking a certain front is our “face”. In an article “On Face-Work” in *Interaction Ritual*, Goffman stated that, “social face can be [one’s] most personal possession and the center of [one’s] security and pleasure, it is only on loan to [one] from society; it will be withdrawn unless he conducts himself in a way that is worthy of it” (Goffman 1967: 10). When we dine out, we are interacting with others in the same circumstance, and we therefore create a “front” to fit this circumstance. This face-saving activity is greatly influenced by our cultural surroundings, since what should be regarded as gaining face or losing face is in large

part determined by culture. Face-saving activity and performance is not confined to customers. As I found in my observations, restaurants, in the establishment and maintenance of their class image, participate in these practices as well. We will investigate how restaurants save their faces in Chapter 3 – “Social Class and Space in Restaurants” and how customers save their faces in Chapter 6 – “Social Class and Behavior in Restaurants”.

Speaking is the most essential behavior in expressing ourselves. Language use, therefore, is an important symbol to signify someone’s class identity. Robert Paine discusses message exchange in communication in his essay “Two Modes of Exchange and Mediation”. There are two roles in the exchange process: the “sender” and the “receiver”. In communication, a message is transferred from one to another and certain controls are imposed on the message by our culture and society. Different controls lead to two kinds of message: a “closed message”, caused by control that “may be directed toward uniformity and consensus” (Paine 1976: 73), and an “open message”, which “may be an arrangement to ensure that alternative interpretations of a message are not lost or hidden or subjugated” (Paine 1976: 73). What he is concerned with is that the power imposed on our message would confine our communication to a certain level. His argument helps me to interpret the different ways of speaking of customers in various restaurants. We will further discuss his

theory in Chapter 6, “Social Class and Behavior in Restaurants”.

By combining these different interpretations of human behavior, I attempt in this thesis to work out the formation of certain behavioral rules in restaurants and the motivation of customers to carry them out these rules.

### **Methodology**

This study has adopted two main methodologies: participant observation and in-depth interviews. The data collected from different methodologies can be confirmed or complemented by the other methodologies. By combining the above two methodologies, some blind spots can be avoided, and valuable data from both the restaurants and customers can be gathered. Before we discuss these methodologies, let me first discuss the field site of this research.

#### **East Tsim Sha Tsui as a Site for Research**

Participant observation was carried out in a city block in East Tsim Sha Tsui, an area within Mody Road, Science Museum Road and the Chatham Road South (Shown in Figure 1). I intensively collected the data of these restaurants from roughly April to November 2004. After this intensive observation period, I still often visited this area.



Figure 1: Map of a city block in East Tsim Sha Tsui. The field of my research is outlined in red. (Source from [www.centamap.com](http://www.centamap.com))

The city block in East Tsim Sha Tsui where I conducted my participant observation is thought to be a gathering place for both the middle class and the working class in my informants' opinions. Even though Tsim Sha Tsui is a tourist area, the people who visit this city block are predominantly local. This is a pedestrian area where large amount of people will pass by since it is very close to the Hung Hom KCR station.

The range of shops here is very large. There are some of the most expensive nightclubs in Hong Kong; at the same time, you can find ordinary shops selling cloths, snacks and goods. There are approximately 50 restaurants crowded together here, and the variety of restaurants is also very wide. First, the cuisines offered in this area are varied; you can find Japanese, Taiwanese, Chinese, French, American and Italian restaurants here. Also, the class range of restaurants is large. There are both

grand Chinese restaurants in five-star hotels and tatty tea restaurants on the street.

Table 1 shows the restaurants in this area.

Table 1: List of Restaurants<sup>3</sup>

|   |  |
|---|--|
| 紅樹林(Red Forest Café)                                  | 德興火鍋海鮮酒家 (Tack Hsin Restaurant)              |
| 輕鬆茶舍(Cozy Station)                                    | 仁氣迴轉居食屋 (Ninki Sushi)                        |
| 噹噹燒(Donchan no okonomiyaki)                           | 聚德軒 (Jade Terrace)                           |
| 沃川自家料理(Yokukawa Japanese Restaurant)                  | 豐明苑茶餐廳 (Fung Ming Yuen Restaurant)           |
| 公和豈品世家(Kung Wo Dou Bun Sai Ga)                        | 新豐明苑粉麵燒腊茶餐廳 ( New Fung Ming Yuen Restaurant) |
| 青樹日本料理 (Green Tree Japanese Restaruant)               | 合興米線茶餐廳 (Hap Hing Rice Noodle Restaruant)    |
| 豐明苑餅店茶餐廳(Fung Ming Yuen Cake Shop and Tea Restaurant) | 尖東快餐廳店 (Tsim Tong Fast Food Restaurant)      |
| 太興燒味餐廳 (Tai Hin Roasted Tea Restaruant)               | 忠惠快餐店 (Chung Wai Fast Food Restaurant)       |
| 百老滙茶餐廳 (Broadway Tea Restaurant)                      | 北京城京滙川名菜 (Beijing City Restaurant)           |
| 靚靚車仔麵(Leng Leng Che Chai Noodle)                      | 佳寧娜潮州酒樓 (Carrianna Chiu Chow Restaurant)     |
| 六益園茶餐廳( Luk Yik Yuen Restaurant)                      | Delifrance                                   |
| 源記茶餐廳 (Yuen Gei Restaurant)                           | 大家樂 (Café de Coral)                          |
| 杏花樓(Han Fa Lau)                                       | KFC  |
| 羽迴轉壽司(Ha-Ne Sushi)                                    | 美國洛城餐廳 (L.A. Brasserie)                      |
| 茶軒 (Odeon Taiwanese Café)                             | Café Allegro                                 |
| 金漢潮粵酒家 (Gold Hon Chiu Chau-Chinese Restaurant)        | 花園茶廊 (La Bagatelle)                          |
| Café de fountain                                      | 法國家鄉餐廳及酒坊 (Maman Wine Bar & Restaurant)      |
| Barista Café  | Sabatini                                     |
| 松板日本料理 (Matsuzaka Japanese Restaurant)                | 稻菊日本餐廳 (Inaqiku Japanese Restaruant)         |
| 四川樓 (Sze Chuen Restaurant)                            | 東來順 (Dong Lai Shun)                          |
| 滙軒麵家 (Shanghai Court Noodles)                         | 雅苑座 (The Greenery)                           |
| 元氣壽司 (Genki Sushi)                                    | 帝苑軒 (The Royal Garden Chinese Restaurant)    |

<sup>3</sup> During the intensive observation period, some of the above restaurants have closed down and the new ones have been set up. Indeed, when I visited the field site some time after this period, I found some more changes. Here, I can only provide the names of the restaurants that I saw during the intensive observation period.

|  |                   |
|--|-------------------|
| 潮州城 (City Chiu Chow Restaurant)        | 碧翠臺 (The Balcony) |
| 東海海鮮酒家 (East Ocean Seafood Restaurant) |                   |

As this area provides restaurants with different class backgrounds and cuisines, it is therefore a good place for me to investigate the dining habits of both the middle class and the working class in Hong Kong.

### **Participant Observation**

My intensive participant observation lasted for around eight months. I visited the field site on average two to three times a week and stayed for around three to four hours. It was a very essential way for me to investigate how people behaved in restaurants. I have done two kinds of participant observations: (1) personal participant observation and (2) participant observation with key informants.

In the personal participant observation, I sat in or out of restaurants and observed what kind of customers usually visited the restaurants, how the staff served the customers, how the customers behaved in the restaurant as well as the setting of restaurant, including the decoration, the music they played, the setting of the tableware and so on. Through observing the above areas, I obtained information about how the restaurants presented and constructed their image. At the same time, I was able to see how the customers and the restaurants work together to construct a certain social class image.

In the second kind of observation – participant observation with my

informants – I visited restaurants and dined with some of my informants. I experienced their whole eating process, including how they made choices of which restaurant to visit, what kinds of food they ate, how they ordered, and how they ate. This kind of observation helped me to obtain first-hand and in-depth information concerning customers' choices of response to the environments they were in.

### **Interviews**

I have casually discussed restaurants and their class image with many people about these restaurants, but conducted formal in-depth interviews with twenty-seven informants (see Table 2); many visited the field site with me from July of 2004 to February 2005. My informants' age-range is from sixteen to fifty-four, coming from various class backgrounds', they are those who visit both middle-class and working-class restaurants. In the interviews, I asked my informants about their perception of different social classes and restaurants. Questions included, for instance, how to identify different social classes in Hong Kong, what criteria a certain social class should have, how restaurants should be classified, and so on. I showed my informants pictures of restaurants, which included their façade and interior decoration, to see how they classified the restaurants in terms of its setting. I have also shown them the menus of restaurants aiming to investigate how they perceive the class of restaurants according to the food provided as well as the class image of

restaurants presented from menus. Since the ambience of a restaurant is also constructed by the music it broadcasts, I played them the music that the restaurants broadcasted and asked my informants to classify the social class of different restaurants according to the music. They did the classification according to the above data together with their general perception of restaurants. For those who visited the field site with me, we walked around in the field site first and ate in the restaurant they chose. During the process, they identified different restaurants we visited and explained their classification of the social-class image of restaurants to me.

Besides of interviewing diners, I have also conducted interviews with three architecture students, who provided me with information about the general rules of the interior design of restaurants, and three staff of restaurants, a waitress, a human resource assistant and a manager of a working-class Chinese restaurant, who helped me to understand restaurant's management.

Interviews were conducted to find out my informants' subjective opinions about restaurants and social class, which are essential to understand how class identity is established and how it influences their consumption patterns in restaurant. Since their opinions were generally quite consistent, I believe that their opinions can show a general picture of Hong Kong customers. As their comments were usually similar, I tend to summarize their opinions and give general comments in this thesis rather than



quoting their similar opinions repeatedly. When I talk about the social class of restaurants in Hong Kong, it is this judgment of my informants that I am using. The interviews of the staffs of restaurants and the architecture students allowed me to understand how restaurants perceived their own image and how they tried to construct their image through decoration and service.

Table 2: Information of informants

| Sex | Age | Educational background | Occupation                                  | Income             |
|-----|-----|------------------------|---|--------------------|
| M   | 54  | Master                 | Administrator                               | > \$40,001         |
| M   | 52  | F.5 Graduate           | Manager                                     | \$ 20,001~\$30,000 |
| M   | 50  | Primary School         | Watch Producer                              | \$ 10,000~\$20,000 |
| F   | 48  | F.5 Graduate           | Clark                                       | \$ 10,000~\$20,000 |
| F   | 46  | Primary School         | Housewife                                   | No income          |
| F   | 40  | F.5 Graduate           | Housewife                                   | No income          |
| F   | 30  | Master                 | Teaching Assistant                          | \$ 10,000~\$20,000 |
| M   | 25  | Degree                 | Technician                                  | <\$10,000          |
| M   | 25  | Master                 | Architecture Master<br>Student              | <\$10,000          |
| M   | 25  | Master                 | Architecture Master<br>Student              | <\$10,000          |
| M   | 25  | Master                 | Architecture Master<br>Student              | <\$10,000          |
| M   | 25  | F. 7 Graduate          | Manager of a<br>working-class<br>restaurant | \$ 20,001~\$30,000 |
| M   | 24  | Degree                 | Financial Planner                           | \$ 10,000~\$20,000 |
| M   | 24  | F.5                    | Office assistant                            | <\$10,000          |
| M   | 24  | Degree                 | Doctor                                      | \$ 10,000~\$20,000 |
| F   | 24  | Master                 | Teaching Assistant                          | \$ 10,000~\$20,000 |
| F   | 24  | Degree                 | Tutor                                       | <\$10,000          |
| F   | 23  | Degree                 | Nurse                                       | \$ 10,000~\$20,000 |
| M   | 23  | F.7                    | Policeman                                   | \$ 10,000~\$20,000 |
| F   | 23  | Degree                 | Human Resource                              | \$ 10,000~\$20,000 |

|   |    |                  |           |           |
|---|----|------------------|-----------|-----------|
|   |    |                  | Assistant |           |
| M | 21 | Diploma          | Clerk     | <\$10,000 |
| F | 20 | Degree           | Student   | <\$10,000 |
| M | 20 | Degree           | Student   | <\$10,000 |
| M | 20 | Degree           | Student   | <\$10,000 |
| F | 20 | High diploma     | Student   | No income |
| F | 20 | F.5 Graduate     | Waitress  | <\$10,000 |
| F | 16 | Secondary School | Student   | No income |

### **Additional Methods**

Aside from the two main methodologies, I also gained data from magazine and restaurant advertisements. The popular eating magazine in Hong Kong, the “Eat and Travel Weekly” (飲食男女)<sup>4</sup>, was my main source of information. The articles about restaurants in these magazines allowed me to have an understanding from mass media of how people classify restaurants’ class and how people’s expectations differ for different restaurants. The advertisements in the magazines together with the advertising leaflets and posters also provided me a clue of how restaurants classified themselves and what image they presented to customers.

### **The Structure of the Thesis**

This thesis is composed of seven chapters. In Chapter 1, the Introduction, I explain the aim of this research and state the significance of social class as well as its

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<sup>4</sup> This is ungrammatical in English, but this is the name the magazine gives itself in English.

relation to food. I also review the literature relevant to this research, and then the methodology used in this research is discussed.

In Chapter 2, “Social Class and Restaurants” I discuss the nature of social class from a theoretical perspective, hoping to provide a basic understanding of existing social class theories. Following this, I bring in both the existing discussions on social class construction in Hong Kong and also how my informants interpret social class formation. In these discussions, I seek to provide the background information for further discussion of social classes in Hong Kong. In the last part of this chapter, I describe how my informants classify restaurants in terms of social class.

In Chapter 3, “Social Class and Space in Restaurants”, I focus on investigating the location and the setting of restaurants. Both the outer and the inner space of a restaurant are influential in establishing its class image. The outer space is the location, including the view it has as well as its position and surroundings. The inner space refers to the setting of the kitchen and customers’ personal space in the restaurant. By studying the symbolic meaning of “a view”, the boundary-creating process both outside and inside a restaurant, as well as how a restaurant utilizes and allows personal space to customers, I examine how social class status can be revealed in the control of space, and how space can contribute in creating not just physical but also social class boundary.

In Chapter 4, “Social Class and Social Taste in Restaurants”, I look at taste differences between the middle class and the working class by studying the decorative elements in restaurants. I draw out three fundamental decorative elements from restaurants – lighting, pictures and music. The different combinations of lighting show the fundamental taste differences between the middle class and the working class. This taste difference is further developed to the aesthetic level in the pictures displayed and music played in restaurants. By studying how various restaurants manage these taste-related elements, I explore how restaurants reflect and create consciousness about taste differences among classes, and what exactly the differences are.

In Chapter 5, “Social Class and Food in Restaurants”, I put the emphasis on the food that restaurants offer. I discuss food on three levels: (1) cuisine, (2) food presentation and (3) food order. The relation between food and social class is intricate. Their connection starts from practical factors, like how much the food costs, to symbolic factors, for instance the way that the food is presented. In this chapter, I concentrate on investigating the symbolic meaning of foods to analyze the class boundary that food helps to draw.

In Chapter 6, “Social Class and Behavior in Restaurants”, the various behaviors of customers and staff in restaurants are looked at. In middle-class and working-class

restaurants, both customers and staff behave very differently. The rather obvious differences can be classified into two aspects: behavioral differences, including the speed of eating, smoking habits and table manners, and speaking differences, including speaking loudness, the way of addressing staff and the use of foul language. These behavioral differences are partly due to the restrictions of a restaurant. Yet the customers sometime actively choose to practice or not to practice certain kinds of behavior. This shows the existence of behavioral rules in different restaurants representing different social classes. In this chapter, I analyze various behaviors in restaurants to see what makes the behavioral rules work in restaurant and how behavior acts as a tool to differentiate the middle class and the working class in Hong Kong.

In my final chapter, I discuss the intention of restaurants to set up a particular class image and the customers' class flexibility. I also analyze how social-class identity in restaurants in Hong Kong is presented and constructed in cultural terms throughout each chapter of this thesis.

## **Chapter 2. Social Class and Restaurants**

To discuss the relationships between restaurants, class and consumption, we have to first understand the nature of social class. Indeed, the discussion of class stratification has been a popular research topic for both sociologists and anthropologists. As I have discussed earlier, Karl Marx, Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu are three of those scholars who have proclaimed essential ideas, which can be regarded as a foundation of social class discussion. In the first part of this chapter, we will further look at their theories in order to have some background for the coming discussion. Since every society, owing to its specific social structure and historical background, has a different kind of social class construction, in the second part of this chapter, we will discuss the nature of social classes in Hong Kong, according to scholars' perception as well as my informants' understanding. After discussing social classes, I will move on to the topic of restaurants in Hong Kong concerning how people classify restaurants and how clear and concrete is the social class boundary between restaurants.

### **What is Social Class?**

To Karl Marx, the different between bourgeoisie and proletariat is determined by "one's position in the prevailing mode of production" (McLellan 1971: 152); in

other words, it is determined by how much economic power they own. In Marx's perception, class is the basic component of a society and it is in fact a kind of social structure; hence, individuals in a society must belong to certain classes. As Marx writes, "the class... achieves an independent existence over against the individuals, so that the latter find their conditions of existence predestined, and hence have their position in life and their personal development assigned to them by their class, and become subsumed under it" (Marx 1971: 142). Marx focuses his study on the inequality of society caused by uneven distribution of production capital; thus, different classes in the society are antagonistic. Since social classes is determined by economic capacity, which is a relatively objective qualification, it is accordingly external to people. In Ollman's interpretation of Marx's perception of class, he emphasized that, "social classes are 'reified social relations' or 'the relations between men [that] have taken on an independent existence'" (Ritzer 1988: 64). However, his study cannot quite catch up with the social stratification today since capitalist development now is quite different than in Marx's time. More subtle differentiation among classes has appeared and the class structure has become more complicated.

Due to the development of capitalism, the division of labor in society has become more and more diversified. Social stratification thereby became intricate. Under this situation, Max Weber provides a more detailed differentiation of social

stratification. Weber believes that social stratification “concerned the social distribution of power, and this distribution of power involves the formation of social strata into structures of domination” (Scott: 1996:24). As I have mentioned earlier, he put forth three categories: social class, which refers to the people who are in the same class situation, a situation that is “the way in which the disposition over material property is distributed among a plurality of people, meeting competitively in the market for the purpose of exchange, [which] in itself creates specific life chances” (Weber 1999: 84); social estates, which means groups of people who share a status situation, which means “every typical component of the life of men that is determined by a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of honor” (Weber 1999: 88); and social bloc, which is related to the command situations that “are defined by the distribution of the powers of command within the state and other authoritarian organizations...” (Scott 1996: 41). These three categories are not independent of one another. We can understand them as different identities that someone can have in a society at different times; we can be identified in different categories in different situations. These categories are linked with each other to a certain extent. For example, social estate can be expressed through the demonstration of lifestyle, which means it is very much related to consumption. How much money someone has can affect his or her lifestyle more or less as economic ability will



confine someone's consumption area. Social class and social status are thus interrelated. On the other hand, when someone obtains a certain amount of wealth or has a high reputation, he or she may have certain influence on the society; in other words, he or she may be able to manipulate a certain degree of power in the society. In light of this, we can see that although someone's social class, social estate and social bloc are interrelated, this interrelation is not inevitable. Since consumption is a way to demonstrate people's lifestyle, it should not emphasize only the price of commodity, but also how to consume and what to consume. Thus, someone may have enough money to spend, but he or she does not necessarily obtain a middle-class or upper-class lifestyle as people generally recognized. Thus, "taste" in consumption will be one criterion to recognize someone's social class. This is indeed what Pierre Bourdieu argues in his theory of social class.

To Bourdieu, the intrinsic difference between classes (mainly bourgeoisie and proletariat) is the difference of taste. Taste, therefore, can help to indicate, at the same time, to consolidate, class status. He writes, "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier." (Bourdieu 1984: 6). Aesthetic disposition is one of the classifiers of taste differences; as Bourdieu writes, "art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences" (Bourdieu 1984: 7). There is a legitimate aesthetic disposition in class

distinction – the so-called “pure gaze,” which is “a historical invention linked to the emergence of an autonomous field of artistic production” (Bourdieu 1984: 3). The bourgeoisie is more likely to acquire this legitimized culture and knowledge because of their education. This is what Bourdieu calls cultural capital. Indeed, Bourdieu has brought forward four kinds of capital that contribute to the construction of different social classes. These are economic capital, cultural capital, which refers to the “primarily legitimate knowledge of one kind or another” (Jerkins 1992: 85), social capital, the “various kinds of valued relations with significant others” (Jerkins 1992: 85), and symbolic capital, which refers to someone’s “prestige and social honor” (Jerkins 1992: 85).

These four forms of capital are interrelated. For example, economic capital can to a certain extent influence people’s chances to have access to better education, which means cultural capital. Cultural capital helps to establish or demonstrate class identity, since common knowledge provides a common language to communicate with people who have similar class background. This, therefore, helps people in obtaining social capital. By demonstrating a proper social taste and lifestyle on the foundation of economic ability, symbolic capital can be gained as well. That is why Bourdieu argued that “Social class is not defined by a property...but by the structure of relations between all the pertinent properties which gives its specific value to each

of them and to the effects they exert on practices” (Bourdieu 1984:106). The bourgeoisie and proletariat are of course differentiated instantly from economy ability, yet the social taste difference shows that the class ethos is not that simple. It is also related to some ideological values which makes social class much more abstract and complicated than economic ability alone.

Both Karl Marx and Max Weber believe that social class is something external to people and therefore objective. Marx perceives class as something purely established on the foundation of economics. Weber’s classification takes power distribution and educational background into account, which make the structure of social class subtler. His three categories of social stratification widen the coverage of class from economic matters to other aspects as well, which make his definition more comprehensive. Weber’s social perspective on class is of course very essential. Yet, his objective perspective cannot fully explain the formation and construction of someone’s class identity, which is also something subjective and immanent. Thus, in this research I mainly take Pierre Bourdieu’s perception of social class as the foundation for my analysis.

### **Social Classes in Hong Kong**

Let us now discuss social class in Hong Kong. Yang and Tang stated, “the

formation of social class is based on the division of labor in society and the production mode which is linked with this division” (Yang and Tang 2002: 51)<sup>5</sup>. In other words, the transformation of the economic structure of a society will lead to the change of social-class structure. The present social-class structure in Hong Kong is influenced by the rapid population growth and the economic transformation during the past fifty years. Yang and Tang note that in Hong Kong, the growth of population was due to the immigration from Mainland China, caused by natural and man-made disasters, presumably from 1960 to 1980<sup>6</sup>. Those immigrants in that period were mainly those who had a lower education level. When British (*foreign*)-invested factories started their business, the new immigrants became the labor for these foreign capitalists. They can be regarded as the rudiment of Hong Kong’s working class (Yang and Tang 2002). However, working-class people are not confined to the same class status. They have chance to become middle class because of Hong Kong’s open class structure.

Hong Kong has experienced an economic transformation in recent decades: a relatively open class structure was therefore formed. According to Li (1998), there are five factors which have contributed in the formation of Hong Kong’s open class

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<sup>5</sup> “階級的形成植根於社會的勞動分工和與之相聯繫的生產方式” (Yang and Tang 2002: 51).

<sup>6</sup> There were three serious natural disasters around 1960. The man-made disasters include, the Great Leap Forward 大躍進 (1958-1960) and the Cultural Revolution 文化大革命 (1966-1976).

structure. First, there was the bureaucratization of both the public-owned and private-owned enterprises, which makes personal ability highly valued. Second, during the industrialization process, professional skill and knowledge were needed, since the production technology became more exact. Third, the result of public examinations became more and more important in the recruitment process of both the government and enterprises. Fourth, the free trade system provided an opportunity for the working class to gather wealth in order to start their businesses. Fifth, the capitalist market economy increased competition in the market, making ability count more than family background. (Li 1998: 39) Due to the economic transformation and the formation of an open class structure, some new occupations arose and the social class called the “new middle class” appeared.

According to Lu Dale, the new middle class in Hong Kong generally refers to those who shoulder the administrative, managerial and professional jobs. Due to their personal education level or professional qualifications, the middle class can obtain better working conditions, for example they have more opportunity to participate in the decision-making process, a higher autonomy in their work, higher income and so on. (Lu 2003: 4-5). An article from a web site entitled “The Hong Kong Middle Class Part I” has outlined some definitions for middle-class membership. This is, of course, not necessarily an accurate set of definitions, but it is interesting to consider the site

characteristic middle-class people as follow:

- (1) They must have a habit of saving, so that they will not have to rely on social welfare payments when they retire.
- (2) Their book collections at home must be about intellectually challenging political analysis, such as matters like the Basic Law or the future of Hong Kong SAR, as opposed to cuisine, health, beauty, or comic books.
- (3) They must be concerned about their children's education.
- (4) They must have "political consciousness".
- (5) They must have a hobby, although playing mahjong is not considered middle-class behavior.

(<http://www.zonaeuropa.com/01113.htm>)

As for the working class in Hong Kong, it seems that there is not much discussion about their class definition. This may be because the term "working class" clearly points to those who have no production capital, and therefore need to sell their wage-labor in order to make a living. As compared with the middle class, they have lesser income, lower skills and less autonomy in their work. Yang and Tang make a more subtle differentiation among members of the working class in accordance with their occupation and economic status. Their five categories are

productive working class, commercial working class, service working class, fisheries and agriculture working class and civil working class (Yang and Tang 2002: 97).

In my interviews, I asked my informants about what kinds of social class they perceived in Hong Kong, and their answers were quite consistent. My informants gave me terms like “upper class”, “royalty”, “middle class”, “working class,” “proletariat”, and “grassroots<sup>7</sup> class” to describe different social classes in Hong Kong. According to their interpretation of the above terms, some indeed describe the same thing. For example, the terms “upper class” and “royalty” are both pointing to magnates, like Li Ka-shing. Grassroots class, proletariat and working class are pretty much the same thing in terms of their explanations. Or more precisely, they can be classified into the same category – working class – but can be further differentiated into different levels according to the property they own. After generalizing their opinions, it seems that there are three main social classes in Hong Kong: the upper class, the middle class and the working class. Upper class is a class that is very hard to reach. There are only a few people able to reach this level. As compared with the upper class, middle class and working class occupy a large proportion of the population in Hong Kong society. They have considerable interaction with each other in daily life. Since most people in Hong Kong society

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<sup>7</sup> “Grassroots class” is a specific term in Hong Kong, which refer to that lowest working class.

belong to these two classes, the discussion of social class is thereby most frequently set forth around middle-class and working-class identities.

I have also asked my informants to identify their own class status. Most of them classified themselves as working-class people in terms of their income, occupation, education level and life style. There were only four of the informants claimed that they belonged to the middle class. Some of them admitted that their class status was a bit ambiguous. This is because, for instance, one of my informants, a fifty-two-year-old manager, might be able to consider as a middle class according to his relatively high income as he himself also admitted; yet, he could hardly identify himself as a middle class in terms of his education level and life style. Indeed, in my interviews, I found that the definition and the construction of social classes in Hong Kong are very complicated. This is because there are many factors that contribute to the construction of social classes, and these factors are interrelated. In the following paragraph, let us briefly analyze these factors.

### **Economy**

The book *Consuming Hong Kong* (2001) discusses the structure of social class in Hong Kong; it claims that Hong Kong's social classes are "based, quite nakedly, on money: the richer you are, the higher class you are" (Mathews and Lui 2003: 8). No doubt economic power is at the very heart of class stratification. In my interviews,



economic power was also the most fundamental factor to determine social classes to my informants, as this was always the first criterion that they mentioned.

Nevertheless, although all of my informants agreed that income was essential in social class distinction, their definition of “high” or “low” income was varied. For instance, one of my informants, a twenty-five-year-old technician, claimed that the monthly income of a middle-class person should be around Hong Kong \$10,000 to \$20,000. But another informant, a fifty-year-old administrator and a sixteen-year-old international school student said a middle-class person should earn around Hong Kong \$40,000 to \$100,000 per month. We can see that the different interpretations of what a middle-class person should earn was very large. With reference to the informants’ background information, this difference in view seemed to be caused by their different class backgrounds. Those informants who came from a working-class family and those who had just started working after graduation from school tended to set a much lower standard for salary to enter the middle class. In contrast, those who came from middle-class families and those who were still studying in university gave a higher income standard for middle-class people.

In addition, they also used one’s possessions to explain his or her class status. Some of them thought that the general standard for a middle-class person should be owning a car and property (有車有樓), but others did not agree. This divergence was

caused by their different interpretation of the symbols of middle-class membership. Owning a car and property has been considered as a marker of being middle class in Hong Kong for quite a long time. However, with the economic downturn, many middle-class people came to suffer from negative-equity property. Thus, owning property usually meant you might not have much money in hand. This confused my informants in their classification of social classes. The different standards of salary and the divergence on what possessions a middle-class person should own revealed how economic factors are essential in class distinction, while, at the same time, how hard it is to use economic factors to define class. In light of this, economic power can only be the base of social class construction; there needs to be something more in the class-identity-constructing process. This is what Lu Dale argues: “In class analysis, income is always only a result rather than a cause of the formation of a certain class position” (Lu 2003: 5).

### **Education and Occupation**

Aside from economic factors, another important factor that my informants have mentioned is education. Education, to all of my informants, is directly linked to one’s potential to acquire more economic power; higher education seems to be the threshold that someone has to pass in order to mount up to a higher class. As I have mentioned before, when I asked my informants about their class status, most of them

classified themselves as working class or even grassroots class, mostly according to their temporary economic situation. However, those who have received or were receiving higher education all thought that they would have a chance to become middle class when they tried to predict their class status in the future. This optimistic prediction was mainly based on their educational level, which they believed could qualify them to find a relatively higher salary job. Thus, education is thought to be a bridge leading to a higher class in Hong Kong.

Education is tightly linked to occupation. It is not surprising to find people linking certain occupations with the middle class or working class, since the salary of some kinds of occupation is always relatively higher or lower in Hong Kong. However, in my interviews, I discovered that the reason why people used occupation to justify someone's social class was not only related to how much money someone could earn, but also to the image that the occupation presented, especially in the media. For example, I asked one of my informants, a twenty-four-year-old financial planner about who he would consider as middle class. He immediately said, "Those in the 'File of Justice' (壹號皇庭) and the 'Healing Hands' (仁心仁術)". "File of Justice" and "Healing Hands" were two very popular dramas describing the lives of lawyers and doctors. He was not the only one who mentioned these two dramas when I asked my informants to give some example of those they classified as middle class.

As they pointed out, the daily life of lawyers and doctors as presented in the dramas was stylish and enjoyable, since they often visited bars or cafés after work or played tennis or golf in their leisure time. No matter if this is true or not, this so-called “middle-class lifestyle” has deeply influenced people’s perceptions toward what is “middle class”.

Similarly, people have a certain perception towards working-class people’s occupation. My informants usually cited the laborious jobs like street cleaner, factory worker and driver when I asked them who should be regarded as working class. Some of them also felt that the nature of those “working-class occupations” was something routinized and standardized. Therefore, they thought the working-class people might have a relatively restricted life and might not be able to “enjoy life”.

It is obvious that a certain class image has already been imposed on different occupations, and this image is influential in people’s interpretation of different social classes. According to the answers that my informants gave, it is not hard for us to deduce that the imposition of a class image on certain occupations generally comes from mass media since people can only have a glimpse at the life of another social class from the mass media most of the time.

### **Taste**

Aside from its linkage to economics, education also relates to another essential

factor of social class construction – taste. Taste basically means someone’s aesthetic ability, which can usually be trained in education, and this aesthetic sense can stretch from art work to other aspects of life, for example, clothing, furniture and so on.

Taste is a very complicated factor in class distinction. In my interviews, my informants all claimed that money was fundamental and essential in the distinction of social classes. At the same time, quite a number of them proclaimed that taste together with economic ability should also be a crucial factor in class stratification.

However, economic ability is not necessarily directly related to taste. Here is an example from one of my informants, a twenty-three-year-old nurse:

(How do you define middle class?) Owning a car, owning an apartment, having money to do spa, having high tea in hotel and earning around \$30,000 a month. (So, money is matter right?) Yes. (Then how about those mainland new rich people who visit Hong Kong? Will you classify them as middle class?) Oh, no. Middle class should be someone who knows how to enjoy life. Even if you have money, you have to know how to enjoy life. Not like those upstarts. (What do you mean enjoying life? Does that mean buying expensive things like gold watches?) No. Gold watches or that kind of thing is too vulgar in my opinion. Enjoying life is not blindly pursuing a luxurious life...it should be...it should be like me, for example, I don’t have much money but I will go to the place like this (a restaurant in a hotel) to enjoy life...I mean... a relaxing life.

In the interview, although she gave several factors which all related to money at the very beginning, it seemed that taste could outdo money in some of her evaluations. Another informant, a twenty-four-year-old financial planner, also claimed,

Not only money makes people middle class. The life quality, attitude, social

perception should all be included. Middle-class people should be those who know how to enjoy life...Middle class is the attitude of life.

To my informants, “enjoying life” means a certain kind of life style, which is usually related to one’s way of consumption. Since taste is something interior as well as exterior, as it has to be shown in order to know its existence, processions are spontaneously used to indicate class by demonstrating wealth and taste. So, taste justifies how and what should people consume. Obviously, to know how to consume “properly” is remarkably important in qualifying someone as middle class to my informants. The opinion of a twenty-year-old university student, about the image of a middle-class person, can shed some light on this situation:

I think middle-class people should have special taste. For example they will have a special way of travel, like visiting exotic and not touristy places. Just like my relatives, who are middle-class, will book a yacht to go to some remote island in Thailand, where not many tourists know how to go.

This expectation of “special taste” in traveling habits shows how taste is inseparable from consumption. Taste, as Bourdieu said, “functions as a sort of social orientation, a ‘sense of one’s place’, guiding the occupants of a given place in social space towards the social positions adjusted to their properties, and towards the practices or goods which befit the occupants of the position.” (Bourdieu 1984: 466). Taste, thus, can be something that holds people together, while at the same time, excluding people from certain social groups.

To sum up, since social class is an identity, both objective factors, for instance

wealth and occupation, and subjective factors, for example taste, as Bourdieu suggested, should also be taking account in the discussion of social-class formation. In my interviews, I found that my informants' perception of social classes was basically very close to Lu's definition, which concerns the nature of occupation and economic ability. Yet they also gave out some more abstract or subjective definitions which were pretty much like the five attributes quoted earlier on page 39 concerning middle-class taste and lifestyle. Hence, the definition and the structure of classes in Hong Kong are multi-layered, and therefore very complicated. It is like a tree that grows from the seed of economics but is shaped as well by other factors like education, taste, life style and so on. These factors are entangled with each other and cannot be understood superficially as they are not only related to some substantial elements but also related to the general social perception toward certain classes of people. In light of this, social class is not merely an objective fact alone. It is also an image, which can be linked with or separated from its objective components.

## **Restaurants**

### **How should restaurants be classified?**

There is considerable class mobility in visiting restaurants. It is perfectly ordinary for a middle-class person to visit a working-class restaurant, and it is less

usual but quite possible for a working-class person to go to a middle-class restaurant. Since it is possible for different classes of people dining in the same restaurant, we can thus investigate how different customers interact with different classes of restaurants when they dine out.

However, how to work out a restaurant's class is not an easy task. It seems to be very obvious that the class of a restaurant should be determined by how much it charges, in other words, the expensiveness of the restaurant. This is indeed my informants' general opinion when I asked them to give the criteria for differentiating restaurants. However, I could not find any consensus among my informants as to how much money should be regarded as cheap or expensive. A thirty-year-old teaching assistant claimed:

I think an upper-middle-class restaurant, like those in a hotel, should charge at least \$250 or maybe \$300 per person for dinner. A lower-middle-class restaurant will usually charge from around \$100 to \$200. I think those (restaurants) that charge below \$100 for dinner (per person) are quite cheap. They should be working-class restaurants I suppose.

Yet a twenty-five-year-old technician said:

A restaurant charge more than \$100 per person for dinner are upper-middle-class. The *chàh chàan tòng* and noodle shop are working-class restaurant. This kind of restaurants usually charges not more than \$40 per person. Those (restaurants) that charge between \$50 to around \$100 are lower middle class.

As we can see, there is a great gap between my informants' perceptions of the price restaurants. Their different economic backgrounds are no doubt the factors that



influence their interpretation of cheap and expensive. This makes setting a standard price for classifying restaurants almost impossible.

Some of my informants have mentioned that whether a restaurant has a service charge and whether customers are supposed to give a tip could indicate the class of restaurants. Based on observations and interviews, I found that working-class restaurants usually did not have any service charge. Without a service charge, customers were not supposed to give a tip to staff. Therefore, if a restaurant does not have a service charge, it is very likely that it will be a working-class restaurant.

However, according to my informants, service charge and tipping can only be used to differentiate the very low class restaurants from others. A twenty-three-year-old nurse said:

All *Chàh Lauh*<sup>8</sup> (茶樓) have service charges, but to me, they are not all high-class or middle-class restaurants. Some of them are only working-class, or maybe upper-working-class.

A fifty-year-old manager said:

The *chàh chàan tòng* or noodle house should not have a service charge. But some of the working-class restaurants will still have a 10% service charge. Sometimes, I do think it is not worth paying.

So, even if we can say that restaurants without service charge and not expecting tips are usually working-class, it does not mean that restaurants with service charges

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<sup>8</sup> Chah Lauh means “teahouse” literally. This is a Chinese restaurant which originally served tea and dim sum. Nowadays, most of them also serve meals in order to provide a wide variety of food. This kind of restaurant can also be call Jau Lau (酒樓) “wine house”.

and expecting tips are definitely middle-class. It is therefore not a sufficient standard to classify restaurants.

I discovered a problem of the “worthiness of restaurant” in my interviews. A nineteen-year-old student said:

It is not the problem of price (in classifying restaurants). A *chàh chàan têng* can set their price high. But, whether it is worth that price is the problem. If a restaurant charges a high price but is not really worth that price, how can it be classified as a high-class restaurant?

Whether a restaurant is worth its charge seems to be more important than how much it charges in its classification. When my informants talked about the classification of restaurants, they were more concerned about whether the restaurant cost more than it was worth. The question is this: what makes a restaurant worth or not worth its cost? The nineteen-year-old student continued:

A good restaurant should at least look high-class, and the environment should be good. The decoration and setting should be classy and should match. Good service is important too. You know, some of the waiters and waitresses in *chàh chàan têng* are so rude. Of course, the food should not be too bad.

Here we can see that the “worthiness” of a restaurant is related to the image that restaurants present from its setting, decoration, service, food or even its customers. The customers also have a presupposition of what images different classes of restaurants should present. They are in fact classifying restaurants based on their presuppositions.

### **Classification of Restaurants**

In accordance with both my observations and interviews, there is a general consistency among restaurants with similar class images in their setting, decoration, service, management and food presentation. For example, as compare with the working-class restaurants, the middle-class restaurants generally tend to provide more personal space for customers, to put more theme-matching decorative stuff in the restaurant and to broadcast classical or jazz music. The misuse of these elements of course does exist in some restaurants. However, this does not affect the consistency in the criteria of classifying restaurants. In my informants' opinions, misuse is fatal to the class image of a restaurant. Obviously, they have certain expectation on decoration, setting and service toward restaurants with certain class image. Even though some restaurants misused these elements, this indeed restates the importance of restaurants to understand their customers' expectations and to live up to these expectations in order to construct and maintain their class image. In other words, the consequence of misuse reconfirms the criteria of classifying restaurants.

In my informants' opinions, restaurants in their image presented, can be roughly divided into two main categories: middle-class restaurants and working-class restaurants. Each category can be further divided into upper and lower levels. My informants always considered the restaurants in hotels as upper-middle-class. *Chàh chàan tềng* and noodle houses were generally regarded as typical working-class

restaurants, neither upper nor lower.



A restaurant in a hotel



A noodle house



A *chàn chàn tòng*

As for the fast food chains like Café de Coral<sup>9</sup> and KFC<sup>10</sup>, they are more likely to be classified as working-class restaurants according to my informants. The reason why they tended to put these restaurants into the working-class category was due to

<sup>9</sup> Café de Coral is one of the largest Chinese fast food chains in Hong Kong.

<sup>10</sup> KFC is the largest fried chicken fast food restaurant in the world. It is popular in Hong Kong.

their popularity, their relatively low cost and their self-help style. Even though Café de Coral has tried to redecorate its restaurants in a much more stylish way, my informants still thought it made no difference in its classification. However, some fast food chains, for example, Delifrance<sup>11</sup>, are thought to be higher in class image. One of my informants, a fifty-year-old watch producer, classified it as restaurant between working-class and middle-class. He thought that the fast food chains like Delifrance are usually quite expensive as he thought they provide a relatively small quantity of food as compared with other fast food chains. A thirty-year-old teaching assistant also said:

This restaurant (Delifrance) is more high-class than Café de Coral, since foreigners, who are usually middle class in Hong Kong, love to visit this kind of restaurant...It is a fast food chain, after all, but the decoration is more stylish. It is hard to say, I think it is something in between the middle class and the working class.

The boundary between lower-middle-class and upper-working-class restaurants is blurred according to my interviews. My informants usually had difficulty in identifying the distinction between these two classes' restaurants, and classified quite a number of restaurants as in between these two classes. It is therefore impossible to find certain types of restaurant to indicate these two classes. Their differences are indeed slight; very subtle misuse of thing can influence their classification. For instance, a restaurant could be downgraded from lower middle class to upper

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<sup>11</sup> Delifrance is a French fast food restaurant which provides French bakery products and pasta.

working class by my informants just because it played music with someone singing (I will further discuss how music contributes to the classification of restaurant in Chapter 4). Yet, even the boundary is not very clear. In fact, the subtle criteria that my informants considered for differentiating these two classes of restaurants are crucial for us to have a closer look at factors, which sometime we may overlook, that play a role in social class distinction.

By studying how restaurants present themselves through their setting, decoration, service and food as well as how customers perceive and respond to the restaurants, I will in the following chapters link social class to different aspects of restaurants, including space management, taste, food and behavior. These relationships can help us to develop a new angle to understand social class in Hong Kong, as well as our own interaction with our social class identity in the dining-out experience.

## Limited

Quite a number of my informants claimed that the quality of a restaurant

### **Chapter 3. Social Class and Space in Restaurants**

Henri Lefebvre claimed, “(Social) space is a (social) product” (2002: 136).

What he meant is that while we are in a particular space, we have a certain kind of relationship with the space we are in. Of course, we cannot create or eliminate a physical space, but how we handle and perceive a space can provide it with different meanings. When we create the meaning for space, this meaning then influences us. This is why “the spatial practice of a society is revealed through the deciphering of its space” (Lefebvre 2002: 149). If space is a social product, then social relationships between people can be seen from the analysis of space management. Indeed, in my research, I discovered the interrelation between space and social class from a restaurant’s location and setting. In our interviews, my informants always mentioned space management in classifying restaurants. In their opinions, the space management of a restaurant is a crucial factor that influences the restaurant’s class image. Space can be a symbol to signify a certain social class; at the same time, it can function as a tool to reinforce class boundaries

#### **Location**

Quite a number of my informants claimed that the location of a restaurant was

important in its classification. Location here included two aspects: (1) the view that a restaurant had and, (2) the position and surroundings of a restaurant. Let us first examine the role that the view of a restaurant plays.

### **View**

Most of my informants claimed that the view of a restaurant should be taken account of in its class stratification. To them, a restaurant with a good view could always upgrade its class image. It might also make a restaurant more worth going to. When I examined the articles from newspapers and magazines that introduce restaurants, I found that they always mentioned the view of a restaurant as an important selling point. A middle-class restaurant with a bad view might be criticized.

A good view usually refers to a wide and unblocked view; therefore, restaurants at a height are more easily classified as middle-class or above just because of their location. A sea view (which is indeed a harbor view rather than a sea view in Hong Kong) is outstandingly good among different kinds of view, and therefore it is always regarded as a marker of “high class”. As a twenty-three-year-old policeman said:

A restaurant with a sea view or harbor view seems more high-class to me, like those at East Tsim Sha Tsui near the harbor. (Why?) Well... I don't know. They are always more expensive.

When I went to a restaurant in a hotel to have a high tea with my informant, a



twenty-four-year-old nurse, she complained that this restaurant was not “high-class” enough. Her criticism was this:

This is not good. Even if it is quite near the harbor, we cannot see the harbor (because there was a building which blocked the view). A sea view can definitely make a place more high-class. For example the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center is more high-class with its view.

Why is the view important? My informants seemed not really able to give any concrete explanation. But I think we can interpret this in terms of the symbolism of the view in Hong Kong. Hong Kong is a remarkably dense city and space is very limited. Buildings are usually located very closely to each other and therefore people’s general visual field is very much confined. In light of this, an unblocked view, especially a sea view, which is remarkably rare, becomes very much in demand. The scarcity makes the view a luxury, which means, generally, that only the middle or upper class will be able to afford it and bother to spend money on it. To be able to dine in a restaurant with such a view is indeed a demonstration of power – economic power, as well as social status, the power of being middle-class. This is why Cheng wrote, “the sea is a spectacular object here in Hong Kong. Everyone is striving for the privilege of ‘seeing the sea’ which is highly related to wealth and power” (Cheng 1998, cited by Cheng 2001: 227).

Since Hong Kong people’s physical space and visual space are both highly limited, an unblocked view, especially a sea view, which is so spacious, provides the

imagination of more space by “privatizing the exterior space” (Cheng 2001: 215).

Eating in a restaurant with such a view can help to create a sense of “relief from the crowd”, at least temporarily. This signifies a feeling of relaxation and leisure (Cheng 2001), which is usually said to be a characteristic of the middle class.

In my interviews, I had my informants characterize both middle-class and working-class lives as they envisioned them. Most of them claimed that middle-class people should have more free time in their daily life. Working-class people, instead, are very much confined by their working schedule. The difference of the working hours that the middle-class people and working-class people supposed to have is related to their general occupation difference. According to my informants, working-class people, for example the construction worker and security as they mentioned, usually participate in the jobs which have an inflexible and long working hours. They generally do not have much holiday as well. They, therefore, have little control of their working schedule. As for the middle-class people, since they are usually professional, for example, doctor, lawyer and university professor as my informants named, their working hours are thought to be relatively flexible and with more annual leaves. Since the middle-class people usually have more power on organizing their working schedule, they are therefore thought to be having a relaxing and leisured life style. This life style is in fact what people generally dream of.

Restaurants that aim to attract the middle class use a spacious view to construct a comfortable and relaxing environment, at the same time emphasize the “enjoyment” of eating. As a twenty-four-year-old financial planner said, “Sea view is a style and a kind of enjoyment”. This is why a restaurant with a good view, which helps to create the sense of relaxation and leisure, can symbolize being middle class. I will further discuss the relationships between controlling time and social class in Chapter 6.

### **Position and Surrounding**

Inside a restaurant, the view contributes to the construction of its class image; outside the restaurant, the surroundings also matter in its classification. For example, one of my informants, a twenty-three-year-old policeman, who visited the field site in East Tsim Sha Tsui with me, downgraded a Chinese restaurant just because there was a nightclub in the same building. In another mall, the influence of surroundings is even more obvious. There are a total of nine restaurants in this shopping mall; five of them are inside the mall and four of them are located outside. Two of those inside the mall are *chàh chàan tòng*, and the other three consist of two Chinese restaurants and one Japanese restaurant, which are regarded as middle-class. The mall is designed to let people see most of the shops, including the restaurants, clearly from the main elevator hall.

When I visited this mall with my informants and asked them whether they thought that having several restaurants in the same mall influenced their social-class image. Some of them said there was great influence, and others said that it only influenced them a bit. However, even those who thought the influence was minor also admitted that it was strange to see relatively high-class restaurants located in the same building with working-class restaurants. Two of my informants, a twenty-year-old waitress and a thirty-year-old research assistant, further claimed that not only the restaurants themselves affected each other's class image, but also the shopping mall itself was not matched with the middle-class restaurants, since the shops in the mall, for example the fashion shop and the beauty parlor, seemed rather old-fashioned, and not high-class enough.

The Japanese restaurant, which was located in the basement and had a semi-open design<sup>12</sup>, was most seriously influenced by its placement, according to my informants. Neither the surrounding restaurants nor the shopping mall itself had much influence on the other two Chinese restaurants, as compared with the Japanese restaurant. This is what a twenty-four-year-old financial planner said:

The Japanese restaurant downstairs, I thought it was quite high-class when we had lunch there. I thought it should be a middle-class restaurant, maybe lower middle class. But when I view it here (the main elevator hall), it looks not that high-class. It seems to be working class here, maybe upper working class.

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<sup>12</sup> The Japanese restaurant has a semi-open ceiling and is located at the bottom of the hollow part of the shopping mall, so that people can see part of the restaurant from above.

(Why?) I don't know, it just doesn't look good together with the other part of the mall. (How about those Chinese restaurants at the upper level? Have you ever eaten there?) Well, I can't really remember. But they look pretty high-class. I will say they are middle class, maybe lower middle class. (You have said that the Japanese restaurant does not look good in the mall, do you feel the same of these two restaurants?) Not really. (Why?) Em...I don't know, they just look better.

Indeed, most of informants who have visited the field site ranked these two restaurants into the lower middle class in spite of the *chàh chàan tòng* on the floor below. One explanation for this is that the two restaurants both belong to a large Chinese restaurant company, and their prices are therefore supposed to be higher. Nevertheless, this cannot totally explain why they can maintain their image more easily than the Japanese restaurant. According to the interviews, it is that the location of the two restaurants that most contributes to maintaining their class image.

The two Chinese restaurants, which are similar in style and class image, are located right next to each other and they take up the whole second floor of the shopping mall. That means that when people go up from either the elevator or the escalator to that level, they go only into these two restaurants with no other possibility. Also, the restaurants use black glass to enclose the part which is supposed to be seen from the main elevator hall. People can hardly see the inner part of the restaurants from the mall; people inside cannot see the mall either. This setting blocks these two restaurants from the other stores in the shopping mall; the influence

on class image from either the shopping mall or the other restaurants is thus relatively weak. Without a direct visual interaction, together with their domination of a whole floor, they seem to be separated from their surroundings. An “independent sphere” is thus created. Due to this independence, their middle-class image is established and preserved.

In contrast, the Japanese restaurant is not the only store on the ground floor. There are many other stores, for example a stationary store, right beside it. The influence from the other stores is thereby remarkably direct. The semi-open ceiling, in addition, increases the restaurant’s visual interaction with the shopping mall. This makes its class image even more fragile. When people examine it from the main entrance hall, they can see part of the restaurant and the other part of the shopping mall, including the *chàh chàan tòng*, at the same time. Since the Japanese restaurant is visually connected with the other stores, it can therefore hardly free itself from their influence. This was why my informant adjusted his appraisal of the restaurant when he observed it from outside

Of course, we cannot only use location to classify restaurants, as a restaurant with a good view is not always necessarily equal to “middle-class”, and the influence of the other restaurants or the building itself may not always be that large.

Nevertheless, here we can see a restaurant hardly separated from its surroundings in

its class classification. A restaurant's class image construction includes not only the restaurant itself, but also its interaction with the location it is in. Therefore, being either a middle-class or working-class restaurant can influence or be influenced by surrounding restaurants and other stores.

To maintain restaurants' class image, which is especially important to the middle-class restaurants, building up a boundary between "we" and "them" is essential. The most effective way to do so is to physically block the restaurant off from others in order to create a separate sphere. Aside from the example of the above two Chinese restaurants, two hotels in my field site can also shed some light on this issue. There are a total of ten upper-middle-class restaurants, as my informants classified them, inside these two hotels. Two lower working-class restaurants right next to them, outside the hotel, have not influenced their class position. Those restaurants' immunity is because of their location – the hotel's individuality, as my informants explained. A hotel, to my informants, is always regarded as a separate entity, with a middle- or upper- class image. The hotel itself sets up a middle-class sphere which blocks most of the influence of class image from outside. In the light of this, the restaurants in a hotel are largely safe from the destruction of class image by external infection.

In short, the relationship between the location of a restaurant and its class image

shows the interaction of both the interior and the exterior of restaurants. This circumstance can help to create a “social-class space” by providing symbols, for example the sea view, to indicate a certain class image or to draw a physical boundary between “here” and “there”, and thus “we” and “them”. This separation is especially important to middle-class restaurants in maintaining their image. Gupta and Ferguson have discussed the relationship between space and identity; they argued, “the identity of a place emerges by the intersection of its specific involvement in a system of hierarchically organized spaces with its cultural construction as a community or locality” (Gupta and Ferguson 2002: 67).

Restaurants, of course, cannot really establish a community; yet, a system of hierarchy in terms of space does exist. In space management, separation occurs not only outside the restaurant, but also inside the restaurant. In the following section, we will look into the setting of restaurants in order to see how space management takes place inside restaurants and how is it related to social class.

### **Setting**

The setting of a restaurant means a restaurant’s overall arrangement of its space, including the layout of the kitchen and dining area. During my observations, I found that the restaurants with similar social class image have some common features in



managing the space, which means that the restaurants are more or less aware of the importance of setting in constructing their class image. In fact, my informants showed great sensitivity to the space management of a restaurant since it was always one of the first points they brought forward to criticize restaurants. Let us examine the two foremost parts of space management in a restaurant – the kitchen and the dining area.

### **Kitchen**

Generally, there are three kinds of arrangement of kitchens in restaurants, I have observed, the hidden kitchen, the open kitchen and the semi-open kitchen. This different level of visibility of a kitchen, according to both the observations and interviews, can be viewed as one of the markers of restaurant's social-class image.

Ordinarily, the kitchen is something rather “back stage” which should be hidden from customer's sight since, for practical reasons, it always has different lighting and setting in contrast to the dining area of a restaurant. A nineteen-year-old university student said:

We can hardly see the kitchen in a high-class restaurant. It is not very good to see the kitchen. Only the low-class restaurants will let customers see their kitchen directly.

A twenty-year-old waitress from a middle-class Chinese restaurant, as she classified it, once mentioned:

We will not let the customers see the kitchen. We have a wall to block the dining

place from the kitchen. There is only a hole for delivering dishes. (Why?) The feeling is not good. It may influence how the customers feel about our restaurant.

It seems that, generally, the more visible a restaurant's kitchen is, the lower its class image will be. This is why middle-class restaurants usually adopt a hidden kitchen, a kitchen that is totally invisible to the customer, including the scene inside the kitchen as well as the kitchen lighting. For example, in one of the restaurant in a hotel in my field site, the kitchen is very well concealed. The waiters or waitresses need to get through a corridor before getting into the kitchen, and there is a door in the corridor which blocks the customer's sight. Because of this setting, customers have no way to have a glimpse at the "back stage".

In contrast, the open kitchen, a kitchen that can be clearly seen from outside and almost has no intention to hide itself from the customers, is usually adopted by working-class restaurants like *chàh chàan tòng* and noodle houses. In one noodle house in my field site, for example, the kitchen is separated from the dining area by glass; therefore, customers can clearly see the whole process of food preparation. Some of the food, like the cow stomachs, are hung up and are placed facing the front door. Also, the refrigerator in the kitchen is partly transparent, so that customers can see the raw material of cooking very clearly.

However, there are also some middle-class restaurants that deliberately make

part of their kitchen visible as a selling point to attract customers. This is what I call the semi-open kitchen. In one Japanese restaurant in my field site, there is a conveyer belt to circulate sushi. The conveyer belt encircles a sushi-making area where customers can see the process of making sushi. This sushi-making area is linked with another hidden kitchen where hot dishes are all prepared. There is a square delivery hole that links the two kitchens together. This kind of kitchen is different from the open kitchen as it is well designed to match the whole setting of the dining area<sup>13</sup>. In other words, the semi-open kitchen should not be regarded as a back stage. It is something not just practical but also decorative for the dining place. The opinion of a twenty-three-year-old human resource assistant of a hotel can shed some light on this issue. She said:

Our restaurant uses an open kitchen to attract customers. By doing this, customers can see the cooking process, for example, how the chefs make cake or grill food. They can enjoy seeing the cooking process and make sure the process is hygienic. However, we still have a back kitchen where all the raw material will be prepared. The customers will not see this part of the kitchen. (Why?) You know, as a kitchen, there is still something that is not very good for the customers to see. And the staff in the back kitchen are not well trained to deal with the customers...The staff in the open kitchen are all well trained.

As we can see here, the so-call “open kitchen” is indeed a semi-open one. The demonstration of the food preparation process can be regarded as a kind of

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<sup>13</sup> Of course we may argue that the sushi bar is something different from the general kitchen since it provides raw food. The setting up of a sushi bar may be to promote the freshness of the dish. Yet, the sushi bar is not the only semi-open kitchen we can find. Some of the middle-class restaurants do cook in front of their customers; for example, some Japanese restaurant will have a semi-open kitchen to demonstrate beef or other food frying, as a form of performance.

performance for customers. The staff of this part of the kitchen need to receive special training in order to fulfill the function of performing for customers as well as cooking.

The visibility of the kitchen in a restaurant is indeed the management of front stage and back stage; and this helps to create a “social-class space” for customers. Goffman proclaimed the idea that every individual is performing a role, and the front is “the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance” (Goffman 1959: 19). Here, restaurants are pretty much like an individual who plays a certain role, either middle class or working class. Its front stage is the dining area — its stage for “performance”. Its back stage, the kitchen, in contrast, seems to be the real self behind the mask.

A good performance of a restaurant, especially a middle-class restaurant, is not only a matter of food quality but includes also the stage setting. In a middle-class restaurant, customers are consuming food as well as “middle-class surroundings”. “The food quality matters in working-class restaurants,” a nineteen-year-old university student claimed, “but the middle- or higher-class restaurants depend not on the food but on the feeling.” “Feeling” to him, referred to both the setting and decoration of a restaurant, and he mentioned that a visible kitchen was very

destructive to this “feeling”. The strict separation of front stage and back stage in middle-class restaurants seeks to maintain the consistency and the integrity of the setting, and thereby creates a “middle-class space”. Goffman stated that “performance” refers to “all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers” (Goffman 1959: 19). The observers of a middle-class restaurant, the customers, are therefore convinced by the performance and the space created that they are middle class, at least at the moment they are dining in the restaurants.

A working-class restaurant, by contrast, is selling a need, filling up people’s stomachs, rather than an image. Therefore, such restaurants consider more the practical factors in managing their setting, for example how much space they can use rather than the customers’ pleasure. The open kitchen indicates that there is almost no boundary between front stage and back stage in working-class restaurants. In the working-class space, the customer’s visual enjoyment is not considered important; therefore, working-class restaurants do not mind letting customers to see the whole process of cooking and the storage of food, the real self of the restaurant, even though it may influence the customer’s appetite.

The difference between the construction of middle-class space and

working-class space is, in the first place, related to practical reasons; for example, a working-class restaurant may not be able to afford a very large space, so that they have no way to hide the kitchen. However, I also believe that the different placement of the kitchen is partly related to the very nature of these two social classes. The middle class, generally, is quite exclusive. It is exclusive because, first of all, people need to have more qualifications, including economic ability, education and cultural capital, to be members. Being positioned in a relatively high social rank, the middle class need to pay more attention on maintaining their social status and consolidating their identity. One of the ways to achieve this aim is to differentiate themselves from those who belong to a lower social status, in other words, to draw boundaries between “us” and “them”. In a restaurant, the kitchen is a rather working-class environment since it involves the preparation of raw material, which is considered to be an undesirable scene to see for the middle class during their dining process. The strict boundary between dining area and kitchen, front stage and back stage in a restaurant can be perceived as a reification of the social-class boundary.

In contrast, the working class is far less exclusive, as they have a relatively low social status which decreases their need to draw boundaries against others. Of course, they are also not actively able to draw boundaries against the others due to their lack of economic power. This is why working-class restaurants may draw no clear

boundary between front stage and back stage as, first, there is not much difference in the setting between dining area and kitchen, and second, their social status or identity does not require constructing and consolidating a separate space for the restaurant customers.

### **Personal Space**

Aside from the arrangement of the kitchen, the management of the dining area's space is a crucial marker of a restaurant's class. In my interviews, all of my informants agreed that the more crowded the tables and chairs in a restaurant, the lower class it is. When I showed pictures of restaurants to my informants, and asked them to give comments on restaurants, they also judged the restaurants' class by how spacious the dining areas were. "More space is better", one of my informants, a thirty-year-old teaching assistant who classified herself as middle class by her partner's economic condition and her own educational background, said, "It is easy to be overheard by the others if the tables are so close to each other. I don't feel comfortable to talk with my friend in such an environment, like a *chàh chàan têng*. I want more privacy." She is not the only one who mentioned "privacy" in the interviews. A twenty-four-year-old financial planner, said, "I think a middle-class restaurant should have VIP rooms because customers can avoid disturbance from outside...I emphasize the feeling of having personal space. The middle- or higher-

class restaurants will make you feel you are having a very large personal space...Middle-class people like more privacy.” In an article from “Eat and Travel Weekly”, the writer also gave credit to a restaurant which provided more private space to customers by offering a screen separating tables for four from other tables (Wong 2005: 14).

Restaurants’ awareness of maintaining the privacy of customers can also be seen as to whether they have customers share tables. In a working-class restaurant, sharing a table with another customers is very common; no effort is made to preserve or provide customers with a more personal environment. In fact, when you go into a working-class restaurant during the busy period, the staff will arrange an empty seat for you between customers without asking either you or the other customers’ preference. In order to allow as many customers as possible into the restaurant, the staff will plug customers in every single space; therefore, customers usually have just enough space to eat in, without any concern for not to mention privacy or personal space. When I went to one of the *chàh chàan tòng* in my field site, I was placed to sit with another three customers around a table and none of us knew each other. While I was taking notes about the restaurant, the customers around me could actually read what I was writing, and we kept hitting each other with our elbows when we were eating.



As for the middle-class restaurants, strangers sharing a table are totally unacceptable. Even if two people occupy a table for four, the staff will not even attempt to ask the customers whether they are willing to share it with another person. Furthermore, middle-class restaurants will provide more personal space to customers by setting tables apart through a curtain, a screen, or even a separate room.

The questions we need to ask here are this: why do the customers seem to need more privacy in middle-class restaurants than in working-class restaurants? What is the relationship between personal space and the construction of class image? First of all, when people go to a working-class restaurant, they generally aim only to fill up their stomach rapidly and cheaply. A twenty-three-year-old nurse said:

If a go to a *chàh chàan tòng* or noodle house, I always mean to get some take-away food. Sometime I may have a quick lunch. I never stay long.

A twenty-year-old diploma student also said:

I go to *chàh chàan tòng* to have quick meal usually. If I want to talk with friend I will choose another place. It seems not very suitable to stay in *chàh chàan tòng* for long.

They do not intend to stay long to chat with friends. This is also no extra consideration given in a working-class restaurant towards customers. This explains why they do not consider the customer's need for privacy. As some of my informants claimed, when people choose to go to middle-class restaurants, they usually look for a place where they can stay longer. More personal space is necessary for them to feel

more comfortable to talk and stay. In light of this, the management of personal space in a restaurant is related to the expectation of the function of a restaurant, for both the customers and the restaurant itself.

Space in restaurants can also help to indicate the customers' role in the restaurant. In working-class restaurants, customers are served as "one of the mass"; this is why their personal space or privacy is not that highly respected and they are thought of as sharing a common space with others. In middle-class restaurants, on the other hand, customers are regarded as individuals instead; therefore they deserve to obtain personal space when they dine. This sense of individuality seems important in creating a sense of what is middle-class.

Individuality can bring about a sense of importance among customers; which means customers can feel that they are more personally respected and served in a relatively private area. At the same time, customers own the space while they are dining in it; thus they can dominant temporarily that specific space in the restaurant, which can provide them with a sense of superiority. This enjoyment of personal space in food consumption can be a way for the middle class to distinguish themselves from those who are non-middle class. This individuality needs economic power to support it, because the restaurant is giving up the chance of getting more customers by offering customers more space; therefore customers usually need to

pay more for the space. Occupying more personal space in food consumption becomes a demonstration of power – the power of controlling space as well as the power of controlling wealth.

## **Conclusion**

Both the location and the setting of restaurants provide us with a clue to investigate how space contributes to the establishment of a certain class image. Space is indeed a product, which means it needs to be created, constructed and cultivated. Space thus bears symbolic meanings in this artificial process and thereby we have a spatial code to interpret it. By interpreting this code in different kinds of restaurants, we can see how social-class identity is, to a certain extent, established and demonstrated in spatial form.

By examining the location and setting of restaurants, I find that space and social class are linked in three aspects: (1) the demonstration of power, (2) the reflection of class expectation, and (3) the creation of boundaries. The demonstration of power can be seen from both the longing for a spacious view, and the occupying of personal space. As I have discussed, in Hong Kong, controlling space is very much linked with controlling wealth. That is why space, for example a sea view, can sometimes be used as a symbol to signify class status. Therefore space "...serves as a tool of

thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power...'(Lefebvre 2002: 137).

By decoding this symbol, we can see the requirement of space can also reflect a kind of class expectation. The feeling of spaciousness creates a sense of leisure and this is in fact a presupposition imposed on the so-called middle-class life. Here, the ability to control time is emphasized in class distinction and hence, controlling time together with controlling space creates a middle-class image. One thing we need to note here is that controlling time and space can only be said to be an expectation rather than a criterion, since the middle class is not necessarily "leisured" and the control of space can only be temporary, at least in restaurants. But these two factors are nevertheless important.

In the establishment of class identity, the opposition between "us" and "them" is very important. Space separation can be a way to reify this boundary by drawing out "here" and "there". Both the surroundings of the restaurant and the management of the kitchen can reveal this situation. A strict separation of space can help to maintain this identity, since a physical space can be transformed into a social space through people's imagination.

Why is this related to the imagination of people? This is because middle-class space is indeed a fantasy. Middle-class restaurants, especially upper-middle-class

restaurants, try to block everything that does not fit – the back stage – from their dining areas. Just like Disneyland, a middle-class space needs to be created, constructed and maintained by leaving out part of its reality, the less favorable areas that make up the back stage. It is a fantasy because we are consuming the experience that we think middle-class people should have, in polished surroundings. This is why it seems so delicate. As I have observed, some middle-class restaurants do not let those who work in the kitchen, including the chefs and the kitchen workers, go out directly into the dining area; instead they have to leave from the back door. Hence, the people who try to imagine that a certain kind of social-class space exists deliberately leave out the full reality of a restaurant. There is an interaction between the space and the people inside the space: people's expectation and requirements construct the space and the space shapes people, or provides people with an identity, at least temporarily. This is, as Lefebvre said, a spatial practice which can "ensure continuity and some degree of cohesion. In terms of social space, and of each member of a given society's relationship to that space, this cohesion implies a guaranteed level of competence and a specific level of performance" (2002: 139)

In short, space can be transformed from geographical or physical perception to social and symbolic understanding. By studying the location and setting of restaurants, we can see this transformation process. Bourdieu once wrote that "class

or class fraction is defined not only by its position in the relations of production... but also by ....a certain distribution in geographical space (which is never socially neutral) and by a whole set of subsidiary characteristics which may function, in the form of tacit requirements, as real principles of selection or exclusion without ever being formally stated” (Bourdieu 1984: 102). These “subsidiary characteristics” in a restaurant, which also contribute to the establishment of space, including the decoration, the music and so on, are connected with the cultural capital of social class – taste – as and we will discuss in the next chapter.

well as his or her way of living. As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, my informants have discussed taste while they talked about class. Taste, to them, seems to be an important criterion to differentiate the middle class and the working class. Generally, middle-class people were thought to be “sensitive”, “stylish” and “tasteful”. As for the working class, they were usually considered as “art” and “vulgar”, as perceived by my informants. For example, a 20-year-old university student has once said:

The middle class should know how to enjoy life. They should know what kind of wine. For example, they will insist on special kind of music. Not the pop music.

A fifty-four-year-old administrator also mentioned:

Middle-class people should be those who will consider the quality of the commodity while they consume.

## Chapter 4. Social Class and Social Taste in Restaurants

Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out the linkage between taste and social class.

“Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed” (Bourdieu 1984: 6). Taste here refers not to the taste of food, but to social taste – someone’s aesthetic disposition as well as his or her way of living. As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, my informants have discussed taste while they talked about class construction. Taste, to them, seems to be an important criterion to differentiate the middle class and the working class. Generally, middle-class people were thought to be “sensitive to art”, “stylish” and “tasteful”. As for the working class, they were usually “not interested in art” and “vulgar”, as perceived by my informants. For example, a ninety-year-old university student has once said:

The middle class should know how to enjoy life. They should have certain kind of taste. For example, they will interest in special kind of music. Not the pop music.

A fifty-four-year-old administrator also mentioned:

Middle-class people should be those who will consider the taste and the quality of the commodity while they consume.

My informants claimed that without proper taste, even if someone had money, he or she might not be able to be classified as middle class. Therefore, taste can be an indicator of social class status; at the same time, it is a factor to construct social class.

Taste is something abstract. Someone's taste needs to be shown through consumption. What we buy and how we consume thereby can reveal our taste as well as our class background. What the provider offers customers also shows their awareness of the taste differences among classes. In restaurants, I found that their décor, including the lighting they use, the pictures they hang and the music they play are greatly related to their perception of customers' taste, and this is very much linked to the class image they seek to construct. In this chapter, by examining the above aspects in restaurants, I will explore how social class and taste are affiliated, and consider what kind of taste the middle class or the working class has or is supposed to have.

### **Lighting**

Lighting is something easy to neglect when we are looking at the whole setting of restaurants; however, it is essential in presenting the image of a restaurant.

According to three of my informants, all of whom are architecture master's degree students in their early twenties, there are generally three kinds of lighting in interior



design: (1) There is task lighting, the light for work, requiring a certain level of brightness. People usually use fluorescent tubes as the main source of light for work. This kind of lighting is usually placed at the back stage in restaurants, for example the kitchen. (2) There is ambience lighting, the light that creates the overall brightness of the whole restaurant. This light is dispersed, and not necessarily as bright as the task lighting. (3) There is the feature lighting, for example spotlights, functioning mainly for decoration by creating different level of brightness. These three kinds of lighting are usually combined together in order to fulfill the function of both illumination and decoration. The different combinations and management of these three kinds of lighting, according to my informants, are usually obviously different in different kinds of restaurants. One of the architecture students said:

The interior designers (of restaurants) are always conscious of how to use the lighting to present the image of a restaurant. Feature lights are always used in high-ranking restaurants. The designers will carefully fix where the feature lights should be located, for example; spotlights will be used to emphasize certain special decorative items like vases or antiques. They mean to create a suitable ambience for a restaurant. It is not common to see working-class restaurants using feature lights like that.

The image of a restaurant referred to its class image most of the time. Their opinion was confirmed by my observations. I found that the difference between middle-class and working-class restaurants' lighting arrangements were mainly in the brightness adjustment and the lighting combination. As one of the architecture

students said:

The high-class restaurants usually use dimmer lighting to create a moody ambience. The lower-class restaurants usually prefer brighter lighting instead, which is more convenient for working.

In contrast, a twenty-five-year-old manager of a working-class Chinese restaurant, as he identified it, said:

We will not use spotlights like the middle-class restaurants do. We only need the light for illumination....We do not target customers who want a moody ambience.

Both middle-class restaurants and working-class restaurants use ambience lighting in their dining areas; however the working-class restaurants usually turn the ambience light up to a relatively high level as compared with middle-class restaurants. In working-class restaurants, the ambience lighting and task lighting may sometimes be mixed together because of the open kitchen. This is indeed very different from middle-class restaurants, where the task lighting, which is supposed to belong to the back stage, is well hidden. As for the feature lightings, they are widely used for decoration in middle-class restaurants, and these restaurants may carefully plan where the feature lighting should be located. In contrast, in working-class restaurants, feature lighting is not usually used.

These differences are quite essential in designating the class image of a restaurant according to my interviews. Twenty of my twenty-five informants mentioned lighting when they classified restaurants. Most of them claimed a softer,

dimmer lighting could create a more comfortable environment, and a middle-class restaurant was supposed to provide such an environment. For example, one of my informants, a twenty-year-old undergraduate student, said:

The lighting in a middle-class restaurant should not be that bright. (Why?) With bright light, it is not comfortable. The feeling is not good.

Lighting is for illumination; however, in a restaurant, it is also an essential way to build up a certain ambience. Of course, different kinds of restaurants may have different kinds of lighting or adopt certain kinds of lighting, for example generally a Chinese restaurant are brighter than a steak house. However, it seems that the idea that middle-class restaurants should not be too bright is generally accepted. Rooney's chapter "Making House into Home: Interior Design in Hong Kong Public Housing" has discussed the matter of lighting. She has mentioned that one of her informants regarded a mini-chandelier as an indicator of wealth (Rooney 2001: 72). Although I am not talking exactly about which kinds of lamps the restaurants are using, this article does show that people are more or less conscious about the symbolic meaning of different kinds of lighting. Indeed, I found that the different choices of lighting could, to a certain extent, reveal the fundamental taste difference between the middle class and the working class – the taste of luxury and the taste of necessity.

The taste of luxury is built on the foundation of a certain level of economic power; thus, generally, it is a taste that a middle class may have. Those who have this

taste tend to establish their social statuses as well as their class identities by distancing themselves from basic need. Consumption is definitely a way for them to demonstrate their taste as well as their social identities. These kinds of people are what Chan calls “consumerists”, who “project their identities in terms of individuality and style in consumption” (2000: 106). They are not satisfied with only the product they have brought, but also utilize the whole consuming process as a kind of “consumption ritual” (Douglas and Isherwood 1996: xxii).

Middle-class restaurants use softer ambience lighting and feature lighting, which mainly function for decoration rather than illumination; this is in fact a projection of the taste of luxury. This kind of lighting helps to construct a romantic and tasteful environment for their customers. This delicate environment is definitely not practical; in contrast, these kinds of displays may sometimes use a large amount of electricity. Nevertheless, it is important in providing a better consuming process for the customers by offering them the enjoyment of the ambience, an enjoyment that is other than food, which is a necessity.

The taste of necessity is mainly caused by the limitations of economic power; people with this taste take a relatively practical attitude in their consumption. As a result, this kind of taste is generally regarded as belonging to the working class. This is as what Bourdieu said, “Taste is... the choice of destiny, but a forced choice,

produced by conditions of existence which rule out all alternatives as mere daydreams and leave no choice but the taste for the necessary” (Bourdieu 1984: 178). Hence, the function of consumption as a way to show social status or class identity is not very consciously perceived by this kind of consumer; practical consideration always outdoes aesthetics.

Working-class restaurants are prone to turn the ambience lighting up because they do not bother to construct any specific ambience for customers, as they are aware that the customers they target are not those who look for a stylish and identity-establishing food consumption experience; and to have a brighter ambience lighting is undoubtedly more convenient for the staff to work in. The use of lighting in working-class restaurants undoubtedly reveals the taste of necessity.

Of course, it is not necessary that the middle class must be a snobbish dreamer and working class, instead, must be the realistic. In fact, the middle class can also be pragmatic, and may be aware of the taste of luxury but not prefer this consumption pattern. Nevertheless, by investigating the lighting in different kinds of restaurants, we can see that there is undoubtedly a general perception of the taste of different classes – the taste of luxury of the middle class and the taste of necessity of the working class. The restaurants do have a certain level of awareness of their class image; furthermore, they understand that the use of lighting is definitely a way to

construct this image. Although in the interviews my informants seemed not very conscious about the revelation of different taste behind the different use of lighting, they were very sensitive toward lighting differences and further, considered it as a factor in defining the image of restaurants as either middle class or working class.

### **Pictures**

The taste of luxury and the taste of necessity are the root of the taste difference between the middle class and the working class. However, this is not the only divergence of taste between these two classes. Their taste difference further develops in another area – the aesthetic disposition.

Restaurants, whether middle-class or working-class, will probably have some decorations; paintings or photos are one of the most popular forms of decoration. Decoration is assuredly the most direct way for restaurants to present their image. What pictures the restaurants pick and how customers judge the pictures they hang can definitely manifest the aesthetic disposition of both the middle-class and the working-class restaurants.

According to my observations, both middle-class and working-class restaurants may use either paintings or photograph for decoration. Usually, middle-class restaurants are more likely to hang up paintings, for instance landscapes, rather than

photographs. However, in working-class restaurants, both paintings and photographs can often be seen. For pictures, there seems to be not much consensus on what they depict, whereas if a working-class restaurant hangs up photos, there will be a great chance that it will hang up photos of food.



Painting found in a hotel's restaurant



Photo found in a *chàh chàan tòng*

In accordance with my informants' views, it seemed that a painting is usually regarded as more aesthetic than a photograph; some claimed that painting was more suitable for middle-class restaurants. However, when we went deeper in this question, I found that the content or style of the picture was the factor which most mattered in influencing the class image of a restaurant. As a thirty-year-old teaching assistant claimed:

If a restaurant hangs up a photo of food, it is really bad. It is totally a lack of aesthetics. The whole restaurant will be downgraded. Even if it is a painting of food, it is not very good either. I think the pictures in a restaurant should be a decoration rather than a promotion of food.

Another informant, a twenty-four-year-old nurse also said:

The paintings in a middle-class restaurant should be artistic. Photographs are hard to say. It depends on what kinds of photographs they hang. But a food

picture is definitely not good.

Here, their justification and criticism of the pictures reveals some of the different aesthetic dispositions of the middle class and the working class.

In the appreciation of art, Bourdieu believed that the taste difference between the working class and the middle class was very much related to people's educational level, as art appreciation was something they needed to learn through schooling. Since the working class is usually confined in its cultural capital, they may face difficulty in understanding artistic work, which is often abstract. Therefore, in Bourdieu's analysis, he found that the working class's aesthetic disposition was prone to be functional. He writes, "Working-class people, expect every image to fulfill a function" (Bourdieu 1984: 41). This explains why the working-class restaurants may display a photograph of food, which is straightforward and understandable, rather than a painting of a landscape or some other aesthetic feature.

The functional aesthetic disposition can also be viewed as an extension of the taste of necessity. Based on my observations, I found that the food pictures in restaurants were always related to the food they offer. For example, in a *chàh chàan t'èng*, they would have photos of Coca Cola, hamburgers or French fries. Hence, hanging up either a photograph or painting of food in working-class restaurants is not merely aiming at decoration, but also intending to promote the food. This practical



consideration in decoration is obviously a manifestation of the taste of necessity.

As for the middle class, art to them is different. Art is "... the product of an artistic intention which asserts the absolute primacy of form over function, of the mode of representation over the object represented, categorically demands a purely aesthetic disposition..." (Bourdieu 1984: 30). In short, the middle class is looking for an artistic feeling rather than function in art appreciation. The different attitude towards art of the middle class is based on the foundation of the taste of luxury, which aims to distinguish them from the necessity. Functional pictures are therefore unacceptable in a middle-class environment. Middle-class restaurants, which target the middle class as their main source of customers, do have a presupposition of their customers' taste of art and an expectation of their ability to appreciate art. Therefore, they will pick landscapes or abstract paintings for decoration in order to fit the customers' cultural consumption habits.

By studying the pictures hanging in restaurants, we can have a glimpse at the expectation of aesthetic disposition in visual art of different social classes. Of course not all restaurants will hang up pictures for decoration; I have not seen any pictures in lower-working-class restaurants. Yet, this further shows that the lower the orientation of class a restaurant is, the more weight that practical factors will take. Eventually, practicality will totally take over aesthetics; thus no decoration at all will

be considered.

## **Music**

It is very common to find restaurants, including both middle-class ones and working-class ones, playing music in their dining areas. The music they play is various, however, according to my observations, they seem to have a certain underlying pattern in choosing songs. For instance, I never heard any Cantonese pop, even instrumental music, in hotel restaurant, and I could not find classical music in any fast food chain. This shows that the choice of songs in a restaurant is not merely a personal preference or a random choice.

The music that restaurants play, with reference to my interviews, is one of the components of the restaurants' image-constructing process. For instance, one of my informants, a nineteen-year-old undergraduate student, claimed that a restaurant with background music playing in the dining area made him "feel better", and the music they played should "fit the restaurant's style". Another informant, a twenty-year-old, high-diploma student said:

(A restaurant) with music is better than without music. Different s of restaurant should play different kinds of music, for instance a high-class, stylish restaurant should play classical, jazz or instrumental music; and fast food restaurants should play pop music.

The "style" of restaurant here is partly related to the cuisine that the restaurant

provides, for example, a Japanese restaurant may play Japanese songs; yet, the “style” of restaurants points to its class image most of the time.

In order to know what kind of image the music presents, I have recorded seven songs that various restaurants played in their dining areas, including: “Adagio Moonlight Sonata” of Beethoven; “What a Wonderful World” sung by Louis Armstrong; “I Believe”, a Korean pop song; “The Beach (沙灘)”, a Mandarin song of David Tao; “Me Against the Music” sung by Britney Spears; “The No. Sixteen Lover (十六號愛人)”; a Cantonese Pop sing by Joey Yung; and the instrumental music of “A Boy in a Girl’s School (女校男生)”, which was originally sang by Twins, a popular girl’s group in Hong Kong.

I asked my informants to rank the songs based on the class image that the songs presented to them and tell me what kinds of restaurants that they thought they should belong to. The results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 3: Ranking of Songs

| Songs                                       | High Class $\longrightarrow$ Low Class |        |        |        |        |        |        | Final Rank |
|---|--|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|------------|
|   | Rank 1                                 | Rank 2 | Rank 3 | Rank 4 | Rank 5 | Rank 6 | Rank 7 |            |
| Adagio Moonlight sonata                     | 18                                     | 4      | 3      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 1          |
| What a wonderful world                      | 4                                      | 21     | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0      | 2          |
| The Beach                                   | 0                                      | 0      | 15     | 7      | 3      | 0      | 0      | 3          |
| I Believe                                   | 0                                      | 1      | 6      | 14     | 3      | 1      | 0      | 4          |
| A Boy in a Girl School (Instrumental music) | 0                                      | 0      | 0      | 3      | 12     | 5      | 5      | 5          |
| Me Against the music                        | 0                                      | 0      | 3      | 2      | 4      | 10     | 6      | 6          |

|                       |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |   |
|-----------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|---|
| The No. Sixteen Lover | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 5 | 7 | 11 | 7 |
|-----------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|---|

Bourdieu has mentioned that music was an indicator of different aesthetic dispositions of the middle class and the working class. He has done research on the distribution of preferences of musical work and identified three zones of taste: (1) legitimate taste, (2) middle-brow taste and (3) popular taste (Bourdieu 1984: 16). These three zones of taste were highly related to the educational level of people, so they linked with people's social-class background more or less. His analysis can fit my findings here.

First, "Adagio Moonlight Sonata" of Beethoven has been quite consistently ranked at the top of all the songs and thus it should be played in the upper-middle or higher-class restaurants. The reasons that my informants gave for this ranking were simple: it is classical music. Why does classical music always rank high in the appreciation of music? My informants could not really explain it. A twenty-year-old waitress said, "The feeling of classical music is just higher." A twenty-five-year-old technician claimed, "When you hear classical music in a restaurant, you'll naturally feel that it is higher". Classical music presents a relatively higher-class impression to all of my informants, and it seems that there is no argument about that. We can interpret this image presentation in terms of the relationship between musical taste

and educational level.

Classical music belongs to the legitimate taste zone, which “ the most self-assured aesthetes can combine with the most legitimate of the arts that are still in the process of legitimation...[it] increases with educational level and is highest in those fractions of the dominant class that are richest in educational capital”

(Bourdieu 1984: 16). “Legitimate” here indicates an inarguable image that classical music presents; and the knowledge required for understanding or appreciating this kind of music is the root of this legitimacy. Classical music is not easy to gain access to. Furthermore, this kind of musical knowledge is usually cultivated by money in Hong Kong, since people usually obtain this knowledge from learning instruments or taking music lessons. A “high-class” image is thus established. This explains why my informants thought classical music should belong to the upper-middle or higher-class restaurants.

“What a wonderful world” of Louis Armstrong is mostly ranked right after “Adagio Moonlight Sonata”, and is supposed to be played, according to my informants, in both upper-middle or lower-middle class restaurants. As compared to classical music, this song should belong to middlebrow taste, which “brings together the minor works of the major arts [and] ...is more common in the middle classes than in the working classes or in the ‘intellectual’ fractions of the dominant class”

(Bourdieu 1984: 16). This is because, on the one hand it is much easier to understand with lyrics, in other words, is more accessible. On the other hand, as a kind of jazz music, it demonstrates a rather stylish and high-class image to people, as people do need more musical knowledge to know how to appreciate it as compared with pop music. One of my informants, a twenty-year-old high diploma student said, “ ‘What a wonderful world’ is quite soft (the music). It is very stylish, so it can make the feeling of a restaurant better.” Another informant, a sixteen-year-old student from an international school also professed, “The image of classical music and jazz music should be higher than the others.” Thus, my informants matched it with middle-class restaurants.

The other five songs can be classified as pop music and therefore all are regarded as a kind of popular taste, which is “most frequent among the working classes and varies in inverse ratio to educational capital” (Bourdieu 1984: 16). In my interviews, I found that pop music generally presented a relatively lower class image to my informants. For example, a fifty-year-old manager said, “The feeling and style of the very popular music is lower.” Therefore, pop music is supposed to be broadcast in working-class restaurants, like in fast food chain stores. This happens because pop music is very easy to understand in both the music pattern and the lyrics; not much knowledge is needed to listen to this kind of music. Also, since both the

songs and the singers are so popular, people can hear them almost everywhere on the street. As it is so easy to access them and can be shared by everyone, it has become something “vulgar”, and its image is therefore downgraded. Put in another way, its popularity is devalued in class distinction. This explains why a Cantonese pop a Cantonese pop – “A Boy in a Girl’s School (女校男生)” cannot be put at a high rank even though it is an instrumental music.

Bourdieu has noted that, in the French case, “it is the middle classes who find in song... an opportunity to manifest their artistic pretension by refusing the favorite singers of the working classes” (Bourdieu 1984: 60). This also happen in Hong Kong. I have heard a fifty-four-year-old administrator said, “Those popular singers are rubbish! They know nothing about music. I don’t know why the youth like them.” I cannot judge whether or not this is an artistic pretension, yet, in my general observation, I found that middle-class people, especially middle-age ones, tend to link popular music with youth culture, and youth culture usually means “bad taste” to them. This is not only an issue of “generation gap”, since I found that the middle-aged-working-class people’s rejection of pop music seemed not as fierce as those middle-aged, middle-class people’s rejection. For instance, the middle class may criticize the lyrics of pop music as “cultureless” and “incomprehensible”, but the working class usually criticizes the singing skill of the singers rather than the

song itself. It may be because middle-class people are more prone to establish their class identity by drawing a boundary against pop music in order to show their musical taste differences as Bourdieu said. I am not saying that this is a “must” attitude toward pop music between middle class and working class, but this is indeed a revelation of the difference of educational background; at the same time, it explains why pop music is always ranking low and therefore matches with working-class restaurants.

Among those five pop songs, there are still different rankings. The Taiwanese song “The Beach” and the Korean song “I Believe” are ranked high in the pop song category. This is, according to my informants, partly because these two songs’ melody is relatively softer than the others. However, why is “Me Against the Music” of Britney Spears usually ranked higher than “No. 16 Lover” of Joey Yung, which is comparatively softer in musical pattern? The financial planner claimed that he did his ranking because of “exotic admiration”. The English-language song presented him with a higher-class image. Some of my informants also directly claimed that playing English songs in restaurant was better than playing Chinese songs, in terms of creating a higher-class image.

The reason why English songs seem to be more high-class than Chinese songs is also due to the problem of accessibility. English, as a foreign language, makes a song



more inaccessible. Those who like to listen to English song are supposed to be those who can understand the English lyrics. In Hong Kong, understanding English is a very valuable capital. Even if English is already the very widespread second language of Hong Kong people, being able to use good English can still be an indicator of class identity because it manifests a certain level of education, which is so much related to social class. The high value imposed on English also projects onto music appreciation. That is why the English popular music is thought to be more high-class than the Cantonese popular music.

In short, the accessibility of music defines its class image. The more inaccessible it is, higher class it will be. The accessibility is generally based on education, or we can say that it is a cultural capital. What kind of music you like or what kind of music you are able to appreciate is a demonstration of taste as well as class identity. The ranking of the songs here is of course not necessarily equal to the value of the music itself, but related to the social meaning – the taste indication – behind it. Restaurants are well aware of this social meaning of music; this is why they play different kinds of music in the dining area in order to help to construct a certain social-class image.

## Menus

Language is always a boundary. Being able to understand and speak certain language is always a primary indicator of someone's social identity: "for a man to speak one language rather than another is a ritual act, it is a statement about one's personal status; to speak the same language as one's neighbors expresses solidarity with those neighbors, to speak a different language from one's neighbors expresses social distance or even hostility"(Leach 1954: 49, cited by Salzman 1993: 173). Social identity, of course, should include class identity. By studying the language that restaurants used in their menu, I found that restaurants might use language to establish boundaries, which could help to block out customers that they might not prefer. At the same time, by establishing boundaries, the restaurant's class image could be further consolidated.

Based on my observations, there are six kinds of language combination in different restaurants' menus, including (1) Traditional Chinese only; (2) Traditional Chinese plus English; (3) Traditional Chinese, simplified Chinese and English; (4) English only; (5) English plus other foreign languages, for example Japanese or Italian, according to the cuisine that the restaurant provided; (6) English, other foreign language and traditional Chinese. I have asked my informants to match these six kinds of menus with different classes of restaurant. According to their

classification, the restaurants that use the menu with English only or the menus with both English and other foreign languages are definitely middle- or higher- class restaurants. The menu using both traditional Chinese and English, the menu using traditional Chinese, simplified Chinese and English and the menu with English, other foreign language and traditional Chinese all belong to the lower-middle-class or upper-working-class restaurants; and menu with traditional Chinese only belongs to working-class restaurants. From this classification, I found that the menus with English were more likely to be ranked higher as compared with the menu with only Chinese.

Since Hong Kong is an international city and tourist area, as well as a former colony of Great Britain, using English in the menu is of course very normal. A twenty-year-old university student said, "It is quite normal to see English on menus in Hong Kong. There are a lot of tourists visiting Hong Kong. A restaurant using English to write the menu does not necessarily mean that it is higher class." A sixteen-year-old international school student even said that, "I think it is discriminating to say that a restaurant using English in their menus is higher class." Thus, even though menus with English are usually classified as belonging to middle- or higher-class restaurants; this should not be regarded as a definite indicator of restaurants' class image.

However, even if menus with English cannot definitely indicate a high-class image, menus that use only English and English with other foreign language can indeed be used to create class boundaries in consumption. In my informants' classification, menus that use only English or English with other foreign languages were consistently classified as belonging to the restaurants with the highest class image. A twenty-three year-old nurse told me:

A menu with English only or English with other foreign language of course will make a difference (in restaurant's classification). It obviously blocks someone who doesn't know English out of the restaurant. It (the restaurant) is higher (in class image).

The absence of Chinese in the menu is no doubt an obstacle for the working class to visit this kind of restaurant, since they may have difficulty in ordering due to their relatively low educational level. Thus, the lack of cultural capital hinders working-class people to enter the middle-class-consuming world. In this sense, even if the upper-middle-class restaurants will not reject working-class customers from coming in, they may be able to select customer by using menus, without Chinese. By blocking the working-class customers from consuming in a middle-class restaurant, it can prevent the possible damage to class image caused by these kinds of customers, since they are generally not very familiar with the behavioral rules of middle-class restaurants. (We will further discuss the influence of customers on a restaurant and the behavioral rules in restaurants in Chapter 6) The image of a restaurant can

thereby be consolidated.

## **Conclusion**

Taste can be interpreted as a kind of life style as well as an artistic disposition. It is crucial in distinguishing social classes because it is greatly connected to someone's cultural capital as well as economic capital. Consumption can always be a way to express taste; as Bourdieu wrote, "...nothing more rigorously distinguishes the different classes than the disposition objectively demanded by the legitimate consumption of legitimate works, the aptitude for taking a specifically aesthetic point of view on objects already constituted aesthetically – and therefore put forward for the admiration of those who have learned to recognize the signs of the admirable – and the even rarer capacity to constitute aesthetically objects that are ordinary or even 'common'" (Bourdieu 1984: 40). Since consumption can demonstrate different tastes of different classes, commodities can therefore be a symbol to stand for the consumers' social-class status.

It is not only direct cultural consumption, like buying a painting or going to a concert, that can show taste differences among classes. We have found in this chapter that the lighting restaurants use, the pictures they hang, the music they play and the language they use in menus can also be a way to unveil the taste differences of the

middle class and the working class.

The use of lighting in restaurants shows the fundamental taste difference of the middle class and working class – the taste of luxury and the taste of necessity. This taste difference is based on a decisive and objective consideration, economy; thus, it is easy to demonstrate by consumption. The taste of luxury and the taste of necessity is indeed the root of the different life styles that the middle class and the working class may have.

On the foundation of this, a different aesthetic disposition is developed – an artistic disposition against a functional disposition, as we can see from the pictures that restaurants choose for decoration. In order to draw out this boundary, middle-class restaurants should keep distance from necessity. Therefore, in restaurants, the more practical and functional the pictures that they hang are, the more vulgar and bad-taste they seem to be. This is clearly revealed by my informants' demotion of some restaurants due to the pictures of food they hang. The binary opposition of beautiful and ugly, stylish and vulgar is obviously shown here.

In the discussion of music choice in restaurants, we discussed taste at a pure art-appreciation level. At this level, the taste difference is caused by something more than money – it is caused by education, a kind of cultural capital. Cultural capital determines the accessibility of music, and thereby, the class image of music.

Certainly, in a restaurant, no one bothers to ask whether the customers can really understand or appreciate the music they play; indeed, some of the customers may not even notice the music that the restaurant play, thus, the music played in restaurant is not a direct reflection of customers' real aesthetic disposition. Yet, as we can see in the interviews, different music is clearly ranked in a hierarchy. This hierarchy of taste can also be transformed into a hierarchy of social class. In this sense, taste may not always be a personal choice, as many people believe; instead it can be socially determined. If you want to identify yourself in a certain class category, you will have a certain kind of taste to accept or to imitate.

Language is also a kind of social taste. It is linked with someone's educational level, just as is music appreciation, in other words, as cultural capital. Even if English is a widespread language in Hong Kong, it still carries a high-class image as compared with Chinese since it implies a higher educational level, as we can see in both the ranking of music and menus. In the study of menus, the different combinations of language used are mostly decided for customers' convenience and restaurants' image matching, such as using Japanese in Japanese restaurants. Yet, it also shows that how English or other foreign languages can be used as a boundary to rule out the working-class customers from middle-class consumption.

In short, taste is a symbolic boundary to differentiate people or further

consolidate one's class identity. The justification of different tastes is indeed in social terms, so that art itself carries a social meaning; as Bourdieu said, "...art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences" (Bourdieu 1984: 7). Of course it is hard to justify taste difference, as it is something so abstract; however, a general trend of picking certain similar styles of lighting, pictures, music and the language of menus in restaurants with similar class image undoubtedly demonstrates an underlying taste difference of different social classes in Hong Kong. Most importantly, both the restaurants designers, as we can see from the patterns of setting and decoration of restaurants, and the customers are well aware of these class-image-constructing elements, which seems so minor, but prove outstandingly important in creating a restaurant's class image. Therefore, when people consume in a restaurant, they are, at the same time, consuming a certain kind of taste.



## Chapter 5. Social Class and Food in Restaurants

When we talk about social class and restaurants, food should definitely be discussed. In fact, food functions not only as a way to satisfy physical need, but also acts as a symbol in the society: “food, its preparation and consumption, is intricately connected to many other central processes of social life...Food is also a significant means of cultural expression and is often used as a general means of commentary on contemporary culture” (Warde 1997:22). Our self-identity, including class, links with our lifestyle, and our lifestyle is always constructed by consumption; therefore, the consumption of food can be a way to express our class status, and at the same time, to construct our class identity.

In the study of food and social class, much attention is paid to what food people of different classes eat. This is always related to the availability of certain ingredients. Some kinds of food, due to their rarity, are very expensive. Therefore, it becomes something only available to the middle or higher classes. However, in this study, I have found that when we dine out, it is not only the availability of ingredient makes a dish more high-class, the social meaning, or maybe the symbolic meaning, of food and the whole eating process can also draws out class differences. In this chapter, I will look into the social meaning behind food by studying cuisine, food presentation

and food order to see how these factors influence a restaurant's class image, and at the same time, how food is bound up with people's class identity.

### **Cuisine**

In my interviews, I found that in Hong Kong, certain kinds of cuisine bear a relatively high-class image. For example, French cuisine and Italian cuisine are generally said to be more "middle-class". When I showed some menus to a twenty-four-year-old office assistant, he said:

This one is an Italian restaurant, isn't it? (Yes.) Then it should be a middle-class restaurant. (Why?) Well, because it offers Italian food. Italian food is always higher class.

Here, Italian food seems to be a signifier of "high-class".

The reason why some cuisines are thought to be more "high-class" is partly because the ingredients they use may be more expensive. For example, one of my informants, a twenty-year-old waitress, said that French cuisine would offer goose liver or caviar which was very expensive and that made her think that it was more high-class. However, this is not a very comprehensive explanation. Some Chinese cuisines will also use luxurious ingredients, like shark fin or abalone; however, they cannot carry, in general, as high-class an image as Italian or French cuisine has. What really makes these kinds of cuisine higher in image? I once heard a conversation

between two of my informants, a nurse and a financial planner that went like this:

“What are you going to eat with your university classmate tonight?”

“We are going to a Greek restaurant.”

“Wa! So high-class! What do the Greeks eat?”

“I don’t know. I’ll find out tonight. I’ll tell you later.”

Here, it was not the ingredients that made my informant think that the Greek restaurant was high-class. It was the “exoticism” of Greek food which contributed to the establishment of a high-class image. This “exoticism” not only refers to Western cuisine, Asian cuisine can also be exotic. A forty-eight-year-old clerk said:

Not only French or Italian cuisine is high-class. Indian cuisine and Xinjiang<sup>14</sup> cuisine can also be high-class. Usually, the cuisine that is not Cantonese cuisine will be higher in image. (How about for example Thai cuisine and Japanese cuisine. Are they high-class too?) These cuisine are higher class than Cantonese cuisine but not as high-class an image as Indian or French cuisine. They are more common. I think every exotic food is high-class, but the more uncommon it is, the higher class it will be.

In Goody’s discussion of the hierarchy of cuisine, he points out, “In terms of class and cuisine, the higher in the hierarchy, the wider the contacts, the broader the view. Thus, the higher cuisine inevitably had to acquire ingredients from ‘outside’” (Goody 1982: 105). Even though he was not discussing food in Hong Kong, he still reminds us that ingredient from outside could be one of the components that help to upgrade a cuisine. Yet, to go deeper, the reason that exotic ingredients are higher in

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<sup>14</sup> The official name of Xinjiang should be Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, an autonomous region of China. There are numbers of minority live in this region, for example Uyghur and Kazakh, who are mostly Muslim. Han Chinese also live in this region but take up only 40 percent of the total population. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)) The cuisine of Xinjiang is very different from the Han Chinese, in both the ingredients and the way of cooking. Therefore, Xinjiang cuisine is regarded as exotic to my informant.

class image is not only related to its relatively high price, but also linked to its connection to distant cultures.

Consuming exotic food can create a sense of “reaching out,” which means the consumers seem to be able to approach other cultures through food. I have seen one advertisement of a restaurant in which it is written, “A large amount of classic French cuisine can make you feel like you are in Paris!” In light of this, the more exotic and uncommon a cuisine is, the higher chance the cuisine may be valued. While people are eating exotic food, they are consuming something outside the general and ordinary experience. This “specialness” is what makes an exotic cuisine worth a higher price, and gives it a higher image. To be able to “reach out”, therefore, indicates class status.

However, exoticism is not a stable factor for maintaining the image of food, since exoticism can be diluted by popularity. For example, in the past, Japanese food was generally regarded as “high-class” cuisine, but nowadays there are more and more sushi chains, so its “specialness” has gradually faded. Now, although there are still many “high-class” Japanese restaurants in Hong Kong, Japanese cuisine as a whole can no longer directly signify a “high-class” image. In the restaurants’ advertisements, I found that they have to declare another value for their food – they describe it as “traditional” and “real”.

This happens not only in Japanese restaurants. Quite a number of restaurants, mostly those high-priced ones, emphasize that the cuisines they provide are “traditional” or “genuine” in terms of the ingredients they use, the cooking method they adopt and the chef who cooks. I have seen an advertisement promote a restaurant’s dishes as follow:

XX hotel especially promotes a series of traditional dishes this year. The appetizer, hot dish and dessert are all famous dishes of the 1960s and 1970s. Since it is already very difficult to find them, our dishes are therefore more desirable. Now, it is a chance for you to re-discover the uniqueness of old dishes.

My informants generally agreed that a cuisine that promoted itself as “traditional” and “genuine” did make them believe that it would be better and thus, should bear a higher class image. Why is it better? The general interpretation is that this is because of the effort and the cost that the restaurants need to pay for preparing the cuisine, for instance, the ingredients may not easy to get or the recipe may not easy to find. Yet, besides these substantial elements, there is another underlying value which helps to upgrade the food – its authenticity.

Emphasizing the traditional or genuine is emphasizing the authenticity of a dish. In Hong Kong, which is such an international city, we have many chances to access different cuisines; however, in order to cater to Hong Kong people’s taste, most of these restaurants have changed the original recipe. Pizza in Hong Kong is one such

example. Pizza, which originated from Italy, is a very popular food in Hong Kong; many pizza chain stores have opened everywhere. Yet the pizza they provide is absolutely not the original Italian style, for example they will add Chinese roast duck on top. Due to the rapid change of foodways, many traditional cuisines may either vanish or are greatly altered. Thus, even if people are consuming this kind of cuisine, they may have no idea of what exactly it should taste like or how it was eaten originally. Traditional or genuine cuisine is apparently quite rare, and this makes the authenticity of cuisine highly valued. If you are able to discover and consume this authenticity, it means that you are able to control some extra knowledge in this sense. Similar to exotic foods, traditional and genuine foods symbolize an extraordinary experience. To be able to consume this authenticity inevitably reflects a higher social status.

In short, the social meaning behind different cuisines is indeed a demonstration of power. Both the exoticism and authenticity of food demonstrate the power of economics, in that consumers must be able to afford the price, as well as have the power to obtain knowledge enabling extraordinary experience in consumption. This experience brings a sense of “specialness”, which is important in showing social status by differentiating people. It is indeed related to social taste. “Specialness” is usually regarded as being linked to “good taste”; this is why certain class images are

imposed on some cuisines. Consuming exotic or authentic cuisine, therefore, can be a way for the middle class to demonstrate their class status.

### **Food Presentation**

It is not enough to establish a restaurant's class image even though food itself bears social meaning which contributes to class differentiation. However, I found, in my interviews that the way that the food presented is outstandingly important; it can sometimes even outdo the food itself.

Food presentation refers to how the dish is presented to the customer, including the tableware and the garnish. Usually in a middle-class restaurant the dishes are well presented. The arrangement of the dishes is always very neat; they may have certain patterns, like putting the meat at the middle and the vegetables arranged around the meat, or sometimes maybe arranged in different shapes, for example arranging the food into a flower shape. They may also put some garnish on the dish; a carrot flower is the most common garnish that Chinese dishes use. Some restaurants will try to match the cuisine with the vessel, for example, using a fish-shaped dish to serve fish. In contrast, working-class restaurants are not very concerned with the presentation of food. They have neither decorative patterns to follow, nor any garnishes; they only serve the food you eat.

Food presentation is thus highly important in establishing a restaurant's class image. In my observations, I found that often the same kinds of dishes were provided in both middle-class restaurants and working-class restaurants. According to my interviews and my own experience, the taste of dishes in middle-class restaurants might not be better than in working-class restaurants. It was in the food presentation that the difference laid. A twenty-five-year-old technician claimed:

The food doesn't matter. The ingredients (in a middle-class restaurant) are not especially good. It is the environment and the presentation (of food) that matters. For example, a dish with a beautiful garnish can help you to have a better appetite. The food will seem better this way.

Another informant, a twenty-four-year-old office assistant explained, Even if the food is not very different, I still think it is worth going to a middle-class restaurant. If the food looks better, I will feel better. Eating is an enjoyment including not only food, but also something more, like visual enjoyment.

However, in a working-class restaurant, the food itself is key. A nineteen-year-old university student claimed:

Food is more important in a working-class restaurant than a middle-class restaurant. We come (to the working-class restaurant) only for eating. If the food is terrible, what am I paying for?

The importance of food presentation shows that the meaning of eating as well as food in middle-class and working-class restaurants is totally different. In middle-class restaurants, food is an enjoyment, or even an art; therefore, a dish is supposed to take both the taste of food and visual enjoyment into account. As Messer



said, "Visual characteristics such as color, shape, or overall appearance also affect acceptability and food preferences and often form aspects of food symbolism" (Messer 1984: 220). Thus, sometimes, the food itself may even be surpassed; or we can say that the food has been to a certain extent torn from its functionality, filling up the stomach, in middle-class restaurants. In contrast, in working-class restaurants, food is more purely functional. It aims only to fill up the stomach, which is a practical consideration. Garnish or special tableware is therefore not considered. Unlike middle-class restaurants, the amount and the taste of food here is much more important than the appearance of a dish.

Food as a commodity is inevitably given a socially identified value. From the study of food presentation, this value is not based only on its use value, how delicious it is or whether it can fill up the stomach, but also includes how it can reflect the consumer's taste, which is linked to the enjoyment of eating. The higher on the hierarchy of social-class a food is, the lesser its use value may be taken into account. The food presentation, therefore, can be a class marker; as Messer said, "the shapes in which foods are presented, whether "natural" or "transformed," recognizable or not, and their culturally developed symbolism constitute additional visual characteristics that in some cases are also ethnic or class markers" (Messer 1984: 220). The way that the food is presented shows the different attitudes toward

food between the middle class and the working class; and in fact, it is the presentation that more often imbues the food with a certain class value in consumption.

### **Food order**

Mary Douglas believes that a meal is a code which embodies social relationships. Eating can be understood in grammatical terms, and thus can be deciphered by its pattern (Douglas 1997). The grammar of food includes the nature of food, for instance whether it is cooked or raw, as well as the food order. Here, I will concentrate on discussing how food order relates to class differentiation.

Food order here means the sequence in which the food is served. In different kinds of cuisines, the food sequence may be somewhat different.; but there is still a general pattern that is followed. Generally, we will have the appetizer and the soup at the very beginning. The main dish should come after that. Finally, the dessert will be served.

Yet, restaurants do not always follow this sequence when serving food. In some restaurants, especially working-class restaurants, they will give you the dish whenever it is ready, whether it is the appetizer, the main dish or the dessert. Therefore, customers need to arrange the food order by themselves if they seek to

follow proper order, for example they may have to order the main dish and dessert separately. During my observations, I found that the customers might not even follow the food order in these kinds of restaurants, as they just cannot wait to eat until all the dishes have arrived. As for middle-class restaurants, they are much stricter in the food order. Customers can order all they want to eat at the same time, and the restaurant will arrange the food order. Some of the staff may remind their customer of the components of a meal, like reminding them to order an appetizer or drink when the customer loses sight of them. In light of this, in this kind of restaurant, the food order is adhered to quite strictly.

In the interviews, I found that the food order could be one of the factors that influence the class image of a restaurant. A thirty-year-old teaching assistant, who perceived herself as middle class, claimed in the interview:

If a restaurant can serve their dishes in a correct order, it could make me rank it in a higher class. (What do you mean “correct order”?) Soup, and then the main dish, then dessert. This is the basic order.

I discussed the influence of food order on the class image of restaurants with other informants and found that the teaching assistant’s requirement was not an individual case. Many informants recognized the influence of food order on the image of restaurants. To be able to understand correct food order and then consciously carry it out seems to be a responsibility of middle-class restaurants,

whereas in working-class restaurants, it is the customers who are responsible for organizing their eating procedure. In my interviews, both the waitress from a middle-class Chinese restaurant and the human resources assistant of a hotel said that their restaurants would deliberately arrange the food order for their customers. The human resources assistant also mentioned that their restaurants require their waiter or waitress to know the food order as well as the detailed components of a meal, and make suggestions for the customer if they have missed something.

However, some *chàh chàan tòng* will provide a set meal including soup, main dish and drink. This kind of meal will also be served in a correct order. Why is the *chàh chàan tòng* not be graded as a middle-class restaurant given its following of food order? In this, the serving time makes the difference. An office assistant showed his discontent of a restaurant's food service as follow:

I don't like them (the restaurants) to put everything on the table all together. I didn't even finish my soup and the main course has already come, and the waiter asked me to order the drink immediately...The timing of food is very essential. For example, after you finish the appetizer, they should give you a suitable length of time to rest before the main course is served.

Here, we can see that the order alone cannot establish a high-class image. The timing of serving is also taking account in the evaluation of food order. "Correct food order" involves proper time management as well.

In fact, the importance of food order brings forth the knowledge required in the

eating process. Whether a restaurant can carry out this correct food order in its service, can also indicate a restaurant's class image by demonstrating their understanding of the legitimacy of the order. In other words, a correct food order can help to legitimize a restaurant's class status.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we discussed how a hierarchy of food does indeed exist in society. This hierarchy is established in several ways. First of all, in food consumption, people can obtain a certain cultural capital, and at the same time can demonstrate this cultural capital. The knowledge of food order legitimizes the whole eating process. Food order is so basic, and yet, so easy to neglect and so hard to get right. A correct food order, therefore, can be said to be a fundamental cultural capital required in the hierarchy- establishing process. Furthermore, the longing for exotic and traditional cuisines shows that its specialness gives extra value to food. People imagine that they are coming in contact with the world outside their own local culture. Food becomes a bridge that can lead people to another culture. The extraordinary experience of dining on cuisine outside their normal experience provides them with a knowledge that can be turned into a kind of cultural capital. This cultural capital can help to build up the consumer's social-class identity.

Eating is not only a process of filling up one's stomach in this sense, especially in middle-class restaurants. In the food presentation, we find that the enjoyment of eating, including not only the taste of food but also visual enjoyment, is much emphasized. How the food is presented becomes a revelation of social taste. Food acts as a class marker in this way. As we can see, when we eat out, food as a commodity may be alienated from its original function, to fill someone's stomach. Its function thus exceeds biological needs. As Mintz argued, "For us as a human, then, eating is never a 'purely biological' activity (whatever 'purely biological' means). .....Nor is the food ever simply eaten; its consumption is always conditioned by meaning. These meanings are symbolic and communicated symbolically; they also have histories" (1996: 7). Even though we are not specifically studying the production history of food as did Mintz, in dining out, we can still find that the social meaning of food expands from the food itself to the way it is presented and further develops to the serving order between dishes. This social meaning of food is a form of a "cultural imagination". It creates a hierarchy of food in the society, which is bound up with social class distinction. As Eric Ma has written, "Consumers are in this sense both the creators of cultural hierarchy .....and, paradoxically, as individual consumers, the servants of the hierarchy" (2001: 126). Indeed, I believe both the consumers and the providers contribute in imposing

meaning on food. In return, we are deeply influenced by this hierarchy in our consumption. This is why what and how we eat can be a way for us to show our social status.

going over how restaurants and food contribute to creating and reflecting social class. Let us now turn our attention to those who consume food and identify the customers.

Customers' behavior plays a role in shaping the restaurant's class image. A human resources assistant of a hotel said,

Customers will influence the whole restaurant. For example, if we allow someone wearing slippers to get into our restaurant, the whole environment will be polluted...

I have seen an article giving credit to a restaurant for the behavior of its customers. It states:

Having tea here is really like enjoying a High Tea. Aside from the elegant environment, the customers are also very gentle. They are observing the rules. This makes people not feel annoyed even if they stay two or three hours. (Wong 2009: 17)

One of my informants, a twenty-three-year-old nurse has also said:

I don't like to see the mainland Chinese in a restaurant. They will always ruin the restaurant. (Why?) They talk very loudly and act very rude. I've gone I tried to have a buffet in a hotel, and the mainlanders just talked and talked and it was so annoying. I don't want to visit there again.

Of course, my informant's opinion may be discriminatory and what I want to point out is that customers are not "outsiders"; instead, they are consumers of the restaurant. They act as a factor that helps to construct the class image of a restaurant.

## Chapter 6. Social Class and Behavior in Restaurants

We have gone over how restaurants and food contribute to sharing and reflecting social class. Let us now turn our attention to those who consume this class identity, the customers.

Customers' behavior plays a role in shaping the restaurant's class image. A human resources assistant of a hotel said,

Customers will influence the whole restaurant. For example, if we allow someone wearing slippers to get into our restaurant, the whole environment will be influenced...

I have seen an article giving credit to a restaurant for the behavior of its customers. It states:

Having tea here is really like enjoying a High Tea. Aside from the elegant environment, the customers are also very gentle. They are absolutely not noisy. This makes people not feel annoyed even if they stay two or three hours" (Wong 2005: 17).

One of my informants, a twenty-three-year-old nurse has also said:

I don't like to see the Mainland Chinese in a restaurant. They will downgrade the restaurant. (Why?) They talk very loudly and act very rude. Last time I went to have a buffet in a hotel, and the mainlanders just talked and talked. It was so annoying. I don't want to visit there again.

Of course, my informant's opinion may be discriminatory, but what I want to point out is that customers are not "outsiders"; instead, they too constitute the restaurant. They act as a factor that helps to construct the class image of a restaurant.



In return, the circumstance, which is constructed according to the class image of a restaurant, will influence the customer's behavior.

“Public behavior expresses features of the public presentation of the self that are shared by members of particular cultures” (Erchak 1992: 2); yet, this is true not just of cultures, but of classes as well. Customers in the same restaurant share an environment which is constructed on the basis of a certain class image. Their behaviors are thus confined by the class culture of this environment more or less. In light of this, other than studying the setting, decoration and food of a restaurant, studying customers' behaviors in restaurants can also show certain characteristics of different social classes. As I observed in various restaurants, there are plenty of behavioral differences between customers in middle-class restaurants and customers in working-class restaurants. In this chapter, I examine six of the most representative behaviors, including speed of eating, smoking, the use of tableware, loudness of speaking, how staff are addressed, and the use of foul language. By examining the differences of behaviors in different restaurants, I seek to understand why there are such differences in behavior, what the meaning is behind these behaviors, and how this is linked to social class.

## The Speed of Eating

The most obvious behavioral difference between customers in middle-class restaurants and working-class restaurants is their speed of eating. Generally, the middle-class restaurants' customers eat much slower than those in working-class restaurants. According to my observation, diners in middle-class restaurants might sometimes bring magazines, newspapers or books with them and read them when they are having their meal. They are also more likely to chat with friends. In working-class restaurants, the customers eat much faster, and seemed to concentrate more on eating. Almost no one reads and eats at the same time.

Most of my informants admitted that they had different eating speeds in different kinds of restaurants. I asked one of my informants, a forty-eight-year-old clerk, about her eating speed difference in different kinds of restaurants, and she said:

Of course I have to eat faster here (*chàh chàan tòng*). I don't feel comfortable staying long. If I eat slowly, for example chatting with friends or reading a magazine, it seems that they will want to kick me out because I have occupied a seat too long. I come to eat, not to chat or read. If I need chatting or reading, I will not come here.

I actually had this experience. One day, I went to a *chàh chàan tòng* to do observations. I was taking notes during my lunch. Even though I kept on eating while I was writing, the waitress kept looking at me and asking me whether she could tidy up the table for me, which was in fact a way of telling me to eat faster and leave. I

never had this kind of experience in a middle-class restaurant.

Here, we can see that different classes of restaurants seem to have different functions to customers. This is why customers eat differently in various restaurants. This functional difference of restaurants reflects one of the different living styles of the middle class and the working class – being leisured or being rushed.

The leisable life always connotes a middle-class lifestyle. As I briefly discussed in chapter 3, this is related to their power over time management. Being able to control one's daily schedule is a demonstration of social status since it is related to one's economic condition as well as the nature of one's occupation. A twenty-four-year-old financial planner said, "The more professional you are, or the higher position you are in, usually the more free time you can have." The working class, instead, have a relatively fixed schedule and they have no power to arrange it. A twenty-year-old university student said, "The working class are those who work from 9 to 5 or 6, very inflexible working hours." The ability to control time is not necessarily related to working hours. The middle class does not necessarily have shorter working hours than the working class, and may even have longer hours. It is the power to arrange his or her time that makes middle-class people seem more leisured. This is the factor that influences people's eating speed. How much time can one spend eating can indicate someone's social-class status in this sense.

Restaurants adapt to the different eating habits of their customers, thus creating a corresponding serving speed which, in return, influences the time that the customers can stay. In other words, the interaction between the restaurants and the customers is what influences eating speed. Eating slowly has thus become the accepted manner in middle-class restaurants, and eating fast has become the common practice in working-class restaurants.

Of course, it is not a must that people should eat at a certain speed either in middle-class restaurants or in working-class restaurants. However, this behavioral difference does show us how the need to eat was transformed into a kind of expectation of eating fast or slow, being leisured or rushed, which creates a symbolic meaning for this behavior. This is similar to what Erchak explained about the symbolic meaning of getting tanned among white middle-class and upper-class Euro-American people: Being tanned symbolizes that someone has the leisure time to get tanned (Erchak 1992). Being able to eat slowly also conveys a symbolic meaning that conveys leisure, which is related to the power of wealth and the power to control time.

### **Smoking**

Another behavior that seems linked with working-class restaurants is,

according to my interviews, smoking. The financial planner claimed:

If it (a restaurant) is all non-smoking, the image will be higher. This is an indication of image.

A twenty-five-year-old technician also said:

Smoking will make the feeling of the whole restaurant bad. Even having a smoking and a non-smoking area doesn't help. Whenever I see people smoking in a restaurant, I think it is a working-class restaurant.

This is not a criticism of a non-smoker toward smoking; in fact, the financial planner is a smoker himself. This is not a matter of what the customers smoke, either;

I asked my informants about whether it would be better if the customers smoked more expensive cigars, and their answer was the same. So, this is not related to how much money they can spend on this habit, but is a matter of the behavior itself. Why did my informants think that smoking was not good? A twenty-three-year-old nurse said that it was because smoking would affect other people. However, she could not tell me why smoking in middle-class restaurants was especially bad and why it could influence the class image of a restaurant.

Generally, my informants explained that smoking presented them with a bad feeling in a restaurant. A thirty-year-old teaching assistant claimed:

People should eat while they are eating. They should not eat and smoke at the same time. Only people, like construction workers will eat and smoke at the same time.

Their criticisms, as I found, were not really aimed at the behavior of smoking; they were talking about smoking in restaurants, especially in middle-class restaurants.

Smoking itself has no bearing on any specific symbolic meaning in class distinction, as I found in my interviews. It is not directly connected with a working-class image in most circumstances. However, in a certain situation – dining in a middle-class restaurant – it does indeed symbolize a working-class image. Allowing or forbidding smoking in a restaurant is indeed due to restaurants' awareness of the image that smoking presents. Customers, being aware of this situation, will understand whether they should smoke or not. We can see that the symbolic meaning of a behavior may not be constant in this sense. Some behavior can have different meanings or images in different circumstances. In this case, the temporary symbolic meaning of a behavior—smoking – is determined by the class image of its surroundings.

### **The Use of Tableware**

The different habits in the use of tableware between the customers in middle-class restaurants and in working-class restaurants is interesting, since it can reflect how restaurants influence customers' eating behavior and how customers must learn such behaviors to enable them to fit in the environment.

The use of tableware is different in different cuisines. Here, I concentrate on the use of tableware in two of most popular forms of cuisines in Hong Kong, Chinese cuisine and Western cuisine. No matter what kind of cuisine you have, in

middle-class restaurants, tableware is carefully differentiated. While in middle-class, Western style restaurants, certain tableware is to be used specifically for certain dishes. For example, there are different spoons for soup and rice, and different forks for salad, main dish and fruit. The arrangement of tableware is according to the food order with the use sequence from outside to inside. In middle-class Chinese restaurants, tableware is not that specifically differentiated, yet instead of the diner's own chopstick and spoon, they offer common chopsticks and spoon for sharing dishes. A chopstick and spoon holder will also be offered. However, in working-class restaurants, only the most basic tableware is usually offered. Generally, customers will only have one knife, one fork and one spoon for a Western dish. Even though sometimes they may provide both soup spoon and rice spoon to their customers when they serve a Western-style dish, they may not put them in any order. For Chinese dishes, the working-class restaurants seldom provide common chopstick and spoon and, there will be no chopstick holder either.

Different tableware offered by restaurants will of course influence customers' ways of eating. Indeed, it is very important for customers to deal with the tableware properly, especially in middle-class restaurants, in order to fit into the environment, and therefore save face. Let's take the Western style of tableware as an example.

Since the system of tableware is complicated, it is not easy to get the function of each

tool right. This is something that must be learned. The customers in the middle-class restaurants were eager to get the sequence right, as I observed. This was not really because they practically needed a specific tool for eating, in fact, it would be absolutely adequate for people to use a rice spoon to eat soup. Rather, the problem was of acquiring recognition from others. As one of my informants, a twenty-year-old high diploma student said, “It makes me look bad if I get it wrong”. Why do informants think they will “look bad” if they cannot use their own tableware correctly? This is because people can recognize their class background by this behavior and they hate to be classified as “unsuitable” for that particular environment. In working-class restaurants, on the other hand, people do not really care about the correct use of tableware. In my observations, I have seen the staff in an upper-working-class restaurant placing the rice spoon and soup spoon in a wrong order a couple of time, but they seemed not to care about that. Indeed, no one will care whether the customers in those restaurants use the correct spoon to eat soup. The knowledge of the correct use of tableware can influence customers’ mobility in visiting restaurants more or less. If someone has not enough knowledge, even if he or she may be able to afford to go to a middle-class restaurant, he or she may not be willing to go because he or she may lose face in the dining process.

As for the Chinese restaurant, the offer of common chopstick and spoon is



indeed intended to be hygienic since people are sharing dishes instead of having separate dishes. Yet, middle-class restaurants seem to be more concerned with offering a common utensil than working-class restaurants. This reveals the presupposition of attitudes about health and hygiene between the middle class and the working class. A twenty-year-old university student once claimed:

Using common chopsticks is more hygienic...the middle class cares more about that. The working class will not insist on using common chopsticks, because it's too troublesome.

It is of course not true to say that the middle class must be more hygienic in eating than the working class. However, due to the presupposition, the habit of using a common set of chopsticks and spoons rather than using one's own seems to be a habit of the middle class. This hygienic habit is thus has to be regarded as a kind of dining etiquette. Therefore, using common chopsticks and spoons can present a middle-class image. As a twenty-year-old waitress said, "Those who insist on using common tableware are usually high-class people." Indeed, there are more and more restaurants, including some upper-working-class restaurants that offer common chopsticks and spoons in Hong Kong after SARS. Yet, generally speaking, the use of common chopsticks and spoons in working-class restaurants to share dishes is not as common as in the middle-class restaurants.

The proper use of tableware is not confined in the sequence of using it but also

how it is used. There is some dining etiquette which is related to the use of tableware. For example, the diner should not lick the chopstick, knife or coffee spoon; and the chopstick should not hit the bowl or the plate and make noise. These rules are generally quite strictly followed in middle-class restaurants; however, in working-class restaurants, you can see “impolite” ways of using tableware everywhere. This may be because the customers who visit the restaurants are often different. The working-class restaurants’ customers may not even know the formal dining etiquette. Yet, some customers are in fact choosing to behave differently in different places. Let me take my personal experience with my friend as an example. We both used to lick the coffee spoon after we stirred the coffee. While we dined in a middle-class restaurant, we tried to remind ourselves not to do so, mainly because we noticed that it was not polite and would therefore make ourselves look vulgar. This is related to the consciousness of etiquette in different surroundings.

The different uses of tableware are indeed partly determined by the restaurants. What they offer decides what customers can use. The offer of certain tableware indicates that there are certain rules to follow and, as a matter of fact, it can create an invisible boundary to leave out those who do not know the etiquette. Finkelstein even believes that “a fundamental purpose of manners is to ensure inequalities and to distinguish people into classes or groupings as a proof that some individuals are more

socially useful and valuable than others” (1989 134). Of course, there is no need to consider manners only as an “evil” that increases inequality in the society; but, it does indeed help in distinguishing people, and therefore, in forming and maintaining social class. The meaning of the correct use of tableware, as we can see here, can be transformed from a consideration of convenience to a kind of identity- presenting etiquette, and from a hygienic practice to a matter of image-presenting. The behavior thereby can be a symbol for connoting class identity.

### **Speaking Loudness**

The most fundamental behavioral rule in different restaurants that I observed is the loudness of speaking. Usually, customers will adjust their speaking volume in different restaurants. In middle-class restaurants, customers tended to speak much more quietly than they would in working-class restaurants. In contrast, in working-class restaurants, it seems that both staffs and customers realize and accept that people usually talk more loudly than in a middle-class restaurant. A

twenty-five-year-old manager of a working-class restaurant said:

Even when customers talk very loudly, we never try to stop them from doing that. (Why? They may influence the other customers, right? Will the other customer complain?) No. They know that the ambience of this kind of restaurant is always noisy. They should have realized that before they came.

I went to both middle-class restaurants and working-class restaurants with one

of my informants, a twenty-year-old high diploma student. She usually talked quite loudly, but when we visited a middle-class restaurant, she obviously tried hard to lower her voice when she chatted with me. I asked her why she made such an adjustment. She said, "The environment is so quiet here. I feel embarrassing to talk as usual." Another informant, a twenty-five-year-old technician, also admitted that he had adjusted his speaking volume in different restaurants. He explained:

The surroundings have influenced (me). When you see others beside you keeping their voice so low, and at the same time you talk so loudly, you will feel that you are disturbing others.

Speaking loudness is of course very much related to the objective environment.

For example, in working-class restaurants, especially during the peak hours, the environment is usually quite noisy, and customers must speak up in order to communicate. Similarly, in middle-class restaurants, the environment is usually much more quiet; thus, customers do not have to raise their voice when they talk.

However, according to my observation, customers in the *chàh chàan tòng* keep using a relatively loud voice to talk even in non-peak hours, when the restaurant is not very noisy. In middle-class restaurants, in contrast, the customers do not raise their voice even if sometimes they might need to do so. For instance, when the customers needs to get the staff's attention from far away, they may need to speak more loudly in order to get them to notice. However, customers do not do that usually. In my

observations, they prefer to raise their hands and wait instead. Even if they address the staff, they do not use a loud voice. This adjustment of speaking loudness is not only a behavior in response to an objective environment; more, it becomes a kind of social behavioral rule in restaurants.

Speaking loudly is thought to be a “rude” behavior generally, since, as a fifty-year-old manager said, “it will disturb others. An educated person should be more considerate.” It thereby usually signifies a behavior of the working class. In a middle-class restaurant, even if the customers may need to speak up, they do not dare to do so because they have to keep themselves apart from this “working-class” behavior. This is because to behave like a working-class person in a middle-class environment will make them lose face, and therefore, lose their projected class identity. Face is “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes” (Goffman 1967: 5). The image of a person includes his or her class image. An individual’s class identity needs to be maintained not only by oneself, but also by social attribution – the approval of others – so that it can be reconfirmed. So we choose to behave in certain way, speaking loudly or not, in certain situations in order to save our face and maintain our class identity.

Aside from the customers spontaneously following the rules, restaurants may sometimes enforce some behavioral rules themselves. In the case of speaking volume, for example, I have seen a staff of a middle-class restaurant asked a group of customers who talk too loudly to keep their voices down. Whether a restaurant can carry out the rule is very important in maintaining its image. A twenty-four-year-old office assistant described one of his experiences in a restaurant to me in the interview about why he downgraded a restaurant in his mind. He said that he once saw a customer complaining very loudly and rudely about the service of an upper-working-class restaurant, as he defined it. He could not recall what exactly she was asking for, yet he did remember that it was a service which was not supposed to be offered in that kind of place. He said:

Maybe she was rich. I don't know. But she shouldn't have such a requirement in this kind of place.... The restaurant should have an appropriate reaction toward this situation. If a restaurant cannot stop the customer from making a row like this in their restaurant, the restaurant should also be responsible for this mess.

We can see the interaction between the restaurant and its customers in this conversation. Customers' behavior not only influences the image of customers, but also affects the image of the restaurant as a whole. Therefore, misbehavior can cause the loss of face of customers as a whole as well as of the restaurant. This explains why restaurants are to some extent responsible for enforcing rules of behavior, and why restaurants serves as an external factor pushing the customers to obey the rules.

For example, a waitress from a middle-class Chinese restaurant told me that their staffs would try to stop the customer smoke in the non-smoking area politely and help them to change the table if they insist to smoke. As we can see, the establishment of behavioral rules can be a combination of the pressure of the environment, as well as the performers' self-discipline.

### **Addressing Staff**

Speaking loudness is partly related to some objective factors for instance the noisiness of the environment. In my observations, I found that there were another two behavioral rules among customers that were free from these kinds of external restrictions – the addressing of staff and the use of foul language.

The differences in the customer's addressing of staff in middle-class restaurants and working-class restaurants are obvious. In middle-class restaurants, customers generally call the waiter “*sīn sàng*”(Mr./先生) and waitress “*síu jé*” (Miss/小姐); or call them “waiter” or “waitress” in English. In working-class restaurants, on the other hand, customers usually call both the waiter or waitress “*fó geī*”(伙記), a general designation of staff; or, in accordance with their gender, address them as “*ngò gò*” (阿哥) for male or “*ngò jé*”(阿姐)<sup>15</sup> for female. These two sets of address

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<sup>15</sup> “*Ngò gò*” (阿哥) literally means “brother”; and “*ngò jé*” (阿姐) literally means “sister”. These are

of middle-class restaurants and working-class restaurants are referring to the same person in restaurants; yet the impression presented is wholly different. Generally, the form of address of middle-class restaurants is regarded as more polite and formal than the form of address in working-class restaurants.

The different forms of address are not related to the class background of customers. The customers are not addressing staff according to their own class status but according to the restaurant they are in. When I visited restaurants with my informants, I found that they would change their way of address in different restaurants spontaneously. I have never heard them mixing it up. I asked a twenty-four-year-old teaching assistant if she would not call the waitress in the hotel restaurant “*ngò jé*”. She said:

Of course not! How can you call them like that?”(But why not?) “You will be discriminated against!” (Will the waitress tell you not to call her that or be mad at you?) No. But...you just won’t do that. (How about in the working-class restaurant, will you call them “waitress” or “*síu jé*”) No. It is so weird.

“Discriminated against” is a direct translation of her Cantonese, but it is more appropriate to understand her meaning as “to be looked down upon”. My informant thought that she would make a fool of herself if she used the terms wrongly. It was difficult to get my informants to explain why they would use different addresses in the different restaurants. They thought it was just “normal” to do that, and that it

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common addresses of male and female stranger. However, in restaurants, “*Ngò go*” usually refers to waiter and “*ngò jé*” refers to waitress.



would be “weird” to mix the addressing up. This implies that they think that they are embarrassing themselves, in other words they are “out of face”, if they get the addressing wrong, since they are “out of touch with the situation” (Goffman 1967: 8). Thus, the different addressing of staff seems to be a kind of behavioral rule in restaurants, whose rules are known to most customers.

The addressing of staff is a conscious and self-disciplined behavior. No one will tell you to address the staff in a certain way; however, people still stick to the rules. What makes people do that? Let us consider the question.

In people’s communication, messages obviously pass from one person to another. The message does not refer to the concrete meaning of a sentence only. From the way that the speakers speak, including, for example, the wording they use, the message also involves indications of, for example, who the speaker is and whom he or she is talking to. As we can see from the above interviews and observations, there is a certain kind of social control over how people address staff in different restaurants. This control is “directed toward uniformity and consensus” (Paine 1976: 73).

In a restaurant, customers are temperately joined in certain social groups, based on the class image of the restaurant as presented. In other words, customers are playing a social role in restaurants. An appropriate actor’s line is important to show

that they indeed belong to this place, and underlying this, to this social class. That is why customers have to properly learn how to address the staff. This situation is not restricted to middle-class restaurants. If a customer uses a middle-class form of address in a working-class restaurant, he or she will be regarded as “weird”. The knowledge of behavior is “structured in terms of what is generally relevant and what is relevant only to specific roles” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:77). So, what is really important in the addressing used is “how things are said, when they are said, rather than what is said” (Paine 1976: 73, quoting Bernstein 1965: 156).

### **Foul Language**

The situation of the addressing of staff is similar to the use of foul language in restaurants. As I observed, it is not at all common for the customers in a middle-class restaurant to speak foul language. However, in a working-class restaurant, foul language is typically heard. My informants have also said that if they heard foul language in a restaurant, they would definitely downgrade it in their minds. This is not because the customers in the middle-class restaurants do not know foul language, only that they do not use it in that particular circumstance. According to both my observations and the interviews, I found that my informants were quite conscious of avoiding foul language when they were in middle-class restaurants, even though

some of them were quite used to using foul language in their daily conversation. As in the addressing of staff, there are no formal regulations concerning customers' language manner in restaurants. Even if someone uses foul language in their conversation in a restaurant, they will not likely be kicked out (unless they use foul language to scold someone). Why do people not want to use foul language in middle-class restaurants?

As I discussed before, what we say is to a certain extent signifying who we are. Using foul language is generally regarded as rude and vulgar, yet expressively tends to be regarded as a working-class behavior. When someone uses foul language in a middle-class restaurant, they are presenting a working-class image; thereby they make themselves inappropriate to the surroundings they are in. Since customers are aware of the image that foul language carries, as well as their surroundings, they deliberately adjust their language used, in other words, adjusting their image, in order to get recognition in that specific social space – a middle-class space.

## **Conclusion**

Finkelstein has written, "Dining out is a highly mannered event. From the moment of entry, the diner is immersed in the moral order of the restaurant. There are codes of conduct in the various restaurants to which diners must adapt, and integral

to this gesture of compliance are assumptions about the nature and dynamics of sociality” (Finkelstein 1989: 126). The “nature and dynamics of sociality” which influence our behavior in a restaurant, as we can see in this chapter, are partly based on social class. Different customers’ behaviors, as we have discussed, including eating speed, smoking, utensil use, speaking loudness, addressing staff and the use of foul language, in a restaurant illustrate how behavior can be a kind of symbol to signify a certain class image; and our behaviors are restrained by both the surroundings as well as by our consciousness of the class image we are trying to present.

The symbolic meaning of behavior is what leads to the formation of behavioral rules. Certain behaviors symbolize class images, which push people to follow or avoid certain behavior in order to save themselves from being thought as someone they do not want to be. This means that people are aware of the social role that they are playing more or less; and they understand that they may suffer from indignity if they cannot play this role well. Loudness of speaking in different restaurants, the addressing of staff and the use of foul language are very clear examples for us to understand that process.

Behavior is a way of communication. In this communication, we get to know our social role. In order to communicate well with others, we need to learn their

“language”, the grammar of behavior. That is why people in the same social class group have similar behaviors. These behaviors may be further legitimized as a kind of rule imposed on people. Certain behaviors, of course, can be the result of some objective and external restrictions, like whether customers are allowed to smoke in a restaurant. Yet, this kind of restriction can be internalized and can become a personal choice when people need to save their face and to show their social belonging. In short, the forming and carrying out of behavioral rules in restaurants is due to the interaction between three dimensions: (1) people and their surroundings, which is related to external restrictions; (2) the relation of the customers, which signifies the creation of social belonging and (3) people as themselves, in their establishment of identity and face saving.

To conclude, behavior can be viewed as a boundary excluding those who behave wrongly from certain social class groups. This may not be a physical abandonment; instead, it maybe a denial of social status and identity. At the same time, since people can pretend to being to a certain class by behaving in certain ways, behavior can also be regarded as a key for us to enter a certain social class, at least temporally. Restaurants can be a place where we learn to perform to be someone we want to be. This is as Finkelstein stated, “Dining out encourages us to imitate the behavior of other people in the restaurant, without there being any need ‘for thought

or self-scrutiny', thus constituting a 'constraint on our moral development'"

(Finkelstein 1989: 5).

In the previous chapters, we have investigated various aspects of restaurant class image construction in Hong Kong, including space management, decorativeness, food, and customers' behavioral responses to their environment while they are dining out. In this chapter, as a conclusion, I would like to draw out certain linkages observed across previous chapters concerning the orientation of restaurants, the restaurant behavior of customers, the nature of social class in Hong Kong and the construction of class identity through dining out. To start with, let us briefly go through the previous chapters.

In the first part of chapter 2, we discussed various theories of social classes and the basic stratification of middle class and working class in Hong Kong. Karl Marx, Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu have provided a theoretical foundation of social classes' development as well as their formation. Along with the social and economic change of a society, the structure of social differentiation and the components that define social classes become more and more subtle and intricate. Karl Marx and Max Weber put their emphasis on the objective components of social classes, the material, economic power, status and so on. However, Bourdieu turned the definition of social classes to a relatively abstract level by advocating a subjective factor—cultural

## Chapter 7. Conclusion

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identified four capitals, including cultural capital, economic capital, social capital and symbolic capital, which are the factors that contribute in establishing social classes. Taste is a kind of cultural capital which is a subjective factor that help to differentiate social classes.

Hong Kong has its own definition of social classes. Many sociologists have studied the formation of the middle class and working class in Hong Kong. Their studies offer us a historical background of the formation of both the middle class and the working class in these past 50 years. They have discussed the definition of these two classes from a rather objective angle. In the interviews, my informants have proclaimed four main criteria that determine people's social class: economy, education, occupation and taste (or lifestyle). Here, we found that my informants' perceptions of social classes were only partly matched with the scholars' definitions since subjective factors like taste were mentioned and their interpretations of other factors were also quite subjective.

In the second half of this chapter, we moved on to the discussion of restaurants in Hong Kong. We have gone through criteria of classifying restaurants and the classification of restaurants according to my informants. This established a foundation of restaurants' differentiation for further discussion.

In Chapter 3, we explored the relationship between space and social class by



observing the location and the setting of restaurant as well as my informants' perception of space in terms of social class differentiation. Space and social class are linked in three aspects: demonstrating power, reflecting class expectation and creating boundaries. My informants' high evaluation of spacious views and large personal space in restaurants explains how the control over space (even it is only a temporary control) in Hong Kong can be a symbol to demonstrate the power of wealth. A spacious view in a restaurant is also a symbol to indicate a sense of leisure, which is expected as the lifestyle of the middle class; the meaning encompassed in these symbols reveals people's class expectation. The third kind of relationship, creating boundaries, is revealed in the observation of the surrounding of restaurants and the management of different kinds of kitchens, including the open kitchen, the semi-open kitchen and the hidden kitchen. My informants pointed out that physical separation could help to maintain restaurants' class image. This explains how physical boundary can be transformed into social class boundary in people's mind.

In Chapter 4, we turned to the discussion of taste differences between the middle class and the working class as revealed in the decorative elements of restaurants. Adjusting lighting, hanging pictures and broadcasting music are three ways for restaurants to create a certain ambience. The brightness determines the mood of a restaurant. As I observed, middle-class restaurants tend to use dimmer

lighting in order to create a moody ambience even if it may cost them more money; and the working-class restaurants, instead, prefer a brighter ambience as it is more convenient for the staff to work in. The different use of lighting shows the fundamental taste differences between the middle class and the working class – the taste of luxury and the taste of necessity, which are caused by various attitudes toward the use of money, based, in part, on the amount of money one has.

Established on this foundation, different aesthetic dispositions occur between the middle class and the working class. The working class is thought to be more functional in appreciating art; thus, in working-class restaurants, photos of food that can be used for promotion as well as decoration are hung. The middle class, on the other hand, seeks to avoid the taste of necessity to differentiate themselves from the working class. Therefore their aesthetic disposition is more artistic. That is why no photo of food can usually be found in middle-class restaurants.

The music that the restaurants played also shed some light on the different tastes between the middle class and the working class. The more accessible a song is, in terms of the knowledge needed in appreciating it, the lower class it will be. This demonstrates the relationship between taste and education. Since education is closely linked with social class, taste differences thereby can be one of the indicators for class differentiation.

In Chapter 5, the food that the restaurant offers and how it is served becomes the focus. Three dimensions related to food were discussed, including the cuisine, the food presentation and the food order. Some cuisines, for instance French cuisine, and some traditional dishes seem to bear a relatively high class image as compared with others. These kinds of cuisine are highly valued due to their “exoticism” and “authenticity”. This creates a sense of specialness by providing an “unordinary experience” which can be transformed into a kind of cultural capital to indicate class status. The knowledge of food order, too, can be a cultural capital for restaurants, since the knowledge of food order can legitimize the whole eating process. That is why people believe that if a restaurant can offer food in a correct order, its class image will be higher.

As for the presentation of food, my interviews showed that the different ways to present food of middle-class and working-class restaurants could demonstrate the different attitudes toward food and eating between the middle class and the working class. The middle-class restaurants preferred to have good presentation of food, for example, placing appropriate garnish on the dish, since they tended to view eating as an enjoyment rather than sheer filling up of the stomach. The working-class restaurants, instead, did not bother to decorate the dish as it was just “food” to them. This attitude difference is related more or less to their economic condition. The

presentation of food is so important that it may also outdo the taste of food itself in a middle-class restaurant in justifying the value of a dish and the class of the restaurant.

In other words, the presentation can give food an extra value.

In Chapter 6, the behaviors of customers in response to the restaurant's environment were explored. We examined two kinds of behavior: how people act, including the eating speed, smoking and table manners, and how people speak, including speaking loudness, the addressing of staff and the use of foul language. In middle-class restaurants, some behaviors are not very welcome, for example, speaking loudly, smoking and using foul language. Customers try hard to avoid these behaviors in middle-class surroundings, since these behaviors can symbolize a working-class image which may make them lose face. Yet, the symbolic meaning of these behaviors may be temporary, which means that the symbolic meaning can be influenced by the surroundings or the situation.

The symbolic meaning of certain behaviors led to the emergence of behavior rules. Since we are so eager to maintain face, we are thereby forced to carry out certain behavior in certain situations. We, as the actors in a social arena, perform a role that we believe we are. Behavioral rules are based on the characteristics of different roles and how those roles interact. In restaurants, a place of consumption, social class roles are undoubtedly an essential identity, and behavioral rules are partly

class based.

### **How Do Restaurants Position a Class Status?**

Dining out is one of the most ordinary consumption practices in Hong Kong. In order to attract different customers, as we have seen in this research, different restaurants try to shape themselves in accordance with different images. However, how do restaurants position a class status? Why do they need a class orientation to run their business? One obvious answer is that customers differ in their consuming ability, and have different requirement in dining out. Since different customers have different expectation to restaurants and the dinning process, it is not very possible for a restaurant to attract all kinds of customers in this sense. If they do not have a specific orientation, they may loss customers from both sides. To set up a class status, which means to target on a certain kind of customer, they can concentrate in arranging their restaurant in accordance with their targeted customers' needs and taste. Therefore, they can ensure that a certain class of customers can be attracted.

We may also ask why not all restaurants choose the same class status, for example, the middle-class status, in order to attract more wealthy customers. First of all, attracting wealthier customers does not necessarily mean they can earn more money. In order to attract more middle-class customers, restaurants need to provide

better food and service. This means restaurants need to have more capital to start and run their business. Not all restaurants can afford to do so. There is no doubt a risk they have to bear. Secondly, when the restaurateurs decide what class status their restaurants should hold, they have to consider whether they can manage this image as well. As we have seen in this research, customers have a code in mind of what certain classes of restaurant should like. The restaurateurs need to understand the class-based requirement very well to be able to make an appropriate arrangement for their restaurants. This is essential in keeping their business running because, as we discussed earlier, the misuse of symbols can make customers downgrade the restaurant and therefore drive some potential customers away. Yet, due to the capital and knowledge restriction, the restaurateurs of restaurants may not all be able to handle this requirement. This explains why not all restaurants can set themselves up as middle-class restaurants.

As restaurants have to evaluate their customers' consuming ability as well as their requirements developing from this ability when they start their business, restaurants' image-construction is thereby based on their perception of their potential customers' class background. Since restaurants with similar class status tend to be consistent in their management as earlier discussed, when we look into different aspects of a restaurant, we can therefore see their management's understanding and

interpretation of certain class characteristics. The customers' evaluation of the image that the restaurant presents can also reveal that elements that contribute to social class formation in Hong Kong.

### **Customers and Their Class Flexibility**

After discussing the orientation of restaurants, we should also talk about how customers choose restaurants and their mobility and flexibility in choosing restaurants. Most of my informants felt free to visit both middle-class and working-class restaurants if they could afford it. Yet, some of my informants were sufficiently conscious of their class identity so that they tried not to visit restaurants which they thought did not match their class background. For instance, one of my informants who is a nurse would not visit a noodle house or *chah chaan teng* if she had any other choice. She thought the environment of working-class restaurants was bad, and she could not put up with it. Another informant, a forty-eight-year-old clerk who classified herself as working class, had no intention to go to the middle-class restaurant even if she might be able to visit there once in a while because she felt uncomfortable to stay in that kind of environment.

Middle-class people's unwillingness to visit working-class restaurants is, as we have found in this research, mainly because they have more requirements towards

dining out as compared with the working class. For example, middle-class people would like the restaurant to have a tasteful ambience, comfortable surroundings, good service from staff, and good presentation of food. These are the requirements of restaurants that working-class people not usually have. The reason why they have many more requirements may be due to their intention of identifying themselves through the dining-out process. Ma has written that, "we tend to identify ourselves not only by attaching positive emotions to a class of product; we also identify by circumscribing and keeping away from ourselves the products that are one step lower than those aligned with our perceived cultural position" (Ma 2001: 128). As the twenty-three-year-old nurse, said, "Look at the waitresses (of a lower-working-class restaurant), they are so working-class. Their dressing (they were wearing sandals and aprons) and service are both working-class. If you dine in this kind of restaurant, you will look working class too." As for the working class, the unease that they may face when they visit middle-class restaurants may hinder them from dining at such places. This leads us to a discussion of the restaurant-going mobility of different customers.

Our class background is an important factor that influences our restaurant-going mobility. Generally, the higher social class someone is, the higher mobility he or she will have in visiting restaurants. Fundamentally, it is money that determines where someone can afford to go. However, as we have discussed in the chapter "Social



Class and Behavior in Restaurants”, the knowledge of behavioral rules, in other words the cultural capital, that one needs for dining in a middle-class restaurant can also affect the customers’ choice of restaurant. Due to the higher educational level that the middle-class people may have, they are usually more familiar with this kind of knowledge. As a matter of fact, the unease that working-class people may feel in middle-class restaurants is very much due to their incapability to access this kind of knowledge. Of course, even sometimes the middle-class people may refuse to visit working-class restaurants; yet, their restaurant-going mobility is still higher than the working-class people generally.

However, in Hong Kong nowadays, it is becoming easier for working-class people to enter middle-class restaurants since they may be able to gain knowledge of behavioral rules from the mass media. For example, they can easily find articles mentioning eating etiquette in magazines and on the Internet. So, even if middle-class people have the advantage of holding certain kinds of cultural capital for dining out, the restaurant-going mobility in Hong Kong, generally speaking, is still relatively high, aside from economic restrictions. In fact, people can also obtain cultural capital from dining out through the consumption process itself. I will further discuss this in the later part of this chapter.

## **The Nature of Social Class Identity in Hong Kong**

The foundation of social classes is no doubt established on economic factors, for instance income and occupation. These factors are more or less objective and concrete. However, there are clearly inter-subjective factors also at work. In this research, I have found that both the restaurants and the customers in Hong Kong are aware of some more inter-subjective factors in social class formation – taste and lifestyle.

I found in this research that the restaurants with similar class background prefer similar settings and decoration. Finkelstein has remarked, “Restaurants differ most obviously from each other in terms of their costs, their size and their hours of business; they are most similar to each other in their recognition of décor and ambiance as the essential ingredients in the pleasures afforded by dining out” (1989: 68). When we choose to dine in different restaurants with different class background, the pleasure in dining out we are looking for is based on our presupposition of certain social-class characteristics. For example, as we can see from my informants’ interview, when people visit a middle-class restaurant, no matter what class background they have, they will still require it to have a good ambience created by appropriate lighting, setting, decoration and so on. By examining these various aspects, people judge whether this restaurant is worth its relatively high price.

The similarity of restaurants' decoration shows that there is a general presupposition of taste. The choices of lighting, pictures and music reveal restaurant management's awareness of taste differences between middle-class people and working-class people. The difference in taste of the middle class and the working class appear at the level of consumption – to consume the luxury or the necessity – and of art: to appreciate art aesthetically or functionally. The misuse of these elements can ruin the whole image of a restaurant no matter how good its food is or how expensive it is. This is because the location, the setting, the food provided, and the service of a restaurant together construct the class image of a restaurant. The restaurant as a whole reveals the class image of the customers who visits there. So, the demonstration of class differences in terms of taste in a restaurant is also the demonstration of class differences of the customers.

The taste differences are no doubt developed from an economic base, for example the taste of necessity of the working-class people is caused by their restriction in economic ability and the taste of luxury of the middle-class people is based on their sufficient economic ability to spend more. Yet, it is not a certain result. Even if someone has certain amount of wealth, it does not necessarily mean that he or she has "proper taste" as people recognize it. Even if someone has money, if she cannot properly demonstrate her wealth through an abstract factor like taste, her

social-class status can be downgraded. She may be considered as “rich” but not “middle class”. “Proper taste” includes not only one’s artistic disposition; it also refers to one’s lifestyle. As we have discussed earlier, even someone’s food choice, for example looking for exotic and traditional dishes which indicates specialness, can also be used as a way to demonstrate social taste.

Social class identity, in this sense, is not only something external to someone; it is also something related to an inner level – taste. Taste is a criterion which you can consider as something objective but at the same time subjective. It is objective since we generally think a certain class of people should have certain kinds of taste; for example, middle-class people are thought to be more interested in art appreciation and, therefore, this has become a generally accepted criterion of being middle class. Yet, how exactly is what we appreciate considered “tasteful”? Or further, what should be regarded as “art”? There is no consensus about this matter. This makes taste, as a criterion of forming social-class identity, quite subjective.

Since such an abstract and complicated factor must be taken into account in class identity formation, the definitions of social classes are not easy to make. Scholars may have technical or academic definitions of different classes. Yet, as I found in this research, these definitions may not always make sense to ordinary people. People may not even always agree with the rather concrete and objective

criteria such as using income as measurement of social class that scholars put forth.

How my informants define or perceive different social classes is not based on some concrete standard; instead, they define classes in terms of their image. Following their image, they further define themselves into different classes and establish their own class identities.

As we have seen in the previous chapters, my informants supposed that the middle-class people and the working-class people have different lifestyles. Lifestyle, as McIntosh argued, is “not used to extend life or make it more comfortable but instead to achieve distinction from others” (1996: 47). From the analysis of restaurants’ external views and eating speed, the middle class is thought to be leisured; the working class, instead, is rushed. Developing from these ideas, the middle class is supposed to be seeking enjoyment in eating, thus, the middle-class restaurants try to offer spacious views, a good presentation of food, and more personal space to their customers. The working class, in contrast, is supposed to concentrate more on filling up their stomachs, which means they do not know how to enjoy eating.

The different lifestyle of social classes is a shared expectation. How people expect the middle class or the working class to live is not necessarily true. Yet, we still recognize people’s classes as well as our own class identity by the image that the

class presents to us. If we cannot live up to the image we hold, we may not be able to classify ourselves in a certain class category. *For example, one of my informants, a financial planner who has a high income, did not classify himself as middle class, since he thought he was not as leisured as a middle-class person should be.* In such a classification, we are guided by the class image that we created. Our class identity and our class-consciousness are to a certain extent, based on this image. Social class identity, of course, is an economic and social status, yet, in this sense, it is also a matter of imagination.

In short, social classes may seem to be objective and concrete in a capitalistic city like Hong Kong; however, some subjective and abstract factors must also be taken into account in the class-identity establishing process. Our social-class identity is demonstrated by the image that we present in taste of these subjective factors. Gradually, this image becomes one of the criteria to justify our social class. This imaginative nature of social class is partly caused by Hong Kong's open class structure. Guided by the capitalistic economy, and the development of industrialization as well as other economic factors, as we have discussed in Chapter 2, personal ability become more and more important in Hong Kong. Due to this openness, class boundaries in Hong Kong become loose and vague. (Li 1998: 39). Since we do not have a rigid boundary for us to differentiate classes, we tend to use

our impression of different classes to understand and interpret social classes. The nature of social-class identity thereby can be an objective social status and at the same time a subjective image. Social class is a social status which has its foundation in objective factor like economic, yet needs to be actualized and completed by the subjective factors like taste and lifestyle.

Since social classes are composed of subjective elements as well as objective elements, their influence on us cannot stay at the social level in our interactions; it also affects us at a cultural level, in terms of our beliefs. Put in another way, social class is outside and at the same time inside us. We must note here that the subjective elements of class formation are quite unstable since these subjective elements, for example taste, can change over time. What should be regarded as middle-class taste or working-class taste can be different from one year to the next. On the other hand, since social class is in part imagined, it is therefore mobile. For example, if a working-class person has saved enough money to go to a middle-class restaurant, he or she can pretend to be a middle class as long as he or she can find a way to learn how middle-class people behave while dining out. Social class identity may be quite unstable and therefore quite vague in this sense, at least as it pertains to dining out in restaurants

## **How Can We Build Up Our Social Class Identity through Dining Out ?**

Since social classes are in part imagined in Hong Kong, when we climb up the social class ladder, we need various forms of capital besides economic capital to qualify us as middle class. These forms of capital, as Bourdieu analyzed, are cultural capital, symbolic capital and social capital. These three forms of capital together with economic capital are interrelated and mutually influence one another. The combination of these forms of capital helps us in building up an integral class identity. In this research, we have examined the nature of class identity as revealed through dining out. Indeed, dining out, as a consuming activity, can help to establish our class identities by offering the chance for us to demonstrate some of these capitals as well as the chance to obtain some of those we lack but need. Let me now discuss dining out as a strategy for building up class identity.

While we are dining out, the first capital we demonstrate is no doubt economic capital. Which restaurants we can afford to go to and how much we can spend in a restaurant are displays of our economic status. Aside from the economic capital, we further show cultural capital when we dine in these restaurants. In restaurants, cultural capital can be shown indirectly and directly. As I have pointed out previously, restaurants will construct their image by, for instance, playing music and hanging up pictures. Their choices of these decorative factors are based on their presupposition



of the ability of art and musical appreciation as well as the preference of art and music of members of a certain class. Of course, it is not necessary for the customers who visit middle-class restaurants to be able to appreciate the classical music that the restaurants play, or the French impressionistic pictures that they may hang. Yet, the customers are nevertheless supposed to be those who have the knowledge, the cultural capital, to have such appreciation. Thus, even if appreciating art may not be the real cultural capital of an individual customer, it can still be regarded as a temporary cultural capital demonstrated in a restaurant by the customers. This demonstration of cultural capital is indirect. On the other hand, in restaurants, especially middle-class restaurants, how the customer eats and how the customer addresses staff reflects an understanding of the legitimized knowledge of a restaurant. Whether we can get these matters right can also show our cultural capital. This is a relatively direct way to demonstrate cultural capital.

When we can afford to go to a high-class restaurant, at the same time we can manage to behave in a certain manner; we are therefore, at least temporarily, accepted in this particular social group in the restaurant. In other words, we seem to have a temporary membership in a certain social class. This is as Finkelstein writes, "Manners have the effect of providing formulaic patterns of behavior, and these are treated as emblems of membership in a particular group or class, and give the

individual a sense of social location” (1989: 131). We are indeed showing this kind of transient social relationship in restaurants. This is a kind of social capital, even if it is loose. By displaying the above three forms of capital, we show our class identity to the others in the restaurant; in other words, we are showing the honor and prestige that this particular class status bears. Thus, even if this class identity is temporary, we can still demonstrate our symbolic capital in this sense.

During the process of dining out, we are not only demonstrating the capital we have in class construction; we can also obtain the capital we need aside from economic capital in this arena. We can definitely obtain cultural capital. Cultural capital is the legitimized knowledge we need to know, which includes academic knowledge as well as other forms of practical knowledge, including, for example, the manner of eating and the form of addressing staff in different restaurants. In the restaurant, the food order and eating manner are regarded as one kind of non-practical knowledge. Some of this cultural capital can be obtained from education, both formal and informal, such as family education. Yet, it is not guaranteed. If someone comes from a working-class family, he or she may not have the chance to learn the manner of eating in a middle-class restaurant from his or her parents. This knowledge is not guaranteed from formal education either. This situation is quite common in Hong Kong. Because of universal education, Hong

Kong people have relatively equal chances to get an education. In light of this, class mobility is quite high. Quite a number of those who have started to climb up the social ladder may not have come from a middle-class family. How can he or she obtain the necessary cultural capital when he or she tries to climb the social-class ladder? Learning from consumption is one way to do so.

When we dine out, we enter a social domain. During the eating process, we observe the environment we are in as well as the behavioral rules we need to know. The environment will offer us some clues about what we should do, for example, the tableware that the restaurant gives its customer gives clues as to how they should eat. Through observing and imitating others, we can get to know how to respond to this particular circumstance and obtain the knowledge we need. When we interact with both the customers and the staff in a restaurant, we may experience how cultural capital works in the dining process. So, as Finkelstein writes, “to enjoy the practice of dining out, the individual has learned by observation, imitation and practice how to behave appropriately in the restaurant” (1989: 52). Simply put, through observation, imitation and interaction, we gain the cultural capital that we may not be able to gain from formal education and family education.

As a matter of fact, while we demonstrate the capitals we own when we dine out, we are at the same time obtaining some of the capitals that we are demonstrating.

The restaurant, as a public and consuming domain, is an arena for us to do so. In the consuming process, we demonstrate what we have and therefore who we are.

Through the demonstration as well as the interaction with others in this social arena, we establish, confirm and carry out our social class identity. In short, dining out involves both the interaction with others and the confirmation of self. Dining out is not only an identity-demonstrating activity, but also a self-shaping process.

### **Final Word**

In Hong Kong, social class is mostly interpreted in a social and political perspective. Of course, social class is a social status which is very much linked to our economic condition, educational background or even political inclination. Yet, social class is also a self-identity. This identity will influence individuals' ways of thinking as well as their behavior. So, aside from investigating the social structure of social class, it is also worth looking at the cultural meanings of social class.

As we can see from this research, social-class identity can be demonstrated and constructed when we dine out. Restaurants provide environments, including decoration, setting, food presentation, service and so on, which are established in accordance with the propensity and expectation of different classes. When customers consume in a restaurant, they are not consuming food but also the class image that

the restaurant presented. Customers, as we have seen in previous chapters, are generally quite aware of the class image that they are consuming, and thus, they respond to those particular environments of restaurants by different behaviors, for example eating fast or slow. In light of this, the restaurant-constructed surroundings confine our consuming process to a certain extent.

This leads to the discussion of how free are we in consumption. Economic power is the factor which allows us to choose in consumption, yet, it is not the only factor which can determine what and how we consume. Ma discussed Hong Kong people's consumption of alcoholic drink as follows: "...there is a certain degree of free choice beyond class location. However, this freedom remains restricted, not just by financial status but by cultural status as well" (2001: 131). Since consumption can express our social-class identity, we cannot totally neglect the social and cultural meaning of consumption. Even if we can afford a large variety of goods, how and what we consume is still under the influence of our social-class identity. In other words, our class-consciousness can determine our consumption pattern more or less. Of course, dining out is not necessarily a conscious instrument for people to demonstrate or establish their class identities. People can visit restaurants just for eating. Yet, they will still be influenced by the class image of the restaurant they visit. No matter where they go, they are bound to the surroundings they are in. They need

to act more or less to fit themselves into the surroundings.

We are, as Goffman argued, all performers in society. Through observation and imitation, we act like someone we want to be or we need to be. Restaurants are just one of the various stages for us to perform, or a stage that pushes us to perform in a certain way. How we perform or what role we are playing is not necessarily the real self we have. In certain situations, like in restaurants, we just follow the setting of the stage and the script we learn from the society most of the time.

We all have a social rule to play. This social rule in restaurants, as we have found in this research, includes the role of class – a role that we may know intrinsically but are never able to formulate. What I am trying to do in this research is to reveal the construction and formation of social class in Hong Kong through studying various restaurants and customers, and therefore, investigate how social-class identity influences our daily life. I seek to raise people's awareness of this invisible power over us so that we may be able to become freer of all the ways it shapes us.

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