Food, Eating Practices and Identity in Postcolonial Hong Kong: A Study of Cha Chaan Tengs, Soy Sauce Western Cuisine and the Narrative of Indigenisation

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ABSTRACT

Food is closely linked to human history, and often acknowledged as a symbol of a region or nation's culture. The culinary history of a cuisine helps people understand the cultural identity of the region or group. In societies shaped by colonial histories, political changes, and cultural shifts, familiar food acts as a vital collective memory and provides a sense of belonging for many locals. Accordingly, people's daily food practices can reflect their tastes, dietary choices, and rules of eating, and can be used to examine how a group's food practices contribute to understanding their food culture by connecting the past and present, affirming "who they are" and why they are different from other groups.

Hong Kong is a world-famous city that was under British colonial rule for over a hundred years and has been influenced by Western culture for a long time. Following the return of sovereignty to China in 1997, localist culture and China's communist culture have been in ongoing conflict, with debates surrounding political instability and local identity continuing. In recent years, an increasing number of democratic movements have prompted Hong Kong's people to reflect on their culture, identity, and sense of belonging.

This dissertation investigates the role of food in shaping identity through the case of Hong Kong people's food practices in cha chaan tengs and their soy sauce Western cuisine. Because cha chaan tengs and their cuisine developed through colonial influence and local adaptation, they occupy an ambiguous cultural position between traditional Chinese and Western culture. This makes it an ideal lens for exploring the development of local culture and the formation of identity in a postcolonial context.

The study examines people's food practices through the lens of social orders, communal functions, and shared memories, focusing on culinary hybridity, dining behaviours, and nostalgic narratives of cha chaan tengs. It explores how characteristics of hybridity in culinary practices manifest in people's everyday food practices, and how the culture of cha chaan tengs is regarded as a distinct culture that reflects diners' behaviours and norms, distinguishing insiders from outsiders. Additionally, the study investigates how nostalgic narratives of cha chaan tengs transmit local culture and reinforce the cultural heritage of food.

The cha chaan tengs and their soy sauce Western cuisine are chosen as a case study subject because the role of food in the expression and construction of identity highlights the importance of examining ordinary cultural forms to understand broader social processes. The study demonstrates the dynamics of identity production beyond individual self-expression and reveals that identity is not a fixed cultural essence. Additionally, the study offers a valuable perspective on how local culture operates through daily life, providing a framework that may be applied to other postcolonial and culturally hybrid societies.

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ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Food not only nourishes but also signifies, as it makes the eater; it is natural that eaters should try to make themselves by eating (Fischler, 1988). Also, Sidney Mintz (2002, as cited in Cheng, 2013, p. 16) once observed that "In understanding the relationship between food and person, we unearth the history of ourselves anew." In this context, food is never just about eating; the importance of food practices extends beyond perceptions of flavour and authenticity. Food carries traces of collective memory and reflects social and historical experiences in many ways; its significance lies in its role in conveying a group's cultural roots and social order (Grey & Newman, 2018).

Hong Kong is a highly developed metropolis with distinctive cultural connotations and historical roots, shaped by the blending of Chinese and British influences (Cheng, 2013). A 2014 survey found that when discussing their identity, Hong Kong residents often identify themselves as "Hong Kongers" or "Chinese," which reflects their recognition of both aspects (Ping & Kin-ming, 2014). Although most of Hong Kong's population is of Chinese descent, the long-term effects of colonial rule and intense Western influence have fostered a local cultural identity. In recent years, several social movements have emphasised native culture, prompting discussions about Hong Kong people's identity and drawing public attention (Steinhardt et al., 2018).

Hong Kong bears the imprint of more than a century of British colonial rule, which is visibly reflected in its culinary landscape. Its British and Chinese elements have long intersected through food (Cheung, 2022, p. 16), as seen in bing sutts and cha chaan tengs. Bing sutts, also known as ice rooms, are a type of cold-drink house that also serves simple food, and bing sutts is generally considered the predecessor of cha chaan tengs (Lo, 2008). By the 1950s, bing sutts gradually changed their name to cha chaan tengs, which include both ordinary restaurants and cafés, serving both Western and Chinese cuisine (Wu, 2001). However, the Chinese food offered at cha chaan tengs is very distinctive from the traditional Chinese food commonly seen in dai pai dongs, which are street food stalls (Cheng, 2013). The food served at cha chaan tengs was called soy sauce Western cuisine, a term used by older generations of Hong Kong residents. People were inspired by perceptions of British cuisine at the time and used common seasonings, such as soy sauce, to create their own Western-style dishes at cha chaan tengs, including baked pork chop, roast chicken, minced beef, and corn soup (Lo, 2008).

Within this landscape, the soy sauce Western cuisine served at cha chaan tengs is a fascinating example for analysis. Cha chaan tengs are restaurants that virtually every Hong Kong resident has visited at least once in their lifetime, and their soy sauce Western cuisine, cooking methods, and dining routines have become familiar markers of shared behaviours and sensibilities (Wu, 2001). Current studies indicate there has been a relatively limited discussion of how cha chaan tengs have become cultural symbols through everyday practices,

particularly how their food culture is continuously reinterpreted and reattached within contexts of cross-regional mobility.

In this way, the study examines the development of cha chaan tengs, including aspects of cultural narrative, communication spaces, and overseas dissemination, exploring how their cultural visibility and symbolic value are constructed in daily routines. This study employs secondary data within an inductive thematic analysis approach to capture potential cultural meanings and significance. The process seeks to extract more conceptual themes from specific cases to understand the structural formation of culture within certain societies.

1.2 Research Question

Existing studies on the identity of Hong Kong residents primarily focus on social and political aspects; there is limited research exploring the connection between food culture and identity. While some scholars discuss the relationship between food practices and identity from a cultural observation perspective, previous research has not been thoroughly explored in the present globalised context.

For this reason, this paper seeks to examine the roles of cha chaan tengs and their cuisine within Hong Kong culture, guided by the following research question:

- "How is Hong Kong's cultural identity expressed and negotiated through 'soy sauce Western food' and cha chaan tengs?"

1.3 Overview of Chapter Structure

This study consists of six chapters:

Chapter 1: Introduction—An overview of cha chaan tengs and soy sauce Western cuisine as the central entry point for exploring the connection between food and identity.

Chapter 2: Literature Review—A review of scholarship on food and identity, national food and identity, colonial influence, and food within the context of diaspora.

Chapter 3: Methodology—A detailed discussion of the research philosophy, research questions, methods, data collection and thematic analysis, as well as ethical considerations.

Chapter 4: Case Study—An analysis of the historical and sociocultural background of Hong Kong's colonial past and the emergence of soy sauce Western cuisine, followed by summaries of selected materials, analytical results, and a discussion of the themes.

Chapter 5: Discussion—An interpretation of the thematic findings within the context of the review, examining the value of soy sauce Western cuisine and the role of cha chaan tengs culture as a form of identity, as well as assessing the limitations of the study.

Chapter 6: Conclusion—A summary of this study and reflections on the broader implications for exploring food, culture and identity.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

"Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are." This famous saying is the maxim of Brillat-Savarin (1825/2009, p. 15), which appears in his book *The Physiology of Taste*. This statement highlights the connection between food choice and cultural identity, as frequently cited in social sciences and anthropology (Cohen, 1993; Jones, 2007; Twiss, 2007). As gastronomy and related topics (e.g., food practices, dietary behaviour, and consumption preferences) have attracted growing attention from the social sciences, research in this area has increasingly intersected with psychology, sociology, semiotics, and cognitive science. Over recent decades, theoretical and empirical developments in food studies and identity studies have extended Brillat-Savarin's proposition to varying degrees.

This chapter begins by examining theories and concepts related to identity and food. Then, it explores their correlation and provides a straightforward analytical approach for understanding the interconnection. Finally, it reviews prior studies on the relationship between identity and food, specifying the connotations and characteristics of identity and food, and showing how differing assumptions lead to different interpretations.

2.2 Food and Identity

2.2.1 Theories of Identity

Early studies of identity were largely confined to psychology and attracted the attention of a limited number of scholars (Baumeister, 2011). Erikson (1959, as cited in Schwartz, 2001) is one of the earliest psychological scholars to have systematically studied identity and to have developed an initial theory of identity with the status of a paradigm in this field. Erikson was careful to differentiate identity from self, as ego identity refers to the awareness of self-sameness and continuity (Schwartz, 2001). Erikson explained that identity formation is a lifelong process, and adolescence is the stage at which a person begins to develop a sense of identity, alongside multiple identity claims and role confusion (Maree, 2022). Subsequently, James Marcia (1966, 1959, as cited in Schwartz, 2001) validated and supported Erikson's ideas, expanding the notion that identity is continuously evolving. Individual identity is related to commitments to values, beliefs, and goals, and individuals may move between different identity statuses over time.

Along with the development of psychology and the social sciences, the concept of identity has gradually evolved. From the 1970s, as social psychology developed as an independent discipline, the study of identity expanded from an individual focus to include group processes and intergroup behaviour (Chryssochoou, 2003; Postmes et al., 2025). Social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner (1974) introduced the concept of social identity theory to explain intergroup behaviour. According to this theory, an individual often feels a strong emotional connection to their group through a sense of identity largely derived

from membership in social groups. Intergroup social activities contribute to the development of diverse values, beliefs, and goals, thereby fostering the concepts of ingroup and outgroup (Tajfel, 1974). In addition, other scholars have highlighted that ingroup favouritism and ethnocentrism can be motivated through social comparison and the pursuit of positive distinctiveness (Billig & Tajfel, 1973).

Since the 1980s, academic attention in identity studies has increasingly shifted towards cultural explanations within historical contexts, particularly in the field of intercultural communication, driven by the increase of social mobility and multiculturalism, and the influence of post-war migration, labour movements, and decolonisation (Dietler, 2007; Jensen et al., 2011). As culture is regarded as characteristic of social action, it is understood as a system of symbols, meanings, and norms transmitted through history (Collier, 1989). The emphasis in this cultural conceptualisation is upon identities, and cultural identity hiding inside the 'self', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common (Hall, 1994/2015, p. 223). The shared history includes histories, beliefs, core values, attitudes, traditions, and language (Collier, 1989). However, cultural identities are like history and undergo continuous transformation. They are not a fixed essence, but a shifting production shaped by similarity and difference (Hall, 1994/2015). Cultural identities are posited to differ in the scope, salience and intensity of identity, which are interdependent dimensions (Collier, 1989).

In addition, when one claims a cultural identity, it is not only associated with a set of characteristics but also distances oneself from others (Cohen, 1993). Fredrik Barth's

(1969/2010, p. 409) research revealed the complexity of cultural identity, focusing on group ethnicity and boundaries that differentiate one group from another. Ethnicity is not defined by objective markers of cultural traits, such as food, accent, dress, and festivals, which only help to emphasise and maintain the group's distinctiveness (Barth, 1969/2010). Barth (1969/2010) highlighted the importance of social boundaries, which function as a stable social structure to strengthen inter-ethnic relations, allowing interactions between people from different cultures, and providing guidelines to regulate and prevent cultural conflicts during inter-ethnic interactions. The explicit social boundary can help to distinguish us from others.

2.2.2 Theories of Food

This section turns to another domain of food, which has a complex and reciprocal relationship with identity. Food is intertwined with human history, regional traditions, preferences, culinary behaviour, emotions, and memory. It also plays a pivotal role in shaping self-concept and identity (Bisogni et al., 2002). The section examines the social functions and cultural meanings of food (e.g., symbols, consumption practices), and reviews the research of scholars such as Roland Barthes, Jack Goody, and Stephen Mennell, among others. This analysis also lays the groundwork for the next section.

The complexity of food is related to the diverse and multifaceted nature of group practices; what people eat and how they eat are determined not only by physiological needs but also by learned preferences, values, knowledge, and motivation (Locher et al., 2005). This reflects the fluidity of one's ideology. As Lévi-Strauss (1971, as cited in Fischler, 1988, p. 278) put it, food must not only be good to eat but also good to think about. Ingredients,

cuisines, and tastes are worth exploring because they are significant elements of people's food practices, expressing and reflecting the roles these practices play in their cultures. However, the meaning of food is deeply embedded in ideology and social construction; it is dynamic and can be continuously reshaped and negotiated (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). Thus, food practices may be enacted, developed through narratives and negotiation, and enhanced through the transmission of traditions across generations.

Although food choice may appear to be a very personal matter, it is embedded in broader cultural structures that shape attitudes towards foods. Cultural factors surrounding food can act as barriers or facilitators of people's attitudes towards certain foods (Murcott, 1982). Anthropological and sociological studies have emphasised the role of food in reproducing social distinctions. For example, Jack Goody (1982, as cited in Sangren, 1989, p. 198) examined how haute cuisine and complex culinary techniques are associated with social status, serving as markers of refined taste. Goody argued that the analysis of cooking or culinary skill must be related to the distribution of power and authority in the economic sphere, that is, it is related to the systems of social class (Sangren, 1989). Additionally, Bourdieu (1979, as cited in Ollivier, 2008, p. 266) conceptualised food preferences as a form of cultural capital, through which groups express and maintain social distinction. Bourdieu's concept of class primarily refers to differences in life conditions that lead to distinct forms of domination and exclusion. The geography of social space lays the conditions for the reproduction of substance (Ollivier, 2008).

However, such class-based distinctions in food practices are not fixed, especially in the context of increasing globalisation. The rise of global cultural hybridisation increases the likelihood that people access a variety of cuisines, thereby weakening rigid boundaries between 'high' and 'low' food cultures (Mennell, 2017). As more individuals engage with multiple culinary traditions and incorporate national or local representative foods into the broader home-cooking repertoire, this suggests that food practices are continually renegotiated rather than solely determined by class position.

People's food consumption and preferences are interrelated with their experience and social environment. For instance, Lupton's (1994) research on the food practices of Sydney University undergraduates found that personal preferences for food are closely tied to belonging, childhood memories, and family connections. Food serves as an emotional object. Moreover, Locher et al. (2005) showed that food habits are commonly established in childhood and are reflected in cuisine preferences, food types, portion size, and the number of meals each day. Individuals' emotions often follow what they eat, both positively and negatively.

When people leave their familiar environments or experience life's ups and downs, they often crave familiar foods (e.g., nostalgic and comfort foods), which can help alleviate feelings of homesickness and other emotions (Mannur, 2007). For example, international students and soldiers posted overseas often welcome food from their home countries, which reflects a desire to maintain emotional ties and cultural identity (Brown et al., 2019). As Mannur (2007) stated, immigrants preserve traditional eating habits by cooking nostalgic

foods, and maintaining these food practices helps strengthen social connectedness and group distinctiveness within their culture. In this sense, food also serves as a function of recalling and re-establishing connections to specific times and places. As Swislocki (2008) examines in Shanghai, the immigrant communities from Nanjing, Ningbo, and Suzhou are growing, and the number of restaurants serving their native cuisines has increased. This finding suggests that immigrants are driven by familiar tastes and memories, which help them sustain emotional connections to their hometowns through food practices.

Scholars such as Mary Douglas (1967, as cited in Leach, 2013, p. 50) and Roland Barthes (1957, as cited in Berger, 2014, p. 23) have also emphasised the symbolic significance of food. Barthes treated food as a cultural "object" and as a sign that is embedded within broader social and cultural contexts. For example, advertisers exploit consumers' emotional responses to food to achieve commercial ends (Berger, 2014). Moreover, Douglas discussed how food and drink in myths, rituals, and daily practices connect humans with their past and present, contributing to communal values and ethnic cohesion (Leach, 2013). In addition, food rituals and symbolism play a significant role in social situations, such as birthday celebrations, wedding banquets, and religious feasts (Mennell, 2017).

2.2.3 Paradigms Connecting Food and Identity

This section examines the complex relationship between food, culture, and identity, drawing on the work of Mary Douglas and Sidney Mintz. First, Douglas (1973/2014, p. 3) proposed an assumption in the *Food in the Social Order* that "unlike livestock, humans make their food choices on what to eat, when and how often, in what order, and with whom."

Douglas's assumption provided a unique perspective on food by examining the cultural meanings and social functions that underlie food practices (Atkin et al., 2021). In line with this approach, Mintz and Du Bois (2002) argued that food serves as a culturally defined substance that contributes to the creation and maintenance of social relations by both solidifying group membership and distinguishing groups. The research of Douglas and Mintz highlighted that eating habits and cuisines, to varying degrees and in different contexts, lend concreteness to the concepts of cultural significance and identity for individuals.

Douglas (1972/2018) thoroughly discussed every facet of eating behaviour, from procurement, preparation, distribution, consumption, and disposal, and regards food both as a substance and a code used for communication. "A meal between breakfast and the last nightcap, the food of the day comes in an ordered pattern. Between Monday and Sunday, the food of the week is patterned again" (Douglas, 1972/2018, p. 66). Douglas argued that eating is a patterned, language-based form of social communication within daily meal patterns, and meal rituals imbue communicative functions. When cultural, traditional, and belief systems are threatened by external factors, the relationship between food and identity can change, depending on the degree of social isolation or marginalisation (Douglas, 1972/2018).

Furthermore, social change affects eating patterns; in turn, eating patterns influence social change, as food travels across the globe with people, especially migrants, refugees, and colonisers, who are agents of dietary change (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). Furthermore, social change affects eating patterns; in turn, eating patterns influence social change, as food travels across the globe with people, especially migrants, refugees, and colonisers, who are agents of

dietary change (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). Although a specific regional food system is shaped by a particular territory and its seasons, human movement inevitably leads to food exchange, and the societies of the receiving areas often adapt, modify, and redefine imported foods. Migrants often preserve and re-create traditional foods and cooking methods to express their cultural identity (Mintz, 2008).

However, identity is continuous and accompanies individuals, even as they move to a new cultural environment. An example illustrating this is immigrants managing to preserve and recreate aspects of their traditional food practices despite socioeconomic constraints and resource scarcity, precisely utilising traditional foods to express their cultural identity. Thus, the work of Douglas and Mintz provides a useful framework for understanding how eating practices influence group identity. The next section examines national identity and how foodways symbolise national culture and contribute to its formation.

2.2.4 Overview

Section 2.2 has reviewed the theoretical development of identity, from a concept grounded in the subject of psychology to one now embedded in the subjects of sociology and anthropology. Accordingly, the section has underscored the point that identity is not fixed but a dynamic, often contested and negotiated construct. Moreover, the section has explored the profound and essential connection between food and identity—food is a significant marker of cultural systems, carrying people's emotions and memories, and serving as a medium for cultural negotiation and identity formation, as suggested by Mary Douglas and Sidney Mintz.

2.3 National Identity and Food

2.3.1 Introduction

The previous discussion has shown that identity is a multidimensional construct, shaped by psychological development, cultural transmission and social construction. In addition, food is a potent cultural symbol of identity, linked to human life and reflecting a group's distinctiveness. These theories and conceptions provide a foundational basis for understanding the concept of identity. Since identity is a process that occurs throughout one's entire lifetime, the differentiation of a group serves as a means of distinguishing "us" from "others" (Tajfel, 1974). The "nation" is one of the most politically organised ingroups, and one of the most extensive forms of collective belonging (Parekh, 1995). National identity represents a significant factor in understanding individuals' psychological development, cultural commonalities, and the construction of economic and political systems (Parekh, 1995; Smith, 1992).

This transition from a broad study of identity to a focused analysis of national identity is intentional. It emphasises the forging of a singular narrative within a specific dimension of power, rather than engaging with a multiplicity of perspectives. The construction of national identity is closely linked to culture, economy, and politics (Parekh, 1995). In other words, it maps personal emotion and memory related to food, the social classification and order embedded within it, and the tastes of cultural capital that define it, onto a collective canvas. Therefore, this section focuses on the vital concept of national identity and its relation to the

role of food in culture and national identity, by reviewing foundational theoretical frameworks and explaining them with examples.

2.3.2 Defining National Identity

National identity is commonly regarded as a complex concept shaped by perception and constructed through multiple processes. Benedict Anderson's (1983/2006) famous constructivist assumption describes a nation as an "imagined community." Despite most members of the nation never having met, known, or heard of one another throughout their entire lives, they still share a mental image of their community and foster a collective sense of belonging (Anderson, 1983/2006). Interestingly, this idea aligns with Tajfel's (1974) social identity theory: group identity is constructed from its members; group distinctiveness is maintained and reinforced through internal membership and comparisons with external groups.

However, this imagination does not come from nowhere; instead, it is rooted in shared mythology, ancestry, memory, culture, and territory. These cultural symbols have shaped the concept of nationalism (Byrd, 2023). According to Anthony D. Smith (1983, p. 154), an individual who shares a history and a culture with others and is driven by a common ideology that tends to promote their interests and align them with the political objectives of the state is a nationalist. In many nations, nationalism is regarded as the mainstream ideology, deeply rooted in historical ethnic ties and using stories and symbols from the past to construct powerful, unifying identities that drive political movements (Smith, 1983).

Moreover, people who share a history, narrative, and collective memory, including the experience of hardship, struggle, glory, and honour, find it easy to transcend regional differences and foster a collective ideology in a broader sense (Anderson, 1983/2006). National identity is often strongly awakened during international competitions, national celebrations, or external conflicts, and is undoubtedly regarded as the primary form of group identity (Huang et al., 2023). Additionally, most ethnic groups have consistent ways of expressing national culture, which are related to culinary traditions and foodways (Colás et al., 2018; Ichijo & Ranta, 2016). The destiny of nations depends on the manner in which they feed themselves (Brillat-Savarin, 1825/2009). Throughout history, food has played a crucial role in uniting communities. For instance, specific foods symbolise national and collective memory during festivals: Chinese eat mooncakes during the Mid-Autumn Festival, and Americans roast turkey for Thanksgiving (Mols & Jetten, 2014).

2.3.3 Construction of Ethnic Food

Douglas (1973/2014) posited that ethnic food serves as a cultural category whose negotiability is determined by the degree of social segregation or openness. In other words, when a food leaves its native region and enters a new cultural context, it conveys two coexisting messages: first, food serves as a strong marker of its origin, establishing distinctive dietary boundaries for the group; second, it becomes incorporated into local cooking practices and blends with local ingredients over time (Mintz, 2008). Through the process of localisation, a new environment may gradually transform imported food into a form of ethnic food (Douglas, 1973/2014). Recently, scholars such as Alejandro Colás (in Colás et al., 2018)

and Atsuko Ichijo (2020) have systematically developed the study of food and nationalism—a subfield that has long been neglected within nationalism studies and reveals how food functions as a construction that shapes national identity and represents historical heritage, often under the influence of political power.

Two critical monographs from the early 21st century systematically explore the connection between food and identity with processes of cultural adaptation, namely *Food, National Identity, and Nationalism: From everyday to global politics* (Ichijo & Ranta, 2016) and *Food, Politics, and Society: Social Theory and the Modern Food System* (Colás et al., 2018). First, Ichijo (2020) elaborated on a top-down process of national performance through the case of Japan's re-creation of Italian pasta. Pasta was an important cuisine after the end of the closed country policy, which was initially eaten by the expeditionary force, intent on improving conscripts' physiques. Pasta became a widely popular home cuisine following the return of many soldiers to their hometowns. Over several generations, pasta incorporated local ingredients, such as soy sauce and miso, for seasoning, thereby evolving into a distinctive Japanese-style pasta. It has come to be recognised for its familiar taste, fostering a sense of national belonging. As a result, this adaptation of pasta has been established as an ethnic food, recognised as part of Japanese cuisine and included on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Ichijo & Ranta, 2016).

Furthermore, Colás et al. (2018) discussed the relationship between food and nationalism with the broader contexts of modernising capitalism and global expansion, particularly in the politics of the modern state. They argued that phenomena such as military conscription,

refugee flows, immigration, and cultural transmission through media, education, and social mobility have weakened the historical constraints of imperialism and aristocracy. Consequently, the significance of individual identity and distinctive national cultural conceptions is heightened in increasingly multicultural societies, while memories of food or dishes reminiscent of cooking by one's mother or grandmother serve to convey national identity and foster ethnic solidarity. For instance, pizza has long symbolised a staple food of Italian American families, and sharing familiar foods helps Italian immigrants unite their communities and maintain their national identity in America (Colás et al., 2018).

To sum up, the connection between food and national identity is multifaceted. Across different cultural contexts and social constructs, manifestations of their connection are significant and driven by openness, negotiation, and political purpose. In this way, food serves as a cultural narrative and participates in shaping individual and group identities through ongoing cultural processes, rather than merely symbolising culture. Additionally, food is an indispensable means of power operations and can be used to examine the construction of identity, establish group boundaries, and shape national or regional identity. The following section evaluates these processes through the lens of the immigrant group by exploring group identity practices in the context of diasporas.

2.3.4 Food in the Diasporic Context

Throughout history, human beings have consistently engaged in migration, and the dispersal of a people from their country of origin is defined as a diaspora (Bulter, 2001). It is worth noting that a diaspora differs from immigration. Diaspora denote the passive separation

from one's geographic place of origin, often influenced by historical events, such as war, or religious and cultural conflicts (Gilroy, 1994). A diasporic community often presents unique emotional characteristics related to its motherland and nations, as it is always situated within the context of 'minority' power relations and differs from other local groups that are the 'majority' (Hall, 1949/2015). Most diasporas retain and inherit their cultural practices, including language and dialects, religions, foodways, and festivals. The exploration of their habits contributes to understanding their cultural characteristics and identity, thereby reducing cultural differences and embedding diasporas in new settings (Gilroy, 1994). Food often accompanies human movement, as familiar foods help people evoke a sense of home and memory. A diaspora's emotional connection to its home can be maintained through memory and the flavour of food, which extends beyond regional boundaries.

As Stuart Hall (1994/2015, p. 229) stated, a view of cultural identity recognises that history shapes individuals and constructs difference; what we really are is like all historical things, continuous and changing and leads to what we become. Hall (1994/2015) emphasised that diasporic identities are those that continuously produce and reproduce themselves through transformation and difference. Moreover, Butler (2001) noted that the dimensions of history and time play a role in diasporic identity. This identity reflects the idea that the diaspora must have a relationship with an actual or imagined mother country, regardless of whether the nation is in decline or revival. For example, using culinary practices preserves the original foodways of the diaspora. Anita Mannur (2007) explored how food evokes diasporic longing for familiar cultural roots, arguing that it serves as both an intellectual and an

emotional anchor for the diaspora in her study, “Culinary Nostalgia: Authenticity, Nationalism, and Diaspora”.

Butler (2001) assumed that newer diasporas, which are up to two or three generations removed from the original dispersal, are more likely to bond with the motherland, while the connection between diasporic and indigenous communities might occur in the fourth generation and bring the possibility of assimilation. Coincidentally, Mintz (2008) noted that new migrants privately ate foods from their motherland, whereas they rarely did so in public in the U.S. Because they wanted their children to be like other Americans, they did what they could to conceal their background by avoiding such food. In that case, diasporic cooking may seek to use local ingredients instead of those from its place of origin and to reconstruct dishes in line with cultural interactions with the local culture. The next section (Section 2.4) focuses on a specific context of colonialism to discuss how food is reshaped through cultural interaction.

2.3.5 Overview

Overall, this section has aimed to narrow the broad discussion of identity to the specific concept of national identity. It began by exploring the theoretical foundations of national identity, which are often framed as an imagined community. It also examined how regional cultures are integrated into a national culture through shared memory, education, and language. Subsequently, the study examined the role of food in shaping national identity, highlighting its importance as a cultural symbol, a carrier for memory, and a key element of cultural negotiations.

2.4 Colonialism

2.4.1 Introduction

The previous section explored how the ingroup (the nation) utilises food to construct its national identity. The present section shifts its perspective to the outside, examining how the external force of colonialism is instrumental in redefining and reshaping food culture in a colony, as well as the issues caused by cultural hybridity and identity. This analysis aids in understanding the relationship between food and identity across contexts.

Colonialism is a practice of domination in which one group controls another, establishing a strict social and cultural hierarchy that also creates dietary boundaries between the two groups (Dietler, 2007; Grey & Newman, 2018). In the early 20th century, half of the Earth's continents were under colonial domination, and approximately two-fifths of the population was under colonial rule (Dietler, 2007). This section examines how colonised people were profoundly affected by the cultural infiltration and power dynamics imposed by the colonisers, through the aspects of food mobility, the cultural identities of colonisers and colonised, and the new identities formed through cultural integration.

2.4.2 Colonialism and Food Mobility

Colonists often organised agricultural activities to control land and resources, leading to the widespread cultivation of highly productive and valuable crops in the colonies and generating substantial profits from selling them to their home countries. For example, cocoa, sugar, and tea are valuable crops. The drain of trade wealth to Britain took place, in part,

through the cultivation of tea in colonial India and Burma (Bora, 2024). In *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, Mintz (1986, as cited in Marino, 1987, p. 550) explores one of the most crucial trade commodities of the last century, sugar, by investigating the production, sale, and consumption practices of sugar, which was transformed from a luxury to a necessity product due to increased colonial productivity. Working-class people relying on this low-cost food substitute, sugar, as a drug food, are being satisfied and drugged by farm and factory workers (Marino, 1987).

Colonialism is a significant driver of food mobility, as colonisers also extract indigenous crops and trade them as exotic foods within their groups. Those imported foods often become localised as European cuisine over time. The tomato, which originated in South America, is now popular in Italian cuisine. After several hundred years and generations of culinary practice, classic dishes such as margherita pizza and lasagna gained popularity in Naples and spread across the entire country (Gentilcore, 2009). In addition, tea in England, the potato in Ireland, the sweet potato in Highland New Guinea, and maize in the U.S. are all examples of foreign indigenous ingredients that have become part of the local cuisine (Dietler, 2007).

2.4.3 Social Class and the Transformation of Foodways

In *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, Jürgen Osterhammel (1997) defined colonialism as the rule of a minority of foreign invaders over many local groups. The rule often reflects class, culture and politics. Colonisers usually claim to represent a sense of group superiority and refuse to make cultural compromises with the colonised. Colonisers establish a hegemonic cultural system and impose strict rules of class segregation, compelling

colonised peoples to adhere to these distinctions, including distinctions in food practices (Osterhammel, 1997).

On the one hand, colonisers tend to believe their eating habits are superior and healthier. For example, Dutch colonists in East Indonesia continued to use porcelain cutlery and plates, rather than local, simple tableware, not only to signal higher social status, but also to draw boundaries along racial and class lines. Porcelain utensils symbolised refinement, and by using them, the elite identity of colonisers was reinforced through racial and class distinction (Earle, 2010). Additionally, Dutch colonists treated Indonesian street food as unsafe and unsuitable for Europeans. Some families forbade their children from buying snacks from local outdoor stalls or wet markets, but children sometimes secretly ate typical Indonesian snacks in private out of curiosity; such food experiences help children develop memories of cross-cultural cuisines (Nope-Williams, 2019).

On the other hand, the colonised can be curious and envious of the colonisers' food, as the differential access to provisions reflects colonial social privilege. In the past, European missionaries used livestock as a reward to attract colonised youth to convert to Catholicism, and the youth accepted this because consuming these animals was a symbol of elevated status (Earle, 2010). This example indicates that youth consume the colonisers' food to satisfy their material needs and are willing to adapt their dietary preferences through cultural integration.

2.4.4 Cultural Hybridity and Fusion Food

During the early 20th century period of colonialism, colonisers sought to use cultural hegemony to assert their discursive power; however, cultural practices eventually shifted

toward interaction and negotiation for political purposes. This section illustrates the cultural complexity within the colonial context, particularly the characteristics of hybridity. According to Homi Bhabha's (1990, as cited in Easthope, 1998) concept of the third space, within colonial societies, the cultures of the coloniser and the colonised do not remain separate; instead, they come into contact through processes of cultural exchange and collision. This interaction creates a space within the 'in-between' zones of cultural boundaries, where the meaning of being neither colonial nor indigenous is constantly negotiated. It is within this interstitial space that hybrid cultural forms emerge, an insight which helps in understanding the discourse and construction of identity among the colonised (Easthope, 1998).

One characteristic of hybridity is difference, which emerges not only between colonising and colonised cultures but also within cultural groups as they undergo processes of hybridisation (Mizutani, 2013). Rather than producing a unified or stable identity, hybridity generates internal variations and tensions in how cultural identity is articulated and understood. As cultural boundaries become more permeable, identity is formed through continuous processes of appropriation, reinterpretation, and adaptation of cultural elements. Thus, hybrid identities challenge fixed or essentialist notions of culture, making it difficult to sustain cultural purity and superiority (Easthope, 1998).

Although Homi Bhabha's research does not directly address food in the context of critical cultural issues in colonial discourse, the concept of hybridity is effectively applicable to the study of food (Dietler, 2007). According to Huat and Rajah (2001), Bhabha's contribution lies in emphasising the connotation of cultural integration through the concept of

hybridity, a new cultural form that addresses the dilemma of cultural purity, particularly within colonial discourse. Interestingly, evidence of hybridity in food and culinary practices often shows the imitation of dominant cultural symbols, with minor differences in detail, such as ingredient standards and presentation styles (Huat & Rajah, 2001). For example, curry cuisine represents a colonial heritage in India. India has cultivated various spices since ancient times; the British introduced various spices to Europe and named them all ‘curry’. At present, ‘curry’ is a widely used term for different types of spices and is widely consumed around the world as the representative national cuisine of India (Vasavi, 1994).

The essence of hybridity is the emergence of a new cultural form that challenges the fixed identities of coloniser and colonised (Easthope, 1998). Instead, it creates another cultural identity for the generations living in the colony. If so, food can be redefined, imitated, and blended to reflect cultural experiences. Consequently, fusion and imitation foods can serve as expressions of identity and underscore cultural integration.

2.4.5 Overview

This section has presented a perspective on colonisation, examining how power structures have reconstructed food practices and their vehicle meanings through food mobility, class boundaries, and cultural interactions. The discussion of agriculture, trade, and food transmission indicated that food is not a natural product of mobility; rather, it is normative, restricted, and redistributed within the power system under colonialism. Simultaneously, food embodies social orders through eating habits, ingredient choices, and dining manners, reflecting the cultural divide between coloniser and colonised.

In the context of colonisation, food serves as both a source of power and a means of control; colonisers established cultural hierarchies by manipulating agricultural practices, dietary norms, and consumption patterns, leading the colonised to accept, imitate, and adjust these rules in their food practices, and continually reconstruct their social status and cultural identity. Therefore, the discussion of cultural interactions and negotiations has shown that food functions as a significant medium connecting power, class, and identity, providing a way to understand how food has acquired social and cultural significance beyond mere nutrition and consumption within historical and power contexts

2.5 Summary

This chapter has reviewed theories of food and identity, including national food and identity, and examined the relationship between food and identity, particularly in colonial and diasporic contexts. It first discussed the transition of identity theory from psychology to social science. Earlier research viewed identity as an outcome of individual psychological development, whilst social identity theory plays a significant role in shaping the understanding of the roles of group belonging, cultural boundaries, and power structures in defining people's identities.

Moreover, this chapter drew on classical theories of food studies to argue that food is not only a material means of satisfying people's physiological needs but also a cultural practice that carries symbolic meaning, emotional memory, and social order. In the contexts of colonisation and national narratives, food serves as a medium for constructing boundaries, facilitating cultural interaction and negotiation.

Therefore, this chapter further illuminates the cultural differences and social significance of food across diverse social structures and historical contexts by reviewing Stuart Hall's and Homi Bhabha’s theories, Mary Douglas’s analysis, and Sidney Mintz’s exploration. This chapter has emphasised the point that food is a complex cultural practice that both sustains cultural difference and enables hybridity across historical and social structures. In doing so, the chapter has provided a solid theoretical foundation for the following chapters, which examine the interactions between food, culture, and identity through specific case studies.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter laid the groundwork for this research by reviewing food as a cultural element in shaping and negotiating identity, particularly within the contexts of diaspora and colonialism. Building on this, the study selected Hong Kong cha chaan tengs and soy sauce Western cuisine as a case study with which to explore the process and empirically validate the theoretical insights.

Hong Kong was a British colony from 1841 to 1997, during which period it was significantly influenced by British culture. Although Hong Kong returned to Chinese Government control after 1997, the legacy of British cultural colonisation, along with its complex and diverse political and cultural systems, continues to shape the ideology of localism (Ping & Kin-ming, 2014). These two distinct cultural influences give rise to differences between Chinese culture and Hong Kong culture. The national identity of the Hong Kong people has been shaped by a shifting balance between continuity and rupture over the past two decades. Hong Kong people share many traditions, myths, rituals, and historical links with the Chinese (Hu et al., 2025). Conversely, people's political ideology is highly liberal and democratic, opposing both colonialism and class-struggle-style communism, as evidenced by several strikes during the 1920s and 1930s and the ongoing support for the Hong Kong independence movement after 1997 (Carroll, 2006; Ping & Kin-ming, 2014)

Recently, an increasing number of researchers (e.g., Lo, Chan, Wang, Cheung, and others) have explored local politics, culture, and society to demonstrate the emergence of a distinctly Hong Kong local identity, leading to a rise in public interest in the cultural field, particularly in food practices. Many local eateries not only evoke nostalgia of the past but also reflect the laborious lives of people during the colonial period. From the advent of bing sutts to cha chaan tengs, they are narrating the story of Hong Kong's history and culture at different times. Soy sauce Western cuisine emerged in cha chaan tengs and developed a fast-paced style and affordability to cater to the tastes and budgets of most working-class and low-income families. It is a blend of Western and Chinese cuisine, which many scholars regard as a food practice closely tied to habits, cultural adaptation, and identity formation (Chan, 2019; Cheung, 2022; Wu & Tan, 2001).

Accordingly, the present study intends to employ a qualitative inquiry methodology to examine the roles of cha chaan tengs and their soy sauce Western cuisine in Hong Kong's cultural adaptation, negotiation, and identity. By utilising a thematic analysis of publicly available secondary data, the study adopts a constructivist ontology, an interpretivist epistemology, and an interpretivist paradigm. Inductive reasoning will be applied for thematic analysis, following the six-phase process of Braun and Clarke (2013, as cited in Byrne, 2022). This chapter ends by addressing ethical considerations and the limitations of the study.

3.2 Research Philosophy

The research philosophy aims to provide an overarching framework and define the foundational assumptions of the research design. This allows the researcher to explore the

nature of the question, which directly affects the outcomes determined by the research, the chosen approach, and the analysis of evidence (Cheong et al., 2023). The appropriate application of research philosophy helps establish a rigorous and accurate methodology, ensuring the defensibility of the choice of paradigm, approach and methods. Ontology, epistemology and paradigms are the primary concepts of research philosophy.

Ontology concentrates on the most general nature of reality (Berryman, 2019). For example, constructivists hold that reality is created within historical, cultural, and social contexts, and is not objective or independent (Schwandt, 1994). If ontology concerns what reality and existence are, then epistemology addresses how to know reality through knowledge and the methods used to acquire it (Dieronitou, 2014). In other words, the ontological perspective shapes the epistemological method (Berryman, 2019). For instance, constructivists acknowledge that reality is socially constructed and that an understanding of it is actively formed by human interpretations, perceptions, and experiences (Junjie & Yingxin, 2022). Moreover, interpretivist epistemology is grounded in constructivist ontology (Goldkuhl, 2012), and interpretivist and constructivist epistemologies are interconnected, as both hold that understanding the meaning of the world requires interpretation (Schwandt, 1994).

The paradigm is the cornerstone of research and guides it, as it reflects the researcher's beliefs regarding ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Ayton & Tsindos, 2023). Paradigm significantly influences the entire research process. Typical examples are the interpretivist and the positivist paradigms; the interpretivist paradigm often involves

qualitative research, whereas the positivist paradigm always leads to quantitative research (Dieronitou, 2014). Different researchers might be positivists, interpretivists, or constructivists, depending on how they perceive and describe truth. Each paradigm is grounded in significant philosophical principles and thought, rooted in ontology and epistemology. The establishment of a paradigm can help researchers choose suitable methodologies for exploring their questions (Goldkuhl, 2012).

Within positivist epistemology, it is asserted that knowledge is a priori discovered and objective. In contrast, interpretivist and constructivist epistemologies contend that knowledge is produced or constructed subjectively, depending on values and context (Ayton & Tsindos, 2023). This study employs the interpretivist paradigm as its guide. This paradigm can provide a practical approach for researchers to uncover meaning through analysis (Schwandt, 1994), as the research question asks how food influences people's identities through their daily food practices, rather than uncovering an objective truth about the relationship between food and identity.

Therefore, this study adopts a constructivist ontology, an interpretivist epistemology, and an interpretivist paradigm. A constructivist ontology helps researchers recognise multiple realities across groups, and an interpretivist epistemology guides researchers in identifying their influences and reflecting on their roles in the construction process, which allows a study to gain a deeper understanding of the meanings of human experiences and how participants construct their perceptions. In short, this research philosophy offers a flexible, in-depth, and

reflective theoretical framework, enabling the research to explore the social and cultural meanings behind human experiences.

3.3 Research Question and Sub-Questions

In order to examine the significance of food practices in shaping the identity of people within the contemporary Hong Kong context, this study is guided by a central research question:

- "How is Hong Kong's cultural identity expressed and negotiated through 'soy sauce Western food' and cha chaan tengs?"

To address this primary question in a structured manner, it is divided into the following sub-questions:

- What distinctive features and meanings are associated with 'soy sauce Western food' in Hong Kong's cultural narratives?
- In what ways do these cultural narratives express or reveal Hong Kong people's sense of identity and group belonging?

3.4 Methodology

Methodology serves as a comprehensive framework for inductive research, providing a blueprint for the entire research process that links assumptions to research design, data collection and analysis. A clear statement of ontological and epistemological positions is essential, and the choice of methodology must also be logically derived from the research questions (Davidavičienė, 2018). Since the study aims to understand the cultural symbolic

meanings embedded in Hong Kong's cuisine, the phenomenon is socially constructed, context-dependent, and shaped by human interpretation and experience. Consequently, the study adopts an interpretive case study approach. This approach enables the researcher to focus closely on the context and process, allowing for a detailed understanding of a specific case (Cheong et al., 2023).

The study relies on secondary data to implement this methodological framework, drawing on published academic works to ensure high standards and reliability. Secondary data from sources such as academic journal articles can be both qualitative and quantitative, and are rich sources for analysis, while also saving time and effort compared with collecting primary data (Cheong et al., 2023). The systematic textual analysis employs a purposive sampling method by selecting textual sources that convey the cultural phenomenon of Hong Kong local food blending Chinese and Western influences, and that highlight "how" and "why" identity is expressed and negotiated through people's food practices within the socio-historical context.

3.5 Method

Thematic analysis is used in this study because it is a fundamental and widely used method in qualitative research, with the flexibility that enables researchers to identify, analyse, and report patterns in data. Additionally, the interpretivist paradigm emphasises the active role of the researcher, viewing the researcher's subjectivity as an essential component of the analysis and enabling the researcher to explore the research question from various perspectives, involving both inductive and deductive approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thomas (2006) described inductive analysis as a bottom-up approach, emphasising that the researcher begins by familiarising themselves with the data, identifying relevant information, and then developing a theory that emerges from the data. In contrast, the deductive approach is a top-down method based on existing theories, allowing researchers to begin with predefined hypotheses, analyse predetermined codes or themes, and thereby test pre-existing concepts (Thomas, 2006). The inductive approach emphasises that the analysis process begins with data collection and enabling meanings to emerge from the data rather than testing a preconceived hypothesis. It also allows researchers to develop codes based on their findings, thereby avoiding the imposition of preconceived theories. Therefore, this study employs an inductive method to analyse data, as it is suitable for descriptive, exploratory, and new theoretical research, and aligns with the study's exploratory aim.

3.6 Data Collection Strategy

The general strategy for data collection begins with an explicit commitment to ensuring relevance, validity, and reliability, and a clear purposive sampling contributes to achieving these goals (Graue, 2015). The search was conducted using Google Scholar, focusing on publications from 1997 to 2025. As initial searches for cha chaan tengs yielded more than 10,000 results, many of which were irrelevant, a Boolean search was used by combining specific keywords, as in the following query: "Cha Chaan Teng" OR "Hong Kong style tea café" AND "Identity" AND "Colonial" AND "Heritage" AND "Cuisine". This two-stage selection process helped establish the corpus, ensuring transparency and traceability while concentrating on texts directly related to the research question.

In the first stage, the search was limited to published academic journals, excluding conference reports, books, dissertations, and book chapters. The initial screening identified 10 eligible studies from the 32 results. In the second stage, the researcher briefly reviewed these 10 articles to determine their relevance to the search terms, retaining only those with clear links to cha chaan tengs, identity, and colonial contexts, for further analysis. Articles unrelated to these themes were excluded, such as studies of Hong Kong archives, chefs' views on Michelin restaurants, cultural biographies based on souvenir bags, and research on Macau's night market and food tourism.

Finally, the articles included in the corpus met the inclusion criteria because they directly discussed the relationship between cha chaan tengs and identity, or were closely related to the search terms in addressing topics such as how food reflects identity or evokes culinary nostalgia. Five articles thus constitute the corpus for the next stage of data analysis, and a detailed record of the two-stage process described above is provided in Appendix A.

3.7 Data Analysis Strategy

Braun and Clarke's six-phase process serves as a general framework for thematic analysis, offering flexible guidelines that allow researchers to conduct meaningful analysis while avoiding rigidly fitting data into strict rules, by emphasising reflective practice and fostering self-awareness among researchers (Braun et al., 2023). Extraction was conducted using Adobe Acrobat, and coding was done in Excel to identify potential themes and subthemes. The following table, Table 1, shows the six-phase process.

Table 1: Six-phase process adopted in the study

Phase	Actions
Familiarise oneself with data	Repeatedly read the final corpus and systematically excerpted any passages that relate to emotion, meanings, memories, or public discourse about food, as well as recording the source ID, page, and paragraph reference for each item, and writing down initial thoughts in a short description.
Generate initial codes	Imported all excerpts into Excel and open-coding line by line. Codes were descriptive, using Excel and the author's phrasing where possible, and all codes were reserved during initial coding to avoid preset themes.
Search for themes	After the open coding phase, the codes were reviewed for substantiveness, similarity and distinctiveness, and then grouped into clusters. These clusters were developed into potential themes with neutral labels. Simultaneously, a log was maintained to record which codes contributed to each cluster.
Review themes	Conducted targeted searches and citation chaining to find further evidence where potential themes indicated gaps in the corpus or unexpected emphases. Reviewed the potential themes, which could be combined, split, or discarded to ensure coherence.
Define and name themes	Clearly defined each theme after reviewing it for internal coherence and cross-source support. Assigned a concise and descriptive name that helped capture its core. For themes originating from only a single source, they were retained only if that source provided unique evidence.
Produce the report	Wrote up the report, and provided a clear and descriptive narration. Each theme is reported with representative excerpts drawn from multiple sources where possible, followed by interpretive commentary that links the evidence back to the research question.

3.8 Ethics

The data used in this study relied on publicly available secondary sources and did not involve collecting primary data from participants, and formal approval from the institutional ethics review board was unnecessary. However, ethical considerations remain important in the research. In accordance with property rights and academic guidelines, researchers are

responsible for respecting intellectual property and critically interpreting to avoid bias or misrepresentation. Consequently, this study adheres to the standards set by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) for the use of research data.

3.9 Summary

In summary, this chapter has justified the case selection and outlined the methodological framework used. It has presented a clear research framework based on the philosophical perspectives of constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, along with their associated paradigms. An inductive thematic analysis utilising secondary data was adopted. Therefore, this chapter has established a coherent and rigorous methodological foundation that provides a credible basis for the subsequent analysis chapters.

CHAPTER 4. CASE STUDY

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to apply a qualitative methodology to a specific cultural case involving cha chaan tengs and their soy sauce Western cuisine, and to examine the role they play in expressing Hong Kong people's identity. The analysis focuses on how this cuisine presents a style that blends Western culinary traditions and ingredients while retaining familiar local flavours. A six-phase analysis is employed to identify recurring ideas in the corpus, ensuring a comprehensive and logical interpretation based on the data. The aim is to emphasise the significance of data interpretation and to support further discussion.

Soy sauce Western cuisine is a popular category of food in cha chaan tengs; it was greatly influenced by British culture and has become closely linked to the daily eating habits of Hong Kong people. After half a century of adaptation, cha chaan tengs have become among the most popular dining spots in Hong Kong. Eating soy sauce Western cuisine remains a common practice across many generations. Accordingly, the influence of soy sauce Western cuisine can serve as a case study. The focus is on its role in shaping cultural identity, colonial heritage, and local narratives.

Therefore, Chapter 4 reviews cha chaan tengs and soy sauce Western cuisine, including their origins, development, and current influence. It then conducts an inductive thematic analysis of the corpus of academic literature and presents the final themes identified through coding, providing a foundation for the interpretive discussion in the following chapter.

4.2 Cha Chaan Tengs

The emergence of cha chaan tengs is closely linked to British food culture, serving as a form of imitation of British-colonial-style coffee shops (Chan, 2019; Wu, 2001). British colonial officials sought to replicate aspects of their domestic lifestyle and food practices within the colonies. After arriving in Hong Kong in 1841, British colonial-style coffee shops rapidly grew and gained popularity across the colony, typically offering coffee, tea, and simple meals like sandwiches. These venues often employed local Cantonese and Shanghainese cooks, who became familiar with Western culinary techniques through their work (Wu, 2001).

British food choices, such as bread and butter, black tea, steak, and sandwiches, differ from those of early Chinese immigrants. However, Western food and beverages in high-class hotels and restaurants were prohibitively expensive for many Chinese immigrants, leading to the establishment of cha chaan tengs, which offered affordable options (Chan, 2019). Chinese immigrants refer to food from cha chaan tengs as Western food, a term that literally means "soy-sauce Western cuisine" because it starkly contrasts with traditional Chinese dishes. Some older generations recall that many working-class people admired Western lifestyles and sought to eat Western food. Consequently, many Chinese restaurants offer a small selection of Western-influenced dishes at discounted prices, usually a modest set menu of soup, salad, turkey, steak, jelly, and cake, especially during the period of Christmas and New Year, and continue to attract many Hong Kong families (Cheng, 2013). At the same time, a similar pattern of coffee shops emerged in Malaya, known as Kopitiams, usually owned and run by

Hainanese and Hokkien migrants. They established and developed local coffee shops based on their experience serving British colonisers (Khoo, 2009).

Various industries grew rapidly during the post-World War II reconstruction period and have continued to do so since the 1950s. Through the same period, many working-class individuals have raised their incomes, and also increased their demand for options for dining out and created business opportunities for cha chaan tengs (Leung & Lau, 2021). Cha chaan tengs are also known as tea cafés, mainly because their signature drink— "silk-stocking milk tea"—is a strongly flavoured blend of black tea brewed in a cotton bag resembling a stocking, with condensed milk instead of fresh milk, and with sugar served on the side (Mak, 2021). The inspiration for this drink comes from British tea habits, but fresh milk is replaced with condensed milk because it is cheaper. Black tea was also more affordable than coffee and offered an accessible high tea set for the working classes (Cheng, 2013). Regular customers often prefer a sweet, soft bun with a pineapple-shaped topping, known as a "pineapple bun," rather than a Western-style butter biscuit to accompany milk tea during tea breaks, as pineapple buns were traditionally made with lard, and are cheaper than butter (Wang, 2022).

Figure 1: Silk-stocking milk tea of Lam Fong Yuen (tea café)

Note. A tea master makes milk tea in Lam Fong Yuen. From "How Humble Milk Tea Remains the Fuel That Powers Hong Kong," by AFP, 2016, August 23, *Shanghai Daily* (https://archive.shine.cn/nation/How-humble-milk-tea-remains-the-fuel-that-powers-Hong-Kong/shdaily.shtml). CC-BY.

By the 1980s, cha chaan tengs could be found in every Hong Kong neighbourhood, serving customers of all ages, genders, occupations, and social standings with a wide range of affordable, quick food options (Wu, 2001). They ranged from small establishments with only two or three tables to much larger ones with 50 tables, with almost all offering takeaway. Menus were extensive and organised by time of day (breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea, dinner, late-night supper), featuring a variety of Chinese dishes and soy sauce Western dishes, such as various sandwiches (luncheon meat, club, ham and cheese), steaks, pork chops, chicken chops, spaghetti with meat sauce, and salads all served as main courses or as set meals (Lo, 2008).

To most people in Hong Kong, cha chaan tengs have long been among the most popular dining venues, possessing an enduring appeal that continues to attract locals even amid globalisation and the spread of fast-food chains (Wu, 2001). Furthermore, cha chaan tengs remain well known to visitors from around the world for their local character and cultural

heritage value. Some have grown into famous chains, established in different cities such as Beijing, London, Bangkok, and Vancouver (Leung & Lau, 2021). As David Wu (2001) noted, Hong Kong people's lifestyle of efficiency, practicality, and multifunctionality can be observed through cha chaan tengs and their customers.

4.2.1 Soy Sauce Western Cuisine

Soy sauce is a liquid condiment made from fermented soybeans or roasted grains, traditionally used in everyday cooking across China. It has a long history and is valued for its salty and umami qualities in seasoning, in marinating, stir-frying, braising, dipping, and adding to food, and it has a long history. Originating in ancient China, soy sauce was initially considered a luxury commodity because it served as a substitute for salt. Later, it spread to Japan and Korea through trade, and by the 18th century, soy sauce had become a product traded around the world (Lioe et al., 2010).

According to Sidney Cheung (2022), an anthropologist at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the Western influence on soy sauce cuisine reflects how local chefs reinterpret and are willing to imitate Western dishes, as evidenced by popular dishes called "Swiss chicken wings," which are famous at the local tea café, Tai Ping Koon. Swiss chicken wings, adapted from a traditional Chinese method of stewing, are seasoned with dark soy sauce and brown sugar to mask the strong meaty smell, yielding a sweet and slightly savoury flavour. Interestingly, this dish did not originate in Switzerland, nor did it follow any Swiss recipe; it was named for its sweetness, but the name was mispronounced as "Swiss," and this

mispronunciation became the official name, which is still used today. Nevertheless, Western customers of Tai Ping Koon recognise it as Western cuisine (Cheung, 2022).

Figure 2: Swiss wings at Tai Ping Koon

Note. Swiss wings served at Tai Ping Koon Restaurant. From *Wikipedia*, by N509FZ, 2018 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swiss_wing). CC-BY-SA 4.0.

In addition, Professor Wu has noted that soy sauce Western cuisine played a significant role in the rise of cha chaan tengs in the 1980s, often appearing on the lunch and dinner menus of cafés serving Western dishes, affordably priced in a friendly way for the general public and often including soup, bread, and meat with rice, such as cream chicken rice, baked pork chop rice, barbeque pork rice, as well as cream and vegetable soups. Although these dishes typically blend Chinese and Western cuisines, their defining character is the Hong Kong tea café's renditions of Western dishes (Wu, 2001).

4.3 Thematic Analysis

4.3.1 Introduction

This section presents a thematic analysis of the corpus, focusing on identifying recurring concepts, metaphors, and narratives within the text, and extracting evidence and interpretive clues. The corpus reveals how cha chaan tengs and their food, such as silk-stocking milk tea (simply called milk tea), pineapple buns, and other hybrid cuisines, contribute to the expression, negotiation, and reimagining of people's cultural identity. Rather than considering each text in isolation, the analysis identifies the main ideas to demonstrate how soy sauce in Western food expresses popular culinary and cultural belonging.

Lo (2008) offered one of the earliest and most comprehensive views of the adaptation in cha chaan tengs, situating it within the city's post-World War II modernisation and changing class structure. Lo explores how foreign products were absorbed and reinterpreted in daily food practices within cha chaan tengs, and the study shows that colonial influences were permeably transformed into local practice. Following this, Chan's (2019) work drew on Homi Bhabha's (2012) theory of hybridity to further develop this insight, depicting the hybrid food created by cha chaan tengs as an imitation of the colonial period, which reflects the desire of the colonised for a reformed, recognisable other (Chan, 2019, p. 8). The analysis of the menu shows the coexistence of Western and Chinese culinary practices and the persistence of dining routines. Chan's study reveals how these spaces play a role in the imagination and performance of Hong Kong identity within a postcolonial context.

Moreover, Mak's (2021) research focused on milk tea, a popular beverage found on nearly every street in Hong Kong. It explores how this drink becomes a symbol of culture and a shared memory for people who grew up in the 1960s, leading the government to designate it as cultural heritage. Wang (2022) examined the same question through a different lens: the pineapple bun. Tracing the pineapple bun from its origins in cha chaan tengs to its status as a Hong Kong cultural icon, this analysis reflects how Hong Kongers negotiate nostalgia and shared memory. Finally, Leung and Lau (2021) discussed the potential for transculturation of cha chaan tengs and provided a global perspective on this local food representation. They explored the global influence of overseas cha chaan tengs and pointed out that the Hong Kong-style café has travelled beyond its original context, becoming part of a global dialogue and reconstituting the identity of Hong Kong people in new cultural settings.

Building on this foundation, this chapter outlines and discusses the findings from the selected corpus. It foregrounds four key themes identified through thematic analysis: cha chaan tengs and their food; everydayness and spatiality; cultural narrative and governance; and the cross-cultural transmission of cha chaan teng culture. The chapter then relates these emerging themes to the research questions, reveals their significance, and synthesises the findings to conclude the analysis. Because of the large amount of data, only the results of the coding, subthemes, and themes from the analysis are presented, rather than the entire process. Full details are provided in Appendix B.

Table 2: Overview of themes and coding from data analysis

Codes	Subthemes	Themes
- Ingredients and cooking methods adopted in a Western style - Silk-stocking milk tea and pineapple buns	Culinary hybridity	Cha chaan tengs and their food
- Western names of dishes lack authenticity - Names of dishes combine local and Western influences - Different menus served at different times	Menu combinations	
- Neon lighting, leather booth and round table - Menus are placed between the surface and the table - Different functions of kitchens	Decoration and atmosphere	
- Lunch break and teatime - Sharing tables and unspoken rules - Relaxing ways and how they spend their day	Several features and unspoken rules	Everydayness and spatiality
- Horse racing gambling - Dating and matchmaking - Family gatherings and hospitality for relatives and friends	Social space	
- Cha chaan teng-goers - Familiar flavours like homemade - A strong sense of human warmth - Open day and night	Familiarity, nostalgia and collective memory	Cultural narrative in a bottom-up way
- Storytelling - Cha chaan tengs appeared on screen - Popular song about milk tea and Hong Kong	Cultural expression through popular elements	
- Milk tea competition - Cultural Heritage Advisory Committee - Top-down placemaking - Identity differentiates between Hong Kong people and the Chinese	Government cultural governance	
- Intercultural communication		

- Semiotic selection of the traditional tea café - Modified to the classic dishes - Adapted to local characteristics - An identity that transcends regional boundaries	The reproduction of cha chaan teng culture as a cross-cultural commodity	The reproduction and transmission of cha chaan teng culture beyond Hong Kong

4.3.2 Theme 1. Cha Chaan Tengs and Their Food

The theme of 'Cha Chaan Tengs and Their Food' covers subthemes such as culinary hybridity, menu combinations, decoration, and atmosphere. This section examines the diverse range of food and drinks produced by cha chaan tengs, particularly iconic items like milk tea and pineapple buns, as well as soy sauce Western dishes. Similar decorative elements maintain consistency across tea cafés and sustain a familiar atmosphere for customers, regardless of their geographical location. Furthermore, this section examines how these foods and beverages are sold at different times throughout the day, revealing cha chaan tengs' flexible business model which, being aimed at various groups, helps maximise profits during their hours of operation.

Culinary hybridity in practices

The characteristics of culinary hybridity in cha chaan tengs are discussed in almost every text within the corpus to varying extents, and they can be observed in two core aspects: ingredients and cooking methods. Some dish names may be regarded as Western, but they combine imported ingredients with a local approach to cooking that adapts the dish to local tastes. Chan (2019) noted that various types of sandwiches are available on the menu, but few follow Western cooking practices by adding various dressings and cheese; instead, they

simply place the ingredients between slices of bread. Moreover, other common Western elements, such as butter, cheese, and spaghetti, are adjusted to suit local diners' tastes and resources. For example, condensed milk replaces fresh milk or cream, and soy sauce is used to season dishes that would otherwise be seasoned with salt or butter (Chan, 2019).

Figure 3: Ham and egg sandwiches & beef spaghetti.

Note. Lunch set from Wah Nam Café. From *A Taste of History: The Traditional Hong Kong Style Bing Sutt Wah Nam Café*, by D. Heung, 2017 (https://hub.hku.hk/handle/10722/350596). CC-BY.

According to Chan (2019), four hybrid food and drink items that Hong Kong people take pride in are milk tea, jyun joeng (milk tea combined with coffee), pineapple buns, and egg tarts. Among these, milk tea is the most frequently mentioned item, regarded as the signature

dish of every tea café, and deeply ingrained in the memories of many people across generations (Chan, 2019; Mak, 2021). Milk tea uses a blend of teas (e.g., Darjeeling, Assam, and Pu-erh) similar to British tea, which is not a single type of black tea. However, recipes for the blend of teas and brewing methods vary slightly from café to café, as these are crucial in shaping the tea's flavour and smoothness (Mak, 2021).

In addition to milk tea, the pineapple bun is a popular snack consumed throughout the day. The pineapple bun emerged in the 1940s and was initially referred to as a "crispy skin bun" because of its crusty exterior, but customers began (and have continued) to call it a pineapple bun (Heung, 2017). At that time, most Hong Kong residents adhered to a "three meals per day" diet, but British influence introduced high tea, which gradually gained popularity in Hong Kong and became a mid-afternoon break for many people. Consequently, cha chaan tengs offer pineapple buns with a slice of butter inside, paired with milk tea, as a teatime treat for the working classes (Wang, 2022). Over time, the pineapple bun was no longer limited to teatime and became a staple, woven into everyday routines through breakfasts before work, afternoon breaks, and late-night suppers (Lo, 2008).

> During afternoon teatime, a typical diner might have a cup of milk tea, a fresh-baked pineapple bun in butter, or a Hong Kong-style egg tart. (Lo, 2008, p. 59)

> Milk tea and pineapple buns are considered classic dishes in Cha Chaan Tengs and are frequently described as symbols of Hong Kong's unique flavour identity. They are easily recognised as Western-style cuisine because of their Western origins, making them familiar yet slightly foreign to locals. (Lo, 2008, pp. 59-60).

Figure 4: Milk tea and pineapple buns

Note. Teatime set from Wah Nam Café. From *A Taste of History: The Traditional Hong Kong Style Bing Sutt Wah Nam Cafe*, by D. Heung, 2017 (https://hub.hku.hk/handle/10722/350596) CC-BY.

Menu combinations

From Lo's (2008) perspective, the layout of the menu also exemplifies hybridity, particularly in dish names, which often contain two options. Firstly, many dishes are still named in a Western style, focusing only on the main ingredients, for instance, Swiss chicken wing, beef sandwich, and macaroni. The actual taste and appearance are no longer regarded as authentic to foreign cuisine (Lo, 2008). Secondly, the names of dishes obviously combine local and Western ingredients, such as pork chop rice, beef fried spaghetti, and tomato fried egg macaroni. These dishes have been adaptively reinterpreted locally, resulting in specific Hong Kong variations. In fact, it is common to find Western and Chinese styles used together to indicate a single dish, and the mixed categories intend to merge them into a readable system, thereby establishing a fixed reading method that supports memory recall for local (Wu, 2001).

Moreover, prices are clearly marked, often with options to add drinks or side dishes, which gives customers a sense of customising their own meals. Some cha chaan tengs with few items narrow their menus to “Set A” or “Set B,” which appear in both English and Chinese, to simplify ordering and speed up service (Lo, 2008). Furthermore, some cha chaan tengs menus combine formal and informal language through colloquial Cantonese transliterations and English abbreviations, for example, milk tea (H / C), where “H” stands for Hot, and “C” for Cold; even some terms are also translated into local idioms in certain cha chaan tengs (Chan, 2019). The language, layout, and pricing system together create an experience of cha chaan tengs and also form an everyday logic that is tacitly understood by staff and regular customers (Cheung, 2022).

Cha chaan tengs often offer different menus at different times for practicality and variety, with a wide selection of food and drinks for breakfast, lunch, teatime, dinner, and supper. Each time slot offers a specific set of meals or an all-day menu. For instance, breakfast menus commonly list macaroni soup with ham. Macaroni was added to the menu through an adaptation of the Chinese soup-noodle structure for breakfast. This reinterpreting not only introduces a Western ingredient into a Chinese meal but also keeps the local soup-noodle tradition, which embodies a culinary hybridity that goes beyond ingredient substitution (Lo, 2008). The filling options include rice sets with soup, fried noodles, and chicken or pork chops, catering to office workers and students at lunchtime. Afternoon tea often includes lighter snacks, such as pineapple buns, egg tarts, or sweets, alongside iced drinks (Lo, 2008).

> Other typical Western dishes that one usually finds on a *Cha Chaan Teng* menu are baked pasta in a cream sauce, pork chop, chicken steak, spaghetti bolognese, cream soup, vegetable soup, seafood baked in a cream sauce, etc. Basically, they are all Hong Kong editions of Western food. (Lo, 2008, p. 58)

Figure 5: All-day menu of Chrisly café

Note. All-day menu of Chrisly Café. From *TripAdvisor,* by M. Tan, 2024 (https://www.tripadvisor.com.au/Restaurant_Review-g294217-d3156860-Reviews-Chrisly_Cafe-Hong_Kong.html). CC-BY.

Decoration and atmosphere

The setting of a cha chaan teng focuses on a design that maximises space with simple decoration, unlike nostalgic Canton-style tea houses or fancy restaurants, which represent a curated tradition; this is to ensure convenience and efficiency without sacrificing comfort or casualness. It cultivates a sense of accessibility that feels both utilitarian and unfiltered, neither luxurious nor overly austere, allowing anyone, regardless of background, to find a place there (Wu, 2001). Although the décor of the newly established cha chaan tengs features a wide variety of layouts, ranging from contemporary to nostalgic designs and technological features, it is far from old-style. Common characteristics include signboards with light strips, leather booths, round tables, tiled floors, and ceiling fans (Leung & Lau, 2021; Lo, 2008).

Many traditional cha chaan tengs use a glass panel instead of a tablecloth as a surface, placing the menu between the glass and the table so customers can view it quickly. The ‘new recommendations’ menu is often posted on the building’s wall to catch customers’ attention. Walls are typically painted white and unembellished, so the new recommendations menu can be displayed there or used to display photographs of famous actors and singers taken while dining there (Leung & Lau, 2021). Additionally, both Chinese and English tableware can be found on the dining table. Cleaned chopsticks, forks, spoons, and knives are placed together in containers at each table (Chan 2019).

> Inside the café, booths are usually aligned along both sides of the walls. Square and rectangular tables are in the middle; round tables can also be found, usually organised in closely packed formation with minimal pass-through. (Leung & Lau, 2021, p. 209)

> As for the tables in tea cafés, booths are usually located on the sides, while small round tables for four or six people are often in the middle. Booths are a Western-style seating option that offers privacy. Round tables are typical for traditional Chinese restaurants, although the size of those round tables in local cafés is smaller. (Chan, 2019, p. 9)

The kitchen area is often divided into specialised zones, such as a drink counter for making beverages and ice cream, a noodle stall for cooking Chinese-style noodle dishes, and a separate kitchen for more complex cooking (Wu, 2001). Drink counters are typically located at the front of the café, adjacent to or opposite the cashier area. The cashier area is typically near the café entrance to help customers find a table, ensure they settle their bills before leaving, and make it easier to collect takeaway orders. People enjoy the clatter of plates, the

constant movement of servers, and the overlapping voices within cha chaan tengs, which contribute to a lively urban life (Lo, 2008).

Figure 6: Old-style cha chaan tengs after the 1980s

Note. One of the old-style cha chaan teng's decoration. From *Local Guides Connect*, by Brett, 2019 (https://www.localguidesconnect.com/t/legendary-hong-kong-style-cafe-cha-chaan-Tengs/166242). CC-BY.

Overview

The food, menus, and interiors collectively create a cohesive environment typical of cha chaan tengs, supporting both efficiency and a familiar atmosphere. Among the dishes, hybrid features illustrate how Western ingredients combine with local flavours to become a staple of daily fare. Items like milk tea are no longer seen as imports but as part of local eating habits.

Simultaneously, the menu's organisation also mirrors a mixture of culinary methods. Western and Chinese items are placed side by side, with bilingual names that use colloquial expressions. Furthermore, the set meal system and all-day menu reflect a flexible business structure that allows adaptation to different customers and budgets.

Beyond that, the decoration further reinforces a sense of practicality and accessibility. Furniture, layout, and cutlery are designed for easy maintenance to ensure cleanliness and

efficient service, allowing the café to serve as many customers as possible during peak times. Whether old-fashioned or newly renovated, most cha chaan tengs retain similar visual cues, creating a recognisable setting that customers can immediately identify with and feel at home in.

In short, the elements of food, menu, and space create a consistent experience that is both hybrid and distinctly local, a form of pragmatism that has long characterised Hong Kong's food culture, where variety and convenience are valued over strict culinary boundaries. Cha chaan tengs do not exist as copies of Western cafés or extensions of Chinese tea houses. Instead, they operate as an independent type that has evolved through adaptation and shaped a practical expression of everyday urban life in Hong Kong (Cheung, 2022; Wu, 2001).

4.3.3 Theme 2. Everydayness and Spatiality

The second theme, 'Everydayness and Spatiality', expands on the first theme's detailed description of the cha chaan teng's hybrid cuisine, menu layout, and interior design. By shifting focus to the customers' perspective, it examines how customers perceive and experience the services and spaces of cha chaan tengs, and how, over time, a set of tacit understandings has formed between staff and their regular customers. In this process, customers fully utilise the café's spatial affordances, transforming it into a communicative space for activities beyond eating—such as chatting about horse racing, meeting potential partners, or hosting friends from outside Hong Kong. Through interactions between cha chaan tengs and their customers, it becomes a place imbued with warmth and familiarity; it not only

offers comfort but also fosters a sense of nostalgia and belonging over time (Chan, 2019; Lo, 2008).

Several features and unspoken rules

In Lo's (2008) study, many respondents admitted that the cha chaan tengs near their home or workplace were their regular spots—some even visited the same one for all three meals of the day. As mentioned earlier, these cafés often adjust their menus across different meal periods, attracting distinct groups of customers at various times. In the morning, retirees and housewives tend to gather there to read newspapers or chat in a leisurely fashion. By contrast, lunchtime is busy with office workers from nearby offices. Since most Hong Kong employees have only an hour for lunch, they barely have time to go home and cook, so many choose to dine out instead (Cheng, 2013). Afternoon teatime brings in students after school, as well as construction and service workers. Late at night, neighbours living close to cha chaan tengs often stop by for a light meal after a game of mahjong. These patterns indicate that people from different professions and age groups share a similar preference for cha chaan tengs (Lo, 2008). Looking back through history, the popularity of cha chaan tengs is remarkable. Professor Wu (2001) once claimed that almost every Hong Kong resident has visited one, and these cafés have become a staple of everyday urban life.

Many customers are also well-acquainted with the unspoken rules of dining at cha chaan tengs. During off-peak hours, diners may sit wherever they like, but when the café becomes busy, customers must share tables with strangers. Almost all cha chaan tengs customers have experienced this and rarely find it uncomfortable. On the contrary, they often dine with ease

and even strike up casual conversations with others (Leung & Lau, 2021). Additionally, when not all diners in a group are present, staff may ask those already there to wait outside until everyone has arrived. They cannot stay inside because it would extend the dining time (Chan 2019). Cha chaan tengs operate under several distinctive rules that aim to maintain turnover efficiency and accommodate incoming customers.

Figure 7: Busy times at Capital Café

Note. Capital Café is among the most popular tea cafés in the Wan Chai CBD, Hong Kong. From *Openrice*, by A. Bercho, 2025 (https://www.openrice.com/en/hongkong/r-capital-cafe-wan-chai-hong-kong-style-r41467/photos/all). CC-BY.

Moreover, based on Chan's (2019) observations, when staff take orders, they often write them down in a mixed way by using simplified and traditional Chinese characters, English words, Arabic numerals, and even their own abbreviations. This mixed shorthand underlines the café's focus on efficiency and the long-standing mutual understanding among staff to avoid confusion. In addition, some regulars arrive at the same time and order the same dishes every day. It is easy for servers to take orders without handing them a menu, and they rarely

make mistakes because an unspoken understanding has developed between regulars and servers (Chan, 2019).

> For all cold drinks, the waiters use the letter ‘C’ to indicate cold. For all drinks with lemon, such as lemon tea, ‘0’ is used to represent lemon because the first syllable of the word ‘lemon’ in Cantonese rhymes with the Cantonese pronunciation of the number zero. (Chan, 2019, p. 319)

Social space

Beyond merely satisfying hunger, Cha Chaan Tengs also serve as social spaces, providing venues for the public. Leung and Lau’s (2021) interviews highlighted that many cafés attract a diverse clientele, influenced by their location or distinctive decoration. Some visitors travel long distances, attracted by the nostalgic décor, while others use the space for business meetings and casual negotiations (Leung & Lau, 2021). For instance, Sheung Hing Café, located near the racecourse, was a popular gathering spot for jockeys and trainers during the 1960s, with many of the photographs of them still displayed on the walls as part of the décor. Similarly, the Red Cotton Café, established in an old textile factory district, was frequented by fabric agents who used it as an informal meeting place for trade discussions (Chan, 2019).

Moreover, Chan’s (2019) study also reveals many functional uses of cha chaan tengs. In the 1950s and 60s, cha chaan tengs were the most popular places for matchmaking sessions, where a single man or woman was brought to meet a prospective spouse in the company of family members or matchmakers. Additionally, many male customers gather at cha chaan tengs on race days to chat, place bets, and watch the races on television. The owner and

waiters sometimes join in the gambling, cheerfully supporting their favourite horses (Chan, 2019). A retired urban planner named Linda, interviewed by Leung and Lau (2021), recalled that cha chaan tengs are common gathering places because Hong Kong is a highly dense city, with people having very limited living space. Many immigrants from the 1950s who moved to Hong Kong keep connections in China, and when their friends or relatives visit Hong Kong, cha chaan tengs are always the preferred venue for meeting (Leung & Lau, 2021).

Overview

The findings from this theme illustrate how everyday routines and spatial practices within cha chaan tengs contribute to a subtle yet significant sense of local belonging. These places are not just venues to eat; the regular rhythms of customer flow at different times of day, along with unspoken rules, such as seat-sharing, efficient ordering, and familiar interactions between staff and regular customers, show that these cafés operate through a shared understanding that many people instinctively recognise. These practices not only reflect a collective familiarity that reinforces a sense of belonging but also help to reproduce cultural behaviours that are broadly familiar within Chinese communities, while taking on forms that are distinctly associated with everyday life in Hong Kong.

Cha chaan tengs serve as a lens through which to understand and integrate into Hong Kong's everyday life. Almost all Hong Kong people instinctively understand the regular rhythms of visiting, ordering, seating, and dining, and small repetitive routines create a sense of comfortable living that requires no verbal explanation (Wu, 2001). Additionally, people

from diverse social backgrounds and with varying communication purposes can easily engage in everyday interactions, whether for informal business discussions, casual conversations, matchmaking, dating, visiting relatives, or family gatherings. Over time, an increasing number of people assert their familiarity and cultural identity, which becomes a source of pride in their urban existence (Lo, 2008).

To sum up, people's daily routines make cha chaan tengs a symbol of local culture; their food, decoration, and unspoken rules can be seen as part of a cultural habitus widely recognised among those who grow up in this environment. Based on this, these daily routines, familiarity, and repeated social encounters reinforce their identification with local culture, which is closely associated with their sense of self.

4.3.4 Theme 3. Bottom-up Construction of Cultural Narrative

The previous two sections examined how cha chaan tengs embody local culture through their hybridity in cooking, distinctive menus, and spatial characteristics in people's everyday lives. This section focuses on broader cultural and institutional dimensions and explains related cultural narratives and governance. Because cha chaan tengs are popular in daily life, they have become symbolic sites of collective memory and have given rise to a series of nostalgic stories that reflect a range of emotions of belonging and shared remembrance, often disseminated through popular media such as film and music, as well as through official heritage discourse and cultural governance. By analysing these aspects, this section reveals a bottom-up narrative of culture that shows how cha chaan tengs and their food help Hong Kong people identify with and affirm their local identity.

Familiarity, nostalgia and collective memory

In Leung and Lau's (2021) study, the term "Cha Chaan Teng-goers" was used to indicate the extent of people's affection for these local cafés. Similarly, Lo (2008) claimed that customers consider cha chaan tengs culture as their own religion and that it is closely linked to Hong Kong's daily practices, functioning as a marker of cross-cultural identity. Furthermore, Wang's (2022) survey noted that the neighbourhood tea cafés frequented by Hong Kong people since the colonial period evoke a strong sense of nostalgia. The underlying reason behind these depictions lies in the core emotional experience offered by cha chaan tengs—a sense of belonging, shared memory, and longing for the past.

Both the environment and the food retain their most original and authentic character. Staff members, whether waiters or cooks, are rarely replaced, and many have formed close friendships with long-term customers. People who are particularly conscious of cultural continuity often find comfort in these spaces. For instance, one university student interviewed mentioned that, since secondary school, he had been going with his family to a nearby cha chaan teng for breakfast every weekend, cherishing the familiar flavour (Leung & Lau, 2021). Two middle-aged men mentioned that they preferred cafés that have preserved their 1950s interior style (Mak, 2021). The owner of a cha chaan teng with more than 60 years of history explained that most of his customers are from low-income backgrounds—they are accustomed to the food and prices there, feel at home in the familiar environment, and appreciate the strong sense of human warmth that the place carries (Leung & Lau, 2021).

> Annie is a housewife with three children, but when her children are at school, she often visits different neighbourhoods to hunt for a good cup of milk tea, and she sees visiting old-style Cha Chaan Tengs as a form of nostalgia. (Leung & Lau, 2021, p. 210)

> A food blogger named Ben posted in his online restaurant review that the characteristic of Cha Chaan Tengs is: "If you want to take pictures and embrace the past, you must go to Lo Fung, which was decorated from the 70s, the era when my parents were young." (Wang, 2022, p. 13)

> In Stanley Yip's article about his childhood memories, he regards himself as the generation that grew up while sitting in the Cha Chaan Tengs and eating a pineapple bun. (Mak, 2021, p. 9)

On the other hand, Wang (2022) noted that pineapple buns are now ubiquitous and woven into people's daily practices through breakfasts before work, afternoon breaks, and late-night suppers. Tens of thousands of pineapple buns are packaged and sold daily in grocery stores, convenience stores, and supermarkets. However, many businesses have improved the recipe for pineapple buns to enhance their competitiveness and made flavoured buns filled with red bean paste or mochi paste (Wang, 2022). The large-scale production of pineapple buns to meet customer demand and the highly commodified process reveal that pineapple buns embody a distinctive local culture (Wu, 2001).

Cultural expression through popular elements

The studies by Wang (2022), Mak (2021), and Chan (2019) agree on the widespread media circulation and public engagement, as cha chaan tengs' image was popularly featured in music, films, and television dramas. The cultural connotations of cha chaan tengs go beyond mere scenario background settings and emotional storytelling. Firstly, in those scholars' studies, the interviewees, who were almost born in the 1990s, noted that they

appreciated the sophisticated cha chaan tengs that appeared on screen; as local film enthusiasts, they enjoyed the stylish atmosphere. In films such as Crossing Hennessy (2009) and In the Mood for Love (2000). Cha chaan tengs have transformed from modest, rough street tea cafés into romantic and artistic spaces, becoming an intriguing dating venue (Chan, 2019). Other films, such as *Goodbye, Mr Cool* (2001), depict Cha Chaan Tengs as settings for gang confrontations and fights that are imbued with a strong sense of local political colour (Lo, 2008). Consequently, the younger generation in Hong Kong feels an unusual sense of pride towards cha chaan tengs (Mak, 2021).

Furthermore, the classic radio drama *18th Floor, Block C* was among the earliest public media works to discuss people's lives and cha chaan tengs in Hong Kong, in 1968. This drama depicted diverse political issues of the period, and vividly showed conversations among customers, waiters, and owners. It drew on ordinary citizens' perspectives to respond to political dynamics, thereby exerting significant cultural influence on the public (Chan, 2019). Nevertheless, many old-style cha chaan tengs have had to close due to globalisation and the rise of chain stores, sparking a wave of nostalgia among people in the 1990s (Mak, 2021). One local composer wrote a song that talks about stories surrounding milk tea and cha chaan tengs, which was performed by well-known female singers and gained popularity by evoking a strong sense of collective memory and celebrating Hong Kong's rich culture (Wang 2022).

> The lyric of the song "*I like you being casual and down-to-earth, making every customer happy and satisfied, like being home, Buttered bread with century-old strong milk tea, making a burned-out body transform. Hong*

> *Kong-style cafés have become part of popular culture, accompanying everyone through glorious and bad days. As handsome as young Andy Lau, you thrill us with your good spirit.*" (Wang, 2022, p. 10)

Government cultural governance

Chan noted that the Coffee and Tea Association of Hong Kong has held an annual Golden Tea Competition to select the best master of Hong Kong-style milk tea since 2009. The following year, the competition was jointly organised by the association and the Hong Kong Trade Development Council (Chan, 2019). According to Mak's (2021) study, the activities of the Hong Kong Government, in cooperation with famous tea merchants and entrepreneurs, include holding the Golden Tea Competition, establishing the Cultural Heritage Advisory Committee, and promoting the cultural heritage of food. These initiatives serve to foster a sense of belonging, identity, harmony, national unity, and cohesion between Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland. This point was also indirectly supported in Leung and Lau's (2021) study, as cha chaan tengs and their food demonstrate the significant potential of food culture as a pillar of cultural-economic policies (termed the Belt and Road) promoted by the Chinese Government, as food, culture, and mobility can contribute to emergent geopolitical efforts. It is a good beginning within cross-cultural export (Leung & Lau, 2021).

Figure 8: Making the milk tea for the Golden Tea Competition of 2019

Note. Competitors are making the perfect milk tea to win the championship. From *the Hong Kong Trade Development Council,* by the Hong Kong International Tea Fair, 2019 (https://hkteafair.hktdc.com/dm/2019/1st_edm/index_en.html). CC-BY.

In recent years, the Hong Kong Government has encouraged cultural governance strategies and preserved cha chaan tengs to build Hong Kong's distinctive metropolitan identity and attract visitors and business opportunities. Food is thus being integrated into this cultural narrative, particularly a well-known one such as milk tea (Mak, 2021). However, Mak (2021) believed that government publicity contributes to the commodification of milk tea to some extent, and that the generations of the 90s and 00s were originally champions of preserving milk tea as cultural heritage, which has reflected power formed by a bottom-up agency that drives policy implementation, since the wave of globalisation rapidly led to old-style cha chaan tengs vanishing in Hong Kong (Leung & Lau, 2021).

In arguing that cha chaan teng culture is a vital part of Hong Kong people's cultural identity, and that it also distinguishes them from other Chinese groups, it is useful to consider the example of Lo Fung tea café: many people from the 90s and 00s generations are keen on visiting it due to its 1970s decor, antique posters, and Cantonese jokes that cover the menu, creating a familiar sense of local dialect and political satire culture. The management of the café often posts photos on Instagram to share their feelings and encourage others to visit (Mak, 2021). As the founder and chef of Lo Fung, Mike, said, "In the past few years, quite a few half-century-old Cha Chaan Tengs have closed. While there is no conservation effort from the government to preserve them, ironically, youth use the internet to inform others about the disappearing old things" (Mak, 2021, p. 12).

Overview

The cultural meaning of Cha Chaan Tengs is shaped more by people's everyday familiarity and emotional attachment than by official discourse or heritage policymaking. In the research by Mak (2021), Wang (2022), and Chan (2019), interviewees and owners often described their sense of belonging as a sense of community, arising from intergenerational and social brotherhood, and leading to long-term cultural practices. In that way, it plays a more influential role in constructing identity than any explicit governance policies. In other words, people's cultural identification with cha chaan tengs feels natural and ordinary, not a result of top-down deliberate cultural indoctrination.

The strong visibility of cha chaan tengs in films, music, and popular media not only reflects their importance in daily life but also shows how people wish to imagine and remember them. However, the media's portrayal of cha chaan tengs tends to be simplistic, framing them as a nostalgic, storytelling, and comfort zone. This way is meant to reinforce a shared sense of Hong Kong's collective memory, but overlooks its deeper, more complex connotations (Wu, 2001). Although the approach can foster a shared sense of home among people, it also unintentionally obscures certain issues, such as globalisation, labour rights, and commercial pressures. Even more, some less iconic cha chaan tengs are facing a gradual decline (Mak, 2021).

Additionally, government involvement in the cultural field shows an attempt to formalise and institutionalise what was once an informal social practice. Such top-down cultural policy

can contribute to constructing regional or group narratives and visibility, but may also redirect public attention towards economic concerns and branding, neglecting cultural significance (Mak, 2021). For example, when the government employs cultural heritage to promote economic development, some dishes may be subjected to scale commodification, prompting public concern about their cultural symbol (Wang, 2022).

To summarise, cha chaan teng culture is generated from everyday life, amplified by media imagination, and incorporated into institutional planning as a form of governance. This development reveals a multi-layered cultural narrative, intertwining emotional, memory, and social elements, grounded in people's daily experiences rather than political practices.

4.3.5 Theme 4. Cha Chaan Tengs in the Diaspora

Since 1997, Hong Kong has experienced several waves of emigration, with parts of the population relocating to English-speaking countries or settling in cities across mainland China (Cheng, 2013). Along with many daily routines, culinary nostalgia as a cultural practice also travelled with their diasporic lives (Leung & Lau, 2021). As Leung and Lau (2021) pointed out, many cha chaan tengs now exist across Southeast Asia, Toronto, London, and mainland China. Most of them incorporate Hong Kong culture and history as core values in their operating and expansion strategies. Therefore, the soy sauce Western cuisine evokes immigrants' memories and maintains a connection to Hong Kong identity. At the same time, it provides local customers with a Hong Kong cultural experience, allowing them to imagine the metropolis. This theme examines the business model that supports cha chaan teng's

widespread popularity across cultures and highlights its role in maintaining identity across diverse social contexts.

The reproduction of cha chaan tengs culture as a cross-cultural commodity

The migration of people has played a key role in the dissemination of cha chaan tengs beyond Hong Kong, and two significant waves emerged at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. Approximately 8% of the population was unwilling to live under a Communist Party government and emigrated to Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom before the 1997 handover to China (Cheng, 2013). In the early 21st century, as China's economy began to soar, some Hong Kong residents chose to relocate to major cities in northern China, such as Beijing and Shanghai (Leung & Lau, 2021). Cha chaan tengs were thus established in various towns as Hong Kong's population grew and food demand increased, the cafés serving as a new form of food culture that represented Hong Kong.

According to Leung and Lau's (2021) analysis, the process of cultural transmission in cha chaan tengs has involved negotiation, reconstruction, and adaptation to local cultures, even reshaping according to different groups' idealised versions of Hong Kong, which demonstrates the selective appropriation and reinterpretation of Hong Kong flavours and symbols during transcultural transmission. For example, the first cha chaan teng in Shanghai, Cha's Restaurant ("Cha" is the Chinese pronunciation of tea), features neon-style signs and lighting, leather booth seating, and menus placed between the glass surface and the tabletop. The cans of condensed milk used to make milk tea (imported from Hong Kong) are stacked

and displayed one by one on the glass shelves behind the service counter (Leung & Lau, 2021). It is evident that Cha's Restaurant attempts to use material semantics to recreate the visual elements of a traditional Hong Kong tea café.

Another example comes from Bangkok, a cha chaan teng named Chef Man, which is famous for the owner's vigorous devotion to old-style cha chaan tengs decor, involving mosaic floor tiles, booth seatings, ceiling fans, and wooden-framed windows that evoke a classic cha chaan teng aesthetic. Its signature milk tea is served in thick ceramic mugs, a common household utensil for every family in Hong Kong during the 1960s (Leung & Lau, 2021). These semiotic selections do not aim to restore historical context but draw on the imagery of Hong Kong from a particular era, making it easier for customers to recognise and promote consumption in unfamiliar social settings.

At the same time, the intercultural communication environment drives revisions to the menu. Most cha chaan tengs established outside Hong Kong often modify classic sweet and savoury snacks from Hong Kong-style tea cafés, creating new flavours and recipes to suit local tastes or consumption patterns (Lo, 2008). For instance, the well-known chain store Charme tea café, operating in Beijing, adjusted its menu from a set of common meals and snacks to a wider selection of Cantonese soups and added new desserts. One of the desserts is called Honey Thick Toast, a modified version of Hong Kong-style thick toast with a thickness equivalent to half a loaf. The inner part of the toast is hollowed out and filled with ice cream (Leung & Lau, 2021).

In addition, a cha chaan teng in Macau offers a different taste profile from that in Hong Kong, as Macau was colonised by Portugal and its cuisine was more influenced by Portuguese than British cuisine. The pork chop bun is regarded as a classic dish that reflects this difference (Wu &Tan, 2001). In Hong Kong, cha chaan tengs typically use a soft, round bun to hold the fried pork chop, whereas in Macau, the pork chop is often placed in a piece of hard, square bread with a crisp crust similar to ciabatta. It has become a new culinary innovation in Macau. Furthermore, a cha chaan teng in Penang also serves a modified version of the pork chop bun by replacing the bun with a pineapple bun, creating a rich, sweet-and-savoury combination (Leung & Lau, 2021).

> Attentions were brought to one of the local Chinese newspapers (Guang Ming Daily) column, in which the lighter taste of Hong Kong style is compared with the richer one in Malaysia. The point of view from a local Cha Chaan Teng, 8 AM, suggests that it is essential to adapt the intensity and variety of marinade effectively to align with the savoury custom of the locals. (Leung & Lau, 2021, p. 212)

As Lo (2008) suggested, cha chaan tengs embody ingredients, culinary practices, and inclusivity. For most people who study them, the cha chaan tengs are a key element reflecting hybridity, colonial influence, and shaping public food habits. The reproduction of cha chaan tengs across cultural contexts is not only a process of business expansion but also one of cultural reconstruction in diverse social contexts. Overseas cha chaan tengs keep soy sauce Western cuisine integrated into a broader cultural narrative by choosing visual symbols, flavours, and atmospheres associated with Hong Kong. Simultaneously, these restaurants position such elements as

recognisable and marketable signs of Hong Kong culture in their new settings, making them intelligible and appealing not only to Hong Kong diasporic groups but also to wider audiences.

Overview

The cross-regional movement of cha chaan tengs culture shows how Hong Kong identity is not just exported but actively reshaped as it enters new social environments. This process extends beyond a fixed outward cultural expression, with findings pointing to a more dynamic pattern: the identity of Hong Kong becomes something different groups negotiate through their encounters with Hong Kong-style food. Thereby, individuals can imagine, interpret, or integrate Hong Kong culture as cha chaan tengs spread overseas, depending on their expectations and cultural positions.

It is clear that the cultural meaning of cha chaan tengs does not remain consistent across different cultural settings. In Hong Kong, cha chaan tengs are closely tied to the rhythms of people's daily life. For diasporic communities, these carry a different weight, serving as a means of holding on to the past or a method to deal with the culture shock arising from their current surroundings. For people who have not visited Hong Kong before, cha chaan tengs are an accessible entry point into this city's culture, although their understanding is based on imagination rather than lived experience.

These varied interpretations do not weaken immigrants' sense of identity. Instead, their distinct food preferences reflect differences in identity deriving from local customs. In this

way, the identity of Hong Kong people can be rooted outside Hong Kong and remains culturally significant beyond its geographic origin. In short, the cultural reproduction of cha chaan tengs underscores the importance of food mobility, its role in shaping identity through reconstituted practices. The ongoing spread of soy sauce Western cuisine demonstrates how the diaspora's identity is preserved.

Although people have different understandings of cha chaan tengs culture, this does not weaken their sense of Hong Kong cultural identity within the diaspora. Through these routines, Hong Kong people abroad keep a connection to their homeland. In this way, the reinterpretation of soy sauce in Western cuisine reflects the identity that persists in various settings.

4.4 Summary

This chapter has examined the historical formation of cha chaan tengs and the emergence of soy sauce Western cuisine. Although influenced by colonial culture, these food practices have long been part of Hong Kong people’s daily lives and continue to be passed down through generations. By outlining the cultural meanings accumulated over time, the chapter employed empirical thematic analysis to examine food habits, spatial practices, cultural narratives, and the cross-regional movement of these culinary forms.

In summary, this chapter has demonstrated the four themes and how the cultural importance of themes shapes the identity development of Hong Kong people. As a result, the analysis not only establishes a coherent framework that underpins the discussion that follows,

but also provides a direction for understanding how a sense of belonging is formed through everyday food culture and within the wider context of the Hong Kong diaspora.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Re-examining the Significance of Themes

The task of this chapter is to place the four themes presented in Chapter 4 within a shared framework for interpreting and examining how the hybridity of cuisines, social spaces, nostalgic narratives, and cross-cultural communication of cha chaan tengs are integrated and flourish through everyday practice, thereby shaping Hong Kong people's experience of identity. This means the case studies in Chapter 4 primarily answered what the cultural phenomena of cha chaan tengs and their soy sauce Western cuisine are, while they do not clarify how these cultural phenomena together weave the identity of Hong Kong people. Those cultural phenomena do not occur in isolation but are the outcome of their interaction. This section proceeds from an interpretive perspective to discuss the role these themes collectively play in constituting identity and providing a clear groundwork for the key findings in the following section.

First, an individual's identity is not a viewpoint that is passively expressed, but is generated through everyday life, which can be learned, repeated, and recognised—a suggestion emphasised in the literature by Mary Douglas (1972/2018, 1973/2014) and Sidney Mintz (2008). That is to say, identity is not simply a matter of personal understanding and perception, but a process constantly produced through behaviour, order, and narrative. According to the analysis of results in Chapter 4, the value of hybrid cuisine is reflected not only in the Chinese-Western mixed style of menus and décor but, more importantly, also in menu descriptions, ordering methods, and dining rules. These practices constitute a social

norm that serves as a method of judging “who is a local.” Therefore, if an individual can naturally participate in and produce these practices through action, they are recognised as local. Based on this observation, this study elevates hybridity from a cultural characteristic to an operable, workable cultural practice. This is the first step in understanding the arguments that follow.

Second, to understand individual behavioural expressions, one needs to extend observation to the level of social interaction. The unwritten rules presented in Chapter 4, such as sharing tables, quick ordering, and dining pace, although reflecting the characteristics of daily life, constitute a tacitly accepted cultural order among diners. Because of adherence to these unwritten rules, individuals who follow this order are considered “one of us,” whereas those who deviate from it are regarded as “outsiders.” In other words, people’s dining practices delineate group boundaries within these unwritten orders, functioning as a criterion for confirming identity. Therefore, the second point in this chapter emphasises that identity formation should be viewed as a process established step by step through daily practice, rather than as a result of grand cultural narratives.

Finally, the dimensions of emotion and narrative, especially nostalgia, extend beyond personal memories. They are mobilised through media dissemination and government policy to build a collective identity. As shown in Chapter 4, nostalgic narratives originate in the accumulated long-term experiences of generations of consumers and serve as evidence used by governments and businesses to designate certain dishes as heritage. For diasporic people, their nostalgia and sense of belonging have fostered the overseas dissemination of tea

restaurant culture, which helps them maintain their identity across different cultural contexts. Therefore, in diasporic environments, familiar food can elevate individual nostalgia into a strong identity marker, serving as a way to maintain, continue, and express one's identity. This aligns with the understanding of identity emphasised in this chapter.

Based on these three points, the next section discusses the key findings related to these points in turn. First, in section 5.2, it is argued that hybridity becomes a discernible competency through practical measures; second, there is an analysis of how everyday dining practices distinguish "us" from the "other"; finally, section 5.2 discusses how nostalgic narratives and a sense of belonging sustain the identity of diasporic groups in cross-cultural settings. Therefore, this chapter aims to turn the analysis of Chapter 4 into interpretive conclusions, establishing Chapter 5 as the central interpretive part of this dissertation, through a discussion from phenomenon to mechanism to meaning.

5.2 Key Findings

Building on the foundations laid in Chapter 4, it is further argued in this study that the cultural significance of cha chaan tengs and their soy sauce Western cuisine is not manifested in the hybridity of cuisine, menus, or decoration. Instead, it is through a system of everyday practices that can be learned, repeated, and recognised, thereby constituting the identity of Hong Kong people. These everyday practices cover three interconnected aspects: dining behaviours, social order, and emotional narrative.

First, this study finds that hybridity within cha chaan tengs culture practically functions as a routine form of cultural competence. As shown in Chapter 4, hybridity is not recognised

through visual style or colonial heritage, but through concrete operations, such as menu combinations, dining conventions, ordering methods, and service habits. The emergence of soy sauce Western cuisine, the localisation of Western dish names on the menu, and the pairing of beverages and foods, together form a system of dining practices that may require a specific cultural literacy. This finding suggests that the hybridity of cha chaan tengs is more than an appearance of a mixed Chinese and Western style; the underlying essence reflects people's capacity to accept and adapt to culture, which is cultivated through their repeated practice. Individuals' natural recognition and participation in these practices are regarded as important criteria for the integration of local culture. In other words, the identity of Hong Kong people does not derive from any single symbol of cha chaan teng culture, but rather from people's familiarity with and proficiency in the eating practices characterised by this hybridity.

Second, this study further reveals that the daily dining practices of regular customers of cha chaan tengs constitute a tacit social contract, and this social order effectively helps to define and refine the force of identity through unwritten rules. According to Mary Douglas (1973/2014) in *Food in the Social Order,* food functions as a kind of system that maintains and expresses social order because it is closely connected to people in everyday life, and the choices of when to eat and what to eat distinguish their groups from others.

The analysis in Chapter 4 of practices such as table-sharing customs, ordering styles, dining pace, and spatial usage shows that these behavioural patterns are typically not formally codified as rules. Instead, they have gradually become the accepted way of operating among

locals. Individuals who follow these rules are tacitly regarded as “one of us,” while those deviating from them are seen as “outsiders.” As Tajfel (1974) noted, the differentiation of a group serves as a means of distinguishing “us” from “others.” This tacit social contract shows that the role of cha chaan teng culture is not merely to preserve local culture; instead, it functions as a cultural space that enacts social distinction, in which the identity attributes of different diners are clearly observable.

Third, this study points out that nostalgic narrative expressions of cha chaan teng culture reflect personal sentiment and serve as a means for dispersed communities to sustain their identity in diasporic settings. Chapter 4 shows that diners across generations at cha chaan tengs build local group memories through repeated experiences. Their memories strengthen emotional attachment to past lives, even in diasporic contexts, and this becomes unshakeable nostalgia. Moreover, nostalgia and people’s memories can shift from merely emotional expressions, prompting the government to selectively preserve certain dishes and endow them with symbolic meanings that represent Hong Kong identity. This illustrates that cha chaan teng culture functions as an emotional narrative, a representation of local culture, and the maintenance of identity among diasporic groups.

In summary, the key finding of this section is that the identity implicit in cha chaan teng culture is formed through people’s everyday practices, their adherence to dining and spatial rules, nostalgic emotion, and memory. Together, these elements form a continuous system for identity affirmation, reveal Hong Kong people’s sense of belonging, and address the second research sub-questions. In this study, soy sauce Western cuisine not only provides an

affordable exotic cuisine but also functions as a form of behavioural practice embedded within specific spaces, orders, and emotions. This prompts individuals, through their daily participation, to affirm their group's food culture, thereby explaining the first research sub-questions.

Consequently, these important findings demonstrate that identity is not fixed but fluid; it is continuously interpreted, adapted, and established through practice, because history shapes individuals and constructs difference. This aligns with Stuart Hall's (1989) research on cultural identity, as what we really are is like all historical things, continuous and changing and leads to what we become. Consequently, the finding responds to the core question of this study: how food in everyday life expresses and contributes to people's identity formation.

5.3 Limitations

The strength of this study lies in its examination of how people's food practices express and help construct their identity, particularly through the case of Hong Kong cha chaan tengs and their soy sauce Western cuisine. The study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged, primarily due to the nature of the database used rather than the research method itself.

First, thematic analysis is a flexible and interpretive approach that can be applied to both primary and secondary sources (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Nevertheless, its findings are inevitably shaped by the scope and depth of the database. Although the secondary data offers access to diverse theoretical perspectives and enables the integration of views from different scholars across a broader scope, its content tends to overlook detailed, contextual nuances of

interactions in everyday situations, thereby limiting access to consumer motivations, daily interactions between merchants and customers, or the lived experiences of operators. The content may not always directly address the specific questions of this study.

Moreover, some themes found in the corpus may introduce thematic bias, for example, an emphasis on nostalgia and cultural governance, overshadowing other important factors such as cultural class differences, consumer perceptions, and generational changes. As a result, these aspects are not fully examined in the present study, and more targeted empirical investigations are beneficial to it.

Given these limitations, a suggestion for future research is to consider incorporating fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, or participant observation, which may help capture more contextual and experiential details of cha chaan tengs. In addition, future studies might adopt diverse analytical approaches and utilise visual methods, storytelling, or spatial exploration to reveal more in-depth findings on how consumers understand cha chaan tengs and their cultural significance. Finally, cross-city comparisons and policy-level analysis would also help understand how cha chaan teng culture is reconstructed across different diasporic contexts.

5.4 Summary

This chapter has re-examined the role of cha chaan tengs in shaping Hong Kong people's identity, discussing how the cultural significance of cha chaan tengs reflects everyday practices, nostalgic narratives, and cross-cultural communication. This study points out that the cultural elements surrounding cha chaan tengs are repeatedly discussed and reinforced,

and have become representative of Hong Kong culture, functioning as a link between individuals and the community. By emphasising the discussion of the key findings, the chapter has addressed the research questions and highlighted the importance of food in expressing cultural values, maintaining group belonging, and sustaining identity. Furthermore, the chapter has identified several objective limitations in the data, suggesting directions for future research, in order to improve the acknowledgement of the role of cha chaan tengs in identity construction.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

This study aims to explore how Cha Chaan Tengs and soy-sauce Western cuisine participate in the construction, negotiation, and dissemination of Hong Kong identity. Previous chapters have analysed their historical formation and emergence as cultural symbols. The objective of this chapter is to demonstrate how the study addresses the core research question—namely, how Hong Kong's cultural identity is expressed and negotiated through 'soy sauce Western food' and cha chaan tengs.

As noted by Mintz (2008), eating practices are significant, establishing a form of communication and self-identification, and they play a decisive role in reinforcing identities and a sense of belonging. The study has used inductive thematic analysis examining secondary sources, pointing out that the cultural significance of cha chaan tengs and their soy-sauce Western dishes does not derive from any single factor, but rather from the repeated and reinforced interplay of these elements through people's food practices. It is this process that enables cha chaan tengs to maintain their distinctive recognisability amid social change and cross-regional mobility. Consequently, the study has demonstrated that cha chaan tengs and their soy-sauce Western cuisine represent a form of Hong Kong culture that constructs and expresses the identity of Hong Kong people.

Therefore, the contributions of this research can be explicitly outlined as follows: first, the findings confirm that cha chaan tengs serve as sites of cultural practice for Hong Kong people rather than merely places of business. When people experience food at cha chaan tengs, they also engage with Hong Kong's distinctive local culture. Second, the study

emphasises that cultural meaning often emerges from people's habits and everyday practices but does not rely on governance or institutional preservation. This inevitably provides a new perspective on how Hong Kong culture persists even amidst turbulent environments and changes in political sovereignty. Third, the study affirms the role of nostalgic food in shaping collective memory and group belonging, and diaspora communities can maintain emotional connections and identity through nostalgic foods.

Nevertheless, this study is partly limited by the source materials and the scope of the research. More detailed and in-depth interviews are needed to address specific questions about the interaction between food and identity. For example, how do customers perceive cha chaan tengs' cultural meanings across different social situations, and how do operators preserve the cultural characteristics of cha chaan tengs while adapting them to local markets? Also, how do younger generations (such as those born in the 1990s and 2000s) view inherited flavours and the identities they reflect?

Additionally, cross-city comparisons of cha chaan tengs and studies on government cultural policies represent promising directions for further research. These could provide reference points for quantitative analysis of tourists' satisfaction with cha chaan teng cuisine, support new cha chaan teng cultures that are shaped in different social settings, and clarify what such developments signify.

In closing, by tracing historical developments and analysing cultural practices, this study has treated the integration of hybrid culinary practices, everyday practices, and nostalgia as a key thread for understanding Hong Kong identity. It has examined the process by which the

cultural meaning of cha chaan tengs arises from long-formed habits, coalesces in collective memory and diasporic contexts, reinforces group belonging, and thereby establishes its role in Hong Kong people's identity. Thus, it addresses the study's research question of how Hong Kong identity is expressed and negotiated through cha chaan tengs and soy-sauce Western cuisine. Consequently, everyday practices in cha chaan tengs can be understood as a process of socialisation, in which interactions between food and individuals give rise to particular behavioural patterns. These patterns express a distinctive order (in terms of what, when, and with whom one eats). As more individuals adhere to this order, they collectively build a group culture and solidify the community's identity.

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APPENDIX A

Appendix A presents the full process of constructing the corpus, outlining the two-step stages used to search, screen, and finalise the established materials. The two tables presented below include details for each stage of the process, ensuring transparency regarding the inclusion and exclusion of materials.

Step 1. Filtering the search results

Number	Titles of returns	Type of sources
1	Tea cafés and the Hong Kong identity: Food culture and hybridity	Academic Journal
2	The heritagization of milk tea: Cultural governance and placemaking in Hong Kong	Academic Journal
3	The potential of cultural exchange under the belt road initiative: A case study of Hong Kong style café (cha chaan teng)	Academic Journal
4	Hong Kong identities through food: Tracing developments and variations of pineapple buns in modern complexities	Academic Journal
5	'Made in Hong Kong' food labels: Two case studies to uncover identity politics and the dangerous 'other'	Dissertation
6	Unsettling the familiar	Academic Book Chapter
7	Hong Kong: A future in archives	Academic Journal
8	Eating together: Food, space, and identity in Malaysia and Singapore	Book
9	Chinese food and foodways in Southeast Asia and beyond	Book
10	Eating Metropolis: An analysis of the cultural hybridity and local identity behind the Hong Kong-style tea café, "cha chaan ting"	Academic Journal
11	The transference of cuisine and Michelin rated Chinese restaurants: A chef's perspective of Chineseness in Hong Kong	Academic Journal
12	Cantonese culinary lexical interaction between Hong Kong and Singapore English: How can Sinograph shape translingual words with English today?	Dissertation

13	An AZ of Chinese food (recipes not included): A delectable collection that serves up Chinese flavour beyond its taste	Book
14	Illuminography: a survey of the pictorial language of Hong Kong's neon signs	Conference Report
15	Diasporic connections to home: Materialisation of collective memory through night markets (夜市) and cha chaan tengs (茶餐廳)	Dissertation
16	Authentic food experiences bring us back to the past: An investigation of a local food night market	Academic Journal
17	Re-thinking popular culture	Academic Book Chapter
18	A bag of remembrance: A cultural biography of Red-White-Blue, from Hong Kong to Louis Vuitton	Academic Journal
19	Reading contemporary Chinese music: Reconsidering identity and cultural politics in analysis	Dissertation
20	Introduction to Hong Kong	Book
21	Milk craze: Body, science, and hope in China	Book
22	Meeting place	Academic Book Chapter
23	The influence of cognitive food image on tourists' desire and intention to consume destination food: A Macau study	Academic Journal
24	Phoenix claws and jade trees: Essential techniques of authentic Chinese Cooking: A cookbook	Book
25	Localizing global strategies: Hong Kong consumer behavior and the aperitivo brands Aperol and Campari	Dissertation
26	Fantasies of Hong Kong Disneyland: Attempted indigenizations of space, labor, and consumption	Book
27	Deep ecology and urban conservation principles for urban villages	Academic Book Chapter
28	Streets: Exploring Kowloon	Book
29	To Asia, with love	Book
30	Analysis of destination food and film tourism	Book
31	I like Hong Kong: Art and deterritorialization	Book
32	Breakfast: A history	Book

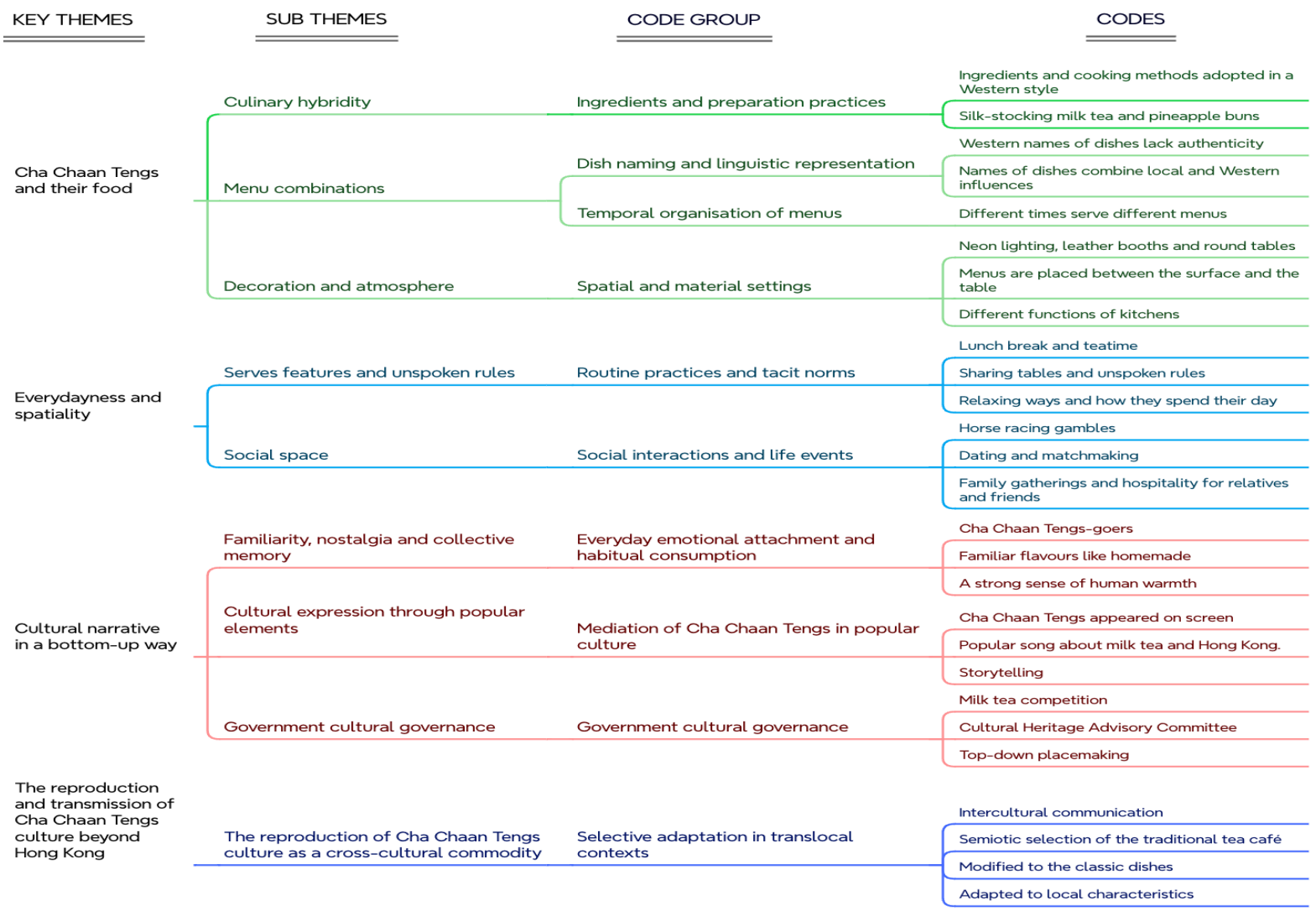
Step 2. Selecting the materials

Number	Titles of returns	Type of sources	Relevance	Results
1	Tea cafés and the Hong Kong identity: Food culture and hybridity	Academic Journal	This is clearly referring to cha chaan tengs or tea cafés, Hong Kong identity, and hybridity, which explicitly aligns with the search words.	include
2	The heritagization of milk tea: cultural governance and placemaking in Hong Kong	Academic Journal	The discussion of the heritagisation of milk tea is closely linked to heritage and the Hong Kong-style tea café.	include
3	The potential of cultural exchange under the belt road initiative: A case study of Hong Kong style café (cha chaan teng)	Academic Journal	This is clearly a case study about cha chaan tengs.	include
4	Hong Kong identities through food: Tracing developments and variations of pineapple buns in modern complexities	Academic Journal	The study explores how food reflects people's identity, which is relevant to the search words.	include
7	Hong Kong: A future in archives	Academic Journal	It can be excluded because it focuses on the archive rather than the cuisine or cha chaan tengs.	exclude
10	Eating Metropolis: an analysis of the cultural hybridity and local identity behind the Hong Kong-style tea café, "cha chaan ting"	Academic Journal	This is an analysis of Hong Kong local identity through the lens of cha chaan tengs.	include

11	The transference of cuisine and Michelin rated Chinese restaurants: A chef's perspective of Chineseness in Hong Kong	Academic Journal	It can be excluded because it focuses on the chef's perspective in the Michelin restaurant, as there are no traces of the search terms.	exclude
16	Authentic food experiences bring us back to the past: An investigation of a local food night market	Academic Journal	It can be excluded in relation to the night market in Macau, as it does not connect with Hong Kong.	exclude
18	A bag of remembrance: A cultural biography of Red-White-Blue, from Hong Kong to Louis Vuitton	Academic Journal	It can be excluded because it focuses on the Louis Vuitton bag, which is not related to the search terms.	exclude
23	The influence of cognitive food image on tourists' desire and intention to consume destination food: A Macau study	Academic Journal	It can be excluded because it discusses a case in Macau, not in Hong Kong.	exclude

APPENDIX B

To clarify the full process of data analysis, Appendix B summarises the coding process, including all codes, code groups, and subthemes. The table below shows how the data was analysed.


KEY THEMES
SUB THEMES
CODE GROUP
CODES
Cha Chaan Tengs and their food
Culinary hybridity
Ingredients and preparation practices
Ingredients and cooking methods adopted in a Western style
Silk-stocking milk tea and pineapple buns
Menu combinations
Dish naming and linguistic representation
Western names of dishes lack authenticity
Names of dishes combine local and Western influences
Temporal organisation of menus
Different times serve different menus
Decoration and atmosphere
Spatial and material settings
Neon lighting, leather booths and round tables
Menus are placed between the surface and the table
Different functions of kitchens
Everydayness and spatiality
Serves features and unspoken rules
Routine practices and tacit norms
Lunch break and teatime
Sharing tables and unspoken rules
Relaxing ways and how they spend their day
Social space
Social interactions and life events
Horse racing gambles
Dating and matchmaking
Family gatherings and hospitality for relatives and friends
Cultural narrative in a bottom-up way
Familiarity, nostalgia and collective memory
Everyday emotional attachment and habitual consumption
Cha Chaan Tengs-goers
Familiar flavours like homemade
A strong sense of human warmth
Cultural expression through popular elements
Mediation of Cha Chaan Tengs in popular culture
Cha Chaan Tengs appeared on screen
Popular song about milk tea and Hong Kong.
Storytelling
Government cultural governance
Government cultural governance
Milk tea competition
Cultural Heritage Advisory Committee
Top-down placemaking
The reproduction and transmission of Cha Chaan Tengs culture beyond Hong Kong
The reproduction of Cha Chaan Tengs culture as a cross-cultural commodity
Selective adaptation in translocal contexts
Intercultural communication
Semiotic selection of the traditional tea café
Modified to the classic dishes
Adapted to local characteristics