

Dead End Work?
– Youth in Menial Fast Food Jobs in Hong Kong



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Abstract

Hong Kong is generally known as a wealthy city. It is now a place where entrepreneurship, luxury and wealth are emphasized, yet there are people doing jobs that are dull, have low prestige and pay poorly. Hong Kong is also a place where success is very much shaped by education, yet there are “losers” who have given up that path to success and knocked on door of the low-wage labor sector. Many of them do not need the money to survive, as they live with their parents and are supported by their families. This research aims to give a portrait of young low-wage workers employed in the fast food industry in Hong Kong. The question of how young people with little human capital understand their present lives and future prospects is also investigated in this study. Participant observation and in-depth interviews were employed during the research. Through this research, low wage earners and fast food jobs in the context of Hong Kong can be understood. The puzzle of why young people are willing to work at such low wages will help us understand wage work in Hong Kong and the nature of low skill work generally.

論文摘要

眾所周知香港是一個富裕的城市，在這個以商業、奢華生活及財富掛帥的地方，卻有不少人從事著刻板、低薪而地位低微的工作。香港也是一個以教育定義何謂成功的地方，以致有很多年青人成為當中的「失敗者」，因為他們放棄所謂成功之路，叩那道進入低薪族之門。他們當中有許多人並不需要賺錢維生，因他們都有家人供養。這篇研究的目的是剖析一班從事快餐業而工資低微的香港年青人的生活面貌；研究範圍亦涵括檢視這群缺乏競爭力的年青人如何理解現時的生活及將來的前路等問題。因此，本研究採用了參與觀察、深入訪談等研究方法以達至上述的研究目的。通過這個研究，我們可以明白到在香港這個社會環境中，低薪工作和快餐業的境況。透過解開年青人之所以願意從事低薪工作（特別是他們並不需要依靠這些薪金維生）這疑團，也有助我們理解香港的受薪工作和低技術行業的情形。

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Scope of Study

Because of the rapid economic growth in these few decades, Hong Kong is generally known as a wealthy city.¹ Hong Kong is now a place where entrepreneurship, luxury and wealth are emphasized, yet there are people doing jobs that are dull, have low prestige and pay poorly. Their jobs are looked down upon in a society where enterprise and wealth is highly valued. There is thus a conflict, or apparent conflict, between their work and society's values. Hong Kong is also a place where success is very much shaped by education, yet there are "losers" who have given up that path to success and knocked on door of the low-wage labor sector. Many of them do not need the money to survive, as they live with their parents and are supported by their families. Who are these people? This research aims to give a portrait of these young "losers" employed in the fast food industry in Hong Kong. The question of how young people with little human capital understand their present lives and future prospects is also investigated in this study.

When McDonald's, the worldwide symbol of fast food restaurants, first arrived at Hong Kong in 1975, the "McJobs"² were also brought into the society. At the beginning of the new millenium, McDonald's celebrates its 25th anniversary in Hong Kong. While having all kinds of celebrations, the corporation as well as the whole fast food industry was also facing serious critiques of giving extremely low wages to entry-level workers. The fast food

¹ The GNI (Gross National Income) per Capita for Hong Kong in the year of 2000 was US\$ 25,920, ranked the 13th place among the 207 World Bank Atlas economies. It was the second highest in Asia.

² "McJob" is a term used by George Ritzer for jobs created by the spread of McDonaldized systems, which is usually associated with fast food restaurants (Ritzer 1998).

industry is one of many low wage sectors in Hong Kong. This sector is well known for paying very low wages and it recruits those who have low education level and few skills so that labor costs can be cut to as low as possible. According to a survey conducted by the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions in 1998, even if a fast food employee works eight hours a day, seven days a week, he/she can only earn around \$3600, which is even lower than the minimum wage set by the government for foreign domestic helpers (\$3860)³ in Hong Kong. In other words, fast food workers earn even less than Filipino maids. With such low wages, people can hardly support themselves. To some extent, this employment sector is even more marginalized since people can only work as part-time employees. That means they can only earn hourly wages. Bottom level workers are paid from HK\$13 to HK\$19 for each hour, depending on the district and time of being employed. No insurance and other fringe benefits are provided by the fast food corporations.

Some people say fast food work is exploitative work and those who work there have “no future”. There is a general perception in Hong Kong that people working in fast food restaurants are those who have few other opportunities. Not only because of the low wages but also the nature of the job, which is highly routinized, it is generally known as alienating and low skill. Therefore, fast food jobs are notoriously stigmatized and denigrated. However, people, especially the young people, keep filling up the vacancies in this sector, despite the stigma of the job. How do these young workers deal with their low status and wages? Also, how do they view the “routinized” work, which is generally viewed as low skill and alienating? Ford paid very high wages to get people to accept the

³ The minimum wage set by the government for foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong was cut from \$3860 to \$3670 in 1999.

alienation of the assembly line. Yet, fast food restaurants do the opposite, paying people the lowest wage in the industry. How is that possible? The fast food industry relies heavily on young people for a labor force. Many fast food restaurants, especially the transnational ones, recruit many teenagers, both school dropouts and secondary school students. Many young people are introduced to the work world through this kind of low-wage job. Some generally graduate from this end of the labor market into better jobs as they get older. What are their alternatives? Why do they choose to work at fast food restaurants? Do they want to learn some skills so that they can prepare themselves for entering the work world in the future? Or do they just want to earn some pocket money? Or are they needy that they have to help supporting their families? How many of them think that they are trapped in dead end jobs, and how many see their job as a temporary job at this stage of their life? Do they think that they are, to some extent, forced to work in fast food restaurants, as they do not have other choices? Or do they think that it is a kind of opportunity that allows them to at least earn something and spend their free time “meaningfully”, or do they hope to climb up the management ladder? More importantly, are these jobs creating an underclass, or offering opportunities?

It has to be noted that different classifications adopting different age groups for youths may exist, depending on the subject matter concerned. For instance, people aged 15 to 24 or 12 to 24 may be respectively defined as youths for different objectives. In Hong Kong, persons aged 15 to 24 have generally been taken as the target population in planning services for the youth. According to the Employment Ordinance, the legal minimum working age in Hong Kong is 15. Therefore, in this research, the term “youth” refers to those aged 15 to 24 for both sexes.

There are many fast food corporations in Hong Kong, both transnational and local. However, the pattern of employment is, to some extent, related to the corporation's recruitment system. Also, the organizational culture of a corporation the young people join is instrumental in generating conditions and experiences that challenge their self-esteem. Therefore, this research focuses only on the transnational fast food corporations like McDonald's, Hardees, Kentucky Fried Chicken, etc. These transnational fast food corporations share a similar recruitment system because they constitute the menial side of the work market. Being well known as worldwide symbols of fast food restaurants, it is surprising that the transnational fast food corporations pay the lowest wage to their workers. Local fast food corporations like Café de Coral and Fairwood pay more.

This research, to some extent, will replicate Newman's (1999) study of young fast food workers in New York inner city. Katherine Newman explores the cultural challenges and moral dilemmas that attend low-wage work, and the confrontation with stigma for the young people who take up the low-wage jobs. According to her, young people employed by fast food restaurants enter a social world in which their identities as mainstream Americans are shaped, structured, and reinforced. Although fast food jobs are highly stigmatized, Newman argues that there are skills inside the "no skill" jobs. Is this also true in Hong Kong?

Though some recent research has been done on young low-wage earners and fast food jobs, especially in the United States, there is so far so little research about this aspect of labor market in Hong Kong. Through this research, low wage earners and fast food jobs in the context of Hong Kong can be understood, and we can better understand the Hong Kong labor market. The puzzle of why young school dropouts are willing to work at such low wages

will help us understand wage work in Hong Kong and the nature of low skill work generally.

1.2 Literature Review

Within any society, “work” has a number of very different meanings. It can be analyzed in terms of physical transformations, social transactions, economic activities or personal identities. Work is about social transaction as much as material production. Indeed its significance is more often seen to lie in the quality of the relationships involved in the allocation, production or distribution of resources than in the bald facts of material survival. Work controls the identity as much as the economy of the worker, whether as an individual or as the member of a caste or an occupational group. We may say that work is about the physical and psychic energy a worker puts into producing, maintaining or converting economic resources; but that the choices, decisions and rewards of the worker are constrained by the logic of the system in which he works. The control of work entails not only control over the allocation and disposition of resources, it implies also control over the values ascribed to each of them. Classification of the activities and achievements of others is subtler than the physical constraint of their actions, but it is no less controlling for that (Sandra Wallman 1979: 1,2).

1.2.1 Capitalist Labor Process

While talking about work, the capitalist labor process should be first looked into. The capitalist labor process, based on Marx’s view, is the means by which raw materials are transformed by human labor into commodities. The process involves the use of labor to generate surplus value and therefore profit. Making

profit requires extracting work effort from labor time and therefore systems of control are established to enhance the ability to extract work. The process stands on the ground of deskilling, fragmentation of tasks, hierarchical organization, the division between manual and mental work, and the struggle to establish the most effective means to control labor (Thompson 1989). The literature on capitalist labor process is centrally concerned with the relative power of employers and workers. Braverman's (1974) influential account of it is the concept of deskilling. In order to achieve higher profits, division of labor has to be increased. It is necessary to deskill in order to establish managerial control. In his *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, Braverman describes how technology has been used not to create new skills, but to fragment and deskill jobs. A number of theorists and researchers, following Karl Marx and Harry Braverman, adopt a critical orientation that they tend to look at the labor process from the point of view of things like managerial control over what workers do, technological advancement and control, deskilling and exploitation. Ritzer (1996) suggests that in the light of increasing importance of McDonaldization, it is likely that the role played by management in control is less today than it was when Braverman wrote. Ritzer argues that the McDonaldization of society can be seen as one large-scale social process encompassing a wide array of cultural and structural changes that is affecting and being affected by changes in the labor process. While talking about culture, Ritzer pointed out that more and more people have come to value McDonaldization, and its various principles (efficiency, calculability, predictability and control) have become part of value system.

As Kanter and Stein (1979) noted, people at the bottom of an organization are often rewarded the least, valued the least, and considered the most

expendable and replaceable. They are, in a sense, not fully members of the organization at all. The classic features of jobs at the bottom are boredom, repetition and monotony (1979: 176-177). The crew members of fast food restaurants are at the bottom of the corporation that they have to receive very little pay, without any insurance provided by the corporations. Pay is not the only indication that a job exists at the organizational bottom, for some jobs at the bottom may pay more, while those at middle levels and in middle kinds of positions may come with less material and more symbolic reward, or less immediate and more long-term payoff (Kanter & Stein 1979). However, in the case of fast food industry, the workers are paid low wages and they are at the corporation bottom.

Historical and sociological research has documented the capacity of workers acting individually and collectively to resist managerial plans in ways that affect how routinization is implemented or even undermine it altogether (Leidner 1993). Although working in a boring and repetitive condition, the workers invent their own sorts of job satisfaction. The workers do not simply follow the scripts but would take some basic and simple matters or even invent some “games” in order to retain their humanness. Also, the major source of reward for work at bottom, besides pay, seems to be friendship, something the organization does not provide and in many cases works hard to suppress (Kanter & Stein 1979).

1.2.2 Fast Food Jobs

Leidner characterizes McDonald's as “an exemplar of extreme standardization (1993: 14-15).” In his book *Fast Food, Fast Talk*, taking McDonald's as an example, Leidner points out that the routinization of “interactive

service work” means rationalizing workers’ self-presentation and feelings as well as their behavior. In addition to the issues of deskilling, autonomy and power already associated with work routinization, Leidner also raises questions about personal identity and authenticity. In routinized interactive service work, employers claim authority over many more aspects of workers’ lives like regulating workers’ appearance, moods, demeanors and attitudes. Hochschild’s (1983) study on flight attendants also holds a similar view that control on employees is extended to workers’ identity and feeling. These findings seem in tune with the efforts of labor process thinkers and researchers to extend their concerns from objective realities to employee subjectivities. What we have evidence of here is a series of unprecedented efforts to control employees. It is not simply what people do and say on the job that many organizations now seek to control, but also how they view themselves and how they feel.

In order to reduce personal discretion, each process and fragment of the job is described in details so that all the workers have to do is to follow the scripts. Many theorists argue that such system deskills or even dehumanizes the workers as it imposes scripts on its employees as if they are robots. However, Leidner points out that there are circumstances in which routines can be useful to workers. For example, some workers accept and even welcome tight scripting as routines can act as shields against the insults and indignities these workers are asked to accept from the public (1993: 192). Here, besides talking about the routinized work, Leidner tries to look at the individual level and how the workers try to make use of routinization.

It has to be noted that the routinized fast food job itself was introduced to Hong Kong by transnational fast food corporations through the globalization of

fast food industry. James Watson (1996) 's landmark study of the adaptation of McDonald's in East Asia has produced ethnographic accounts of McDonald's social, political, and economic impact on local cultures. It demonstrates the interaction process of globalism and local cultures working both ways. That is, on the one hand, McDonald's has brought changes in East Asian dietary patterns. While, on the other hand, East Asian consumers have transformed their neighborhood McDonald's into local institutions. However, this study has not looked into the impact brought by McDonald's to local labor market. The relationships between the public perception of the fast food industry in Hong Kong and how the workers perceive their jobs inside need further investigation.

1.2.3 Youth and Part-Time Work

Youth is a transition between childhood and adulthood, characterized as a period of ambiguity and confusion (Rothman 1992: 128). The fast food industry relies heavily on part-time young labor force. Some studies have been done on how students perceive their part-time jobs. Rothman suggests that part-time work does not seem to offer the young people any particular advantage in their later career development, and this is dictated by the very nature of part-time work (1992: 126). In fact, there is little indication that such rewards are expected (1992: 129). In their research, Lowe and Krahn conclude that money is the major motivation for the young people to work part-time (1992: 138). Among lower-income youths, part-time work seems to be perceived as a portent of the future. Some hold on to aspirations for upward mobility, but many others see only similar jobs in their future (Macleod 1987).

In the study of youth and part-time work, Dale (1992) pinpoints the importance to make a distinction between those young people who are working

part-time to supplement their incomes as students, and those who are working part-time as a substitute for full-time work. Despite the fact that both may be doing similar kinds of work, they constitute two quite distinct types of part-time workers, with very different career trajectories (1992: 158). This is very important since students and school dropouts are two very different groups of people and how they perceive their futures are very different. In fact, some student workers are potential university students who have more opportunities in their future career. This leads to an important reminder that fast-food restaurant workers is a heterogeneous group of people.

Reiter (1996) examines the impact the fast food industry has had on the organization of work and family life. The flourishing fast food industry represents one particular blueprint of how to live. Reiter analyses the profound consequences of this blueprint for many spheres of life: women's work, youth employment, the labor movement, the family, and the community. Since the 1970s young people and women have increasingly entered the job market in low wage, service-sector jobs. Theories about what happens at work and why workers behave as they do have, until recently, treated the worker as a uniform creature of no particular gender and race. However, it was assumed that this ungendered, raceless worker was really an adult white male, settled in a factory where he could expect to remain for long stretches of time with some job security, and where, if lucky, he would move up the job ladder a few rungs. Researchers who considered the influences of life outside work on the paid workplaces' neither considered nor respected the young people as workers. Young people still attending school who had part-time jobs never entered the literature. Some scholars critical of the pro-business orientation of industrial sociologists noted how gender, race, and ethnicity were important in making sure workers got jobs

deemed suitable for their particular attributes. Their focus however, was on labor market segmentation and job assignment, and they didn't explore what happens after that. Some Marxists critics who looked at what happens at work assumed that paid work experiences were most important, and treated workers as influenced only by the flows of capital and the social relations at the point of production. It is only very recently that some writers have begun to look at the individuals.

1.2.4 No Shame in my Game

In her study of poor young fast food workers in Harlem, Newman (1999) argues that working for a living pulls ghetto dwellers away from street culture and into the mainstream. According to Newman, young workers align themselves with the great mass of people who work for a living by pointing to the essential virtues of the gainfully employed. Since work equals dignity, even a minimum wage job helps young working poor attain an honored identity of mainstream American. Newman explores the cultural challenges and moral dilemmas that attend low-wage work, the confrontation with stigma, and the strategies young people used to balance the competing demands of school and work and examines in some detail the potentially valuable skills they learn in their "no skill" jobs.

1.2.5 Social Class

Hong Kong people hold a strong conviction that Hong Kong is a land of abundant opportunities and these opportunities are allocated in accordance with individual achievement rather than social ascription. In 1978, Lau and Ho revealed in their survey of young workers that 60 percent of them believed that "Hong Kong offered opportunities for upward mobile common people" (Lau and

Ho, 1982). In another survey conducted in 1986, more than 80 percent of respondents agreed that in Hong Kong, provided a person had the ability and worked hard, he should have the opportunity to improve his social and economic status (Lau and Kuan 1988: 64). Contrarily, Tsang (1992), based on his objective data, points out that youths from working class origin in Hong Kong have fewer opportunities to move upward. This leads to an interesting situation that the young people in Hong Kong generally believe that they have many opportunities to move upward, but in fact they do not.

In *Learning to Labour*, Willis (1989) investigated the question of how and why working lads come to accept working class jobs through their own apparent choice. He concludes that it is their own culture that most effectively prepares some working class lads for the manual giving of their labor power. Therefore, as pointed out by Willis, there is an element of self-damnation in the taking on of subordinate roles in Western capitalism. Knocking on the door of low wage labor sector is usually the young people's own choice. Willis has made an important note that how and why they make such choice is in fact affected by their working class background and culture.

1.3 Methodology

Data was collected primarily through my fieldwork at one of the transnational fast food corporations, Burger Master⁴, from September to November 1999, for eight weeks. The major methods employed were participant observation and in-depth ethnographic interviews. Written materials and some relevant web-sites on the Internet also served as supplementary sources of data.

⁴ Burger Master is a pseudonym for a transnational chain of fast food restaurants.

1.3.1 Participant Observation

I worked as a crew member at one of the branches of a transnational fast food corporation, Burger Master, for two months, approximately one hundred and sixty hours. My goal was to observe the workers more closely, experience the job myself, and get to know more informants. Working in a fast food restaurant provided me a greater chance to know more workers and also employees in different management levels of the corporation. It was a good way for me to compare what my informants told me about their work and what I could see for myself. As I was on hand for a long time, I could explore questions about the skills embodied in low-wage jobs of this kind that might be invisible to survey researchers. As pointed out by Newman (1999), workplace culture does play an important role in affecting workers' attitudes and self-images. Only by experiencing the work by myself could I get such firsthand information.

I tried at the beginning to apply formally for a working position as a crew member to several transnational corporations, identifying myself as a researcher. However, all the applications were turned down. I was only able to get a working position as a worker in a fast food restaurant through an ordinary application, receiving personal permission to do research from the shop manager. Due to this situation, I was regarded as a "normal" crew member, rather than a researcher. Although I had identified myself as a researcher, my colleagues still regarded me as one of them, as I had to work as hard as they did and had no privileges. This provided me a very good chance to develop close relationships with the employees. As a worker, I could always chat with my colleagues behind the counter, at the grill, in the lobby, and while taking break.

This kind of daily conversation was a very good chance for me to know their views on their job and their future.

Besides working as a crew member, I also hung out with some of my colleagues. Since I was regarded as their friend, I had the privilege of participating in various activities that were only reserved for themselves. I participated in some of their activities like seeing movies, having meals, going to game centers, having barbecues, etc. This helped me to observe and understand their social network. Also, how they spent their money was clearly shown in these activities.

1.3.2 Interviews

The majority of my informants were those young people who were working as crew. I have interviewed thirty fast food workers (see Appendix). Trainers, team leader, assistant managers and managers were included in my sample because most of them worked as crew members before getting promoted or joining the management. Interviews were also conducted with twenty non-workers in order to understand the general perception on fast food work and the workers in Hong Kong.

In finding informants, I employed snowball sampling. Before conducting fieldwork in a fast food restaurant, I had only a few fast food workers as informants at the earliest stage of my research. Luckily, they were very supportive of my research and introduced many colleagues to me. Therefore, I could have a general picture of working in fast food restaurant before conducting my fieldwork. After working at fast food restaurant, my colleagues became my informants. Many of them were willing to introduce some ex-workers to me so that my data could be enriched.

Most of my interviews were done informally. Most of the valuable information was obtained through the daily conversation with my colleagues. Therefore, I employed formal interviews only if the informants were not colleagues of mine. This kind of interview was taped. However, for those informal interviews, I could only write long accounts immediately after each time I worked and talked with them. Most of my colleagues felt uncomfortable to talk in front of the recorder as they regarded me as their true friend, rather than a researcher. In addition, it was impossible for me to tape the dozens of hours of chatting. Therefore I chose not to tape our conversation even though it might not be a perfect way to do interviews in terms of preserving records.

In the interviews, I tried to collect the life histories of the young workers. Questions about how and why they got the fast food job were asked. I also asked questions like how they saw their work and prospects, how they spent the money they earned, whether they learnt anything from the job, etc.

1.3.3 Written Materials and the Internet

Besides conducting participant observation and in-depth ethnographic interviews, data was also collected from written materials like newspapers and journals concerning fast food work and youth employment in Hong Kong. Attention was also paid to news report on television and radio.

The internet was used as a supplementary source of background information. Because of the new technology, the world is becoming smaller and smaller. From surfing on the internet, I learnt a great deal about the fast food industry, not only those of the corporations themselves but also of many issues related to it. This helped me get a general picture of working in fast food restaurants. However, it has to be noted that such resource only served as a

supplementary source of background information since there is the fact that not all workers have access to the Internet.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

In the chapter that follows, I will focus on the lives and backgrounds of the young workers. In Chapter 3, I will look at the fast food job itself and try to examine the difference between the reality and the stereotypes attached to the job. In the chapter that follows, I then explore the cultural challenges and moral dilemmas that attend low-wage work. I also try to look at how the organizational culture helps the young people to confront with stigma. Chapter 5 looks at the strategies young people use to rationalize their work and future and the slow but steady ways in which working pulls young people away from dead end work into the mainstream labor market.

Chapter 2 Portraits of the Fast Food Workers

2.1 General Understandings of the Hamburger Flippers

When talking about fast food workers, we might ask who they are in a sociological sense: what kinds of people find themselves in this category? The general answer for this question is youths, housewives, the poor and the poorly educated. Although such short answer oversimplifies the reality, it is undoubtedly the general portrait of the fast food workers in Hong Kong. Apart from the general portrait, this chapter aims at exploring what kinds of people the fast food workers are in depth.

2.1.1 Age

People usually think of the fast food job as a youngster's first stepping-stone into the labor market, a part-time foray for pocket money and a foretaste of an adult lifetime of full-time employment. In Hong Kong, that is exactly who occupies this employment niche. Due to the lack of education, experience and skills, people at such a young age have great difficulties in finding jobs, as there are very few opportunities for them. The fast food industry is thus, to some extent, a stepping stone for entering the labor market for thousands of young people.

Basically, fast food workers can be divided into two main groups according to age: housewives and youngsters. Due to the restrictions of the Employment Ordinance that the minimum working age in Hong Kong is fifteen years of age, all of the young workers are above this age. Most of them are below eighteen years old, which is the end of secondary school age. This predominance of fifteen to eighteen year olds, to a very large extent reflects the education system

in Hong Kong. All secondary school students have to sit for the Hong Kong Certificate Examination (HKCEE) after the fifth form. Many young people started working at a Burger Master when they were having the long summer vacation after attending the HKCEE. This is the period when most of the young people started entering the labor market. As they do not have high education level, most of them have no choice but to knock on the doors of fast food restaurants.

Most Burger Master workers are of the opinion that fast food jobs are for youngsters and might even be acceptable for people in their early twenties. But no workers, not even managers want to see themselves working as crew members there into their late twenties. Young adults, who are in the age range from eighteen to twenty-five, can also be found behind the counter. However, people in this age range are seldom at the bottom of the restaurant hierarchy. Most of them have worked at Burger Master for several years so have climbed up to the trainer position at least. These young adults include five assistant managers who are in their early twenties. In the restaurant where I worked, no crew workers are in their late twenties. This clearly shows that none of the youngsters get stuck at the bottom of the fast food industry for their whole lives. The future of the youngsters is either to quit or to be promoted. This fits well with the hierarchy pyramid of the corporation which will be discussed in the following chapter.

2.1.2 Gender

It is known for some time that low-wage work is often women's work. Fast food jobs, typical examples of low-wage work, are overwhelmingly held by females. In the restaurant I worked at, about 70% of the workers were female.

As mentioned before, according to age, the workers can be divided into two main groups, housewives and youngsters. The age factor cannot be ignored when we look at the gender ratio, as workers who are over thirty are all female. The gender ratio is totally different for those who are under thirty, nearly half of them are male.

It has to be noted that the gender ratio changes with the different time shifts. This is best shown in the morning shift when most of the workers are middle-aged women. In the Burger Master I worked, the morning shift is dominated by females. Most of these females are middle-aged women who only worked in the morning, when their kids are at school. Only a few of them are young girls. In most of the morning shifts, there are very few males working in the restaurant. In the afternoon hours, the gender ratio changes, as more male youngsters start working at this shift. But still, there are more female workers as some of the housewives also work in this section. The male proportion increases in the night shift as most of the housewives leave in the late afternoon. Nearly all of the workers at the closing section are male youngsters. One reason is, according to several female colleagues, parents do not allow them to work late as it is believed to be unsafe.

Time	Male Youth	Female Youth	Housewife	Manager / Manageress	Total
6:00am	0	2	5	1	8
11:00am	1	5	10	2	18
4:00pm	6	6	7	3	22
9:00pm	6	4	2	2	14
1:00am	4	0	1	1	6

Fig. 2.1 The Number of Workers from Different Categories at Different Working Times in a Sample Day

2.1.3 Education¹

Fast food restaurants are commonly thought to be the refuge of secondary school dropouts who lack the skills and credentials to do any better in the labor market. This is one of the reasons why hamburger flippers rate so poorly in the prestige game. They are often defined as uneducated people with no other options. It is obvious that the economy and labor market favors the well-educated. Their incomes have risen while secondary school dropouts have seen a precipitous loss in their wages and their employment rates.

Not surprisingly, the education level of the young workers in fast-food restaurants is not high. Some of the young workers are those who quit school after finishing the third form. Although most of the young workers quit school at quite an early age, some of them are potential university students. However, university students seldom work in fast-food restaurants. Thus those potential university students only work at Burger Master when they are still in secondary school. In fact, it is a kind of joke when the university students say that they have to work in fast food restaurants. It is widely accepted by the public that fast-food workers and university students are two very different categories that could not be related to one another. This is also true among the fast food workers. During my fieldwork, before identifying myself as a master's student, I was always asked by my colleagues why a university student like me had to work as a crew, earning \$14 per hour. "Why don't you work as a private tutor? You can earn far more than working at here. Why are you stuck here?" Private tutor is a very common part-time among university students. As private

¹ Hong Kong education system provides nine-year free but mandatory education to all citizens between the ages of six and 15, up to the third form of secondary curriculum. The secondary curriculum is offered in five-year secondary courses leading to the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE). After the HKCEE, one can have further studies by taking the two-year sixth-form course, which leads to the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKAL).

tutors, young people can earn more than a hundred dollars per hour². One assistant manager said jokingly, “Only those university students who have to do research will work at here.” During my application, another assistant manager accidentally saw my application form with “The Chinese University of Hong Kong” in the blank of “School Name.” With a bit surprise, he asked me, “Oh, the Chinese University of Hong Kong! Do you work for gaining some ‘special’ life experience?” To him, and also most of the workers inside, my presence in Burger Master was just for experiencing another type of life, a totally different way of life. One middle-aged colleague even said to me, “Being a university student, it’s okay for you to have fun at here for a short time. Just spend some time here to have fun. If you find out that you don’t like it, just quit then. You know, you can’t make much money here.” She regarded me as a university student who was searching for fun in working at Burger Master, but not earning money. To most of the young workers, working with university students or even master’s students is beyond their imagination. “I have never imagined that I can meet a master’s student here in Burger Master,” one 17-year-old colleague told me. “In fact, I have never thought of having a master’s student as my friend,” she added. Even though some of the managers are university graduates who entered the management directly, it is incredible to them to work as a crew person with a university student or even a master’s student.

Not only the university students, but also students in sixth and seventh forms are regarded as rare cases in fast food restaurants. Many young people started working at a Burger Master when they were having the long summer

² The tuition rate varies according to various factors like education level of both the student and the tutor, the background of the family, and etc. There is no standard rate and it is often negotiated by the tutors and parents. Usually, the hourly rate for secondary student tuition is \$100 or more.

vacation after attending the HKCEE³. This is the period when most of the young people started entering the work market. However, those who can get to the sixth form after the summer vacation would mostly quit the job at the end of the summer when school starts. Only very few of them still keep working on Saturdays and Sundays after entering the sixth form. Ah Pang was one of the fifth form students who just wanted to spend the summer vacation in Burger Master at the beginning. He kept his job at the fast food restaurant after entering the sixth form. He regarded himself as a “rare” case inside Burger Master as nearly none of his colleagues, including most of the managers, had as high education as he did. He said to me, “To be honest, people there (in Burger Master) are not well educated. For me, a sixth form student, it’s unnecessary to stay working there. You know, the wage is really too low. There are many other opportunities for me as I’m more educated.” In Hong Kong, the two-year period of sixth and seventh form is known as a preparation period for entering the university. Therefore, those who can enter the sixth form after the open examination are regarded as potential university students. Of course, not all students in the seventh form can continue their studies in a university. However, those who graduate in the seventh form have more chances in jobs with a higher salary. Most of the young workers inside Burger Master have finished the fifth form only. Since they did not get good results in the HKCEE and could not continue their studies, they decided to work. Some of them prefer working, rather than spending a year to re-take the same examination.

Youths with education lower than the fifth form are also found inside Burger Master. However, such population is much less than fifth form graduates.

³ Since the HKCEE ends in mid-June, the candidates thus have a longer summer holiday than other students whose summer holiday usually begins in mid-July. Therefore, many HKCEE candidates would have their very first time to find a summer job in this period of time.

Sunky was a fifth form student. She quit school after having studied in the fifth form for three months, without taking the HKCEE as most fifth form students do. "You know, I would have to sit for the HKCEE a few months later. I knew that I cannot get a good result or even pass it. Why bother then? I think it's better for me to work, rather than to study." Sunky's case of quitting school in the middle of the school year is not very common among Hong Kong youths. However, third form and fourth form graduates like Ah Yan and Kat, my key informants, are sometimes found behind the counter.

2.1.4 Family

Hong Kong's fast food labor force was composed mainly of young people who are living at home with their parents. Most of the young workers are living in a nuclear household, that is, with both parents and siblings. As a matter of fact, the young workers cannot earn enough money to launch independent lives and are therefore forced to remain at home, especially in Hong Kong where housing is so expensive. Indeed, according to the statistics from the Census and Statistics Department, more than 80% of youths aged between 15 to 24 live with their families.⁴

Some would expect that the young fast food workers are from poor families which need their financial support. In contrast to Newman's findings that most of the young fast food workers in Harlem are working poor who have to live on the little money earned from their fast food jobs, the income the youngsters in Hong Kong received is usually not a critical source of support in their households. Instead, the family burdens are still on the backs of the their family members. Although most of the young workers give money to their parents, it has to be

⁴ The statistics are taken from the Hong Kong Monthly Digest of Statistics (May 1998), which is based on the 1996 Population By-Census (96BC).

noted that it does not necessarily mean to be financial support, as pointed out by Ah Bo, “Yes, I do give money to my parents every month. But the fact is that there isn’t much money that I can give. What I’m making can only cover my daily expenses. Indeed, my family does not need my support. I keep contributing money every month so as to fulfill my responsibility as a member of my family.” Instead of supporting family, some young workers even receive pocket money from their parents. Most of them are from working class families. Although the reality is that they are mostly from lower class families, these youths are not as poor as one might imagine. It has to be noted that none of their families live on supports from the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme offered by the Social Welfare Department⁵. Surprisingly, a few of them even live in expensive private flats.

2.2 The Young Burger Master Workers

From the information above, we can have a general picture of who the young fast food youngsters are. However, even if they were working together with colleagues of the same age, the same education level, the same position and the same wage, their stories of how and why they got their job and what they do with the money are very different. Therefore, the individuals need to be studied closely. Through looking at the following stories of my five key informants, Ah How, Ah Tung, Ah Yan, Ada and Kat, it is hoped that a precise portrait of the young fast food workers can be seen.

⁵ The objective of Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme is to provide a safety net for those proven to be in need of financial assistance. The Scheme is designed to enable such individuals and families to meet their basic and special needs. To be eligible, the applicant must be a Hong Kong resident and have resided in Hong Kong for at least one year. The monthly household income is insufficient to meet the recognized needs under the CSSA Scheme and the total value of the capital assets of the household must not exceed the prescribed limits. For example, for a family with four members involving any able-bodied adult, the asset limit is HK\$64,000.

Behind the counter, there are many different stations inside the grill, everyone is busy preparing different kinds of food products. Every worker moves his/her feet quickly from station to station in order to satisfy the continuous calls from the counter. This is where Ah How and Ah Tung had spent many nights. Both of them enjoy working at the grill very much. Their laughter from the grill can always be heard even at the counter, the place where Ada, Kat and Ah Yan usually work at. When both the customers and managers are not around, Ada, Kat and Ah Yan usually join their laughter, making fun and telling jokes with each other. This is how these five youngsters have spent most of their nights at Burger Master.

2.2.1 Ah How's World

Ah How entered Burger Master after sitting in the HKCEE, when he was 17 years old. He decided to enter the work world before the release of the HKCEE result, as he knew too well that he could not meet the qualifications for entering the sixth form. Besides, he was not interested in schoolwork. That was why he did not take the HKCEE again to fight for another chance. "It's meaningless. The result will just be the same if I sit for the HKCEE again. I don't want to waste time on it anymore." "It was too boring to be at home all day long with nothing to do. My mom always scolded at me of wasting my time. This made me think of why not pick up a job so that I can not only spend my time meaningfully but also make some money by myself?"

Graduated from a Band 5 secondary school, Ah How is usually regarded not only as having poor academic results and having no interest in study, but also as being bad. It is true that some of his ex-classmates were triad members. However, Ah How regarded himself as totally different from his bad

ex-classmates. Once while having barbecue after work late one night, we met some gangsters and were in real trouble and danger. Several of the gangsters tried to beat us due to some misunderstandings. Luckily, one of them was Ah How's ex-classmate, whom he had not met since he graduated. Having explained the whole matter to Ah How's ex-classmate and jokingly promised to give them free food and drinks when they go to the Burger Master where we worked, the gangsters let us go eventually. All of us were scared, including Ah How himself. In the following day, Ah How said he wanted to quit Burger Master. It was not because he wanted to find a better job or had other future plans, but because he did not want to have any connections with the gangsters. "I don't want them to cause any troubles for me. You never know when they will come. If they really come, what can I do? I can do nothing. I don't want to have any connections with them. They are not easy to deal with." Since the day we met the gangsters, Ah How had asked me for several times whether I thought he was bad or not. "You may think that I'm as bad as them, right? I'm not that bad. I'm different from them. At least I have a normal job and they don't." It was very important to him to distinguish himself from them. He cared a lot how the others looked at him, especially his friends and colleagues. The fast food job was not only a way to make money, but also an identity that Ah How could distinguish himself from those who were labeled as "bad" in the society.

There is a park near the shopping mall where the restaurant is located. This is where Ah How had spent many nights drinking beer and talking with his colleagues. His shift was from three o'clock in the afternoon to the closing, which was usually around one o'clock in the midnight. Every night after the closing, he talked with Ah Tung in that park until at least two or three at night.

Sometimes, other colleagues and assistant managers would also join the after-work chat. "It's the most enjoyable time of each day. I really treasured it a lot. Sometimes we even drink beer and wine together and talk until dawn. It's good to have someone to share and talk with you every night."

Wednesdays were Ah How's days off. He seldom stayed at home and he hated to do so, as he often thought that his elder brother and parents did not care about him. He usually slept until late in the afternoon and then hanged out with his friends until very late at night. However, Burger Master was the place where he would definitely drop by on Wednesdays. He would Sometimes in order to help his friends to finish the work earlier, he would even give them a helping hand without pay. "I don't want to wait (for Ah Tung) for that long. It's just what I do every night. It's not a big deal. Even if I were paid to do so, it would only be a very small amount of money, you know. Who's going to care about that several dollars?" There was one night before the visit of the area supervisor, several workers were asked to work overnight in order to clean the whole restaurant thoroughly. Ah How was one of the employees who was willing to stay. "I am not working for, but helping the managers and the restaurant. They (the managers) are my friends. When they need help, I would help them for sure. I don't care whether I'm paid to do so or not. It's not that important."

Being the youngest son at home, with all other members are working, Ah How does not have much burden from his family. He lived with his parents, who were both factory workers, in a public housing estate. Even though he made little money, he gave part of his income to his parents every month. To him, working meant being independent. While being asked of his parents' view on his job, he told me with a smile on his face, "They have never said a word

about my job. I think they know it well that it's too hard for me to get a real job at this moment. They can't expect more. In fact, they don't care. You know, I have no working experience. As long as I'm working, no matter how little I earn, they won't bother me, at least in the near future. Maybe they'll push me to find some better jobs later. But it's my own business, not theirs. I don't want to think of such long-term things and now is not the suitable time to do so." Ah How stopped asking for money from his family after having beginning to work at Burger Master. This continued even when Ah How quit Burger Master after having worked for more than a half year. Even without any income and not enough money for eating outside, he did not ask for a cent from his family. "I had a job before and I used to live on my own money. Quitting the job (at Burger Master) was my own decision and thus I should be responsible for it, rather than asking my parents for pocket money like a kid, even though I am unemployed now."

Ah How left Burger Master after six months as he found it difficult to climb up to higher positions. "Everyone wants to be promoted and so do I. No one likes to be a *crew* for a whole life. But it takes at least several years and lots of efforts to reach the management level. It's too much to me. I prefer working elsewhere or taking some vocational training courses." Two months after he quit, I saw Ah How in a local Chinese fast food restaurant working as a crew. "It's difficult to find a job. There are not many opportunities for me, you know. Maybe I'll stay working here for years. Or maybe I'll quit a month later. Who knows? I have no idea of what my future will be and I don't want to think too much on it."

2.2.2 Ah Tung's World

Ah Tung went to Burger Master everyday on his professional mountain

bike, with the latest model of MD player and the trendiest mobile phone in his pocket. This was also where most of his money earned from working at Burger Master went. His aim for working at Burger Master was getting enough money to pay for the stuff he wanted. Although he often claimed to be poor himself, he spent most of his money on luxuries. Ah Tung lived with his family in a residence provided by his father's company. All his family members (father, mother and elder brother) were working and thus they were capable to buy a brand new private flat, which cost more than a million dollars. Even though he did not have any burden from his family, he contributed certain amount of money every month. Although the money made by Ah Tung was very little when compared with his family members, he did not have any pressure. "Sometimes my dad would ask about my future plans. They (his family members) expect me to quit Burger Master and find a real job in the future but they don't push me. Dad says that I am still young and thus I can do and try whatever I want. They know that I want to stay working at here (Burger Master) to try to get into the management level and they support me. Later, maybe it would be me who wants to quit rather than being pushed by them! Who knows?"

Ah Tung got three marks⁶ in the HKCEE. "Studying is not suitable to me and thus I won't force myself to do so. I'm not that kind of person. Why bother?" He was a typical case of how most of youngsters in Burger Master and other fast food corporations entered the industry. As mentioned before, many fifth forms students are left out of the further educational institution. Therefore, many youngsters have to enter the work world after finishing the fifth

⁶ Students have to take at least six subjects in the HKCEE as six subjects are taken into account. One can get five marks for an A, four marks for a B, three marks for a C, and etc. Therefore, the full mark is thirty. If one wants to have a chance to enter the sixth form, he/she has to gain at least fourteen marks. Since Ah Tung had three marks only, it was not possible for him to enter the sixth form.

form. Before entering the fast food industry, Ah Tung did not have any future career plan. "After receiving the results of HKCEE, I had no idea of what I could do. In fact, you can do nothing with three marks, except re-taking the HKCEE and I won't do that. That means I have to work. You don't have a third choice. If you don't want to study, then you have to work. I didn't have any idea of what kind of job I could take. You know, I have no experience and skills. And thus I came here (Burger Master) to have a try as this is where many young people work at." To him, this is a try of stepping into the labor market and making his own money. Knowing that fast food industry was the first stepping stone for many youngsters to enter the work world, Ah Tung applied to Burger Master, without any other considerations. "When the idea of getting a job came to my mind, the name of Burger Master popped up immediately. I just don't know why. Just like the case when students want to get summer jobs, most of them will knock on this door. Also, when you go to any fast food restaurant, you can see most of the workers are youngsters. Maybe that's the reason. I don't know. I just can't think of any job that's suitable for young people like me except this (job at Burger Master)." Indeed, there was not much choice in front of him. Future career plan was beyond his consideration.

After working for a few months, Ah Tung told me that he wanted to climb up to higher positions in Burger Master, rather than hunting for a more stable job or job that pays better. Even though he agreed that the job is menial and exploiting, he did not mind and worked as hard as he could. His performance was so good that the managers taught him lots of things in the advance level. He was also given a chance to work at the counter. For one to be promoted, he/she has to perform well and know all the techniques in all three areas: grill,

counter and lobby. However, such hard work and earnestness did not bring him what he had expected. "I don't mind working hard for the restaurant. I don't even mind devoting myself to the job, even though it pays so low. But it does not mean that they can trick me. Both Ah Ming and Wiss (assistant managers) promised me that I would be promoted in the following month. However, nothing has happened and two months have passed. Do they remember who worked for them overnight so that they could pass the supervision? There were days that they treat me so well and told me that they would raise my salary. Yes, I got fifty cents more per hour but what I want is promotion." Feeling desperate and deceived, Ah Tung believed that this Burger Master was not the right place for him. "It's totally political, you know. You have to please all those above you, that means the trainers, team leaders and managers, as they have the power to decide whether promoting you or not. How can I please them all?" Regarding himself as the loser of the political game, Ah Tung decided to leave. He told me that he would apply to another Burger Master in the same district, for he still wanted to climb up to the management ladder for he thought himself as knowing nothing but only flipping hamburgers. Six months later, I met Ah Tung in the same Burger Master restaurant. With a trainer name tag on his uniform, he was no longer a crew member. "At that time, I really wanted to quit and I have decided to do so. But the managers asked me to stay as I performed well in my job and they promised me to promote me. If I switch to another branch, that means I have to start the whole thing again from the beginning. Even though I know how the jobs should be done, it takes me time to build a trust relationship with the new colleagues there. This is essential for promotion. So, why not stay here?"

2.2.3 Kat's World

Kat, who has just finished the third form, started working at Burger Master after the summer vacation. She should have been studying in the fourth form at that time but she chose to quit school. She did not have any interest in schoolwork. Despite knowing it well that education would bring her a brighter future, she still chose not to continue. "If I were good at schoolwork as *Wiss* (an assistant manageress with a university degree) did, I could enter the management level directly, rather than starting the whole thing as a *crew member*, making only \$14 an hour. I know that well. I just have no talent and no interest in schoolwork. It's useless to force myself to continue." After having worked at Burger Master, she understood more and more the value of education in handling her work, even the so-called "no skill work" at Burger Master. "Before, I thought it (the job at Burger Master) was like a piece of cake. Everyone knows that people who work at here are all not good at schoolwork. But now, I know that if I want to climb up, I have to study. All assistant managers had to take several courses offered by the corporation before promotion. Well, I must say that it's a big luck to me as what I have to study is no longer Mathematics or History, but something about how to get this job done. Anyway, education is really important even to this job. No one wants to be a *crew member* for a whole life, you know." After knowing that I was a university graduate, she kept asking me to teach her English. "I can't handle the counter work if I don't know English. You know, I just know a few words like hamburger, muffin, coffee, drinks, etc. No matter how good I am at the counter work, I still fail in dealing with foreign customers." Whenever there were foreigners, Kat would ask me to deal with them, as she was not confident enough to do so.

Even though Kat was only sixteen, she believed that it was her turn to contribute to the support of her family when she started working. Making approximately \$4000 a month, she gave \$2000 to her parents. "I don't need much money, you know. Burger Master provides me two meals a day. I work for six days a week and thus I don't have to spend much money on entertainment. Indeed, I don't have the time and energy to spend much money. The job is really exhausting. Of course, I would like to have more money to pay for the clothes I want, the newest CDs, etc. But I'm not a student anymore and I have responsibilities to my family and also myself." Like most of the young workers who have entered the work world, even without any family burdens, she believed that she had the responsibility to support her family. However, Kat did not gain enough support from her parents. "They (Kat's parents) say that I shouldn't work the closing shift as it is too dangerous for me to go home so late. My father thinks that it's not a big deal to leave a couple of hours earlier as the pay is so low. He doesn't understand that money is not what I care most. I really enjoy working with them (colleagues) during the closing shift. Even though they (Kat's parents) doesn't push me to do something else, it doesn't mean that they support me to continue working at here (Burger Master)."

Kat was a very earnest worker. Even when there were only a few customers, she still worked as fast as she could. She loved her job very much and thus she wanted to have a bright future at Burger Master, that means climbing up to the management ladder. However, she left after six months as she thought the chance of promotion in that branch was small. She then applied to another Burger Master in the same district. On the next day, Kat decided to go back, "I miss the friends and 'mothers' here (the first Burger Master she worked). The 'mothers' treated me so well as if I'm their own

daughter. Also, the young colleagues treat each other like brothers and sisters. We're just like a family and I have very close ties with them all. How can I leave them?" Many young workers called the middle-aged female workers as "mothers." The "mothers" often treated the youngsters as their own sons and daughters that they would care about them and even bring them cooked food for lunch and dinner. Sometimes, the youngsters would consult the "mothers" when they have to make some decisions as if they are their own parents.

Once after the closing, we had wine and talked overnight together. As it was not allowed by her father, Kat was scared that he would punish her and thus she did not want to go home. Still being drunk and not knowing where to go, she asked me to take her back to the Burger Master early in the following morning. Even though the managers did not allow that at first, they still let her rest in the crew room. To her, Burger Master was a shelter outside home, or even more secure than home.

2.2.4 Ada's World

With scars and wounds on her arms, Ada always worked as hard and as fast as she could. Nearly all of her wounds and scars were from working at Burger Master, especially during the closing shift, when Ada had to wash the machines and often got hurt by them. Although Ada was only a crew person, she was a well-experienced fast food worker. She was capable to work at all stations. She also knew how to train the new staff and was the one who taught me on the counter and cash register. She was only seventeen but she had already had two years fast food experience in total.

Ada started working part-time at another branch of Burger Master after sitting for the HKCEE. As her result was not adequate for studying in the sixth

form, she chose repeating the fifth form in a night school. She kept working at that branch until the shop manager left for another branch. Getting failed again in the following HKCEE, she decided to enter the work world. After having tried several jobs, she went back to a Burger Master, a branch where her ex-shop manager had shifted to. To her, the shop manager was a good boss and she would like to work below her. More important, the shop manager knew her before and thus it would be beneficial for promotion. Looking at her scars, she said, "I want to climb up the management ladder, of course. Otherwise, I won't work that hard." There was once she got drunk after the closing shift, unconsciously she shouted, "I'm really sorry. It was my fault that I gave the wrong change to the customer. Please forgive me. I promise that it won't happen again. Manager, would you please promote me? I'm very good at the closing work. You know, I always wash all the machines as fast as I can. Promote me, please!" Indeed, Ada was experienced enough to be promoted and it was only a matter of timing. She had been in this Burger Master for just two months and there was no vacancy for promotion at that time. Another reason for Ada's hard work was her father's injury.

While teaching me on the counter and cash register, Ada told me, "Burger Master is like your home. You want your home to earn more money, right? So you have to be careful so that you won't waste anything, and work as fast as you can." I was shocked, as no crew people would say that. Only those in the higher positions, mostly the manager, would tell the staffs that Burger Master is like their home. Ada was just a crew worker but experienced enough to be a trainer that she knew well how to use ideology to train new staffs.

Ada worked from three o'clock to the closing time. Usually she went home after one o'clock in the morning. Her father was often disappointed as

she went home late. "He doesn't like me working at the closing section. Parents like their daughters going home early. However, there are not enough crew members for closing and they need me. Not many people can work that late. Therefore, I work as fast as I could so that I can go home earlier. In fact, if I want to be promoted, it would be better if I do the closing. It's the shift that you can learn things and techniques that cannot be learnt in other shifts. You know, each machine has to be washed in different ways. Besides, the managers will think that you're willing to devote yourself to the job and thus they would like to promote you."

Ada was more mature than most of the young employees at Burger Master in the sense that she had her own future plan, even though she was only seventeen years old, "I have to save money for my marriage in the future. Getting married is what I really want to do. My boyfriend and I have opened an account together and we put certain amount of money into it every month. Although it's still a very small amount of money, it's a good start." As the only source of income for her future plan was the job at Burger Master, Ada cared a lot about her job, even though it was menial.

However, after several months, Ada asked me to introduce her some secretarial job so that she could leave Burger Master. "Ah Man (team leader) has spent four years in climbing up to the team leader position. How can I spend several years in making not more than twenty dollars per hour? I can't wait that long. Also, if I want to be promoted to *trainer*, I have to please all of the managers, trainers and team leaders. You know, it's too hard. Also, as my father doesn't allow me to do the closing now, the managers won't consider me anymore." In order to equip herself for future careers, she decided to join the

Youth Pre-employment Training Programme⁷. After having left for a week for the program⁸, one assistant manager, Ah Ming, scolded at her, using foul language, saying that it was useless. “What have you learnt? You have learnt nothing. You were just wasting your time as you still get stuck at here with no way out. You’d better work hard and don’t take any leave again.” Managers seldom encouraged the young workers to join such kind of employment training programs, as it was troublesome for them to find other workers filling up the temporary vacancies. Besides the non-encouraging response of the managers, there was the fact that such training programs did not help. Ada told me, “In fact, I agree with Ah Ming that it’s useless and meaningless. You just sit there and spend your time on listening to boring things and then you’ll get a certificate. What can I do with that certificate? Nothing! Anyone can get as many such kind of certificates as they want to.”

Ada quit Burger Master eventually for she had found a secretarial job at a child daycare center. “I’m so happy that I can have this job with stable salary and fringe benefits. Even though the pay is not very high, it’s far better than working at Burger Master. I’m not saying that jobs at Burger Master are not good, but it’s not enough to support my family. Such jobs are only suitable for those who don’t have any burdens on their backs. You know, my father was seriously injured and he couldn’t work anymore. Even though my mom also goes to work, she can’t make enough money to support the whole family. I have to take up the responsibility.” Even though she has had a stable job, she`

⁷ The Youth Pre-employment Training Programme was launched by the Hong Kong Government. Its target was secondary school dropouts aged from 15 to 19. Through a series of courses about employment in a six-month program, it aimed at raising the vocational skills, self-confidence and competitiveness in the labor market of the youth. Several young workers in Burger Master have joined this program.

still worked as a part-time worker in another Burger Master branch on Saturdays and Sundays. “To me, working at Burger Master is not a job anymore, but just for fun. I enjoy working with people of my age. My view on fast food job has changed a lot. When I was a full-time Burger Master worker, I would devote myself into the job so as to get the attention of the managers. But now, I’m just a part-time worker, I don’t care much about it. I can go to work for a couple of hours when I like or I can skip my shifts to hang out with my boyfriend.”

2.2.5 Ah Yan’s World

Ah Yan quit school after having finished the third form. She was at the very young age of fourteen when working at Burger Master. “I just don’t like studying. It’s too boring. Also, even if I want to continue, my father won’t let me to as he thought that I was not capable to do so.” In finding a job, Ah Yan did not have any plan and priority. She just hung around in the shopping malls nearby and tried to apply every vacancy that she could find. Different from the above cases, Ah Yan’s mother played an important role in her job hunting experience. “My mom helped me a lot in finding jobs. She often suggested some jobs to me and then I would go there to have a try. I can’t do that without my mom’s permission. She worried a lot as she thought that I would be cheated easily.” Having been rejected for several times, she figured out the underlying rule. Ah Yan lied about her age when applying to Burger Master, knowing that they wouldn’t give her the job if they knew how old she really was. Nearly no one knew that she had not even reached fifteen. “I won’t tell anybody as they won’t hire me. You know, I’m too young. I have tried applying many jobs before and got reply from none of them.” Ah Yan did not

⁸ The course Ada took lasted for a week only.

make much money from her menial job, but her mother supported her a lot. “It was my mom who introduce me to this job. She said that I shouldn’t complain, as I was still too young. Having a job was enough, no matter what kind of job it were. To you, the wage here (Burger Master) maybe too low. But to me, this is quite a lot of money. I even don’t know how to spend the money I have earned. My mom told me to deposit the money in the bank for my future use. She said I didn’t have to give her any money. So, I just follow what she told me to do.”

There was once one of her ex-classmates saw her working at Burger Master and spread the news to the others. According to Ah Yan, she was then often teased by her ex-classmates because of her job. Ah Yan claimed that she did not care much about that, “So what? I’m just working. There’s nothing laughable.” Indeed, it did matter to her as she often tried to avoid being seen by friends and ex-classmates. It clearly shows that to both Ah Yan and her ex-classmates, fast food job is looked down upon. The job itself is a stigma attached to the worker.

Ah Yan did not stay long at Burger Master. She quit after working for 3 months, as she thought the job was too harsh and demanding. There was also another reason. It was because of her poor social skills. Nearly everyone in the restaurant had negative comments on Ah Yan as she was a troublemaker. Not only serving the customers badly and slowly, she also behaved impolitely in front of other colleagues, as well as the managers. She was not a popular person inside the restaurant. Being fat and aggressive, Ah Yan was not welcomed by other colleagues. She was often the one to be ignored and teased. Even the managers treated her disrespectfully, and thus Ah Yan decided to leave such unpleasant place without any hesitation. After her quit,

Ah Yan had tried several jobs but none of them lasted long. She was once working at KFC but quit again after several months due to bad relationships with colleagues.

Ah How, Ah Tung, Kat, Ada and Ah Yan do not inhabit the very bottom of Hong Kong's social order. At least, they are not the targets of the welfare system and public aid. They are only the "loser" in the local education system. Our society has deeply implanted an idea that when one chooses to quit school, that means he/she has to enter the work world. Therefore all the above youngsters chose to work even though they had no idea of what work and future mean. Since their education level are not high enough to compete with those more educated or more experienced people, it seems to them that they have no other choice but taking up low-wage jobs. Nearly none of them has any concrete future plans in their heads. Fast food job is only a stepping stone for entering the work world. Only after taking up the menial fast food job did they start considering whether they should stay and climb up the management ladder or look for a brighter future elsewhere. This will be discussed in details in the following chapters.

Chapter 3 Working at Burger Master

For many people, in particular women and youths, the kind of jobs available to them and the ability to use their creative abilities at work are very restricted. The most available choice for them is the menial jobs, and fast food job is one of the best examples. Besides being known as menial, fast food job is also well known as being routinized, highly scripted and even skill-free that anyone without skills and experience can do. The nature of the job plays an important role in influencing workers' attitudes towards their job and future. In this chapter, we will look into the real situation of the fast food job.

3.1 QSC

Like all fast food chains, Burger Master runs on the principles first pioneered by McDonald's: QSC, standing for *Quality*, *Service*, and *Cleanliness*. Quality is defined as standardization and predictability; service is defined as speed and friendliness; and cleanliness is valued not as a means for ensuring healthfulness, but for its associations with order, which can help promote sales. The standardization of food is presented as a virtue: the customer knows what he/she is going to get. Therefore, the selling of the meal, the service part of the business, is crucial. Friendly, fast food service in pleasant surroundings will provide the incentive to return that the food cannot. The emphasis on cleanliness has a double function for the restaurant. First, it keeps the customers coming in. Second, since workers are told to use any free time for cleaning, it is used to reinforce the message that workers owe full use of their labor time to their employer. Like the friendliness of the crew, cleanliness is used as a promotion for the store. The image to be conveyed is that Burger

Master “cares,” perhaps to make up for so many other aspects of peoples’ lives that are cold and indifferent.

Workers are often reminded by the managers to follow the principles of QSC strictly. For example, in order to maintain the quality of the products, managers keep checking to see whether the jobs are done in correct procedures. There is a “Six Steps of Counter Service” for all counter workers to follow and they are always told to greet the customers with a smile on their face so that the quality of service can be maintained. Whenever there are no customers or other duties, workers are expected to do cleaning in their own working area. In addition, workers have to clean their hands every thirty minutes to maintain cleanliness.

3.2 Inside the Restaurant

There are three main sections in a fast food restaurant: the grill, the counter and the lobby. Inside the grill, there are a number of different stations for producing different food products. There is a part for cooking and assembly of hamburgers, fish sandwiches, chicken sandwiches, and another place for making muffin, one station for fries, and another one for packaging and temporary storing the food products, etc. There are at least one machine for each food product and most of them have timers and buzzers. Almost all foods enter the store ready for the final cooking process. Buns are pre-cut, the fries are also pre-cut and partially pre-cooked, so are the chicken and fish. Pickles and onions are pre-sliced, and the lettuce is pre-shredded. Workers at the grill do not need to know how to cook since what they do is just follow the procedures of making different food products, as well as the beepers and buzzers.

The counter job is a bit different. Workers on the cash register are those who have the most interaction with customers. There is a "Six Steps of Counter Service:" Step 1: Greet the customer; Step 2: Take the order; Step 3: Assemble the order; Step 4: Present the order; Step 5: Receive payment; and Step 6: Thank the customer and ask for repeat business. All the above six steps have to be done within sixty seconds. In place of numbers, the keys on a Burger Master's cash register say "lge fries," "reg fries," "med coke," and so on. Each food product has its own key on the cash register. Some cash registers even have pictures on the key caps. Therefore, instead of the price of each food product, workers have to memorize the positions of the keys. Suggestive selling of particular food products is another duty of counter workers. For example, if a customer orders only a hamburger, workers should suggest him/her to have a drink or snack or the new food products. Working at the lobby is a lot more easier than other sections. The lobby work includes collecting trays, cleaning tables and the dining hall, and packing the rubbish bins. Such job does not need any particular skill and thus anyone can do it. In some branches of Burger Master in Hong Kong, some mentally retarded people are hired to work at the lobby area. There were three mentally retarded workers in the Burger Master I worked at and all of them were only assigned to the lobby job.

Management encourages "cross-training," although in practice, crew people tend to be assigned the same jobs each shift they work in order to save costs on training.

3.3 Learning the Job

The crew training process is how Burger Master's standardization is maintained. A four-step process is recommended by the corporation for trainers, team leaders and managers to train new crew people. Such process includes preparation, presentation, trying out, and following up. Videotape of how the particular job should be done is shown to the crew people at first. They then have to watch an experienced worker illustrating the job in detail. Next, crew people try the job themselves in front of the trainer. In the follow-up step, speed and competence are built up. The fast food work is arranged so that none of the jobs is difficult to learn, but with practice, workers can pick up speed at a particular station.

On the first morning of my work, I was assigned to the muffin station inside the grill. Before working, I was first asked to watch the videotape of how muffins should be made in great detail, as well as how to use the cooking equipment and machines, the functions of different utensils, etc. Then an assistant manager told me to work with a middle-aged woman, Ah Ching, who was a crew person in charge of the muffin station during the breakfast section. She showed me how to make different types of muffins and the special technique for breaking the muffin into two by hand, distinguishing the upper and lower part of the muffin, putting them into the oven, adding butter, cooking eggs, sausage and bacon, and how to operate different machines, etc. Since it was during the rush hour in the morning, Ah Ching could only show me once how the whole thing should be done and I was then asked to work on the part of breaking the muffins into two pieces and putting them into the oven with her.

On the second day, I was on the night shift. An assistant manager assigned me to work at the muffin station again. However, this time I had to

work alone. At first, I was quite confident. However, I was in a real mess after a few minutes. Not knowing the special techniques of putting the muffins into the oven and cooperating with other stations, which were not described in the video, I burned more than ten muffins inside the oven. The oven was nearly damaged and I was severely scolded and teased by a *team leader*. Only after that did I understand the importance of following strictly the order of the caller, rather than judging the situation and demand by myself. The caller is a special position inside the grill area. It is the bridge between the counter and the grill and has to be handled by a manager or an experienced *trainer* or *team leader* as judgements on the situation and product demand have to be made. When certain product is out or nearly out, the caller has to make a call so that the grill workers know how many of which product should be produced.

Before this accident, I did not realize that the situation was totally different at night. In the morning shift, as muffins are the major products, the demand is nearly continuous without any break. Therefore, the muffin worker may not need to follow strictly the instructions of the caller and can just keep working continuously. However, the situation is totally different in other shifts. As more food products are available after the morning shift, the demand for muffins decreases and thus the worker will have to follow the caller's instructions strictly. For instance, when the caller calls, "Six eggs," you have to break six muffins into two and put them all in the oven immediately. Then six eggs have to be put into the egg machine and the timer is set. After finishing the above procedures, you have to ask for how many are egg-sausage-muffin. "Four" means four eggs are for making egg-sausage-muffin and the other two are for bacon ones. You can then put four pieces of sausage on the grill and set the timer and put two pieces of bacon on another grill. After that, you have to rush back to the oven and

take the muffins out. The bottom parts are put on the tray; butter and cheese are added on them. You will then hear different “beep-beep” sounds indicating that the eggs, sausage and bacon are done. After placing the ingredients on the muffin, the whole tray with six muffins on it is brought to the caller and you have to say loudly, “Eggs done.” Then you have to wait for another order from the caller. All stations inside the grill have to strictly follow the orders of the caller.

Indeed, no one should be in charge of any particular station. Workers shift to the stations time to time according to the caller’s instruction as well as the positions of the others. When the caller called for six hamburgers and you find the others are busy at other stations, you then have to take up the hamburger order. Since I had only learnt the muffin station, I was assigned to stay there. Even so, sometimes I was still not capable to handle different procedures at the same time. Speed was an important factor. Therefore, some colleagues would give me a helping hand.

On the fourth night, I was then able to handle the whole muffin station alone. After the peak dinner hour, the team leader, asked Ah Tung, another crew, to teach me to prepare beef on the grill. He taught me the ways to use different utensils in different processes, and how to clean the grill each time, how to adjust the timer, even how to place different amounts of beef on the grill. There were many things to learn in the grill. Manager came to me sometimes to check whether what I had learnt was correct or not.

One night, an assistant manager came to me, “Do you know how to work on the cash register? You should be on the counter as you’re a university student. You can definitely handle it. Put down your apron and go to the counter.” The counter is the station where girls would mostly be assigned. No

videotape was shown this time but I was then referred to Ada, an experienced crew person on the counter instead. At the very beginning, Ada asked me to distinguish all kinds of hamburgers and sandwiches on the food bin. After that came recognizing and memorizing the keys on the cash register and how to operate it.

Besides operating the cash register, there are some special techniques and things to be remembered. For assembling food, drinks should be collected first and placed on the central part of the tray so that they would not fall off easily. As food has to be discarded after a certain span of time to maintain freshness, workers have to strictly follow the order for collecting each food product. For example, when there are two rows of fries on the tray, workers can not just pick any of them. They have to pick the one on the right side of the front row. When they are two rows of hamburgers lying side by side, you have to pick the first one on the left first. If there is a row of another product between the two rows of hamburgers, you then have to pick the first one on the right first. I got confused as to what should be picked up first at the beginning. Some experienced colleagues, especially those middle-aged ones, often scolded me when I was wrong. There are many things to be remembered as well, like when each size of paper bag should be used, the exact weight of ice cream for different products, how many pieces of tissue should be given, how many sugar packs should go with tea and coffee, how much ice should be in different sizes of cups, etc. These things seemed to be trivial but all counter workers had to follow them strictly as to reduce waste and expenses of the restaurant. Besides, counter workers have to do the "Six Steps of Counter Service." Crews are supposed to suggest to the customer, "Would you like a drink with that?" or other food products, which are under promotion. The most important thing to know

for working on the cash register was how to zero out an order. For example, a customer wants large coke but change his mind for a medium one after the "total" is pressed, the worker has to zero out the order of the large coke by pressing "0" and large coke. Each crew person could zero out no more than two orders each day. Managers can tell who have cancelled any order by the central computer. After telling me all the rules and things of counter job, Ada asked me to work on the cash register alone. It was not easy to find the correct keys on the cash register, to memorize the orders and to assemble the order according to the rules. Speed was developed after several days.

Besides the above rules, when there is not enough change in your cash register, you have to ask a trainer or someone above to deal with that. It was hard during the peak hours as nobody would be free to do the change for you and you have to wait and also keep the customers waiting. When there is a five-hundred-dollar-note, you cannot accept it immediately. Crews should again ask a trainer or someone above to check if it is a fake note. This keeps workers from making decisions by themselves. For any waste, you have to announce it loudly to let everyone know you have wasted something.

I seldom worked in the lobby. Some workers were specially assigned to this section, included those mentally retarded ones. Other workers would be asked to help sometimes during the peak hours. I was asked to help in the lobby several times without any training. In fact, there were some standardized ways to clean the trays and pack the rubbish bins. I realized that only when other colleagues saw me doing the things incorrectly.

The managers are the people who are responsible for daily enforcement of corporate standards. For example, they often asked the counter workers about the "Six Steps of Counter Service" to ensure they were following the script. I

was once asked by an assistant manager suddenly, "What's the forth step?" Luckily I got some hints by my colleagues so that I could finally come up with the correct answer after a long pause. They want you to be fast and they also want you to follow the scripts strictly. They even time how long you take on one order. Managers are virtually always present behind the counter and in the grill area.

When the store was busy, both the counter and the grill were extraordinarily hectic. From the grill area came the sounds of buzzers buzzing and people shouting instructions and requests. Workers dashed from side to side behind the counter to pick up the various products ordered by the customers. During peak hours, there might be twelve or even fourteen workers on the cash registers, some even have other workers backing up, helping to collect orders. All workers were hurrying in a very small area, often carrying drinks, fries, burgers. Traffic jams frequently formed around the fries area and ice cream machines. Food products were often not ready when needed, frustrating workers' efforts to gather their orders seedily, forcing them to explain to their customers that they would have to wait for their food.

3.4 Teamwork Spirit

Teamwork spirit is an important motivation for young people to devote themselves to the fast food job. Through working as a team, a sense of belonging is constructed. This is one of the strategies used by the fast food corporations to motivate their workers.

During a rush in the restaurant, anywhere from managers may be on the floor offering helpful comments such as, "Let's get with it." Everyone has to response "Yes Sir!" loudly, no matter what they are doing, to the managers.

Sometimes the team leaders do the same thing to keep up the spirit of the whole store. At first, during the rush hours, I could not hear clearly what the managers and team leaders said and did not know how to respond. Later, I found out that it was not necessary to understand what they were saying. You just respond loudly, with other colleagues, and then you can have a high spirit to work as hard and fast as you can. A sense of teamwork is reinforced by this kind of ritual, especially during the rush hours.

An Olympics is held annually. Each store sends a crew member from each station to compete. The person who can perform the work on his/her station fastest while abiding by rules and regulations wins. Some of my colleagues have participated in the Olympics before. Being representatives of the store, workers are eager to win for the store. There are also regular contests within the store, which pit workers against each other and keep people working hard and fast. An employee of the month is selected. A bonus of fifty cents per hour is given. Managers often give an oral quiz to the crew suddenly to ensure that they know the rules and regulations of the stations. Such quizzes are informal. However, managers often give some bonus to those who can give the correct answer like a drink.

Naturally, managers played a major role in keeping crew people hard at work. Their training therefore focuses as much on building commitment and motivation as on extending knowledge on rigid adherence to routines. Teamwork spirit is an important means to keep the workers work hard. There is a custom of saying "Yes, Sir!" loudly in response to the instructions of the managers, team leaders and trainers. Even if you cannot understand clearly what the instruction is or if the instruction is not for you, you still have to say "Yes, Sir!" Such an act helps in establishing a teamwork spirit. Sometimes,

managers would also work side by side with the crew on the cash register as well as issuing instructions and encouraging the others to work as fast as they can.

Racing is another means for establishing teamwork spirit. Crew people like to race as individuals but even more as a team. They like to get on a production mode like a burger-turn-lay and push themselves for a big rush. Especially after some concerts or functions in the shopping mall, the crew enjoy pushing themselves. Many of them said it was the most fun they ever had in Burger Master (see Garson 1989: 30-31 for more information on races inside fast food restaurants).

It is often believed that communication is one of the most valuable tools for controlling workers. According to the managers, crews who understand what is going on and who feel a part of the store life, develop a sense of loyalty and pride. Therefore, "keeping the crew in the know" is seen as very important in maintaining good communication. To this end, crew meetings are held regularly to keep crew informed about the corporation policy and to enlist their support. Crews are told about the new promotion programs. It is also when the new promotion is announced. Prizes like "Best Workers of the Month" are given in the crew meeting. The crew meeting is presented in a party format with free food provided.

Besides the formal crew meeting, there are also times and chances for workers to establish close relationships with each other. When the store was not crowded, workers were expected to keep themselves busy. There was no such a time when they had nothing to do. When there was no customer, workers were expected to clean the cash registers and machines, to mop up the greasy floor, and to replenish the supplies like lids for cups, ketchup, ice, paper

bags, etc. All workstations must be kept clean. As said by a manager, the corporation was proud of its cleanliness, and it was what brought people back. One could often hear the managers saying, "If you think you have nothing to do, grab a broom and sweep. If there's time to lean, there's time to clean." Certainly, workers quickly find that is the case. At first, many people do not like sweeping and mopping. As they become more seasoned workers, they realize that since it is never possible to relax, sweeping and mopping is better than doing nothing, or trying to look busy. This leads to a seem-to-be-busy way for the workers to gossip. When there was no customer, they would then have a towel in their hands and pretended that they are cleaning the cash register, but in fact they were talking with each other, rather than concentrating on cleaning the machine. Although they are not supposed to chat with each other during working hours, the managers would not stop or even join in conversation, as long as the workers are "working". Closing time is another good time for workers to have fun together. They do not have to serve the customers anymore and can then act in the ways they like in the restaurant. They play CDs and sing along loudly together while doing all sorts of cleaning work.

3.5 The Management Ladder

The fast food industry is very good about internal promotion. Workplace management is nearly always recruited from the ranks of entry-level workers. Carefully planned training programs make it possible for employees to move up; to acquire transferable skills, and to at least take a shot at entrepreneurial ownership.

Beginning as a *Crew*, young workers can advance to the position of *Trainer*, then to *Team Leader*. After reaching the position of *Team Leader*, one can

have a chance to get promoted to the management. This requires the workers to undertake some courses and training provided by the corporations. The first level of the management is *Assistant Manager* and then *Shop Manager*. For *Shop Manager*, *Area Supervisor* is the next step, responsible for overseeing the operations of multiple restaurants. From there, employees can progress to jobs within the corporation, or can join the ranks of the corporation's licensees. *Crew*, *Trainer* and *Team Leader* are paid hourly. No insurance or other fringe benefits are provided. Only those who have entered the management can have stable monthly salary and other fringe benefits. For *Crew*, *Trainer* and *Team Leader*, there are both part-time and full-time workers with the same hourly wage.

3.6 Hidden Skills

It is true that the food preparation and the multiple stations behind the counter have been broken down into the simplest operations. Yet to make them work together under time pressure while minimizing wastage requires higher-order skills. We can think of these jobs as lowly, repetitive, routinized, and demeaning, or we can recognize that doing them right requires workers' abilities to process information, coordinate with others and track inventory. These valuable competencies are tucked away inside jobs that are popularly characterized as utterly lacking in skill. In fact, it took me lots of time to learn all those hidden skills. There is much to learn about the french fry machine, about how to get a milk shake to come out right, about the difference between preparing a fish sandwich and a chicken sandwich, about how to key special promotions into the cash register, and about how to forecast demand for each product so that the bins would not overflow and force wastage. All young people

began working as a normal crew member, flipping hamburgers and fries and cleaning the machines. If they were mechanically adept, they learned how to break down the milk-shake machine and put it back together. In fact, over time they learned how to repair virtually every piece of mechanical equipment in the store, so as to avoid the expense of calling in repairmen. People at the closing shift were the ones who were most familiar with the machines. Some experienced workers would even be called to stores nearby to repair mechanical equipment. Indeed, knowing how to disassemble the machinery and rebuild it from scratch is one of the criteria for promotion. These are the hidden knowledge locked up inside what appears to surface observers and to many employees themselves as a job that requires no thinking, no planning and no skill.

While schooling separates those destined for good jobs from those likely to spend their lives in the low-wage world, entry-level positions in industries like fast food do provide opportunities for learning, for developing skills that should make a difference in occupational mobility. This, of course, is hardly what “McJob” is known for. Entry-level jobs of this kind are undeserving of this scorn that more skills, discretion, and responsibility are locked up in a fast food job.

Chapter 4 Cultural Challenges

The fast food job is notoriously stigmatized and denigrated in Hong Kong. This chapter deals with the cultural challenges and moral dilemmas that attend low-wage work. It also investigates how young people who take up fast food job confront the stigma. The stigma affects not only the public view of fast food workers, but also influences how the workers look at themselves, their job and even their future.

4.1 Public Perceptions

Low wage is the most influential factor that gives rise to the stigma of a fast food job. The public perception is that there is very little potential for improvement in status or responsibility either, and fast food workers are not likely to end up in a prestigious job as a general manager or restaurant owner. Not only because of the low wages but also the nature of the job, which is highly routinized, it is generally known as alienating and low skill. It is also commonly believed that fast food jobs are exploitative because of the menial wage. People working inside are regarded as having no choice and even no future if they get stuck at the grill for their whole life with no way out. There is a general perception in Hong Kong that people working in fast food restaurants are those who have few other opportunities. This is one of the reasons why hamburger flippers rate so poorly in the prestige game that they are defined as uneducated people with no other options.

4.1.1 Having No future

One of the public perceptions on fast food work is that such jobs have no

future. In Hong Kong, even though there are several well-known stories of great success of people with little education, it is usually believed that education is the most important factor for a bright future. Those who have little education are believed to have to end up spending their lives in low-wage work. It is no doubt true that education separates those destined for good jobs from those likely to spend their lives in the low-wage world. There is a general perception that fast food workers are those who do not have any interest in schoolwork or even are losers in the education system. Fast food industry is commonly thought to be the refuge of secondary school dropouts who lack the skills and credentials to do any better in the labor market.

The public perception fueled by knowledge of wage conditions is that there is very little potential improvement in status or responsibility either. Although most managers are promoted internally, the vast majority never even gets close to rising to management. Although it is quite possible to rise above the fray and make a very respectable living as a manager overseeing the restaurant, most crew members remain at the entry-level and leave too soon to see much upward movement. As a result, the epithet “McJob” has developed out of the perception that fast food workers are not likely to end up in a prestigious job as a general manager or restaurant owner and they are going to spend their whole lives flipping hamburgers. People usually conclude that one cannot get anywhere in a job like this, and there is no real future in it. In a society where education means future, fast food workers with little education are regarded as having no future.

4.1.2 Any Idiot Can Do It

Another perception on fast food work is that “any idiot can do it.” Leidner

characterizes McDonald's as "an exemplar of extreme standardization (1993: 14-15)." According to Braverman (1974), highly routinized jobs with scripted and high-tech system are deskilling and alienating the workers. Fast food job is one of the typical examples. Some even says that they are "skill-free" jobs that any mindless idiot could do. Barbara Garson (1989), who wrote about the McDonald's, lambastes the largest fast food employer for dumbing down the jobs to the point where anyone could do the work.

These are not only academic conclusions but also the public impressions of fast food work. The worker's human judgment has been entirely replaced by preset oven timers, blinking lights, beepers and buzzers. All the workers have to do is to follow the lights, beepers and buzzers and move their hands and legs as fast as they can. The workers are limited by the popular impression that the jobs they hold are devoid of value. The fast food industry's reputation for deskilling its work combines with the low social standing of these young workers to make their skills invisible. When being asked to explain the skills involved in their work, my colleagues looked at me in great surprise, "Any idiot could do this job. Skills? Are you kidding?" They saw themselves as sitting at the bottom of the job chain and the negative valence of their jobs as ore or less justified.

According to the managers of the Burger Master I worked at, the typical entry-level worker passes through his or her job in short order, with an average job tenure of less than six months. In fact, quite a large number of employees are there and gone in a matter of weeks. It is this pattern, a planned operation built around low skills and high turnover, that has given fast food jobs such a bad name. In order for the industry to keep functioning with such an unstable labor force, the jobs themselves must be broken down so that each step can be learned, at least at a rudimentary level, in a very short time. A vicious circle

develops in which low wages are attached to low skills, encouraging high departure rates.

4.1.3 Toilet-Washing Job

Besides the above two well-known perceptions on fast food jobs, there is another one that I would like to mention here. Surprisingly, it is related to washing toilet. When I was young, my mother often told me if I did not study hard, I would end up washing toilets at McDonald's. Before conducting this research, I just thought that it was only a kind of joke told by my mother. However, after being asked by many people whether I had to wash the toilet or not while working in fast food restaurant, I found out that it was a myth told by the public, rather than a joke. Many friends of mine, ranging from secondary school students to middle-aged people, asked me the same question. It is widely believed that what fast food workers do are not only selling hamburgers and frying fries, but also washing the toilet. This clearly shows that fast food work is commonly known as a low-class job. Even though toilet washing is not the responsibilities of the fast food workers, the rumor exists and is often told in the society. Ah Yan told me, "They (her ex-classmates) laughed at me, as they thought that I had to clean the toilet. I don't know why everybody believes that working at Burger Master means washing toilet."

The general perceptions stem from the low social status of the people who hold these jobs: teenagers with little education, and otherwise unemployable housewives. To the extent that the prestige of a job reflects the social characteristics of its average holders, fast food jobs are hobbled by the perception that people with better choices would never purposely opt for a "McJob."

The views mentioned above cannot be interpreted as simply as misunderstandings, although it is true to some extent. Such perceptions are not only the views of the public, but also influential factors on how the fast food workers view their job.

4.2 Organizational Culture

Publicizing the opportunities that are within reach and the friendly and family-like atmosphere inside the restaurant are strategies used by fast food corporations for overcoming the stereotypes mentioned above. However, much of it falls on deaf ears. In fact, there is little the fast food corporations can do to rehabilitate its workers in the eyes of the public and thereby reduce the tension across the counter. What the corporations can do is to help their employees to value their jobs and retain their dignity by its own organizational culture.

In fast food industry, the workplace itself is a major force in the creation of a "rebuttal culture" among the workers. With this support, menial wage workers are able to hold their heads up, not by defining themselves as separate from society, but by calling upon their commonality with the rest of the working world. Organizational culture plays an important role in constructing an honored identity for entry-level workers, who suffer most from the negative public image; at least they have a job. Honor comes from participation in this central setting in our culture and from the positive identity it confers. To construct a positive identity when the reminders of low status coming from customers, friends, and the media are relentless, something stronger is required: a workplace culture that actively functions to overcome the negatives by reinforcing the value of the work ethic. Managers and veteran employees play a critical role in the reinforcement process.

4.2.1 The Burger Master Family

The acquisition of an identity as part of the working world is only one of the important ways for young people to overcome the negative images attached to their job. Besides constructing a valued identity for the employees, the workplace culture also gives the workers things that they gain and treasure from the menial job. Due to the fact that the pay is so low, something more important than money is emphasized inside the restaurant. Devoting oneself to the organization and the social circle inside is another important way for them to face the negatives from the public. The friendly and family-like atmosphere inside the restaurant is often emphasized by the fast food corporation to the young workers. Other than financial ends, these become the motivations for the young workers to devote themselves to the menial job.

Having entered the work world, most young workers are likely to experience a sudden shortage of time. Hours that might once have been spent hanging out with friends, relaxing at home, doing schoolwork, or just doing nothing at all suddenly evaporate. This is a part of the process of joining the adult world. The pay is so low that most full-time young workers would work for more than ten hours a day, six days a week. The time demands of the job push the workers into the arms of the organizational culture, or at least into the presence of fellow workers.

Ah Yan, who entered Burger Master after finishing the second form, said, "Before working at Burger Master, I spent most of my time with my classmates." But now, I usually hang out with colleagues who share the same schedule with me. I find that I'm moving further and further away from my ex-classmates. They have to sit in the classroom while I'm having my hours off. They hang out while I'm busy at taking orders. The time schedule is so different and thus it is

not possible for us to meet each other often.” Most young Burger Master workers shared the same experience with Ah Yan.

The twin pressures of holding down a stigmatized job and having to spend a lot of time on it conspire to squeeze a worker’s friendship circles. The time demands of the job push the worker into the arms of the organizational culture, or at least into the presence of fellow workers. The similarity of workers’ schedules and daily experiences creates a new, natural circle of friends. Therefore, youths have to establish priorities and many of them can no longer keep up with friends who are not on such a tight schedule. At the same time, workers develop close ties with colleagues who share the same schedule and have a new circle of friends. The more workers withdraw from non-working friends, the more the workplace customs, networks and expectations shape them. Over time, employees begin to spend many of their leisure hours with one another. To be a worker is also to be integrated into a meaningful community of fellow workers, the community that increasingly becomes the source of personal friends, intimate relations, and the worldview that comes with them.

Although fast food jobs are, to some extent, regarded as exploiting and alienating the workers, young people keep working as hard as they can. This is not only because they have no alternatives, but also because of their close ties established with each other. Due to the tight schedule as mentioned before, such ties are very important in the work lives of the young people. Not to mention the intimate ties and love affairs between boys and girls, the close friendship between the workers, as well as with the managers, are worth looking at.

Having friends on the job, and making new ones once there, is a major goal for most people working at the low-wage end of the market. Entry-level positions are rarely intrinsically interesting or well rewarded. They are often routinized, are boring once mastered, and offer little variety—a daily grind not unlike an assembly-line job in a car factory. What makes them worth holding, apart from the obvious importance of the money they provide, is the opportunity to socialize, to spend pleasant hours with friends during the time when one must work anyway. (Newman 1999: 77)

When talking about her 10-day experience at Burger Master, Ah Fai was very excited. “The job itself was not interesting at all. However, what I treasure most was the friendship established among workers. You know, when several young people get together, friendship is easily established. I really enjoyed the time when we were working together, especially during break when we ate and played together.” Even though Ah Fai had worked in Burger Master for only ten days, she made some friends with whom she is still in contact years after.

Ah Pang shares the similar view with Ah Fai that working at Burger Master was like the kind of activities that he enjoyed after school. When he was a fifth form student, he started working part-time at Burger Master everyday after school. Ah Pang mentioned, “I was in fact having fun at Burger Master, rather than making money.” Having quit Burger Master for a couple of years, he still has close relationships with friends he met there. Both Ah Pang and Ah Fai point out that they enjoyed working at Burger Master. Even though the pay was so low, they agreed that the atmosphere was warm and close.

Friends are so important to these young workers that many of them go back to the restaurant on their days off, even though they do not have to. They just go for chatting with friends who are on their duties, sit and watch them

working hard at each station. For them, the restaurant is another home and the colleagues are like their brothers and sisters. Many young employees pointed out that what they treasure most is the relationship and friendship established among fellow workers.

Burger Master is also a place where romance can easily develop among workers. There is nothing surprising about this, for beyond one's school years, there are few other sources of new acquaintances than the workplace. During the several months I spent working at Burger Master, I saw the birth and demise of many romances. Kat has been working at Burger Master for three months only. During these three months, she had experienced two romances. The job has become the center of her social universe, the place she spends nearly all of her time, the source of all of her closet friends and romantic attachments. Romance also developed between workers and managers. Ah Ming was one of the assistant managers, and his girlfriend was a part-time crew member of the restaurant.

Although there is nothing remarkable about these intimate ties in and of themselves, they do signal something else quite crucial about the importance of work opportunities for young people. When time binds restrict one's friendship circles to fellow workers, the choice of mates tends to narrow down as well to men and women who are gainfully employed.

As detailed in Chapter 3, understanding what is going on in the restaurant and the corporation and feeling a part of the store life help crews developing a sense of loyalty and pride. Close ties among workers and managers helps developing their loyalty. Most of the workers, especially the young ones, are willing to devote themselves to the restaurant. Whenever the restaurant is in need, they would even give their helping hand voluntarily.

Whenever the restaurant lacks workers, some workers would work voluntarily in their free time without any pay. Not only workers but also managers regard the restaurant as their another home. Once on the National Day, as it was a public holiday and a new promotion scheme was started, lots of customers were attracted and the restaurant was extremely hectic. Although it was his day-off, Ah Ming, one of the assistant managers, and his girlfriend went back to the restaurant, as most workers and managers often did. Having realized that there were not enough workers, Ah Ming and his girlfriend went to the crew room immediately and changed into crew uniforms. Although being an assistant manager, Ah Ming worked on the counter as if he was a normal crew. His girlfriend also helped out on the counter voluntarily. Both of them were not paid to do so and they just worked for free.

There was also once on his day off, Ah How went back to the restaurant during the closing section, waiting for his colleagues to finish the cleaning. He went into the grill voluntary to work with his friends as his usual working days. "That's ok for me even though I'm not paid to do so. It's not a big deal. In fact, it's not much money and I don't care about that. All I want to do is to help my friends to finish the work as soon as possible so that we can hang out together."

Besides, preparations for the day of the big test, when the supervisor from the area office comes around, reinforce the notion of crew and store management operating as a team. In the period prior to the inspection, crews are encouraged to work hard cleaning everything in sight. Workers are asked to work overnight to clean up the whole store thoroughly on the night before inspection. Most young employees are usually willing to stay. To them, they are not working for, but helping the managers and the restaurant, that they have close relationship with.

Ah Tung, who has joined the overnight cleaning once, commented, "It was really exhausting, but fun enough. We played all sorts of music as loud as we could and sing along together while cleaning every tiny corner of the restaurant. I enjoyed that very much as we felt like a real crew. Everyone has the same target, that is, to clean up the whole restaurant before the supervisor comes and to pass the harsh requirements."

Even those who have quit often go back to visit their friends and give their help hand whenever it is needed. Once the typhoon signal number 8 was raised, and some workers were not able to get back to the restaurant as some public transportation systems were closed. The shop manager called some ex-workers to ask for help. Four ex-workers came back to the restaurant to work without any hesitation. Ah How went back to the restaurant on that day. It seemed to me that he admired the ex-workers he worked with on that day. "I was so touched when I saw them (the ex-workers). They were not working for money but for their friends. You know, they have quit for several months! Also, the typhoon signal number 8 was raised. Who would work for so little money on such a bad day? Although I didn't know them, I was glad to work with them. They were really cool."

Devoting oneself to the organization and the social circle inside are important means for young workers to face or even overcome the stigmas attached to their menial job. The friendly and family-like atmosphere inside the restaurant is not just advertisement slogan but real experience for the workers. Close ties among colleagues push young people into the organizational culture so that they can support each other. Besides, the sense of belonging and loyalty to the restaurant is also important. Other than financial ends, these become the motivations for the young workers to devote themselves to the

menial job and forces to face the social negatives.

4.2.2 Handling Insults

Work is much more than a means to financial ends. This is particularly the case when the job holds little satisfaction. Fast food workers know their jobs are poorly valued as they can see that clearly in how much they earn and in the tone of voice of the customers they serve across the counter. Facing the negative perceptions from the public, some workers claim they do not care what other people think. But when you get to know them personally, they will admit that it took a long time, a lot of swallowed pride, to build up this confidence. Even though workers crave an honored identity, there are situations in which such identity is challenged. This usually happens when the entry-level workers are being insulted on the counter.

Burger Master workers are told that they must, at whatever cost to their own dignity, defer to the customer. Customers are often unreasonably demanding, rude, even insulting, and workers must count backwards from a hundred in an effort to stifle their outrage. Serving the customer with a smile pleases management because making money depends on keeping the clientele happy, but it can be an exercise in humiliation for workers, especially the young ones. It is hard for them to refrain from reading this public nastiness as another instance of society's low estimation of their worth. But they soon realize that if they want to hold on to their jobs, they have to tolerate comments that would almost certainly provoke a fight outside the workplace. An experienced middle-aged worker, Eva, told me, "Customers don't treat us as human beings. They just scolded you without any reason, and throw the money to you as if you're a beggar."

Faced not only with the negative perceptions, but also the low estimation of their worth, the management emphasizes reinforcing their identity of being part of the working world. "As you're paid, you have to accept it. This always happens. You'll be alright and you'll get used to it. You don't have to care what they say and do. You have a job and that's the most important thing." This is what the workers are often told by managers.

My experience on the counter taught me that rude customers were not the worst. Some customers even insult the workers or even play tricks upon them. My first insult experience was from a Western customer. After I had finished collecting the order, he handed me the money. When I took the money, he held the money tightly in his fingers and did not let me get it. I said "Excuse me" several times but he just kept holding the money tightly. He pretended that he was giving me the money and had a smile on his face, looking at me as if I was a fool. This lasted for about a minute and finally I decided to call the manager for help. The Westerner released his fingers eventually. When I gave him the ten cents change, he threw the coin to me as if I was a beggar. I was so angry that I had thought of beating him up right in front of the counter. The manager then said to me, "Don't take it seriously. You'll get used to it later. You're working and thus you have to tolerate it. Go and take another order." "Just ignore them. That's what you have to face when you have a job and that's the most important thing." Colleagues said a few words to encourage me.

Such words are often heard behind the counter. Colleagues often encourage each other that no matter how bad the situation is, they at least have a job. This is also reinforced by managers; they emphasize the importance of holding a job and say that everyone should try their best to keep it. Rude customers and insults are not new to every fast food worker and they have taken

them as part of their job. Without the support of the haven of the fellow stigmatized workers, it would be very hard for Burger Master employees to retain dignity. With this support, however, they can retain their dignity of being employed and the opportunity to participate in social activities that increasingly define their working adult lives.

4.2.3 Providing “Opportunities”

Burger Master workers are often told by the organization that their jobs have hidden virtues that make them more valuable than most people credit. Fast food workers find their job valuable as they could gain something other than money and friendship, such as opportunities of climbing up the management ladder and some skills and working experience.

The fast food industry looks favorably on internal promotion. Fast food corporations often claim that many of their managers started as a crew. Even those who work as crews and those who do not have education beyond secondary school can have opportunities to climb up the management ladder. Marko, one of the assistant managers, started working at the fast food restaurant after quitting school at the age of 15, when he was only a third form student. With education up to the third form only, many young people are always being looked down upon. However, having worked for five years, he has become an assistant manager, a position that is out of the imagination of young people who have same education level. He was once making \$12 per hour but is now earning more than \$9000 a month, which is near the amount made by university graduates. It has to be noted that many young fast food workers do have the intention to follow Marko's route. Most of the young full-time workers in my store want to get promoted from within. Even though it is well known by the public that there is no future in a fast food job, the workers carry the opposite

view. Most managers in the restaurant are real examples of the possibility of promoting from within. This helps the young workers a lot in positively redefining their job; they believe they can have a bright future in the fast food industry that might not be reached in other fields of the work world.

As mentioned before, both the public and the workers consciously think that the fast food job is skill-free. However, the youngsters are in fact learning something and acquiring human capital from the menial job. No matter how little or even nothing can they think they can learn from the job, young fast food worker do care about how much they know and understand even though they seldom admit or even aware of that. Understanding and knowing more means becoming more a part of the store. The employees, especially the young ones, are eager to learn. At the entry-level, youngsters are often eager to learn how to work at every station. Especially those who want to enter into the management, knowledge beyond flipping hamburgers is essential for internal promotion. This is not what "McJobs" are generally known as.

In order to retain their sense of dignity while facing the public negatives of having no future and skills but low status, young workers attach themselves to the organizational culture which provides them an honored identity of being part of the working world. They learn the cultural defenses against the scorn heaped upon them in the workplace, from concerned managers and veteran workers who have already "been there." Other than the facts of the negative images and even insults, young workers put their focus on the close ties with colleagues and the possible bright future they can have a chance to fight for. The workplace gives their lives humor and pleasure, support and understanding in hard times. Ultimately, being a member of this fraternity shifts their identities from kid to adult.

Chapter 5 Dead End Work?

Due to the negative public perception, the fast food job is portrayed as menial and even dead end. That means there is no real future inside this labor sector. This chapter looks into the question why teenagers keep entering this menial labor sector and how they view such entry-level job as well as their prospects.

5.1 Part-time Workers

It has to be noted that the reasons why teenagers take up such a menial job and how they view it depend greatly on whether they are part-time or full-time workers. Let us first look at how and why part-time young workers take up the fast food job.

The first criteria of the recruitment system of Burger Master are availability and flexible time schedule, rather than capability in handling the job. To most part-time Burger Master workers, they take the job because the flexible schedule fits in with their other obligations. Obviously, fast food job is the only kind of work students can do outside school hours. The work at Burger Master is for many young students the best of the limited alternatives available. Fast food job is the only kind of work students can do outside school hours. Every Friday night, Saturday and Sunday, the store is crowded with young part-time workers. Sometimes it is so crowded that some of the full-time workers have to take these days off. It is undoubtedly true that due to their lack of experience and education, they are forced to "choose" fast food jobs. However, the more crucial factor is the flexible working schedule which Burger Master offers.

Beside the flexible time schedule, location of the fast food restaurants is also a contributing factor for the students to work there. The rapid growth of fast food industry brings a large amount of easy-to-get working opportunities to the students. Fast food restaurants are present in most districts. Students can easily find one in the area where they live or study. Ah Pang kept working at Burger Master even when he was in the sixth form as it was so convenient that it only took him five minutes walk from his school. Due to such convenience, he could work several hours after school everyday to make some pocket money.

To these students, money is their major motivations to work. However, it has to be noted that it is not a real need. Chole and her classmates, Emily and Cathy, were all fourth form students. They worked on every Friday night, Saturday and Sunday. By making \$13 per hour, they were able to earn about a thousand dollars each month. "My parents give me a thousand dollars each month. That's only enough for lunch and transportation to school. I don't have extra money to hang out with friends, to buy clothes and things that I want. You know, you can't always ask your parents for money. I won't do that. I prefer making money by myself." Emily shared the same views with Chole. "I earn the money by myself and so I can use it on whatever I like. Every time I ask my parents for more pocket money, they just tell me not to spend money on so-called trivial things. I understand that their burden is heavy enough that I shouldn't ask for more. But I really want more money so I can spend on whatever I like." This can be proved by the way they spend their money. Chole showed me a shopping bag before working on the counter on one Friday night. Inside was a pair of trendy shoes which cost about \$400, representing 30 hours of work at Burger Master. "This is my money and I can spend it on

whatever I want. That's why I have to work. It's not very expensive. I'm working and thus I can afford that."

Emily and Cathy also spend most of their salaries on shopping and hanging out with friends. In addition, some of these part-time workers would even give money to their families. Cathy explained to me, "Since I'm working now, I should give some money to my parents, even though it's just a very small amount. This is my responsibility. They can't stop me from buying the things that I want now as I'm just spending my own money." The money they earned from working at Burger Master serves as a symbol of independence. Since these young part-time workers have obligations at school, this is their only way to gain independence. It is important to note that some of these young workers are from needy families, which need their financial support. However, the proportion is very low. In fact, most of the young part-time workers do not have any family burdens, neither do they have to make their own living as most of them live with their families.

Compared with their full-time colleagues, these part-time workers, from the public perception, have a brighter prospect, as they are still gaining an education and acquiring human capital. That means they still have many chances and choices before them. They do not regard a fast food job as their future. Burger Master is just a temporary place where they can make their own money and gain their independence. Since their major responsibility is schoolwork, part-time work offers them a means to integrate the symbol of independence with it.

5.2 Full-time Workers

Compared with their part-time colleagues, young full-time Burger Master

workers are generally known as having no future or even as having no way out. It is simply because they are losers in the education system. Their motivations to work at Burger Master, to a very large extent, reflect how they view their job and their future. Why do teenagers take up such menial and stigmatized job? Public perception rests on the explanation that due to their lack of experience and education, fast food industry is the only way out for these young people. This is true, to some extent, as most young fast food workers lack skills. However, such an explanation in fact over-simplifies the actual situation of these teenagers.

5.2.1 An Honored Identity

Newman (1999) argues that Americans have always been committed to the moral maxim that work defines a person. To her, this penchant for ranking by occupation and system of stratification is more pervasive in the United States than in other societies, where there are different ways of evaluating the personal worth of individuals. Here I want to point out that such system of stratification and ways to define a person is not a uniquely American cultural value. Hong Kong people also carry around in their heads a rough idea of what kinds of jobs are worthy of respect and what kinds are to be disdained. There is a pyramid organized by the income a job carries, the sort of credentials it takes to secure a particular position and the qualities of an occupation's incumbents in their minds. The culture of equating moral value with employment constitutes to the most profound dividing line, which separates the working person from the unemployed. Although there are many reasons why some people cross that employment barrier and others are left behind, such culture wipes the background truths out in favor of a simpler dichotomy like the worthy and the unworthy, the

hardworking person and the lazy sloth. For those on the positive side of the dividing line, the rewards for those who work are far greater than a paycheck. The employed enter a social world in which their identities as mainstream Hong Kong people are shaped, structured, and reinforced. The workplace is the main institutional setting in which individuals become part of the collective Hong Kong enterprise that lies at the heart of the culture: the market.

Although having a respected career is prized above all else in Hong Kong, Hong Kong culture confers honor on those who hold down jobs of any kind over those who are outside of the labor force. Having a job not only means being financially independent. It also means to be part of the working world, no matter what kind of job it is and how much they earn. The work ethic is more than an attitude toward earning money. It is a disciplined and meaningful existence, and creates a social life woven around the workplace. Everyone should have a job or otherwise he/she will not be valued as a member of society. Pressures from the public and families are often forces that push the young people into the work world. Only the job itself can give them an honored identity of being part of the society.

To most of the school dropouts and young people, quitting school is not the end of the story. Kat terminated her studies after having finished the third form. "After quitting school, I stayed at home for several months. Some neighbors looked down upon me, as I was a school dropout with nothing to do. My parents said I couldn't stay at home all the time. Even though they still have the responsibility to take care of me, I should go to work to make my life more meaningful. Therefore I came here to start my new life in the working world. Although I'm not making much money, at least I have a job. It makes a difference, not only in the eyes of my neighbors and my parents, but also of

myself.” Being another school dropout, Ah How shared a similar experience with Kat. “My parents kept pushing me to find a job and I was pretty annoyed by them. They always said I was too lazy. I really hate that. There’s no way out unless I have a job. I can’t live on my family. Neither can I live on social welfare.”

The creation of an identity as a worker is a transformation created by organizations, supervisors, colleagues, and the whole long search that leads from the desire to find a job to the end point of landing one. This is a particularly dramatic transformation for youngsters, for they face a difficult job market, high hurdles in convincing employers to take a chance on them, and relatively poor rewards, in the economic sense. However, the crafting of an identity is an important developmental process for these youngsters, just as it is for their more privileged counterparts.

5.2.2 Ah Temporary Shelter

Young fast food workers are mostly school dropouts or fifth form graduates. Having decided not to have any further studies, these youngsters knocked on Burger Master’s door. Surprisingly, perhaps, before entering the fast food industry, many of them did not have any plans for their future. When being asked why they chose to work in fast food restaurants, most of the young full-time workers said they did not know. “I just don’t know why I chose working at here (Burger Master), rather than other places. After having decided not to continue studying, I just knew that I needed a job and what came into my mind immediately was Burger Master. And that’s why I’m here now.” Ah Tung told me. Having the perception that fast food restaurant is a place for school dropouts and young people with little human capital, youths just entered the fast

food industry without having any other considerations. Kat said, "After quitting school, I really didn't know what I could do. I just knew that I should find a job. That's all I knew at that time. I didn't know what kind of job I should work. My parents and friends told me to try working at here (Burger Master) like what most school dropouts do. They said it's just temporary and thus I could figure out what I really want to do in the future while flipping hamburgers at Burger Master. Only after working at here (Burger Master) did I really think about my future." Before entering the fast food industry, young people do not have any plans at all. The Fast food industry is not just a menial sector of the labor market in Hong Kong, but also a refuge for teenagers who do not have any future plans. More precisely, it is a place for young people with little human capital to think about as well as figure out what their future plan should be.

It has to be noted that most of the young workers regarded their jobs as a temporary option when they first entered the store. Before entering the store, both Ah Tung and Kat, as well as many other full-time workers thought they would have another job somewhere else later in the future. Instead of wasting time at home thinking about their future, they preferred spending the time more meaningfully and productively. To the youngsters, spending time on working at Burger Master is "meaningful" as they are at least making money and having a job, rather than sitting at home with nothing to do. Taking a step further, they also tended to think that the time at Burger Master was for them to think about their future, even though they usually did not have any idea of what their future would be and when would they start fighting for it.

The above argument shows that, to the full-time workers who have detached themselves from education, earning money is not their motivation to work. Pressures from the public and families are in fact the major forces that

push the young people into the work world. Having left school, youths should have a job or otherwise he/she will not be valued as a member of the society. Even though money still serves as a symbol of independence, only the job itself can give them an honored identity of being part of the society. Fast food industry becomes the refuge for these teenagers who are pushed into the labor market but do not have any future plans in their head.

5.2.3 No Alternatives?

One might ask why it should necessarily be fast food restaurants for young people to be relieved from parental and public pressure. It is no doubt true that the fast food job is not the only choice for the youngsters. There are in fact quite a lot of alternatives for young people, especially in the service and catering sector. In the service sector, it is obvious in Hong Kong that many salespersons in shops and corporations of any kind are quite young. It has to be noted that the average salary for sales people is a bit higher than that of fast food workers. Some salespersons are even provided with monthly salary and fringe benefits by their employers. The catering sector is also populated with lots of young people. Youths usually work as waiter/waitress or kitchen trainees in all sorts of restaurants. Some young people even work as junior clerks and office assistants. The monthly salaries of the above jobs are around \$5000 or even more. Compared with working in Burger Master, these jobs are much more rewarding and stable.

The question then turns to why young people still take up menial fast food jobs when there are in fact many other alternatives lying before them. The reason lies on the public image of fast food jobs in Hong Kong. As mentioned in the previous chapter, fast food industry is commonly thought to be the refuge

of secondary school dropouts who lack the skills and credentials to do any better in the labor market. Such perception is deeply implanted in people's minds that those who do not have any interest in schoolwork or even are losers in the education system would immediately think of taking up fast food jobs when they want to find one. Sunky said, "It (fast food job) just came to my mind immediately when I thought of getting a job. It's always told that fast food job is for young people who quit school early, like me. I think it's quite true. It's pretty obvious as you can see there are many young people working here (Burger Master). You're right that there are in fact many possibilities, but I wasn't prepared enough to take up those serious ones when I left school. In fact, I have never thought about other alternatives before." Ah Bo shared the same opinion with Sunky, "When I was still at school, I was always told to knock on the door of fast food restaurant if I didn't want to study anymore. It's really common. To be honest, I don't want to put too much effort in finding a so-called "more stable job" or "better job", at least not at this moment. Fast food restaurant is a good choice, as I don't have to think too much about the future. I think nine out of ten youngsters like me will take the same path as mine." Even though there are many other possibilities, the image of fast food job as refuge for young school dropouts is quite influential, so many of them tend to take their first step into the work world through the door of fast food restaurant.

5.2.4 Importance of Family

In Newman's research in the United States, young people are struggling to work more so that they can earn more to support themselves and their young families. Such youths are regarded as working poor who do not earn enough money, on their own, to take care of the basic necessities of life. Without the

support of others in their families, they would not be able to manage at all. These independent young people live on their own, some of them are even married and have their own kids (Newman 1999). In the case of Hong Kong nowadays, where most of the young people live with their parents, their needs are not as urgent as those are in the United States. As mentioned before, young people enter the fast food industry without any future plans in their minds. Most of them are still at a very young age, the age that they are supposed to be students who depend on their families. All of my informants live with their families and thus they do not need to support themselves or their families. Or at least, most of them do not have a great family burden on their back. On the contrary, some of their families are even relatively wealthy. Ah Tung's family is wealthy enough to buy an extra flat that costs more than a million dollars. It is obvious that there was no need for him to support his family. Therefore, as mentioned in Chapter 2, he spent most of his salary on luxuries and trendy things. Ah Yan is from a low-class family. Contrary to what one might think, she saved most of her salary in the bank, rather than supporting her family. "My mom said I should put the money into the bank account so that I can have money for future use. Although I have no idea of what the future use could be, I think it's reasonable for me to save some money. My family does not need my support. Even though we're not wealthy, my parents are able to manage." None of my informants is making a living from the menial fast food job as his or her counterparts in the United States.

The situation was quite different when we look back a generation. According to Salaff (1981), families in the 1970s depended upon the young daughters' wages to survive and advance as no individual wage earner could bring home enough to fill the family rice bowls. Working daughters had heavy

family burdens on their backs that they had to support not only their families, but also their male siblings. "Social class dictated the uses to which the women's wages were applied, but without exception all families drew upon their daughters wages; three-quarters of their income went to their families. The family wage economy is one primary manifestation of the modified centripetal family in Hong Kong." (Salaff 1981: 266)

Even though most of the young workers do not have to support their families, it does not mean that they do not feel responsibility for their families. Nearly all youngsters give money to their parents. Full-time workers usually make \$3000 to \$4000 a month. Most of them would give \$1000 to \$2000 to their families. "This is my obligation. The social rule is that when I have a job, I should give money to my family, even though it's just a small amount to them," Ah How explained. To some extent, earning money is a symbol of independence, which means that they can have their own money, not from their families. Money often serves as a symbol of independence. However, to the young full-time workers, it does not have such strong symbolic meaning. Even though they are working and making their own money, they still have to depend on their family, as the salary is far too low for them to support themselves.

Most of the young workers regard their fast food job as temporary shelter to hide from both public and parental pressures. However, fast food job is so menial that it might seem to put the youngsters into another sort of parental pressure, especially if there were in fact many other alternatives. The reality is quite different. Most parents of my informants are quite supportive of their children's menial fast food job. One mother told me, "My daughter quit school after the third form and she's too young to find any good job. She even doesn't know what the future is. I think this job (at Burger Master) is good to her, at

least she can have a try to see what work really means and think about her future more thoroughly.” On the one hand, parents do not want their children to be known as lazy sloths. Therefore, they would rather push their children to find any job they can, no matter how menial it might be. Parents think that working in Burger Master is far more better than just wasting time with nothing to do. On the other hand, parents believe that they should not push too hard, as their children still young and need time to think of their own future path. It has to be noted that most Chinese parents do want their children to make money after quitting school. However, most of the Burger Master workers’ parents would tolerate this soft, caring, wishy-washy approach, since they know such situation would not last long. The turnover rate serves as a proof to them that their children would not keep flipping hamburger for a whole life. “She (her daughter) can’t stay there for long as I won’t let her to do so. I think it’s Okay for her to work for several months to have a try, but not for more than a year. You know, nobody wants her daughter to work in such place for that long. There’s no real future in it. You can’t make any money from it.”

5.3 Quitting

Young workers quit with great regularity. The turnover rate among the young people was much greater than among the adult workers. In the store where I worked, teenage crew members who had been there for a year or more were hard to find. When I returned to the restaurant three months after my fieldwork, only 5 out of about 14 young crew members were still working behind the counter.

5.3.1 Part-time Workers

Young part-time workers quit their jobs at the restaurant for a variety of reasons. The symbolic meaning of their part-time job as independence is not strong enough for the youngsters to pull themselves totally away from pressures from family and schoolwork. For part-time workers, most of them quit as they found it hard to balance their job and schoolwork. Ah Pang started his fast food job in the summer before taking the HKCEE. "I kept working there after entering the sixth form. In the second semester, however, I found it was quite time-consuming that I didn't have enough time for study. Therefore, I quit. I really enjoyed working there. But I had no other choice. Keeping up with the schoolwork is much more important to me, as well as to my future. I can't spend my whole life at Burger Master." Emily also quit her job for a similar reason: "Even though I just work on Friday nights, Saturdays and Sundays, I found it more and more difficult to keep up with my schoolwork. I did not have enough time to finish the assignments. I even had no time to prepare for the tests and quizzes."

Parental pressures also contributes to the high turnover rate of young part-timers as they complain that working undermines their children's education. Ah Ting quit because of the objections from her parents, "My parents always say I should now concentrate more on my studies, rather than making money. They tell me that I should study hard or otherwise I would end up my life here (at Burger Master). I understand that they are concerned about my schoolwork and my future. They want me to have a good job in the future. Therefore, they keep pushing me to quit so that I can have more time to study. Compared with my future and the expectations from my parents, quitting the job is not a big deal to me."

5.3.2 Full-time Workers

Not only the part-time workers, but also the full-time ones, do not view their fast food job as necessarily central to their lives. As mentioned before, fast food job is only a temporary shelter for them to relieve the public pressure that pushes them into the work world. In fact, it can neither support their living nor provide them a secure future. This affects their response when they are unhappy with the restaurant, the corporation or other workers. The most typical response to dissatisfaction with the workplace is to quit as they believe that they can easily find another job in other branches or other fast food corporations.

Ah How left Burger Master as he had an argument with Ah Tung, who was his good friend before. "Now, it's very different from before. Alan has left and Ah Tung has decided to climb up. We had a great time working together at the grill. But now the situation has totally changed. Ah Tung always wants to catch the attention from the managers so that he can advance. I really hate that. He is now like another person. I always have arguments with him and we're not good friends as we used to be. It's meaningless for me to stay here. I would rather leave to a new environment." Due to her bad relationship with other colleagues as well as managers, Ah Yan quit eventually. "They just always scold me. What's wrong with me? It's not my fault but they just keep blaming me. I don't want to stay here. My mom has found me a job at an herbal teahouse nearby. They even pay two dollars each hour more than here."

It has to be noted that young full-timers like Ah How and Ah Yan usually remain in the fast food industry or other menial labor sector after they quit working at Burger Master. Ah How eventually got a job at a Chinese fast food restaurant nearby. In Ah Yan's case, she was not employed by the herbal teahouse due to her young age. Even though youngsters like Ah Yan are at the

legal age of employment, employers usually do not like employing them as they are thought to have no working experience and are not mature enough. Some employers would even think that these young people are trouble-makers. After being rejected by the herbal teahouse, Ah Yan got a job at the Kentucky Fried Chicken in the same shopping mall. Besides other fast food companies, some young workers would choose to work at other Burger Master stores. This can be explained by the argument mentioned in the previous section that menial fast food job serves as a temporary shelter for these teenagers to think about their future. They do not have, or more precisely, they cannot see many working opportunities due to their lack of human capital. Ah Yan, in her Kentucky Fried Chicken uniform, told me, "I still don't know what kind of job I can do. This job (at Kentucky Fried Chicken) is just temporary. I don't want to think about my future, not at this moment. You know, I'm still so young." Only once they accepted their low status and have figured out which career path they should follow would they quit their fast food job. Ken said, "When I was small, I had a dream of being a doctor in the future. It's only a dream, or a joke, maybe. It's impossible for I have quitted school. Before taking up this job, I still had dreams of my future like having my own business. However, this job makes me begin to understand that I shouldn't have that kind of dreams anymore. What I should do now is to really think about my own future and find a way out. In fact, I have decided to take an accounting course as it will help me to find a clerical job."

5.4 Entering the Real Work World

Even though many of them are loyal to their fast food jobs, they finally come to realize that they cannot end up their life there. By taking part in this menial labor sector which hardly paid a living, young people realized that they

should figure out what their future could be. It is only from this starting point that young people hope to launch careers that will take them out of the menial job into one that pays enough to support themselves. As discussed before, fast food restaurants can be considered as a temporary shelter for youngsters who are in the margin of the society. The menial job allows the youngsters to understand what “work” means before entering the work world. Fast food job is a stepping stone for the young people with little human capital to a more remunerative future. Therefore, on the one hand, young people can struggle to climb up the management ladder and have a more stable job. On the other hand, for those who cannot, or are not willing to, get promoted from within, fast food jobs are a training ground for them who need an introduction to the culture of regular work. Once they have clear ideas of their future paths, teenagers are no longer kids anymore, but a real member of the society and the work world. This can explain why the young workers leave after an average of several months even though they enjoy their fast food jobs and even work there for free. The experience in Burger Master makes them face the reality that they are no longer kids. They then come to realize that they have to find a real job instead of fooling around in Burger Master and making just pocket money.

5.4.1 The Outside Track

Beside dissatisfaction with the workplace or colleagues, many youngsters leave when they get to understand more about the reality of the work world. Only once they have realized the importance of a stable job that can bring them a real prospect would they totally quit from the menial fast food job. Ada, an experienced crew member who had potential to be promoted, often told me how eager she was to have an office job. “I’ve thought of climbing up before.

However, there's no such chance for me to be promoted here. I've been working at here for a year but I'm still a crew member. I know that I'm experienced enough to be a trainer, but there's just no vacancy for me. Maybe there are some chances in other stores, but I don't want to take the risk to start the whole thing all over again. In fact, even if I were promoted to trainer or even team leader, the situation would just be the same, except I could have extra fifty cents for each hour. It's a long way to go to become a manager. I prefer an office job which I just have to work from nine to five." She eventually found a secretary job in a kindergarten herself.

Ka Kue started his job at Burger Master when he was 16. Having worked for two years and been promoted to trainer, at the age of 18, he quit eventually. "I'm not young anymore. It's time for me to fight for my own future. Burger Master is just for kids, not for me, an 18-year-old boy, anymore. It pays so low that it can only satisfy kids who are just making pocket money. I have to make a living as I'm now a grown-up. Having been there for two years makes me face the reality that I couldn't stay there forever, as selling and flipping hamburgers is not a serious job, but an exploiting one. I love working there and it was fun. But I just can't live on that job. I'm so tired of working ten hours a day and make extremely little money. I need a real job, a job that is not so harsh, with more salary and even fringe benefits." Similar to Ada, Ka Kue also preferred having a white-collar job.

Ah Bo, Ka Kue's friend, was once a devoted crew member who wanted to continue his career in the fast food industry. After realizing that he had no chance to be promoted because of discrimination, he quit. "I was thinking of devoting myself to the job and climbing up to the management positions. However, someone told me that as I was too short and too ugly, the managers

were not going to promote me. I didn't know if it was discrimination or not. I just knew that I had no chance when they gave the trainer position to another crew member, not me. They even didn't consider giving me the trainer position. It was meaningless for me to stay there." Ah Bo then went to a sushi restaurant to work as an apprentice. "I want to develop my career in the catering sector. That's why I wanted to become a Burger Master manager before. Anyway, I'm glad that I have quit my fast food job as I'm now having much more opportunities in the catering sector."

Working at Burger Master pushes the youngsters to think about their future, as no one wants to flip hamburgers and be exploited for their whole lives. The menial job makes them understand the necessity of having a stable one. The youngsters soon come to realize that there are no real prospects in their fast food jobs, except if one has a chance to climb up to the management. However, the reality is that such chance is so limited that they are forced to find their own way out. They have to quit not only from that particular Burger Master store, but indeed the menial fast food job as they can see no way out. Therefore, Ada, Ka Kue and Ah Bo did not apply to other Burger Master stores or other fast food chains. What they were looking for was no longer a temporary shelter for them to avoid the public and parental pressures that push them to the work world, but a stable job which pays a living wage. To them, it is a process of maturing.

Young people who decided to quit from fast food job usually did not mention such experience when they went to seek another job. To them, beginning with fast food industry was not an accident, for the stereotype of hamburger-flipping as the emblematic low-wage job turns out to be quite accurate. There is no doubt that the perception on fast food job of the young people is highly influenced by the negative public perceptions. They all have

the same conception that fast food job is low skill and low class. Some even do not regard it as a real job. Even though the organizational culture helps them a lot in overcoming the public negatives, they still carry the public perceptions in their mind. Ka Kue told me that he would not mention his 2-year experience in fast food restaurant while applying for other jobs, "It's useless to mention it for it's not real working experience. Do you think they will hire me because I have worked at Burger Master for 2 years? No! They may even look down on me when they realize that I have spent 2 years there (Burger Master)." It has to be noted that although there are in fact some skills hidden in the fast food jobs, the young people do not regard them as "skills" as they are deeply influenced by the public negatives that fast food is a low skill job.

5.4.2 The Inside Track

Besides following the outside track to enter the work world, some teenagers prefer the inside one. As mentioned in the previous chapter, fast food industry looks favorably on internal promotion. As a result, there is a surprising number of executives who got their start cooking fries and setting the timers on microwave ovens. Even though the reality is that the upper positions are far fewer than the bottom level workers, there are still some workers who have the chance to pursue their career future from the inside track. Once they have got such chance or have seen the possibility of following this track, they are then beginning to quit from the temporary shelter to the real work world. Here I want to point out that entering the work world is not necessarily to be a physical movement of leaving the fast food restaurant, but in fact a transformation of the young individuals' perceptions on their own job and future.

As discussed before, most youngsters entered Burger Master just because they did not have any idea of their future. Without any idea of what work really means, the teenagers regard Burger Master as the only but temporary choice. Once they have come to understand their situation and started to be concerned about their own future, they are then becoming members of the work world. Although the physical environment and the job itself remain the same, the meaning behind it is totally transformed. To them, fast food job is no longer a temporary choice, but a career. Ah Tung entered Burger Master since he had no idea of what kind of job he could do. He had never thought of staying there for long as he understood that he could not live on such a menial wage. After a few months, he decided to stay to pursuit his future inside Burger Master. He became more and more devoted in his job and was then promoted to the trainer position. Ah Tung understands that it is a long way from crew member to the point where that stability and prospects come their way. However, he also understands that he is no longer in the temporary detention center but following a career path that may bring him prospects in the future.

5.5 Acquiring Human Capital

The acquisition of a mainstream identity as a member of the work world is only one of the important changes that befall a youngster who gets a job. Contrary to the public perception, the workers acquire human capital from such a menial entry-level job. As entry-level employment, fast food jobs provide the worker with experience and knowledge that ought to be useful as a platform for advancement in the work world.

5.5.1 Rediscovering the Value of Education

Fast food jobs are often thought to act as magnets, pulling young people away from school, distracting their attention from the kind of human capital investment that will pay off in the long run. As a result, most of the young workers are thought to be school dropouts who have no interest in schoolwork. Here I want to point out that on the contrary, the job changes the youngsters' attitude towards education. It is from such entry-level job that school dropouts rediscover the value of education.

Ada decided to take an intensive one-week computer course after having worked at Burger Master for ten months. "It is essential for my future career. No one would employ a person who doesn't know how to use the computer, no matter what kind of job it is. You know, I want a secretarial job. It is a must for me to learn computer." Since the computer course was an intensive one, she had to leave Burger Master for a whole week. While being asked whether it was worthwhile or not, Ada told me, "Before, I thought I would never pick up the books again. I have no talent in studying and that was why I got no offer in the sixth form. In fact, I did not care how much education I had. However, having spent more and more time at here (Burger Master), I then came to realize how little I know and understand about work. If I want to get a better job outside, it would be very difficult as I know nothing. I have to equip myself so as to become more competitive in the labor market. Or I can't find any job and I will get stuck here. Leaving here for a week is not a big deal when you think of your future."

A trainer, Terry, asked me to suggest to him some accounting courses. "I want to be an accountant in the future. But I know nothing about accounting. I have to take some accounting courses so as to acquire related qualifications.

This is very important if I want to work as an accountant. I regret not studying hard when I was at school. Otherwise I wouldn't have to worry much about my future now. I feel bored and I don't want to be stuck at here. The only way out for me is either leaving this restaurant or climbing up to the manager position. However, both paths require more education." Like most of the young Burger Master workers, Terry did not have any interest in studying. Only from his menial fast food job does he start to understand the importance of education.

5.5.2 Discipline

Besides technical skills, young people do also acquire experience and knowledge for advancement in the work world from their entry-level job. Fast food jobs involved taking care of responsibilities that were delegated to the workers. Burger Master taught the young people that they had to be on time and that completing their work in a defined period of time was an expectation they had to meet. It is a proving ground for youths with limited human capital who need an introduction to the culture of regular work.

Having a job means selling one's own time and labor to the employers. "Those who are employed experience a distinction between their employer's time and their 'own' time. And the employer must use the time of his labour, and see it is not wasted: not the task but the value of time when reduced to money is dominant. Time is now currency: it is not passed but spent" (Thompson 1967: 61). While at work, the time and labor no longer belong to the workers themselves but to their employers. In addition, teenagers learn to control themselves while facing different situation like encounters with abrasive customers, as well as strict and demanding managers. Youngsters are asked to tolerate situations that would possibly provoke a fight outside restaurant. It

takes discipline, patience, forbearance, and an eye for the long-range goal of holding on to their jobs to get through some of these encounters. It is from the entry-level job that young people understand the culture of the work world before entering it.

5.6 Dead End Work?

As a career, the menial entry-level fast food job is undoubtedly dead end for there is no real future in it. However, it serves a purpose as a shelter for young people, who are the losers in the education system, to be temporarily relieved from social pressure, where they can not only acquire an honored identity as a real member of society, but also have time to reflect and come to terms with their poor prospects. Fast food job also serves as a stepping stone for youngsters to real work world from which they can even acquire human capital for advancement and figure out the future paths before them.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

Fast food corporations have long been the targets of attack in Hong Kong for underpaying their workers. They are often accused of recruiting temporary workers and paying low wages. The survey conducted by the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Union in 1998 discovered that McDonald's, the worldwide fast food symbol, paid its staff as low as HK\$ 13 per hour. Several local workers unions had even staged demonstrations against the exploitation of workers by the transnational fast food corporation, McDonald's. Earlier on, concerned parties and NGOs (Non-Governmental Organization) even held protests outside McDonald's restaurants demanding that the corporation pay decent wages to its workers. However, all these urges have fallen on the deaf ears of the corporations as well as those of the young people who keep filling up the vacancies. Hong Kong does, after all, operate according to the principle of free enterprise. No matter how low fast food restaurants pay, how severe the public accusations are, fast food corporations never have to worry about lacking of employees.

The fast food industry relies heavily on young people for a labor force. Many fast food restaurants, especially the transnational ones, recruit lots of teenagers, both school dropouts and secondary school students. Those who keep knocking on the doors of fast food restaurants are mainly aged from fifteen up to eighteen. Such dominant age range is due to the restriction of the Employment Ordinance that the minimum working age is fifteen years old and thus no one younger than fifteen can be found. Since the education system in Hong Kong that quite a lot of teenagers quit school after the HKCEE at the age of seventeen or eighteen, young people usually knock on Burger Master's door

at this age. More than 90% of them have education not more than the fifth form. Some of them even quit school after finishing the third form, the limit of mandatory education. University students, as well as students in sixth and seventh forms, are rarely seen in fast food restaurants.

The fast food industry favors internal promotion that workplace management is usually recruited from entry-level workers. However, the vast majority of workers never even get close to management. The typical case of entry-level workers is the one who passes through his/her job in short order. The industry is a planned operation built around low skills and high turnover. In order for the industry to keep functioning with such an unstable labor force, the jobs must be broken down so that each step can be learned, at least at a rudimentary level, in a very short time. A vicious circle develops in which low wages are attached to low skills, encouraging high turnover rates.

Many scholars, including Braverman (1974) and Thompson (1989), argue that work that is highly routinized, scripted and high-tech systemized is indeed deskilling and alienating the workers. Some even say that such jobs are "skill-free" that any mindless idiot could do them. These are not only academic conclusions but also the public impressions on fast food work. Human judgement has been entirely replaced by preset oven timers, blinking lights, beepers and buzzers. All the workers have to do is to follow the lights, beepers and buzzers and move their hands and legs as fast as they can. The workers are limited by the popular impression that the jobs they hold are devoid of value. Fast food jobs are thus notoriously stigmatized and denigrated, not only because of the low wages but also the nature of the job. Therefore, young fast food workers are generally known as low class people without future. Those who pick up fast food jobs are often regarded as getting stuck at the bottom of the

labor market for their whole lives.

Faced with negative public stereotypes, teenagers are helped by the workplace culture to hold their heads up. What the organization can do is not to reeducate the public, but to help the workers to value their jobs and retain their dignity. Since the pay is so low, something other than money is emphasized by the organization. The fast food corporations always try to create a friendly and family-like social circle inside the restaurants. The close ties among workers are the influential factors for why young workers would devote themselves in the exploiting and alienating job. Many young workers go back to the restaurant on their days off. Some would even give their helping hands voluntarily without pay when the restaurant is in need. To them, Burger Master is like another home. Fast food workers have to face not only with the negative perceptions, but also the low estimation of their worth. Facing rude customers and insults are indeed part of their job. Without the support of fellow workers, as well as the managers, it would be very hard for them to retain their dignity. Beside the sense of belonging, a sense of teamwork is also developed in the workplace. Teamwork spirit is strongly emphasized, especially during the peak hours. The managers often offer helpful comments to encourage the whole team to do their best and every worker would response "Yes Sir!" loudly. This ritual keeps the workers working with a high teamwork spirit. Crew meeting is held regularly in order to keep the workers informed about the corporation policy and to enlist their support. All of which are means for developing a sense of loyalty to the organization.

Our society generally confers honor on those who hold down jobs of any kind over those who are outside of the labor force. Having a job means something more than making money. It is from having a job that people's

identities of mainstream Hongkongese are shaped and reinforced. It is a symbol of being a real member of society. Most young people do not have to make their own living after they have quit school. However, most of them would undoubtedly hunt for jobs of any kind immediately so as to be relieved from the social as well as parental pressures that push them into the labor market. No matter whether they are school dropouts or university graduates, our society assumes all of them should enter the labor market immediately after they have finished their studies as if it is the only possible and reasonable path that every member of the society should take. Otherwise, they would lose their mainstream identities, as they could not fulfill the social expectations on them. Those who are not inside the labor force are looked upon as they not only have no contribution to the society, but also have to be living on others' support. Teenagers are, on the one hand, being pushed to enter the work world. On the other hand, however, they are too young to have any concrete idea of what their prospects could be. To these youngsters who have little human capital and work experience, money, fringe benefits, opportunities and job satisfaction are not in their consideration. The most important thing to them is to get a chance to enter the labor force so that they can become a honored member of our society. In such dilemma, fast food industry serves as a temporary shelter for the young people to be relieved from public pressure and have their first taste of being part of the labor market, as well as to figure out their own future career paths. Even though there are many other alternatives, many young people would regard fast food industry as their very first step, for it is well known as shelter for young school dropouts. It favors people who see these entry-level jobs as a temporary pit stop on the way to something better, a path to upward mobility more likely to be opened by schooling than by work experience of this

kind.

The young fast food workers seldom regard their job as means to gain working experience or acquiring skills. Some of them even avoid from mentioning such working experience while applying other jobs. This is not only because they are influenced by negative social perceptions and stereotypes attached that their jobs are not valued by the society, but also because fast food industry is only their temporary shelter. However, this "no skill" job has brought something positive to the young workers, something which has never been thought of by both the workers and the general public. The fast food industry's reputation for deskilling its work combines with the low social standing of these young workers to make their skills invisible. In fact, as entry-level employment, fast food jobs provide the workers with experience and knowledge that ought to be useful as a platform for advancement in the work world. Understanding the rules, and then understanding the "work-arounds" that crew members devise to get out from under the rules, is a big part of what it takes to fit into the work routine. New workers have to learn the difference between the official procedures mandated by the corporation and the informal practices that most people resort to in order to get the job done. The job also makes youngsters who have lost their interest and motivation in education rediscover its value from their job as they come to realize that it is the only way to a better tomorrow. What they can learn is not only social skills to get along with managers and colleagues, but also how to be a responsible and polite employee. This is particularly important to the young people for their future in the labor world. Besides, fast food jobs involve taking care of responsibilities that are delegated to the workers. They teach the young people that they have to be on time and that completing their work in a defined period of time is an expectation they have

to meet. They are a proving ground for poor youth who need an introduction to the culture of regular work. Even though there are skills involved in the entry-level job, they are so subtle that most young workers do not regard such work as real working experience, not only because they are influenced by the public perception, but also because they only view their jobs as temporary choices.

While most of the public attention is put on the negatives of the fast food job, there are indeed skills, discretion and responsibility and even prospects locked up in it. The fast food industry is actually very good about internal promotion, in that the management is usually recruited from entry-level workers. It is true that the vast majority never even get close to management. However, there is still a possible path for teenagers with little human capital to have a prestigious job as a manager or even restaurant owner. Young workers acquire not only technical skills but also experience and knowledge for advancement in the work world. Even though most of the young workers are losers in the education system, the menial job changes their attitude towards education.

In a society where enterprise and wealth is highly valued, jobs that are dull, have low prestige and pay poorly are looked down upon. This is one of the reasons why hamburger flippers rate so poorly in the prestige game that they are defined as uneducated people with no other options. Fast food industry is commonly thought to be the refuge of secondary school dropouts who lack the skills and credentials to do any better in the labor market. Such perception accords well with the reality as most of the young workers are indeed losers in the education system. Teenage workers quit school as they not only have lost the interest in further studies, but also are no longer capable to continue. Even though they are often told before leaving school that being losers in education

would give them low status in society, these young people often tend to believe that there are still other possibilities for them to have their own career in the future. Once they have left school, the social pressure becomes so strong that they are pushed to get a job without thinking of what work and future really mean to them. The exploiting working condition and menial rewards in fast food industry make them face the reality that their prospects would not be as bright as they thought. This is particularly true when after they have spent several months in flipping hamburgers, they then come to realize that a fast food job can never support their own living, nor fulfill their growing desire for independence. Most of them would leave the temporary shelter and enter the real work world.

For a young person to enter the labor force at such a low level is no great tragedy. What is tragic is to see that same person stuck in a job that will never pay a living wage. For all too many Burger Barn workers, the future ends up looking just like the present. They do not graduate; they remain in jobs designed for teenagers and try to manage adult responsibilities on hopelessly inadequate wages. (Newman 1999: 151)

No one would disagree with Newman that it is a great tragedy to see the teenagers stuck in menial entry-level jobs for years without any other possible choice. Although fast food job would be undoubtedly dead end, it is not a dead end because they do not stay there. Fast food work in Hong Kong is not a life-long career for most young people. It serves a purpose as a stepping stone for the youngsters to enter the other sectors of the real labor market.

This research, to some extent, replicates Newman's study of young fast food workers in New York inner city. The focus of her research is on the young working poor in central Harlem whose earnings are so meager that despite their best efforts, they cannot afford decent housing, diets, health care, or child care.

More than one-third of the Harlem workers are parents trying to support families on the strength of the entry-level positions. Their situation is best described by a quote from one of her informants:

What people do about going to work or going on welfare depends on two things: their self-esteem and what's giving them the greatest benefit. Your self-esteem will definitely make you want to work. But at the same time, the welfare's giving you the greater benefit in dealing with your bills. (Newman 1999: 254)

In contrast to Newman's findings, the teenage workers in Hong Kong are not making a living from their jobs as their counterparts do in the United States. Over 80% of them live with their families, not just because they cannot earn enough money to launch independent lives and thus are forced to remain at home, but the fact is that their urge on this kind of independence is not as strong as those in Harlem. Young people in Hong Kong are not expected to live independently. In addition, most of the young workers do not have any financial burden as their counterparts in central Harlem do. Most of young fast food workers in Hong Kong regard their job as not only a stepping stone for them to prepare for entering the real work world, but also as a temporary shelter for them to be relieved from the social pressure of craving an identity as a real member of society.

The fast food job is highly stigmatized as "no skill" in both central Harlem and Hong Kong. However, Newman argues that there are skills inside the "no skill" job and the young workers are in fact acquiring human capital from it. This is also true in Hong Kong that fast food jobs provide the worker with experience and knowledge that ought to be useful as a platform for advancement in the work world. Beside technical skills in getting the job done,

fast food jobs involve taking care of responsibilities that are delegated to the workers.

This research is done on young low-wage earners and fast food jobs in Hong Kong. Though some research has been done on this topic, especially in the United States, there are so far so little about this aspect of labor market in Hong Kong. Through looking at the young fast food workers, low wage earners and fast food jobs in the context of Hong Kong is better understood. In addition, the comparison with Newman's case shows that the nature of the fast food job, which is low skill and low reward, remains unchanged in both Hong Kong and central Harlem. The major difference is in how the workers view on the job as well as their own prospects, which varies according to the different social and cultural contexts in two places.

Table 1: Personal Information of Burger Master Workers

No.	Name	Sex	Position	Education (Equivalent M/J)	Education (Present)	Age
1	Ada	F	Store Manager	F.5	F.9	16
2	Al Bo	M	Store Manager	F.6	F.5	17
3	Chun	M	Store Manager	F.2	F.1	10
4	Bob	F	Store Manager	F.7	University	18
5	Alvin	M	Cashier	F.8	F.1	17
6	Alan	M	Cashier	F.3	F.5	17
7	Alvin	M	Store Manager	University	University	23
8	Alvin	M	Store Manager	F.7	F.1	16
9	Alvin	M	Store Manager	F.6	University	17
10	Alvin	M	Store Manager	F.6	F.2	17
11	Alvin	M	Store Manager	F.4	F.1	13
12	Alvin	F	Store Manager	F.1	F.3	14
13	Alvin	F	Store Manager	F.4	F.2	16

Appendix

Table 1: Personal Information of Burger Master Workers

No.	Name	Sex	Position	Education (Entering BM)	Education (Present)	Age (Entering BM)	Age (Present)	How long	FT/PT	Remarks
1	Ada	F	Crew Member	F.5	F.5	16	18	2 years	FT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> She has quit Burger Master and is now working as a secretary at a child daycare center.
2	Ah Bo	M	Crew Member	F.5	F.5	17	19	2 years	FT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> He has quit Burger Master and is now working as a trainee in a Japanese restaurant.
3	Ah Chi	M	Crew Member	F.5	F.5	16	16	3 months	PT	
4	Ah Fai	F	Crew Member	F.7	University	18	20	10 days	PT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> She worked for 10 days only during the summer vacation after the seventh form.
5	Ah How	M	Crew Member	F.5	F.5	17	17	5 months	FT	
6	Ah Man	M	2nd Assistant Manager	F.5	F.5	17	21	4 months	FT	
7	Ah Ming	M	2nd Assistant Manager	University	University	23	26	3 years	FT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> He entered the management level after graduation.
8	Ah Ngai	M	Crew Member	F.4	F.4	16	16	1 month	PT	
9	Ah Pang	M	Team Leader	F.5	University	17	20	2 years	PT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> He quit after entering the university. He is now working as part-time private tutor.
10	Ah Tung	M	Crew Member	F.5	F.5	17	17	5 months	FT	
11	Ah Wai	M	Crew Member	F.4	F.4	17	17	2 months	PT	
12	Ah Yan	F	Crew Member	F.3	F.3	14	14	2 months	FT	
13	Ah Ying	F	Crew Member	F.4	F.4	16	16	4 months	PT	

14	Amenda	F	Crew Member	F.5	F.5	17	17	5 months	PT	
15	Betty	F	Crew Member	F.5	F.5	17	17	5 months	PT	
16	Bo Bo	F	2nd Assistant Manager	F.5	F.5	17	21	4 years	FT	
17	Cathy	F	Crew Member	F.5	F.5	17	17	1 month	PT	
18	Chole	F	Crew Member	F.5	F.5	17	17	1 month	PT	
19	Emily	F	Crew Member	F.5	F.5	17	17	1 month	PT	
20	Ka Kue	M	Trainer	F.5	F.5	17	20	2 years	FT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> He has quit Burger Master and is finding a secretarial job.
21	Kat	F	Crew Member	F.3	F.3	15	15	5 months	FT	
22	Ken	M	Trainer	F.5	F.5	16	18	2 years	FT	
23	Marko	M	2nd Assistant Manager	F.3	F.3	15	21	6 years	FT	
24	May	F	Crew Member	University	University	20	20	1 month	PT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> She entered Burger Master just for school project.
25	Moon	F	Manageress	F.5	F.5	17	32	15 years	FT	
26	Paul	M	Trainer	F.4	F.5	17	18	1 year	FT	
27	Penny	M	Team Leader	F.5	F.5	17	19	1.5 years	FT	
28	Sunky	F	Crew Member	F.4	F.4	16	16	2 months	FT	
29	Terry	M	Trainer	F.5	F.5	17	18	1 year	FT	
30	Wiss	F	2nd Assistant Manager	University	University	24	25	1 year	FT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> She entered the management level directly after graduation.

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