A Seat at the Table

Placemaking in the Hong Kong-Canadian Diasporic Landscape

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Gathering is present in every aspect of Chinese culture - its customs, traditions, and celebrations. This act of gathering provides community, a shared strength in celebration, but it also reveals the social nuances of the community.[1] In the North American diaspora, it provides protection against prejudice, community, and the tools to teach and grow, offering opportunities for grandparents to teach grandchildren about their culture. Food accompanies this crucial act of gathering as a vehicle for cultural transfers of knowledge. In Cantonese, one of the most common phrases to greet a person is not "how are you?", but rather, "*sik jo faan mei aa*?"[i] Bringing a group of people of different ages and lives together over food and conversation is an act of solidarity, of sharing, and an expression of care.[2] It has provided the very foundation for the formation of Chinatowns and their surrounding ethnoburbs,[3] as places to keep an eye out for one another amid exclusion, and it is this very act of gathering over food specifically that provided the first stepping stone in the Canadian acceptance of Chinese culture.

The Chinese restaurant provides the arena for food and gathering to take place, a key player in the transfer of cultural knowledge between the generations of Hong Kong-Chinese immigrants that reside in the Greater Toronto Area - namely in Markham, Richmond Hill, and Scarborough. Restaurants are known to adapt and shift with the current times, but in the recent years, through modes of gentrification,[4] an influx of anti-Asian racism following Covid-19, and the aging of the first-generation Chinese immigrants that had in Canada in the late twentieth century, the traditional and beloved Chinese restaurant typology that has anchored neighbourhoods for decades face a much more rapid and drastic change.

Through analysis of Hong Kong settlement patterns across the Greater Toronto Area, this thesis reveals the integral role the restaurant plays in the Hong Kong-Canadian diaspora and its network of businesses. It investigates the often unsaid part of Chinese culture that is intergenerational knowledge sharing, and speculates on what tools may be carried down to the second and third-generation Hong Kong immigrant to imagine what the Chinese restaurant can become. This thesis uses analysis of placemaking and memory, accompanied by interviews and ethnographic drawing studies to come to a written projection of the trajectory of the Chinese restaurant, understanding the ways in which culture defines space and how space can, in return, preserve culture. The research provides an analytical approach to understand the Hong Kong culture that has stood the test of time, through the movement across continents and political upheaval,

1. Kwang-chih Chang and Eugene Newton Anderson, *Food in Chinese Culture : Anthropological and Historical Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 16

2. ibid.

3. Wei Li, *Ethnoburb: The New Ethnic Community in Urban America* (University of Hawai'i Press 2009) http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wqxsr

4. Shanifa Nasser, "*What Will Become of Toronto's Chinatown? Activists Worry Gentrification Will Erase a Unique Part of History.*" (CBC News, 2019). https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/chinatown-toronto-gentrification-1.5162626.

i. 食咗飯未呀 - *sik jo faan mei aa*
Have you eaten [rice] yet?

and speculates on what is needed to maintain its ground against rising threats of financial instability, gentrification, and change in the customer landscape. The Chinese restaurant, a silent yet crucial contributer to the community, may be considered a regular spot today, but is a pillar of Chinese culture, specifically Hong Kong culture, that stands to be preserved.

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List of Terms

General

爺爺 *yeye*
Paternal grandfather

嫲嫲 *maa ma*
Paternal grandmother

竹升 *jook sing*
Bamboo rod; in reference to Chinese individuals born and raised into Western culture

香港人 *heung gong yan*
Hong Kong people

關係 *gwaan hai*
Relation, connection

好市 *hou si*
Good market performance

風水 *fung seoi*
Wind and water; Taoist practice of arranging objects to balance the qi in the environment

Sayings

食咗飯未呀 *sik jo faan mei aa?*
Have you eaten [rice] yet?

坐低，飲杯茶，食個包 *chodai yum bui cha, sik gor bau*
Sit down, drink a cup of tea, eat a bun

饮咗茶未啊？ *yum zo cha mei aa?*
Have you had your tea yet?

得閒飲茶 *dak haan yum cha*
Let's have tea when you have time

美食天堂 *meisik tintong*
Heaven of delicacies

一盅兩件 *yat zung leung gin*
One cup, two pieces

粽子 *zong zi*
Glutinous rice dumpling

蠔豉 髮菜 *hou shi fa cai*
Dried oysters and black moss

蝦餃 *har gow*
Shrimp dumpling

燒味 *siu mei*
Roasted meat

叹茶 *tan cha*
Enjoy tea

點心 *dim sum*
Touch the heart; traditional Chinese food consisting of a variety of items served in small portions
("dim sum." *Merriam-Webster.com*. 2025.)

飲茶 *yum cha*
Drink tea; a meal eaten in the morning or early afternoon, typically consisting of dim sum and hot tea
("yum cha." *oed.com*. 2025.)

大牌檔 *daai pai dong*
Big license stall; a traditional licensed street stall, typically with a small seating area, selling cooked food at low prices
("dai pai dong." *oed.com*. 2025.)

茶樓 *cha lau*
Teahouse, dim sum restaurant, Chinese restaurant

茶餐廳 *cha chaan teng*
Tea food hall

冰室 *bing sutt*
Ice house

1 Introduction

Everything I like, my yeye liked before me.

When I was in elementary school, *yeye*[ii] would take time off at lunch once a week, often the busiest hour at the restaurant he managed, to bring my brother and I pre-made lunches from the Chinese grocery store. He would bring a soy chicken for my brother and a barbecued eel on rice for myself, wrapped tightly in a white plastic bag. The school principal would call on us from the intercom in our classrooms and my brother and I would race to the office, my grandfather grinning from ear to ear, happy to see us even for a small break in his long day. I would return to class with the eel, surrounded by curious second graders peering over my shoulder to look at the strange food I had brought, though it never bothered me what my classmates thought of the food I ate. If my grandfather picked it out for me, I knew it had to be the best.

ii. 爺爺 - *yeye*
Paternal grandfather

As I worked through my portfolio for university admissions, my father would come home late from his shift at work to see me seated and working at the dining table, close to midnight. He would take me to Richmond Court, a late-night staple in Richmond Hill. He'd tell me that he and my mother used to bring me here late at night as a baby so the two of them could eat dessert together, as we passed through tables where uncles sat cross-legged in their chairs, hats hung on the backrest, even shoes slipped off and tossed to the side. Loud Cantonese chatter would fill the room with a type of energy that made you think that you arrived at lunch, not at midnight. My dad would order for me — a peanut-butter Hong Kong style French toast and an iced Hong Kong milk tea. Much like his own father, he always knew what I would like.

Now, on weekends home from university, I'll meet with my old friends from high school for lunch at dim sum restaurants just five minutes

from where we attended school altogether some years ago. The usual crowd that surrounds us consists of grandparents bringing their young grandchildren to *yum cha*, introducing them to steamed dishes they've never seen before and trying their hardest to get the little ones to learn Cantonese before they go to kindergarten and inevitably forget it all to learn English. At my table though, I sit between friends from different cultures, staring at the pink slip of checkboxes next to a plethora of menu items. My friends will make me order for the table - an array of classic dim sum dishes and personal favourites – like my father and my grandfather, I'll know what they like.

Though the experience of growing up in Chinese-Canadian households for the second and third-generation immigrant is complex and unique, what remains common and centered amongst most of our lives is the presence of food. Food becomes a way to bring people together. Grandparents and parents bring the memories of the homes they left behind to the dining table in the form of dishes and stories, the aromas and familiar sounds recalling a restaurant or apartment across seas. Food becomes the language shared between grandparents and grandchildren, separated by a language barrier, where a warm dish can become common speech for “I care about you”. In Cantonese, one of the most common phrases to greet a person with is not “how are you?”, but rather, “*sik jo faan mei aa*,” which translates to "have you eaten yet?" These experiences, at their core, inspire gathering, bringing a group of people of different ages and lives together over food and conversation. It is an act of solidarity, of sharing, and an expression of care.[5] It has provided the foundation for the formation of Chinatown as a place of protection and safety amid exclusion, and the subsequent formation of the suburban settlements surrounding the downtown core, labelled "ethnoburbs,"[6] at a time of growth and expansion of both businesses and families.

When Chinese diasporic settlements began to take shape in the 1930s,[7] beginning with Toronto’s original Chinatown on Elizabeth Street, Chinese immigrants attached themselves to one another for familiarity and safety, establishing their own associations and networks between family members, neighbours, and sponsors. Since then, following mass immigrations from Hong Kong, Chinatown has grown, split, relocated, and expanded, to the west and east ends of Toronto, and the suburban neighbourhoods of Markham, Scarborough-Agincourt, and Richmond

5. Kwang-chih Chang and Eugene Newton Anderson. *Food in Chinese Culture : Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 16

6. Wei Li, *Ethnoburb: The New Ethnic Community in Urban America*. (University of Hawai’i Press, 2009)

7. W.R. Winnicki, “*Chinatown in Transition: The Impact of the New City Hall and Court House on Toronto’s Chinatown*.” (University of Waterloo, 1969)

Hill. Each Chinatown that exists today, whether city-centered or suburban, has taken a piece of the original Chinatown, and has grown to accommodate families of multiple generations. While previously a tool for ensuring safety, gathering has become a mode of cultural preservation. Families settle in these neighbourhoods that have cultivated over the span of decades to remain close to grandparents, to culture, and to the developments that have since resulted from their movement and growth — the specialized grocery stores, medicine shops, and restaurants that they have grown accustomed to, nestled in plazas that sit within a ten-minute drive away.

What has resulted is the flourishing of extremely tight-knit communities across the Greater Toronto Area, connected with one another over complex networks that span three to four generations. Neighbours that look out for one another, visiting each other's homes to play mahjong and exchange ingredients, bringing turnip cakes and mooncakes for Mid-Autumn Festivals and offering to watch grandchildren when the busy seasons at work begin to pick up. Community members in these areas spend time at one another's homes and congregate at workplaces — the restaurant, the grocery store, the fruit stands, and souvenir shops — where many of them work together. They will also frequent less formal public spaces. Such is the case for the older generation especially, where groups of them will meet in atriums of malls to begin their morning walks, followed by a group lunch in the food court. They will meet in parks for tai-chi in the morning, lingering for hours after to catch up and speak about their home lives, or they will find one another on the sidewalk when buying produce.

These places of congregation are what sociologist Ray Oldenburg refers to as "third places,"[8] in reference to places where people may interact physically and socially outside of living and working. In these third places, the line between living and working is distinct and clearly drawn — a prescribed relationship between those who work and those who visit. It is that relationship that contributes to what the third place offers — individual and community development on the social level. In Chinese culture, however, there are many instances where living and working overlap, both within the environment and the people that exist within the space. This is attributed to the Chinese-Canadian tendency to adapt their own lives to a space, to create new rooms, furthering the clarification of the invisible line drawn between life and work

8. Ray Oldenburg. *The Great Good Place*. (New York: Paragon, 1989)

and adapting the space to bring forth conditions like the restaurant dining room, where young children of employees are watched over by the patrons in the space, and busboys sit for lunch at tables next to students skipping class, watching CP24 on the large TV screen on the wall.

The restaurant, particularly the Chinese restaurant, is an outlier under Oldenburg's definition of the third place. It presents a unique case where the lives of those who work in the establishment and the lives of those who visit overlap and intermingle, creating a much more complex network between people from the typical third place. While a third place in Oldenburg's definition creates a space where connections can be fostered between people who may already know one another, the Chinese restaurant presents a place where connections are formed between people of all levels of connection, from strangers to immediate family members. The restaurant provides an integral place in the network of the Chinese, and specifically Hong Kong, diaspora in North America. It creates a strong case for interpersonal connection, as any public third place may, but its emphasis on cultural teachings, the evident generational hierarchies that exist in the dining room, present opportunities for much more enriched versions of learning that are not present in the mall, the community centre, or the study areas of libraries. In these particular spaces, public squares and areas for gathering are large and open, and young visitors are presented with the option to keep their interactions within the bubble of their groups of friends, or open themselves up to the possibility of making new friends. In the restaurant, where the layout consists of just one central space for gathering, packed tightly with as many tables and chairs as possible, interactions, overheard conversations, and chance run-ins with friends of relatives, or friends-of-friends, is not uncommon.

iii. 飲茶 - *yum cha*
Drink tea; a meal eaten in the morning or early afternoon, typically consisting of dim sum and hot tea

While communities across North America are facing the loss of third places following the aftermath of Covid-19, what Chinese communities are experiencing is a quieter diminishing of their public space. Given their frequency in neighbourhoods, Chinese restaurants are often the first to face closure or relocation to accommodate for the redevelopment of an area or to be replaced by a newer, up-and-coming cafe. They will close for a nondescript reason first, citing a short-term closure, that they will "be back soon!", yet weeks later, these signs will be replaced by "for lease" posters, without a word.

Just as the teachings and nuances of Chinese culture are unseen, the effects of the restaurant as a social space as a whole may go unseen over decades, the casual nature of the restaurant as a typology overpowering its cultural significance. Because of this, there is little appreciation or documentation for Chinese restaurants that become community staples, serving and hosting members of the community for decades. The feeling of erasure, in part due to gentrification, the rise and fall and rise again of anti-Asian racism, the aging of our first-generation immigrants, looms over the Chinese community in Canada and transcends just the restaurant; it becomes an issue for the people that live in the neighbourhoods as well.[9]

As a whole, the community faces a massive decline in the conservation of Hong Kong culture and generational knowledge-sharing.[10] The generation of Hong Kong immigrants that came to Canada and established these suburban Chinatowns act as the keepers of tradition and culture, and as this generation grows older and retires, the concern for who will continue these traditions and important parts of culture grows in tandem.

This thesis aims to highlight the integral role that the restaurant plays in the Hong Kong-Chinese diaspora, through an intensive study on not only the diaspora itself, but the networks and businesses that it consists of. In doing so, the research aims to reveal a much richer, often unsaid, part of Chinese culture that is intergenerational knowledge sharing. With the restaurant as a vehicle, first-generation immigrants in the Hong Kong diaspora have used food to transfer knowledge and culture to their children and grandchildren. Now, through case study research, interviews, and ethnographic drawing studies, it is time to see how this knowledge and culture can be carried on by the second and third generations. This thesis will create an understanding for the ways culture has and will continue to define space, and how a space can, in return, be used to preserve culture.

9. Tanya Mok, "*Chinatown Staple Rol San Could Be Replaced by a 13 Storey Building*." (BlogTO, August 27, 2019) https://www.blogto.com/eat_drink/2019/08/rol-san-chinatown-replaced/.

10. Karon Liu, "*Meet the People behind the Rise of '80s and '90s Hong Kong Culture in the GTA*." (Toronto Star, June 9, 2022). https://www.thestar.com/life/food-and-drink/meet-the-people-behind-the-rise-of-80s-and-90s-hong-kong-culture-in-the/article_a9bd06c8-c058-5d76-a658-7b3ad1149c23.html.

1.1 Methodology

This thesis layers the following methods of research: literature review of theoretical accounts in placemaking and culture, a review of research on the Hong Kong-Canadian waves of immigration and settlement and field research, assisted with ethnographic drawing and personal accounts from Chinese-Canadian citizens shared through interviews. The following chapters layer these methods to address Chinese restaurants of different scale, style, and hybridization with its Western counterparts, to create a comprehensive study on the importance of each restaurant to the Chinese community, highlighting the intergenerational teaching that prevails through every experience.

A literature review was conducted to create a foundational basis for the research performed in this thesis. Using Ray Oldenburg's work on third places[11] and Yi-Fu Tuan's writings on placemaking[12] to create a framework for understanding the concepts, writings on Chinese diasporic communities by David Chuenyan Lai and Wei Li were used to contextualize the concepts to the site. Chinese communities in North America have provided a plentiful case study for ethnic enclaves in what scholars refer to as "transcultural cities."[13] These studies typically focus on the role of language in Chinese diasporic thirdspaces,[14] and the existence of Chinatowns as hubs for global tourism and economic growth.[15] This review provides context to the Chinatowns in the Greater Toronto Area, examining the social networks and businesses created. Theoretical studies, concerned with placemaking and ethnic enclaves, are paired with studies on provincial policies that influenced mass immigration from Hong Kong, to provide a basis of understanding of settlement patterns, particularly in location, building typology, and programming. These previous pieces of research also provide, on a more individual scale, the life and work structures of the typical Chinese immigrant, providing ample context for understanding the restaurant as an amalgamation of the two, which is where this thesis begins.

Though literature and theory-based research will provide the groundwork for this thesis, the topics addressed must be supplemented by on-

11. Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*. (New York: Paragon, 1989)

12. Yi Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. (University of Minnesota Press, 1977)

13. J. Hou, *Transcultural Cities: Border-Crossing and Placemaking*. (New York: Routledge, 2013)

14. Xin Zhang and Xiaobin Jian. *The Third Space and Chinese Language Pedagogy: Negotiating Intentions and Expectations in Another Culture* (Routledge, 2020)

15. Kay Anderson, Ien Ang, Andrea Del Bono, Donald McNeill & Alexandra Wong, *Chinatown Unbound: Trans-Asian Urbanism in the Age of China* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019)

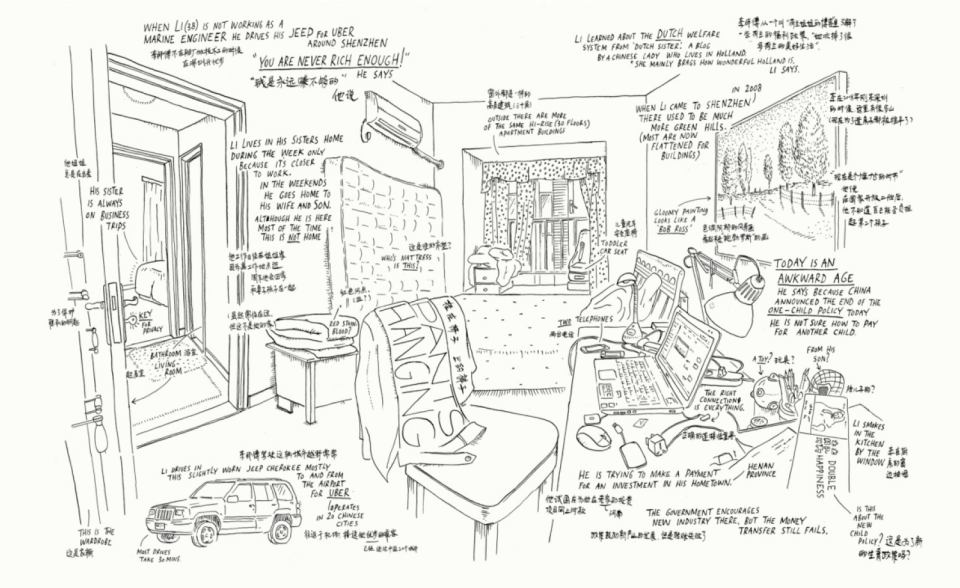


Fig. 1.1 *Shenzhen Inside*, Jan Rothuizen, 2015

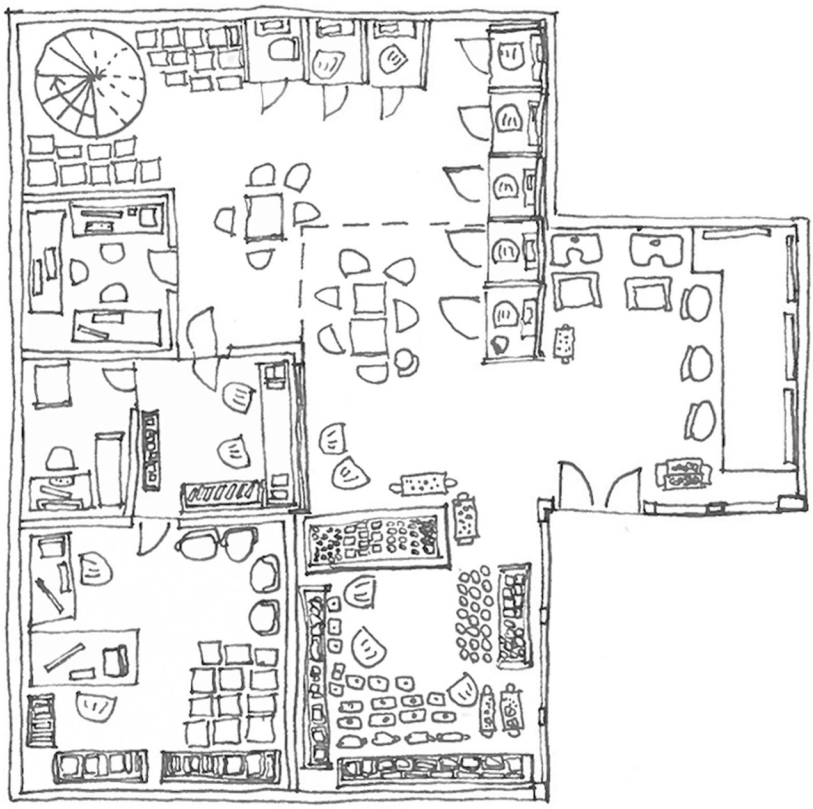


Fig. 1.2 *Fatima's Shop*, Bellstat Junction, Cape town, Huda Tayob, 2014-2015

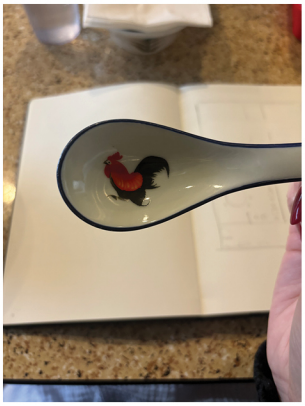
site research. This provides a much more thorough understanding of placemaking and culture in gathering spaces across the Greater Toronto Area. This is achieved by pairing ethnographic drawing and interviews with community members of varying roles and generations to create a breadth of insight into the lived experience in these communities.

The interviews are conducted between restaurant employees, owners, customers, and address a variety of generations of Chinese and Hong Kong immigrants living in Markham, Richmond Hill, and Scarborough-Agincourt. The interview process involved a series of questions regarding experiences immigrating to Canada, living in Canada, and working in Canada, particularly restaurants. The questions further address experiences with restaurants generally, to derive their importance to the community members through each moment of life. Participants of the study range between ages 25-75, providing a range of perspectives on the Chinese and Hong Kong immigrant experience.

Restaurants for this study fall under the categories of *cha chaan teng*, *cha lau*, or new-generation restaurant. Establishments under the *cha chaan teng* or *cha lau* category are chosen within the Markham, Scarborough, and Richmond Hill, and are visited at the recommendation of family members, community members, and interviewees through word of mouth. New-generation restaurants featured in Chapter Five are located in Toronto, recommended in conversation with young chefs or children of business owners in the Greater Toronto Area.

This thesis uses ethnographic drawing, referring to the style of Jan Rothuizen and Huda Tayob to draw as you see. The “soft map” approach to drawing allows for the space to be sketched as it is observed, understanding the quality of the space and effects of layout, lighting, decor, and human networks. Applied in this thesis, this is combined with a more traditional, accurate way of sketching in the case studies, where restaurants throughout Markham, Richmond Hill, and Scarborough are visited and observed. The sketches are paired with photographs in order to capture the look and feel of the space, and provide an overall base that can be translated into digital architectural plans where use of space, employee-to-customer ratio, and paths of travel can be diagrammed to understand the restaurants in a top-down view.

For this study, restaurants are visited across the Greater Toronto Area for varying periods of time from thirty minutes to an hour. During this period, rough sketches of the layout are made, along with notes on observations, and perspective sketches of any eye-catching moments. This, along with accompanying photographs, are used to create a sense of the way the spaces feel from the human-scale. The initial layout sketches are then digitally translated into orthographic plans to provide a common scale between case studies for comparative use (see Fig. 1.3).

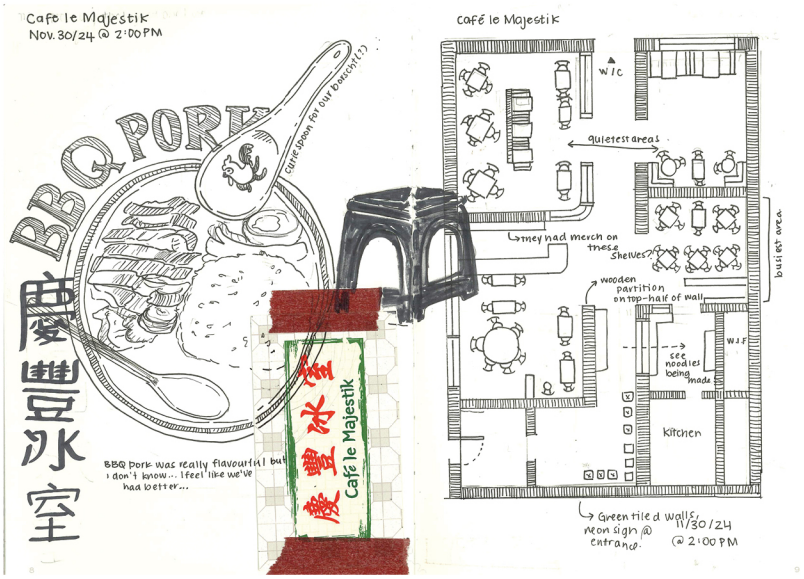




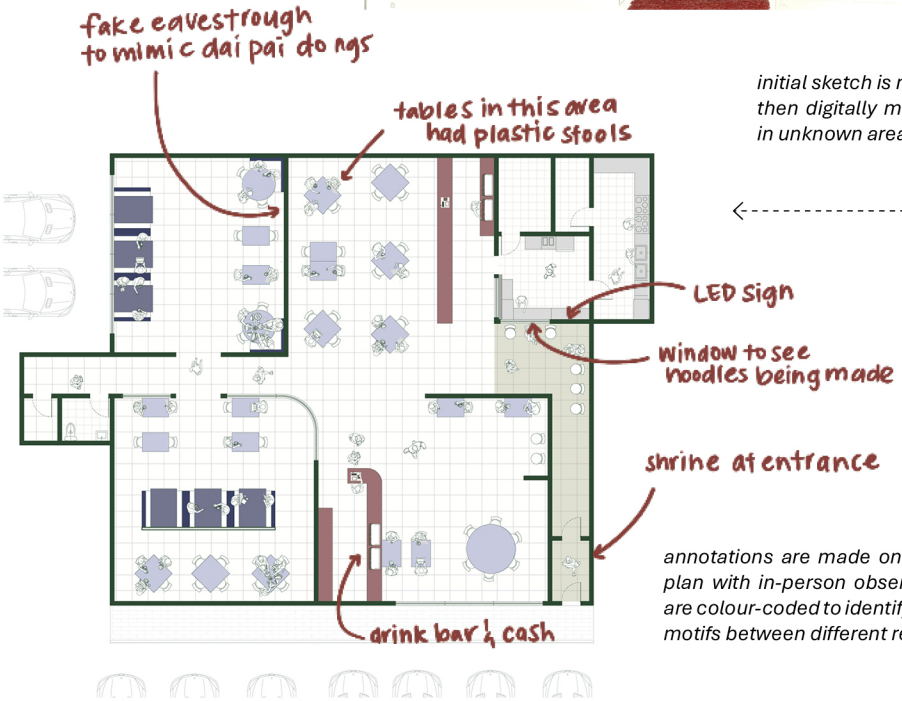




photos are taken while on-site for look + feel, furniture, finishes, and layout



initial sketch is made on-site, and is then digitally made to-scale, filling in unknown areas with photos



annotations are made onto the digital plan with in-person observations, and are colour-coded to identify reoccurring motifs between different restaurants

Fig. 1.3 *Sample of case study process using Cafe le Majestik (Scarborough) as an example*, images and sketches by author

1.2 Positioning

It is important to recognize where and how bias can be used in research theses such as this one. I believe my position in this research is celebrating the culture and importance of community-led and driven spaces. Recognizing my position as the granddaughter of Hong Kong immigrants gives way to understanding my place in this thesis. As a third-generation immigrant, my knowledge entering this field of research and my primary questions and topics can be surface level and almost naive. Not knowing how to speak Cantonese and growing up in a predominantly Western household, I can be seen as an outsider — my main connection to these spaces being my ethnicity and my proximity. In the research itself, this position as an outsider brings forth a challenge of deciphering between what is known and what is not known. I am bringing a lot of prior knowledge into this research, but I am also unveiling a lot about my culture that I did not know before, and the process behind unpacking and organizing what is essential to the argument of this thesis is also part of what makes the research itself.

This position, however, provides a stronger outlook on the research itself. Living on what can be considered the “periphery” of these communities allows for an objective look at the research and the results, though my connections to the people that are much more rooted in the community plays a key role in keeping this topic personal and quite close to me. Many second and third-generation immigrants often feel this disconnect in culture, and what keeps us grounded and rooted are the regular visits to restaurants and bakeries, sitting at tables with grandparents and aunties, sharing stories of what life used to be like; this is how culture is preserved.

I have grown up as a third-generation Chinese immigrant to a Hong-Kong Chinese father and Hakka Chinese mother. My parents have lived in Scarborough and Markham their entire lives and, in my mother's case, her first introduction to most Chinese culture came from meeting my father's family. As is the case for many second and third-generation immigrants growing up in these ethnoburbs, one of the only places

to access or explore my culture outside of the family setting is the restaurant. While there is more breadth to what I learn from dining with my grandmother, I am still able to go to a restaurant with friends my age, and learn something new, just from being there. Naturally, because of this, I feel a strong pull to investigate ways to preserve culture, and given my educational background, the first natural step for me in doing so would be to look into ways space can become defined by, and also become a place, to preserve culture.

1.3 Thesis Structure

The structure of this thesis breaks down the role of the Chinese restaurant first as a bridge between different communities - the Hong Kong immigrant and its host society - then as a common place for members within a community, followed by the restaurant as a place for knowledge transfer between differing generations of Chinese-Canadian immigrants, and finally looking forward to what the restaurant can mean for a generation of second and third-generation immigrants that are culturally more Canadian than their parents and grandparents.

This is achieved by bringing together two components – context and analysis. In each chapter, context is provided by reviewing a period of time in Canada and Hong Kong's linked cultural history and its immigration ties, and introducing a typology of restaurant and its role within the given time period. Each chapter is supported by case studies of the restaurant typology, on-site research through interviews, and sketching, to provide a further analysis and connecting element between the theoretical findings and evidence.

Chapter One, *A Restaurant for Culture*, examines the concept of third place, outlined by Ray Oldenburg, and placemaking, in order to understand how cultural space is created. Examples of placemaking are found in China, Hong Kong, and Ontario's Greater Toronto Area to understand the factors that influence the creation of place. Understanding the unique importance of food to the act of placemaking in Chinese culture, this chapter then investigates dining culture in the southern provinces of China and Hong Kong, focusing heavily on the teahouses of Guangzhou, and their translation into *yum cha* in Hong Kong.

Chapter Two, *A Restaurant for Community*, begins by briefly analyzing Chinese immigration to Toronto on a broad scale, looking at their migration from British Columbia to Ontario, and the first Chinatown on Elizabeth Street. This is done to highlight the pivotal role restaurants played in the political dialogue between Toronto's Chinese community

and its City officials. Following along the timeline, the chapter then shifts to the Chinese community's move to the ethnoburbs – the suburban settlements of ethnic groups, and the influx of immigration from Hong Kong that followed. This chapter will look at the Hong Kong-style cafes, *cha chaan tengs*, as a result of colonization in Hong Kong, and the ways the restaurant has been translated across seas as a place that provides belonging for the people within the community.

Chapter Three, *A Restaurant for Learning*, brings the analysis to present day, understanding the shift in the role of the restaurant as a place that communicates culture and tradition between generations of Hong Kong -Chinese immigrants. Defining intergenerational learning, the chapter will look at unspoken etiquettes of dining and rules of placemaking in today's banquet hall-styled dim sum restaurants as places for first, second, third, and even fourth generation immigrants to learn from one another and meet other community members as well.

The final chapter, *A Restaurant for Us*, looks forward to the future of Chinese restaurants, and speculates on what they may become with the advancements in technology, and the recent influx in Hong Kong immigration to the downtown core. Using interviews and case studies of newer restaurants in the city, this chapter will look at dining trends following the Covid-19 pandemic, and will use interview results from the second and third-generation of Chinese immigrants that are involved in the restaurant industry in some capacity to speculate a way forward in a much more technological and media-driven landscape.

2.0 A Restaurant for Culture

"Place is security, space is freedom:
we are attached to the one and long for the other."[0]

0. Yi Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1977)

"If there's a kid doing homework at the counter, that's how you know the restaurant is good" was a running joke between my Chinese friends and I in high school. Laughing amongst ourselves trying to choose a cheap restaurant to have lunch at in Chinatown on a weekend, a crisp twenty dollar bill from our parents in each of our wallets. It wasn't that long ago when I would visit my grandfather at the restaurant he managed in Bayview Village mall, peering at kids my age sitting at tables, waiting for their dads to finish work, taking advantage of the full floor to keep an eye on their sons and daughters while they moved between the front and back of the house.

Now, I'm seated with my siblings in a private dining room in a restaurant, at an age where no one needs to watch me, despite the many aunties peering their heads in to see what my grandmother is up to. As I interview her and my aunt, they tell me about the many other restaurants my *yeye* worked at, back when the "kids doing homework at the counter" were my own father and his sister. Working up to sixty hours a week managing the restaurant, my father and his sister would have *dim sum*[iv] every weekend just to see him, and when my dad was old enough, he worked in the kitchen, too. For the family of a restaurant owner or employee, the restaurant becomes an extension of the home. Walls are adorned with family photographs, a child's school accomplishments or art, not only signifying an establishment as a family-owned business, but displaying this transformation of the restaurant into the family's living room, a unique version of a third place – not quite separate from work nor living.

iv. 點心 - *dim sum*
Touch the heart; traditional Chinese food consisting of a variety of items served in small portions

The following chapter outlines third place and placemaking concepts and the crucial roles they play in culture and urban fabrics. Hong

Kong's use of placemaking comes from the resistance to Chinese and British leadership, certifying their democratic autonomy as a region. It will outline the many ways in which Hong Kong's struggle for a culture of its own has shaped its dining, lifestyle, and building, and how those manifestations of the struggle are evidence of Hong Kong's strength in placemaking.





Fig. 2.1 *Restaurant Kids*, Hannah Yoon, 2017.

2.1 On Third Place & Placemaking

Social interactions are inherently spatial; there exists a reciprocal relationship between the players and the setting of an interaction that may create and inform space. This relationship, as geographer Edward Soja states, is a crucial component in transforming our plain interactions into lived experiences – citing his notion that, "...all social relations become real and concrete, a part of our lived social existence, only when they are spatially 'inscribed' - that is concretely represented – in the social production of space."[1] The role of the player in an interaction nods to what Lefebvre describes as the act of bringing together the "... materials or the most finished of products, be they business or 'culture' [...Bringing] them all together and then in a sense [substituting] itself for each factor separately by enveloping it."[2] In doing so, a space may be made into a place.

The distinction between space and place, as geographer Yi-Fu Tuan explains, can be ascribed to movement and pause – where "...each pause in movement makes possible for location to be transformed into place."[3] By this definition, the distinction of space and place is situated in our intimate knowing of a certain location. Our experiences and memories that occur in a space can bring about its transformation into a place as it becomes physically realized as our experience of it is total. Tuan describes this as, "through all the senses as well as with the active and reflective mind."[4] Place is made, as Tuan describes, through the interaction of the components of a space with the human body. When a chair in a living room may become our favourite, or a couch may become a space where an important conversation was shared, the making of a certain memory is what can transform a space into a place.

In the urban scale, the human act of appropriating a space to make it one's own is what creates a third place, "...a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work."[5] The third place exists alongside the first place -

1. Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace : Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1997), 46

2. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005), 410

3. Yi Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 6

4. ibid. Ch.2, Pg. 18.

5. Ray Oldenburg. *The Great Good Place*. (New York: Paragon, 1989), 16

the home - and the second place - the workplace. It provides a neutral ground for people to gather and acts as a leveler between people. A leveler, as described by sociologist Ray Oldenburg, is a place that is not hierarchical, it is accessible to the public with no exclusions or limitations.[6] The existence of a third place presents, on an equal playing ground, the opportunity for people of all backgrounds and work associations to gather and engage in conversation with one another, allowing themselves to be exposed to unanticipated interactions between other patrons, and for relations and friendships to become diversified.

6. Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*. Book, (New York: Paragon, 1989), 24

2.2 Placemaking in the East

In China, policy and leadership provide catalysts for the act of placemaking to become an opening for reclamation, reinstating an agency over a space that citizens may not feel they have ownership over. Placemaking in rigidly planned and policy-driven Chinese cities presents the opportunity to make a space "yours" by allowing the experiences and preferences of a person to define its appearance. What Lefebvre refers to as "lived spaces," " *les espaces vécus*" is integrated into the cities of China by way of third places that spill into the streets and sidewalks, markets and casual gathering spaces alike. In this sense, the act of living in and creating place allows for urban space to become humanized.[7] In a country that experiences drastic leadership and policy change, with a fluctuating urban fabric of cities that seem to appear overnight,[8] creating space for one another provides stability that is not often guaranteed from the city's officials. According to academic John Friedmann, placemaking, particularly in China, occurs at the "...intersection of the state with the everyday life of the people."[9] The interaction between a city and its residents, met with acceptance or resistance, inspires the use of placemaking to create autonomy and the opportunity to feel "at home."[10]

This phenomenon is not only motivated by the people's interaction or, rather, refusal, of the state, it is also the interaction between the people and its neighbours. Placemaking in Chinese cities, including Hong Kong, occurs and is expedited by the interaction between the cities themselves. In the Tang Dynasty, the city of Xi'an, formerly Chang'an, employed placemaking in the walled and highly regulated neighbourhoods in the form of large markets and festivals. Though closely supervised, much like other parts of their day-to-day lives, the markets allowed for the citizens of Xi'an to claim ownership over space and determine how it may look and represent their own selves. In the Northern Song Dynasty, when the walls of Xi'an were gradually removed and ordinary people were permitted access to the streets, the markets, and what they represented in terms of placemaking, began to expand through the streets in the form of storefronts and shops.[11]

7. John Friedmann, *Reflections on Place and Place-Making in the Cities of China*. (International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 31, no. 2, 2007), 257–79. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2007.00726.x.

8. P.D. Nyiri, *Realms of Free Trade, Enclaves of Order: Chinese-Built 'Instant Cities' in Northern Laos in The Art of Neighbouring: Making Relations across China's Borders*. (Amsterdam University Press, 2017)

9. John Friedmann, *Reflections on Place and Place-Making in the Cities of China*. (International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 31, no. 2, 2007), 257–79. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2007.00726.x.

10. ibid.

11. ibid

Noted for its rapid expansion and development once the walls were removed completely in the Qing Dynasty, Xi'an was still a landlocked city – its growth, like many other cities in China at the time, mainly occurred from interaction with its neighbours, giving way to "...a flood of modernizing impulses across the former empire."[12] Modernization began to spread throughout China through to the Republican era, furthered by the influence of coastal cities like Guangzhou, that began to experience a sense of globalization through trade in the Pearl River Delta.

This condition of placemaking propelled by national and global exchange is much more apparent in the coastal Chinese regions, including Hong Kong, that situate themselves on trade routes with their ports. Cities situated along the Pearl River Delta especially, such as Shenzhen and Guangzhou, bear the responsibility of progressing China's economy and development, contributing to their own rise through "...export-oriented manufacturing, commerce, and trade, i.e, industrialization and globalization."[13] It is evident, then, that though placemaking is seen as a tool to provide permanence and stability, it is ultimately created through movement, whether trade, migration, or movement in time.

In Hong Kong, factors such as political unrest, a constant flow of migration from mainland China or from the West, and its position as a trade centre contribute to its rapid growth and, consequently, its crucial use of placemaking. Densely packed and overflowing with people and business, placemaking in Hong Kong is employed as a display of autonomy and the general need for more space. Confined to the infamous shoebox apartments for living,[14] and the small corners of retail space for work, the people of Hong Kong – *heunggong-yan* – are made to spill out onto the streets and into the public spaces of Kowloon and Hong Kong Island.

While in Hong Kong, I found that at all hours of the day, public parks, sidewalks, outdoor restaurant seating, and alleyways were filled with people eating, chatting, and exercising. These areas are noticeably better kept than the common spaces of housing complexes, like stairs and outdoor hallways. In-use on weekend mornings by aunties and uncles, setting up foldable tables to play Go, or stretching against the fences to prepare for a brisk lap around the neighbourhood. In the

12. John Friedmann, *Reflections on Place and Place-Making in the Cities of China*. (International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 31, no. 2, 2007), 257–79. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2007.00726.x.

13. Jianfa Shen and Gordon Kee, *Development and Planning in Seven Major Coastal Cities in Southern and Eastern China in Development and Planning in Seven Major Coastal Cities in Southern and Eastern China*. (GeoJournal Library, Volume 120. Springer Nature, 2017)

14. Adolfo Arranz, Marcelo Duhalde, Kaliz Lee, Han Huang, and Dennis Wong, *Life in Hong Kong's Shoebox Housing*. (South China Morning Post, 2022) https://multimedia.scmp.com/infographics/news/hong-kong/article/3180601/subdivided-flats/index.html.





Fig. 2.2 *Sham Shui Po markets,* Kowloon, Hong Kong, image by author, 2025.

Fig. 2.3 *Lunchtime at Tak Yu*, Hong Kong Island, Hong Kong, image by author, 2025.







[top to bottom]

Fig. 2.4 K*owloon Walled City facades*, Ian Lambot, 1993

Fig. 2.5 K*owloon Walled City facades*, Ian Lambot, 1993

Fig. 2.6 *Children Playing on Walled City Rooftop*, Greg Girard, 1989

afternoons, domestic workers spend their days off placing blankets on patches of grass, or along pedestrian bridges in the city centres, to see fellow domestic workers, spend time outside with family, and listen to music. On any given weekend, you may see them doing each other's eyebrows or nails, showing each other what they picked up in Central, or laying down with the radio blasting. In the evenings, as the remaining neon signs left in Hong Kong flicker to life, sideroads in Kowloon become populated with individual vendors, setting up tables and overhead tarps, ready to sell to neighbours, speak with friends, or upsell to the unknowing tourist.

The largest, and perhaps most well-known display of placemaking and the city's desire for autonomy, was Kowloon's Walled City. To this day, the Kowloon Walled City is regarded as a phenomenon of sorts, a marvelled example of community and urban infrastructure built by the inhabitants of the space.[15] Demolished in 1994, the city housed a population of about 50,000 citizens, with a complex, labyrinth-style plan, connected over three hundred buildings over multiple levels.[16] The city was under Chinese jurisdiction as a military fortress following the Japanese invasion in World War II, though Hong Kong as a whole was still under British rule. To avoid conflict, neither the Chinese or British government acted on this site, leaving this specific area in Kowloon with "...no legislation, planning, regulation or building standard, low rents, and no taxes requirements."[17] Citizens in Kowloon, particularly the immigrant population that faced difficulty in acquiring housing, flocked to this region in Kowloon, where they were able to establish social networks of their own to support their community.[18] High-rise apartment buildings were constructed – mostly without natural light, ventilation, or any construction guidelines for that matter – and many commercial establishments began to populate the space as well, including factories, shops, and illegal businesses, which included dentists and doctors from mainland China who could not afford Hong Kong's steep licensing fees.[19]

Though the living conditions were unfavourable, among many other concerns that were raised with its existence, the Kowloon Walled City displayed a prime, albeit extreme, example of the lengths the people of Hong Kong may go to create places for themselves, and how far humans can go to gain back autonomy. Though at varying scales, the similarities between placemaking in Xi'an during the Tang period, and

15. Sofia Quiroga Fernandez and Guillermo Sanchez Sotes, "*Kowloon Walled City, a Social Urban Analysis through Pictures and Drawings*." (AMPS International Proceedings Series 35, no. 2 2024), 663–73.

16. ibid.

17. ibid.

18. ibid.

19. ibid.





Fig. 2.7 *Chinatown West*, images by author, 2024

modern Kowloon appear in the conflicting needs of the government from its people. While the aristocrats of the Tang dynasty saw the Xi'an markets as inferior in status, they were a necessary cog in their society, providing goods and trade to the ordinary people of the city, and allowing for expression and ownership by the vendors. In the case of the Walled City, the opposing forces of China and Britain deemed this specific region a "no-go" zone for either government, creating an opening for citizens and non-citizens of Hong Kong to lay claim to a part of a region that is constantly changing hands.

The case for placemaking as a byproduct of rapid or durational movement is made in diasporic regions as well. Just as the Kowloon Walled City was created by and for Hong Kong migrants, the Chinese diaspora in the West has utilized placemaking to create host communities that allow them to feel welcome. Though the boundaries of Canadian cities of Victoria, Montreal, and Toronto are not physical like Xi'an and Kowloon, the boundaries, at the time of mass immigration, were still present – established socially and manifest in neighbourhoods like Chinatowns as socially acceptable places for Chinese people to reside. Similar to the coastal cities along the Pearl River Delta, the Chinatowns in British Columbia were founded on the movement of people across the coast, looking for work, a direct mirror of the placemaking in Hong Kong that has occurred by way of labour and trade. In these areas, Chinese people stayed within the imaginary boundaries of Chinatown, sticking together with like-minded people, while the non-Chinese communities in Canadian cities stayed out, held back by prejudice and stereotypes surrounding the Chinese people. In this case, placemaking is an essential practice in the Chinese-Canadian diaspora. From finding a common place within a neighbourhood to finding a common place across continents, placemaking in diasporic cultures is rooted in the necessity to establish a place to belong. It is the inherent desire to feel more comfortable in an unknown or unstable space, what architect Clare Cooper Marcus refers to as the appropriating of absolute space, and creating a “mirror of self”.[20] Streetscapes in North American Chinatowns are made to bear resemblance to those back home – though diluted and enhanced to appeal to the Western tourist market – the signage, colours, ornamentation, and even street and plaza names are mirrors for cities in China and Hong Kong.

20. Clare Cooper Marcus, *House as a Mirror of Self : Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home*, (Calif: Conari Press, 1995)

2.3 At the Dining Table

In his study, “Food in Chinese Culture”, anthropologist K.C. Chang states, “...the Chinese are among the peoples of the world most preoccupied with eating,”[20] labelling food as the "great social facilitator."[21] Food underpins the occasion of many gatherings in Chinese culture. Present at every social gathering, the act of preparing and consuming it is a shared event, and sharing the food itself is an intimate act. These social interactions between family members, friends, market vendors, and the like communicate subtle nuances of relation and status.[22] Whether intentional or unintentional, food is present in many third places that appear in Chinese communities – from the ancient teahouses of Guangzhou to the street vendors of Toronto's Chinatown, the presence of food is what grounds social interaction.

With a port situated along the Pearl River Delta, Hong Kong has played a major role in international trade. Their previous position as a British colony leveraged them as a trade centre against other Chinese ports, allowing them to adopt a leniant policies, refusing to cater to industries that required commitment,[23] thus allowing Hong Kong to become an attractive place to import and trade goods like food, incense, and later electronics, contributing to their globalization and heavy Western influences in their food, media, and even building style.

The Hong Kong gravitation to placemaking and gathering can be seen as an adjacent outcome of their constant grasp for culture.[24] Focused primarily on food, the people of Hong Kong existed in what can only be described as a political limbo for many years – not quite British and not quite Chinese. They were seen primarily as a financial powerhouse with no known culture, working only to boost the global economy. In his writings on the textualization of cuisine, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai states that, "...the construction of a national cuisine is essentially a postindustrial, postcolonial process,"[25] displayed - in his research - in the culinary progression of postcolonial India, but also applied to Hong Kong, where its limbo-state manifested itself in its cuisine. Taking

20. Chang, Kwang-chih, and Eugene Newton Anderson. *Food in Chinese Culture : Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*. Book, Ch, 1, Pg. 13. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977.

21. ibid.

22. ibid. Ch. 1, Pg. 16

23. Wang, James J., and Michael C. Cheng. “*From a Hub Port City to a Global Supply Chain Management Center: A Case Study of Hong Kong*.” Journal of Transport Geography 18, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 104–15. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jtrangeo.2009.02.009.

24. Tam, Siumi Maria. “*Eating Metropolitaneity: Hong Kong Identity in Yumcha*.” The Australian Journal of Anthropology 8, no. 3 (1997): 291–306. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1835-9310.1997.tb00169.x.

25. Appadurai, Arjun. “*How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India.*” Comparative Studies in Society and History 30, no. 1 (1988): 3–24.

influence from neighbouring Chinese cities like Guangzhou, stylizing their *dim sum* and Cantonese dishes to create a Hong Kong style with British influence, the region was able to make a name for themselves as a food centre – "*meisik tintong*."[v,26] With this knowledge, it comes as no surprise that the third places that have frequented Hong Kong for decades past have been related to food – the back alleys of restaurants where industry workers may have their lunch breaks, the makeshift patios that spill out onto the road where foldable tables may be quickly moved away to make room for delivery trucks, the cooked food centres that serve as the city's dining room – all of these spaces present the common third place opportunity to gather outside of living and working, and all are centred around food.

v. 美食天堂 - *meisik tintong*
Heaven of delicacies

Under British rule, Hong Kong accelerated as the centre of finance and business, and in turn, produced men and women who worked long hours to keep up with the growing economy that catered mainly to British settlers. Work became the focus for many and housing became an afterthought – it was okay to have a small kitchen or living space, since people were working for 45-55 hours weekly[27,28] – and at the end of their long days, they would not want to spend another hour standing in front of the hot stove, when they had just spent the previous twelve standing in the blistering Hong Kong sun, lifting and delivering materials or packages.

26. Tam, Siumi Maria. "*Eating Metropolitaneity: Hong Kong Identity in Yumcha.*" The Australian Journal of Anthropology 8, no. 3 (1997): 291–306. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1835-9310.1997.tb00169.x.

27. Census, Hong Kong, and Statistics Department. Hong Kong Annual Digest of Statistics, Table 3.7: "*Working Population by Industry by Sex by Number of Hours Worked Per Week, 1981 Census.*" Government Print, 1981. https://books.google.ca/books?id=W_Q8rIKbXecC.

28. Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Census and Statistics Department. "*Table 220-23034: Level and Distribution of Weekly Working Hours by Employment Nature and Industry Section,*" March 24, 2025. https://www.censtatd.gov.hk/en/web_table.html?id=220-23034.

The *dai pai dong*[vi] became the city's dining room. Medium-height buildings with large floor plates, the *dai pai dongs* offered fresh meat, produce, and cooked food, all organized between stalls sprawling three to four floors. Their layouts are often akin to a food court, formica tables and plastic stools in the centre, and individual food stalls along the perimeter, but their order and delivery service are similar to any other restaurant. Menus are served with every dish from every vendor on the floor, and the servers take your order and delegate whether your roast goose comes from a vendor on the east end, and your plate of steamed vegetables comes from a vendor on the other side. In neighbourhoods like Sham Shui Po, and many others in Kowloon, these *dai pai dongs* are filled with people meeting one another after their long workdays. Loud, rowdy, and covered in a sheet of unknown substances that make the floors perpetually sticky, these *dai pai dongs*, in contrast to the tourist-centered ones in Temple Street Market (Fig. 2.8), that open onto the streets for tourists and young friends, display just how important food

vi. 大牌檔 - *daai paai dong*
Big license stall; a traditional licensed street stall, typically with a small seating area, selling cooked food at low prices



Fig. 2.8 *Temple Street Night Market Dai Pai Dong*, Jordan, Hong Kong, image by author, 2025

is to the people of Hong Kong. Troubles with bosses or tricky clients can be washed away with a bottle of beer and, essentially, a home-cooked meal – and it saves the dish cleanup afterwards too. In this case, the *dai pai dong* as a place - an extension of the dining room - for the working class of Hong Kong to gather and build community, is a chain reaction example of the relationship of the state and its people as a catalyst for placemaking. The *dai pai dong* appeared into the dining scene of Hong Kong as a solution for people who, at the hands of colonization and rapid globalization, were made to quickly adapt to the higher demands the growing economy demanded of them.

For decades, Hong Kong has struggled with its positioning, never belonging solely to Britain or China, and how that manifests as a culture that represents their region – perhaps it was carried over to Canada, or perhaps it is a coincidence that this sentiment of being stuck in the in-between is carried on in the lives of many immigrants living in Canada, grasping between two homelands. This conflict may not spill out into the streets of Markham, into the parking lots of pristine plazas and small corners of Toronto's Chinatown, but they appear in the restaurants that reside here – in their nomenclature, their layouts, their decor - Hong Kong style restaurants in Ontario have a particular soft spot for "the good old days," adorning old posters from eras of Hong Kong that are decades past.





Fig. 2.9 (top) *Lan Fong Yuen*, Central, Hong Kong, image by author, 2025

Fig. 2.10 (bottom) *Cheung Hing Coffee Shop*, Happy Valley, Hong Kong, image by author, 2025



Fig. 2.11 *Map of Hong Kong*, by author



Fig. 2.12 *Hung Wan Cafe*, Mong Kok, Hong Kong, image by author, 2025



Fig. 2.13 *Bolton Cafe*, Tsim Sha Tsui, Hong Kong, image by author, 2025



Fig. 2.14 *Hung Wan Cafe*, Mong Kok, Hong Kong, image by author, 2025



Fig. 2.15 *Luk Yu Tea House Menu*, Central, Hong Kong, image by author, 2025



Fig. 2.16 *Cheung Hing Coffee Shop*, Happy Valley, Hong Kong, image by author, 2025



Fig. 2.17 *Lan Fong Yuen*, Central, Hong Kong, image by author, 2025



Fig. 2.18 *Mido Cafe*, Yau Ma Tei, Hong Kong, image by author, 2025



Fig. 2.19 *Temple Street Night Market*, Jordan, Hong Kong, image by author, 2025

2.4 Hong Kong Dining

The effects of globalization in Hong Kong have appeared not only in building, lifestyle, and technology, but have been folded into the very fabric of its culture, appearing even on the smallest of plates. Hong Kong gastronomy is physical proof of its historical ties to Britain and China, and its persistence for its own culture. Chefs from around the world move to Hong Kong to open their own takes on the classic dishes *heunggong-yan*[vii] know and love. The classic dishes – Hong Kong's *dim sum*, *siu mei,*[viii] Western-fusion dishes, and everything in between display the relationship between the people of Hong Kong and their longing for tangible proof of autonomy and ownership, making the cuisine of Hong Kong and their reliance on placemaking directly correlated.

The traditional tea houses of ancient China were interpreted by Hong Kong down two roads: tradition and innovation. Beginning with tradition, the Hong Kong teahouses, *cha lau,*[ix] serve the typical steamed dishes with tea, *dim sum*, in buildings that span up to three floors. In tourist areas, traditional-esque *cha lau* exist, with clothed round tables and symbolic bird cages, sometimes, there are still women pushing carts. In residential areas like Kowloon, *dim sum* is much more accessible – offered in street stalls, 7-11's, and in more typical chain-style restaurants.

The *cha chaan teng*[x] is the teahouse on a long path of technological and policy advancement. Originating from the ice room – *bing sutt,*[xi] the *cha chaan tengs* offer warm, simple meals, and fast service. With smaller tables than the cha lau, the *cha chaan tengs* are a product of British colonization, with booth seating along the perimeter to mimic the Western diners, and menu items such as tomato and pork chop casseroles, Borscht soup, and pineapple bun burgers. It is Hong Kong's interpretation of the lifestyle their English counterparts lived, tailored for the working class of Hong Kong.

Similarly, the *siu mei* restaurants and stands offer quick, lunchtime

vii. 香港人 - *heung gong yan*
Hong Kong people

viii. 燒味 - *siu mei*
Roasted meat

ix. 茶樓 - *cha lau*
Teahouse; dim sum restaurant; Chinese restaurant; *more in Ch.4*

x. 茶餐廳 - *cha chaan teng*
Tea food hall; *more in Ch.3*

xi. 冰室 - *bing sutt*
Ice house

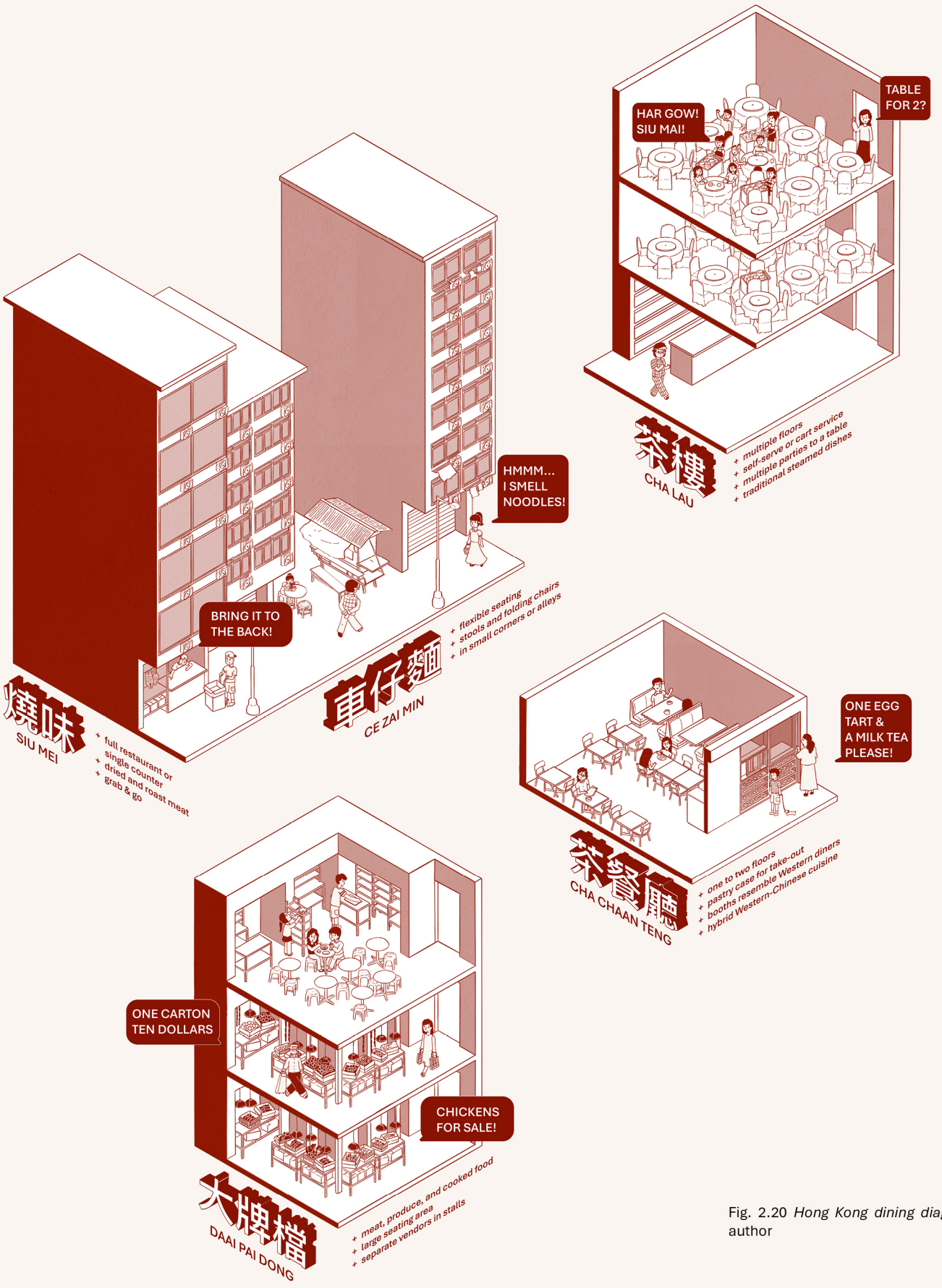


Fig. 2.20 *Hong Kong dining diagram*, by author

meals such as roast pork or goose. Busiest in the afternoon, *siu mei* restaurants will offer afternoon tea specials for quick turnaround of dine-in guests, while simultaneously serving a long line of patrons down the sidewalk, ordering platters of barbecued meat to bring home to their families. Efficiency is the name of the game in Hong Kong, maintaining its reputation as a business centre, many food stalls and restaurants are founded on their speed in service, but also in adaptability – hence the plethora of vendors and markets that populate the streets.

Specialized in impermanence, vendors and markets are set up in the blink of an eye in the evenings across Hong Kong, ready by 6PM to serve a flow of foot-traffic until the late hours of the night. Street markets, such as the Temple Street Market in Jordan, Kowloon, houses a handful of hawkers serving tea eggs, egg waffles, fish balls, and many other cultures of food. Offering the fastest and often most affordable mode of dining, the housing and financial condition of Hong Kong makes it that much easier to step outside and find a place to eat – on any given day, at any given hour A similar style of dining includes the noodle stall, which may be standalone or attached to a larger restaurant, host outdoor seating typically down alleyways, in the form of foldable tables and stools.

The *dai pai dong* sits between the *cha chaan teng* and street markets in size, housing semi-permanent vendors in a much more permanent building. These vendors, categorized along the street or along the floor of a building, situate themselves into built-in units of the building, typically a small alcove or booth that allows for storage and the vendor to move around and serve their customers. The furniture consists of foldable tables, and their merchandise is displayed in cartons or cardboard boxes, easily displayed and packed away. *Dai pai dongs*, "big license stalls," are situated on side streets, housing clusters of vendors that serve produce, meat, and cooked food. These areas are bustling with pedestrians, looped audio recordings of shop owners reciting deals on vegetables and poultry playing loudly over the chatter of people haggling. Crowds vary between neighbourhoods, as does the type of *dai pai dong*, between closed or open-air. In the open-air *dai pai dongs*, wet and dry markets, where one may buy their groceries, are allocated to the ground floors of buildings, with the cooked food centre in a separate structure or building off to the side. The enclosed *dai pai dongs* are large buildings spanning three floors – a wet market

on the first floor, for poultry and fish, a dry market on the second, for fruits, vegetables, and dried meats, and the cooked food centre at the very top. Similar in layout to a commercial food court, the cooked food centre has vendors in built-in stalls along the perimeter. What varies is the service – patrons are seated at round, plastic tables at the centre, and are served by the same team takes the order, relaying it to the corresponding stalls. For the patron, everything is on one bill. It is a one-stop-shop for residents looking to purchase groceries to cook for themselves, or for residents who are looking for a home-cooked meal, without the hassle of cooking in a hot kitchen and cleaning the dishes.

What is evident in every style of dining in Hong Kong is the importance of people – the presented opportunity to share a meal and see one another after work, the feeling of being taken care of by an auntie, the multiple walks of life you encounter at any restaurant or stall in Hong Kong is the Hong Kong-way of eating, where the company kept is just as important as the food eaten. Whether in a small stall, the mezzanine of a *cha chaan teng* or packed between boisterous (and possibly drunk) blue-collar workers at a *dai pai dong*, any Hong Kong restaurant can become the city's dining room.

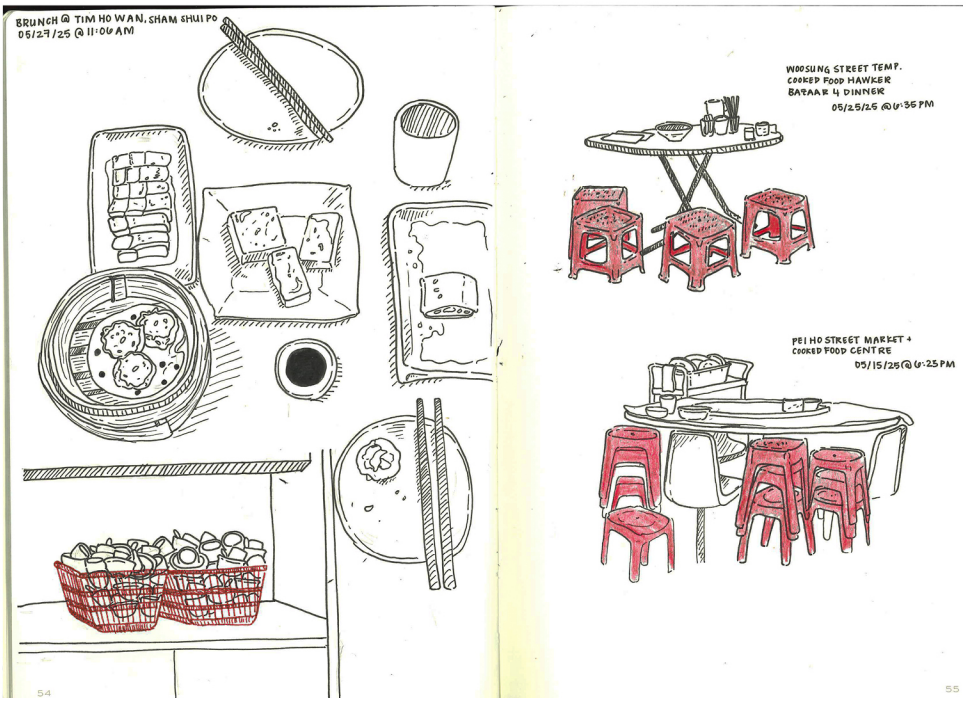
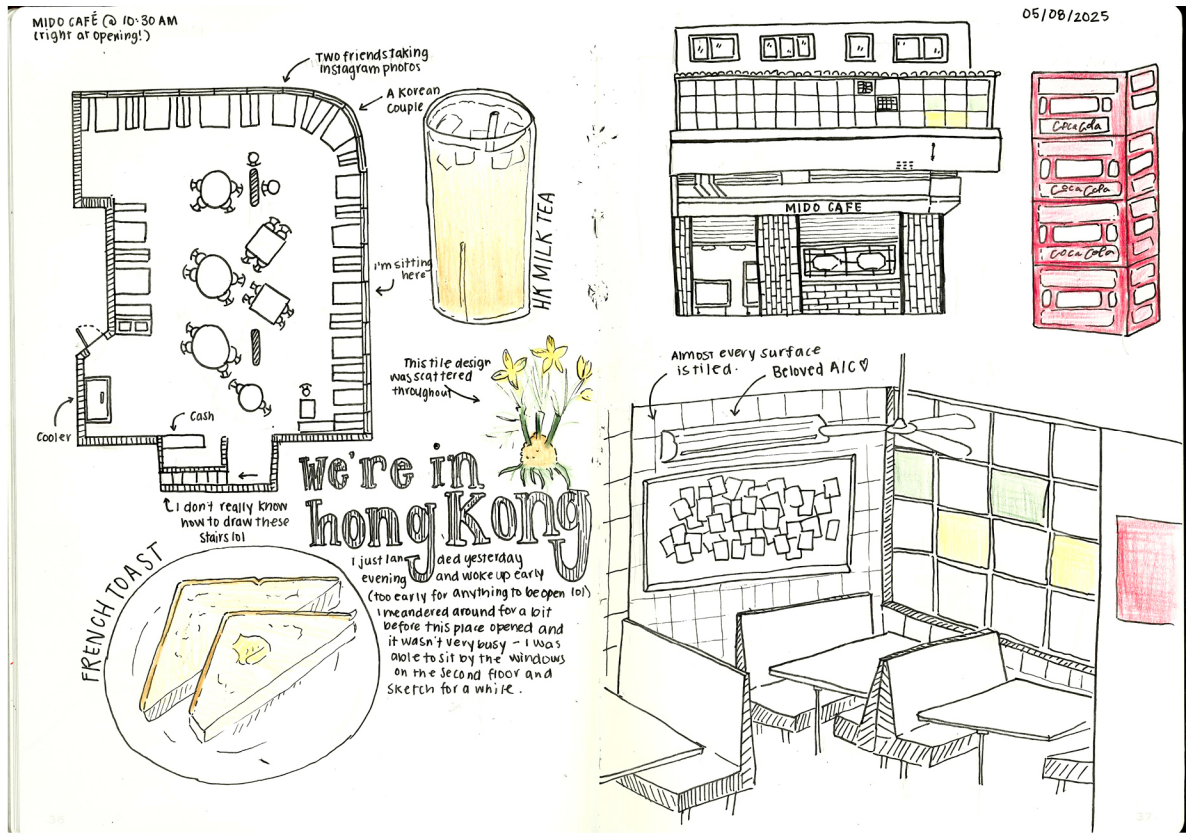


Fig. 2.21 *Hong Kong perspective sketches*, by author



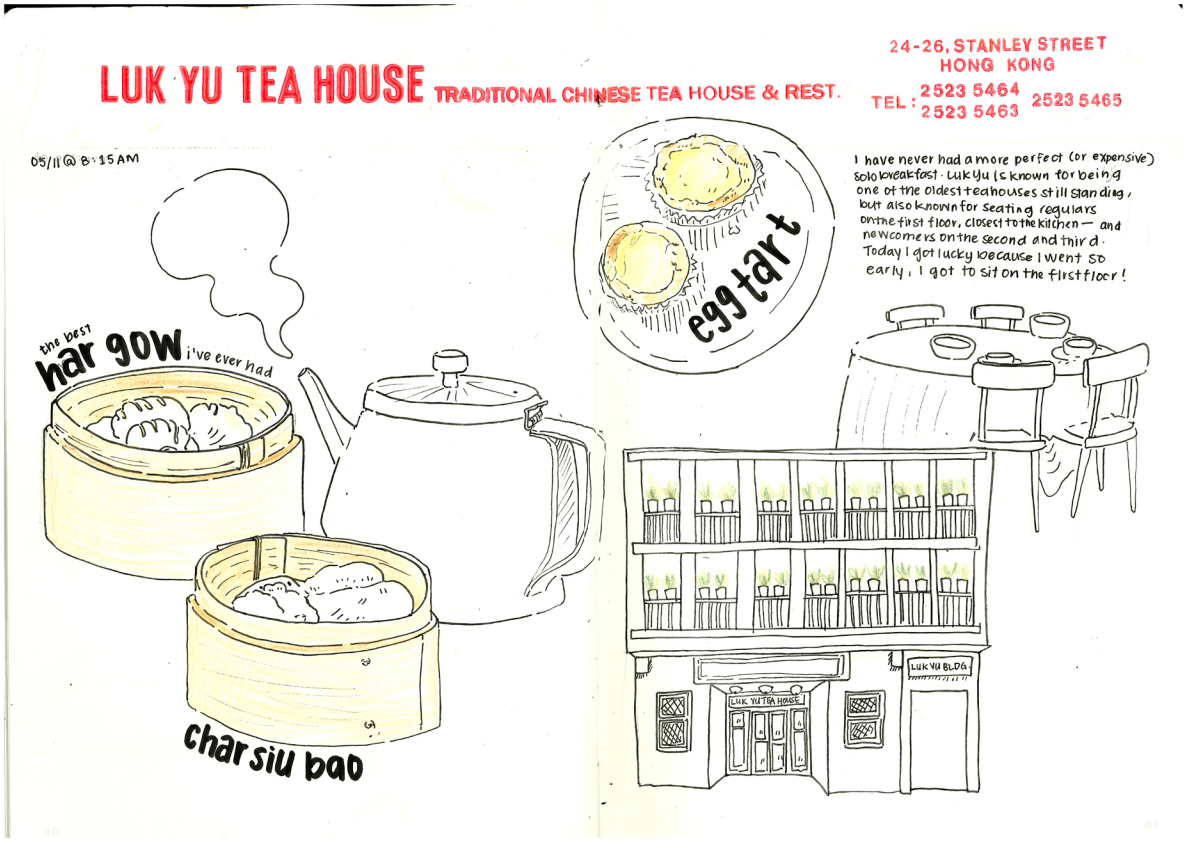
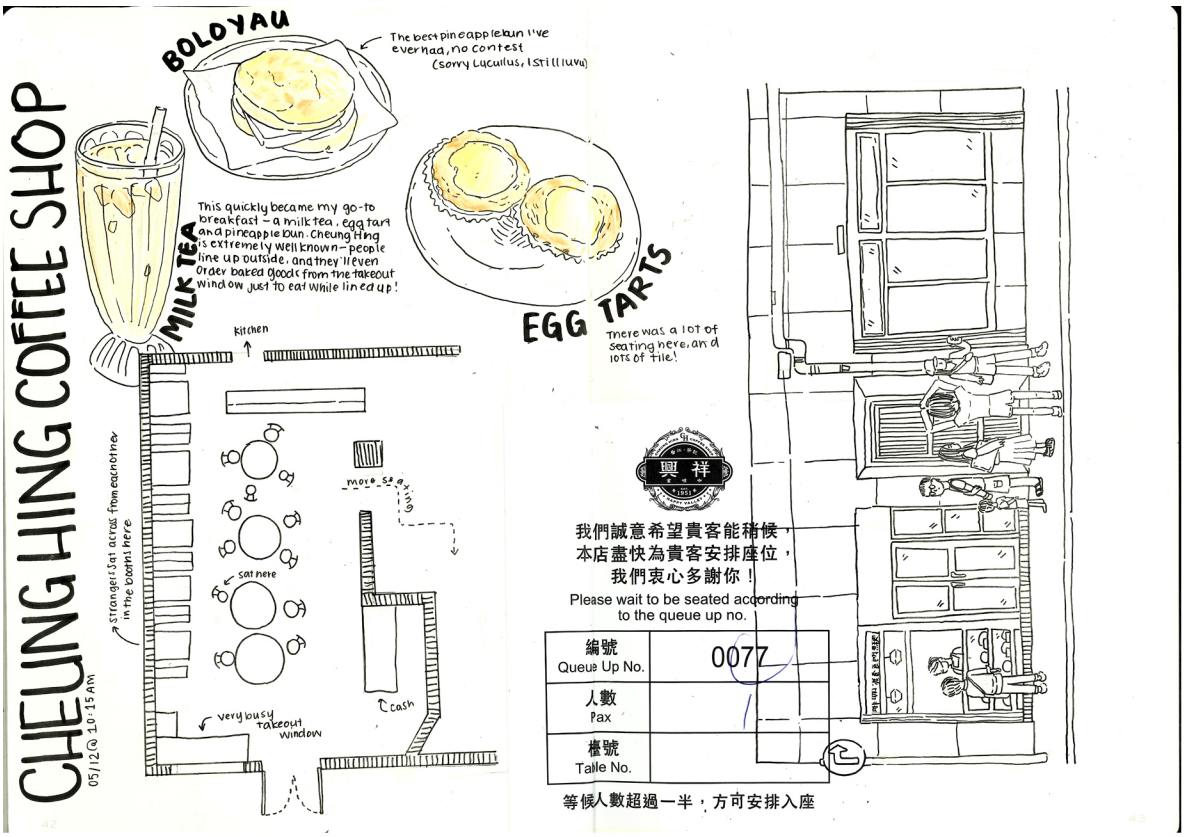


Fig. 2.22 (top) *Mido Cafe sketches*, by author

Fig. 2.23 (bottom) *Luk Yu Tea House sketches*, by author



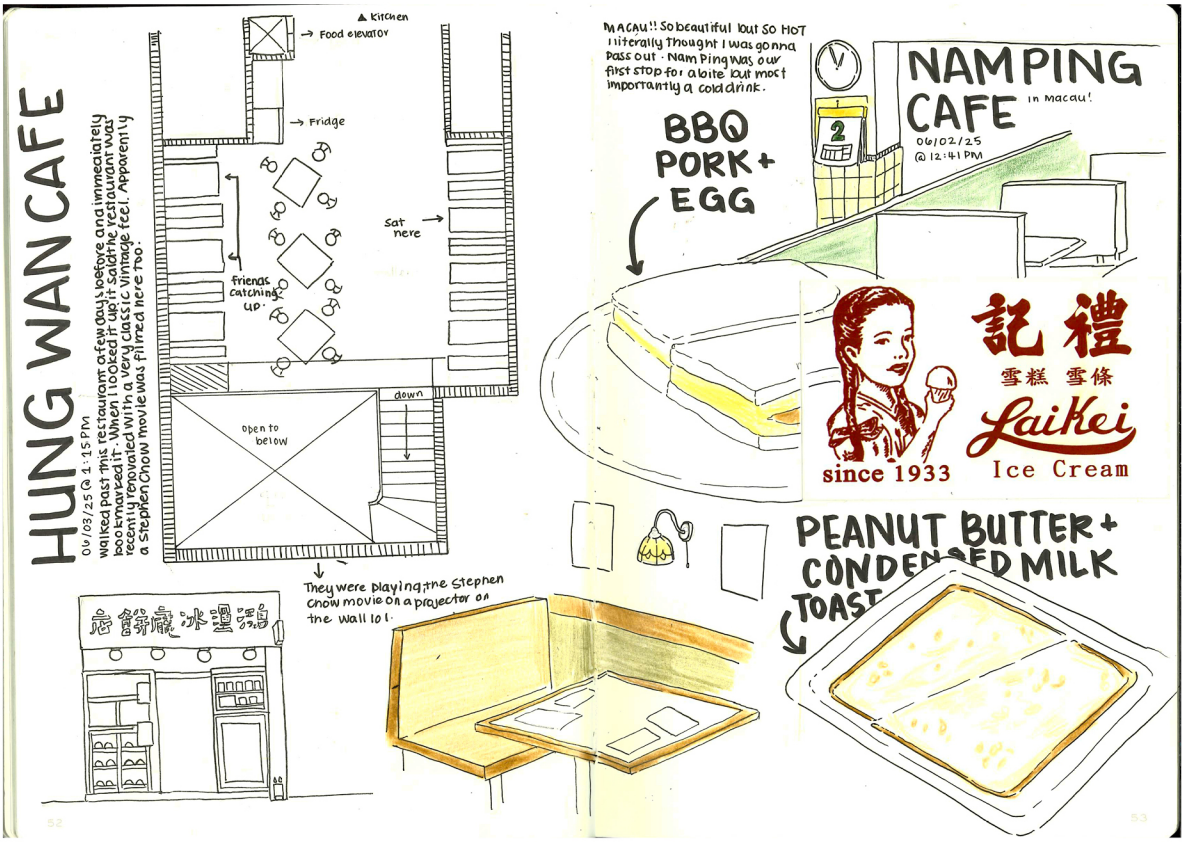


Fig. 2.24 (top) *Cheung Hing Coffee Shop sketches*, by author

Fig. 2.25 (bottom) *Hung Wan Cafe sketches*, by author

2.5 Conclusion

The diverse and eccentric style of dining found in Hong Kong today is a result of a long battle between the region's leadership, much like many other elements of Hong Kong that have grown to become iconic and desirable to the outsider. In postcolonial regions like Hong Kong, placemaking becomes a tool that allows the citizens to position themselves and create businesses, recreational spaces, and places that belong solely to them. In the case of a business-driven place like Hong Kong, this manifests itself in many different third places, offering the working resident the opportunity to socialize and exist in a place other than work and home.

China and Hong Kong's modes of placemaking have come from the residents being separated from their governments, either by agreement in policy or by leadership, and has led to the residents of the regions to become "othered," in a sense. In a similar way, placemaking for Chinese and Hong Kong immigrants in North America has appeared as a result of being "othered" by the host communities and governments.

3.0 A Restaurant for Community

"Enjoy the joy of gathering;
do not ask how many are present".[0]

人知聚歡，莫問多少

0. Chinese proverb

My *mama*[xii] and *yeye* immigrated to Canada from Hong Kong in the 1970s, between the wave of Hong Kong immigrants from the 1960s, and the 1980s. When their neighbourhood began to fill with more and more Hong Kong immigrants, my father and his sister were blessed with many children of similar ages to play and get into trouble with. Across the street from them lived one of two brothers, both pastry chefs from Hong Kong, who had moved to Canada to open their own cafes (separately, though donning the same name). My mother shares stories of always receiving cakes from one of the brothers when she would visit their house.

xii. 嫲 嫲 - *maa ma*
Paternal grandmother

We can imagine, having gravitated to the same neighbourhoods and streets, apartment complexes and suburbs, that the community that formed in these areas was extremely tightknit. In fact, we can see it for ourselves, having moved to Richmond Hill to start a family in a condominium complex that was predominantly Chinese in the early 2000s. My parents, with newborns, received many gifts from their Chinese neighbours, curiously, almost always in the form of food. During the Mid-Autumn Festival, our neighbours across the hall would bring us turnip cakes, and during the weekdays I would venture upstairs by myself for piano lessons after school in a house with Chinese-ornamented painted screens and dressers. As a child, I would wave to aunties and uncles that lived down the hall, and when we changed schools, one of the uncles had a hand-me-down uniform to give to me, from when his daughter went to the same school. In our little village of neighbours, where Chinese seniors would gather in the centre park for tai chi in the mornings, I was exposed to an immense amount of culture that I did not have at home, being raised by second-generation immigrants.

The following chapter reviews the history of Chinese and Hong Kong migration to Canada, analyzing patterns and waves to understand the initial landing in Toronto's downtown Chinatowns, to the eventual migration uptown to the suburban neighbourhoods of Markham, Agincourt, and Richmond Hill. It will also review the history of the Hong Kong cafe, the *cha chaan teng*, and its role as a facilitator of community in Hong Kong and in the diasporic community.



Fig. 3.1 *Passing the Time*, Dick Loek, 1981, Toronto Star

3.1 A Brief History of Chinese Migration to Canada

The first few waves of immigration from China saw labourers arriving in British Columbia to participate in the Canadian labour force, first in the Fraser Gold Rush of the 1850s, followed by the Cariboo Gold Rush of the 1860s, and later in the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway in the 1880s.[1] In the earlier periods of migration, the Canadian attitude towards Chinese migrants raised no cause for concern, discrimination against foreigners was not made public, though they were often looked upon with feelings of curiosity, prejudice, and sometimes resentment.[2] As time progressed, and the economic state of Canada began to fluctuate, Chinese immigrants became scapegoats for the shortcomings of Canada's labour force. Associations were formed to protest their employment, and even their immigration, committing themselves to "...the mutual protection of the working classes [...] against the influx of Chinese, and the use of legitimate means for the suppression of their immigration."[3]

The consistent pressure on the federal government from associations and provincial leaders eventually came to a head following the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885. The Canadian government quickly enacted the Chinese Immigration Act of 1886, mandating that "...every Chinese person who entered Canada for the first time as a landed immigrant had to pay a head tax of fifty dollars for a certificate of entry."[4] This tax intended to place enough of a financial burden on Chinese immigrants to deter them from coming to Canada, but the disparity between their wages at home in China compared to working on farmlands in Canada still enabled them to afford the head tax, and save toward the cost of bringing the rest of their families to join them.

The end of the First World War saw an increase of Chinese immigrants to Canada, from 650 in 1918 to 4,066 in 1919.[5] In response, the federal government announced in June of 1919, "...that immigrants of any nationality who belonged to the labouring class [would be] prohibited from landing in Canada at any twenty ports of entry in British Columbia,"[6]

1. Arlene Chan, "*From Chinatown to Ethnoburb : The Chinese in Toronto.*" (2012) https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/59585/items/1.0103074.

2. David Chuen-yan Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns Within Cities in Canada*. Book, (British Columbia: The University of British Columbia Press, 1988), 15-31

3. ibid.

4. ibid, Chapter 4, Page 52-67

5. ibid.

6. ibid.

supplemented by the Chinese Immigration Act of 1923, also known as the "Exclusion Act" by Chinese immigrants. This act mandated that,

> ...every Chinese in Canada had to register in the Ministry of Immigration and Colonization before he left the country. A person so registered was only allowed to leave Canada for two years; if he did not return to Canada within two years, he would not be allowed in. Consequently, many Chinese people were effectively separated from their families in China.[7]

The disdain towards Chinese immigrants in British Columbia came to a head during the Great Depression, forcing many Chinese immigrants east toward Ontario and Quebec. During this time, Ontario accounted for roughly 41 per cent of the shift of the Chinese population[8] with a high concentration in the metropolitan areas due to their "...larger market for Chinese laundries and restaurants and [their heightened] opportunity to find jobs in stores, factories, and other trades and businesses."[9]

7. David Chuen-yan Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns Within Cities in Canada*. Book, (British Columbia: The University of British Columbia Press, 1988), 52-67

8. ibid.

9. ibid.

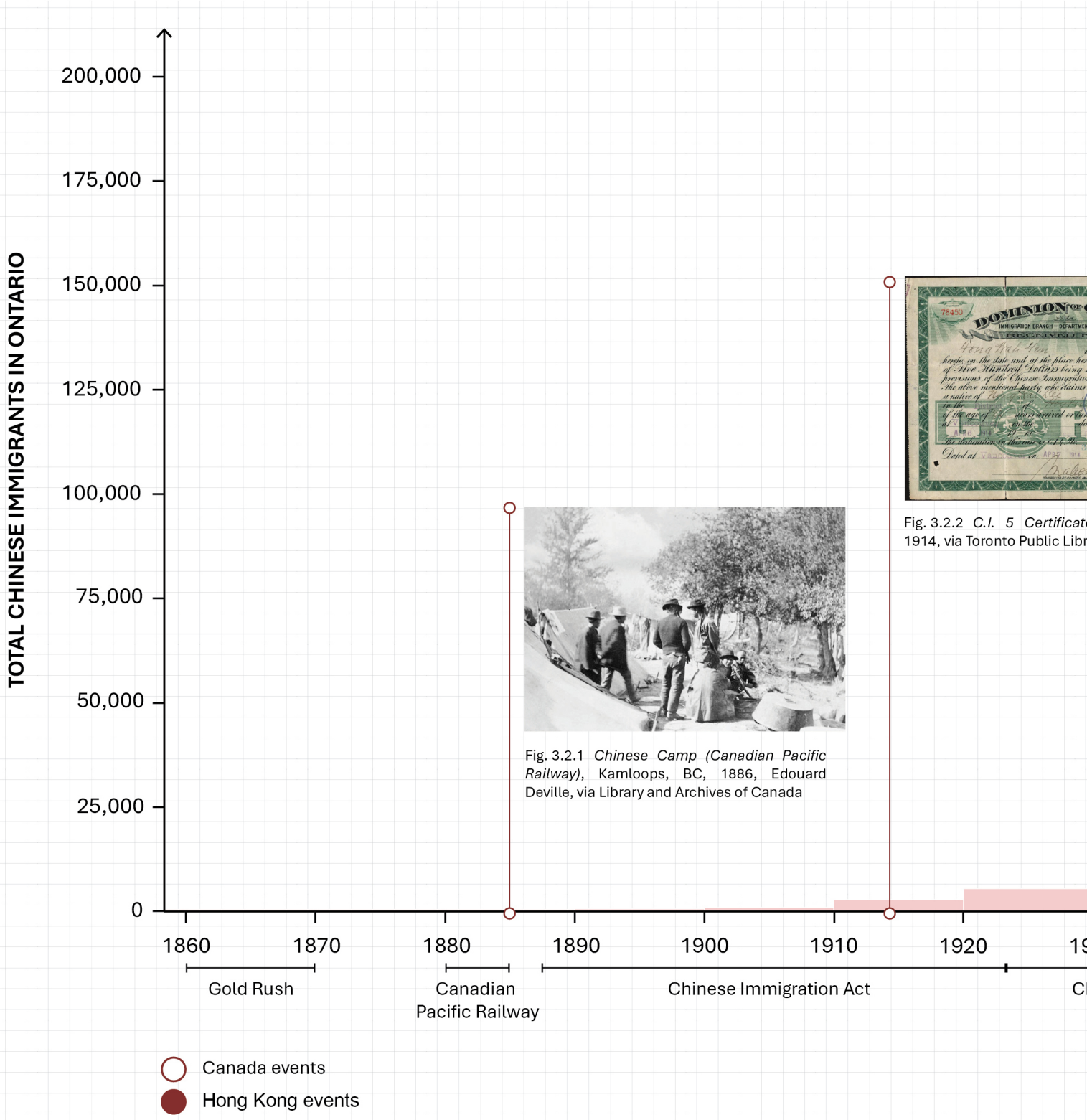


Fig. 3.2.1 *Chinese Camp (Canadian Pacific Railway)*, Kamloops, BC, 1886, Edouard Deville, via Library and Archives of Canada

Fig. 3.2.2 *C.I. 5 Certificat*
1914, via Toronto Public Libr

Fig. 3.2 *Timeline of Chinese and Hong Kong immigration to Canada*, by author



e, Fong Wah Yen,
ary

930 1940 1950 1960 1970 1980 1990 2000 YEAR

hinese Exclusion Act

Canada closes its doors to immigration

Hong Kong riots

British handover

China objects to elections for members of the lawmaking body in Hong Kong

Investor incentives introduced

Britain announces handover

Immigration point system

Chinese refugees from Hong Kong accepted

Family reunification accepted

3.2 Chinatowns in Canada

The first Chinatown in Canada was established in Victoria, British Columbia in 1858.[10] At the time, with less than fifteen Chinese immigrants accounted for in census data from both Toronto and Montreal,[11] British Columbia housed the only cluster of Chinatowns during the influx of Chinese labour around the mines and railway. These Chinatowns were small, with wooden shacks housing the basic necessities for the men working, and were located in cheap districts of the towns, often referred to as "instant Chinatowns". Sometimes, these Chinatowns would disassemble as quickly as they had gone up, but in other instances, they would start as small clusters of stores and restaurants and expand as Chinese immigration grew to accommodate family members, friends, and immigrants with sponsors already residing in Canada to work. With this growth, the amenities of the neighbourhoods followed suit, opening grocery stores, theatres, schools, and establishing associations.

In their earliest stages, the Chinatowns in North America appeared in cities close to railways and mines as a result of white racism.[12] Though, naturally, Chinatowns provided spaces to live together, speak familiar dialects, eat familiar food, and practice their own religion, the ethnic enclaves that came about were not solely caused by a desire to live with one another, but because they were limited from settling elsewhere. The creation of Chinatowns, in British Columbia specifically, was fuelled by the anti-Chinese sentiment that dominated the province at the time. In his study, *Chinatowns: Towns within Cities in Canada*, geographer David Chuenyan Lai recalls the treatment of the Chinese as akin to "... dogs -- bullied, scoffed at, kicked and cuffed about on all occasions."[13] When we look at the formation of Chinatowns as a direct result of this treatment, it becomes less about the formation of a town to provide a comforting community, and more about the formation as a "...self-defense measure used by the Chinese to avoid open discrimination and hostility. They confined themselves, whenever possible, to the boundaries of Chinatowns, where they felt safe and secure."[14]

10. David Chuen-yan Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns Within Cities in Canada,* (British Columbia: The University of British Columbia Press, 1988), 34-51

11. ibid.

12. ibid.

13. ibid.

14. ibid.

Chinese immigrants, isolated into their Chinatowns, were instantly "othered" by the predominantly white communities of British Columbia. Their differences brought forth harmful stereotypes that barred the Chinese community even further from acceptance, often perceived as "filthy, unsanitary, overcrowded, sinister, and insidious."[15] A clergyman depicted Chinatown at the time as,

> ...a miniature Chinese town built by Chinese carpenters, without any regard for beauty, regularity, sanitation, or comfort; a segregated group of individuals who realized that they were unloved and separated from their neighbours by an almost impassable gulf of race, colour, language, and thought...within the unshapely structures of Chinatown were the parasites of the Chinese race — professional gamblers, opium eaters, and men of impurity...Chinatown became the carcass to attract the foul birds of Western vices, the dumping ground of those evils which the white man wishes removed from his own door.[16]

15. David Chuen-yan Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns Within Cities in Canada,* (British Columbia: The University of British Columbia Press, 1988), 34-51

16. ibid.

17. ibid. Chapter 5, Page 68-99.

18. ibid.

19. ibid.

This common sentiment only furthered the isolation for the residents of Chinatown, the hostility causing them to feel unsafe outside of the confines of Chinatown.

Following the shift east through the country, Chinatowns began to appear in cities like Toronto and Montreal, sharing a consistent similarity in business typology – restaurants, grocery stores, laundries – signage, merchandise, and building structure. These buildings would anchor the neighbourhoods, combining to create what Lai describes as a "forbidden city"[17] with enclosed courtyards, alleyways, and passageways. The buildings in these neighbourhoods were often brick buildings of two or three storeys, with Chinese decorative details such as "...upturned eaves and roof corners, extended eaves covering main balconies, and structural components such as tiled roofs, latticed windows, moon-shaped doors, and recessed balconies."[18] Their facades typically included dragon, phoenix, or lion motifs and wide varieties of colours, specifically yellow, red, green, and gold, concentrated on the ground floor, where units were often rented out to businesses, with the top floors reserved for residents and institutions.[19]

Toronto's first Chinatown was preceded by scattered Chinese businesses in 1900, when the city housed 200 Chinese residents and

Fig. 3.3 (top) Old Chinatown, *"123 to 141 Dundas Street West of Elizabeth"*, City of Toronto Archives, Box 745018, Fonds 2043, Series 2523

Fig. 3.4 (left) *Chinatown West,* City of Toronto Archives, Box 728655, Fonds 200, Series 2477

Fig. 3.5 (right) *Chinatown West,* City of Toronto Archives, Box 651540, Fonds 200, Series 2284







95 Chinese businesses.[20] Towards the end of the 1910s, following the movement of the Jewish neighbourhood on Elizabeth Street to north of Queen Street, the Chinese community began to establish themselves along York Street, raising concern for the residents of the city who warned against the development of a Chinatown. The editor of Toronto's *Saturday Night*, "...[warned] the white public of the Chinese influence on the city and [advocated] the policy of 'keeping the Chinese on the move' so no Chinese quarter could develop in Toronto," [21] which was supported by local labour paper, *Jack Canuck*. This policy did little to deter the Chinese community from moving closer to one another, in fact, it did quite the opposite. As the anti-Chinese sentiment followed them from British Columbia to Ontario, Chinese residents of Toronto once again moved their residences and businesses closer to one another for protection. By the 1920s, Toronto's Chinatown was the third largest Chinatown in Canada, following Vancouver and Victoria.[22]

With their isolation came the appearance of many Chinese-owned and operated businesses. Prior to the repeal of the Exclusion Act, many white employers refused to hire Chinese immigrants, and their seclusion in Chinatown necessitated the opening of businesses run by and for their own people. The frequent types of businesses that would pop up included laundromats and restaurants, with the first recorded Chinese laundromat in Toronto belonging to Sam Ching in 1878,[23] and the first recorded Chinese restaurant in Toronto, Sing Tom Restaurant, in 1901.[24]

20. David Chuen-yan Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns Within Cities in Canada,* (British Columbia: The University of British Columbia Press, 1988), 68-99

21. ibid.

22. ibid.

23. Valerie A. Mah and D. W. Magill, *The Bachelor Society: A Look at Toronto's Early Chinese Community from 1878-1924*. (1978)

24. Arlene Chan, *The Chinese in Toronto from 1878 : From Outside to inside the Circle. In The Chinese in Toronto from 1878 : From Outside to inside the Circle.* (Dundurn, 2011)

YEAR	POPULATION	LAUNDRIES	RESTAURANTS
1881	11	4	0
1891	33	24	0
1901	159	95	0
1911	1099	237	13
1921	2134	358	32
1931	2735	471	202

Fig. 3.6 *Chinese Businesses and Population in Toronto from 1881-1931*, via Mah, V. A., and D. W. Magill. 1978. *The Bachelor Society: A Look at Toronto's Early Chinese Community from 1878-1924*. Mah.

The cost to start a business like the laundromat and the restaurant were relatively low, Chinese immigrants were able to take out initial capital investments of $1000-$2000 on a loan, and learn the business on-site. Though this investment was two to three times greater than that of a laundromat, the profit margin for restaurants was greater.[25] It was typical for these restaurants to house the owners, their families, and even the employees and their families, above or behind the units of the restaurants, in crammed corners, where no doubt the contents of the dwellings could slip through the cracks into the dining rooms of the restaurants.[26]

As the Chinese restaurant expanded in numbers and size, many people outside of the Chinese community began to take interest. With their cheap and flavourful meals, they became the reliable establishment in the 1930s, during the Great Depression. Following their expansion, a reevaluation of the Chinese, particularly Cantonese, menu was afoot. Chinese-Canadian food began to emerge as an adapted version for the Western palate, creating now-well-known dishes such as *chop suey*, *chow mein*, and *egg foo young*.

Isolated east of York and west of Elizabeth Streets, between Dundas and Queen Streets, Chinatown became a hub for exotic dishes and eccentric cultural experience. Though they still faced discrimination and were constantly met with accusations of selling opium and running gangs, the Chinese immigrants in Toronto's Old Chinatown were able to emerge from the prejudiced borders they had been placed into by using their restaurants. Like the traditional tea houses of ancient China, the Canadian Chinese restaurants became places of meeting and business exchange, especially when one third of Chinatown's bubble, along York and Elizabeth Streets, was expropriated as prime real estate for the City of Toronto to relocate their new City Hall and civic plaza, Nathan Phillips Square, in the late 1940s.[27]

At the time, there existed a group of established Chinese restaurants in Chinatown, considered "The Big Four," consisting of Lichee Garden, Nanking Tavern (Fig. 3.7), Sai Woo, and Kwong Chow. These restaurants served the Chinese-Canadian classics in large, banquet-style dining halls, going "...beyond cheap eats and [presenting] Chinese dining as an elegant, sit-down affair,"[28] and became a "battle ground" of sorts when it came time for the City to begin conversations about purchasing

25. Arlene Chan, *The Chinese in Toronto from 1878 : From Outside to inside the Circle. In The Chinese in Toronto from 1878 : From Outside to inside the Circle.* (Dundurn, 2011)

26. ibid,

27. W.R. Winnicki, "*Chinatown in Transition: The Impact of the New City Hall and Court House on Toronto's Chinatown*." (University of Waterloo, 1969)

28. Koby Song-Nichols, "Saving Sweet & Sour." (Canada's History, January 23, 2025). https://www.canadashistory.ca/explore/settlement-immigration/saving-sweet-sour.

the land. The owners of The Big Four would meet with City Officials to discuss on behalf of their community, and Council members would visit Kwong Chow or Lichee Garden for meetings over lunch. Chinatown was ultimately moved west to Spadina Avenue in the 1970s, proving that despite their efforts, "...City Council did not give a bamboo shoot for Chinatown (except at mealtimes)."[29]

29. The Globe and Mail "*Action From Within.*" (Toronto, ON, Nov. 1964) ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Globe and Mail (1313955757).



Fig. 3.7 Nanking Tavern, *"Chinatown Photos 1962-1965",* City of Toronto Archives, Box 616127, Fonds 351

3.3 Hong Kong Migration to Canada

The Chinese Exclusion Act was officially repealed in May of 1947, following the repeal of a similar act in the United States in 1943, and the participation of Chinese-Canadians in the Canadian forces during the 1941 war in the Pacific.[30] This repeal allowed Chinese-Canadian citizens living in Canada to bring their wives or unmarried children to Canada on an immigrant basis, under Order-in-Council PC 1378, that stipulated that "...certificates of naturalization [would be] issued only to Chinese subjects who could prove that they had renounced their Chinese allegiance."[31] Because of this, only a select few of Chinese immigrants were able to reunite their families, as many Chinese citizens were either unable or unwilling to renounce their Chinese citizenship.

The regulations and policies became progressively more lenient through the late 1950s and early 1960s.[32] By 1957, Chinese residents were able to apply for family reunification before acquiring Canadian citizenship, and in the following years, mothers and fathers over sixty and sixty-five respectively were able to enter the country. In 1962, the Canadian government removed the emphasis on the country of origin as a major criterion for admission to Canada, and in the same year, Prime Minister John Diefenbaker announced that "...Canada would accept one hundred refugee families who had fled from Communist China to Hong Kong,"[33] also guaranteeing travel and settling costs to be covered. Over this timespan, Canada saw about 22,000 Chinese immigrating to Canada, with 66 per cent from Hong Kong,[34] though it is to be noted that many Hong Kong immigrants at this time were originally from China and had fled to Hong Kong to escape the Communist party and apply for entry to Canada from there. This can be seen as the mark of the beginning of a shift in immigration to Canada from China to immigration to Canada from Hong Kong, and the subsequent waves of immigration show a tangential movement between Canada's changes in immigration policies and Hong Kong's relative political stability.

In an effort to align the country's growing industrial economy with the needs of the labour market,[35] Canada introduced a point system in 1967

30. David Chuen-yan Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns Within Cities in Canada*. (British Columbia: The University of British Columbia Press, 1988), 102-116

31. ibid.

32. ibid.

33. ibid.

34. ibid.

35. Yuk Wah Chan and Yvette To. *Global Hong Kong: Post-2019 Migration and the New Hong Kong Diaspora*. (Taylor & Francis, 2025).

to incentivize non-discriminative immigration. The new policy provided equal opportunity to people across the globe to apply for admission into the country. "For the first time in Canadian history, prospective Chinese immigrants were treated exactly the same as immigrants of other nationalities and were selected for admission according to education, training, skills, and other criteria linked to the economic and manpower requirements."[36] The point system brought 169,348 Chinese immigrants to Canada between 1968 and 1984, with the majority originating from Hong Kong.[37] This influx in Hong Kong immigration to Canada was caused by the political unrest within the region against the colonial government. The infamous riots of 1967, originally a minor labour dispute, was cause for concern for many affluent Hong Kong citizens, concerned about the communist threat.[38] Following this change, between 1972 and 1978, Canada saw an increase to an estimated 67,000 immigrants from Hong Kong, followed by 7,000 from Taiwan, and 4,000 from China.[39]

This shift brought forward a different type of Chinese immigrant from those who had immigrated prior to the changes in policy. Newer immigrants were "...mainly independent immigrants and were admitted according to their educational background, occupational skill, knowledge of English, and personal qualities."[40] Many of these factors, in addition to the political unrest in Hong Kong at the time, brought a considerable number of immigrants from the region, typically entrepreneurs in the restaurant or banking business of considerable wealth, setting up businesses and creating employment in Canada.[41]

The flow of entrepreneurs and businesspeople coming from Hong Kong continued through the eighties with the introduction of a new "investor" immigrant category. The Canadian government, following their historical revolving door approach to immigration policy, had "closed its doors" in the early 1980s in response to the rise in unemployment amongst its Canadian citizens.[42] At the end of 1985, however, the Minister of State for Immigration announced that Canada would open its doors in the following year of 1986, and implement a new "investor" immigrant category, "...under which an investor and his family would be admitted as immigrants if the investor had a successful track record in business in his native land and a net worth of at least half a million dollars, and invested $250,000 in an approved business for three years in Canada."[43] This program, accompanied by Hong Kong's uncertainty

36. David Chuen-yan Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns Within Cities in Canada*. (British Columbia: The University of British Columbia Press, 1988), 102-116

37. Yuk Wah Chan and Yvette To. *Global Hong Kong: Post-2019 Migration and the New Hong Kong Diaspora*. (Taylor & Francis, 2025).
37. ibid.

38. David Chuen-yan Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns Within Cities in Canada*. (British Columbia: The University of British Columbia Press, 1988), 102-116

39. ibid.

40. ibid.

41. ibid.

42. ibid.

43. ibid.

in their future as a British colony, influenced another large wave of immigrants to arrive from Hong Kong. In 1986, the same year as the start of the investor program, the Chinese government "...objected to the introduction of direct elections for members of the Legislative Council, the lawmaking body in Hong Kong."[44] In this year, more than 8,000 heads of families applied for emigration Canada, with another 10,000 dependents in tow.[45]

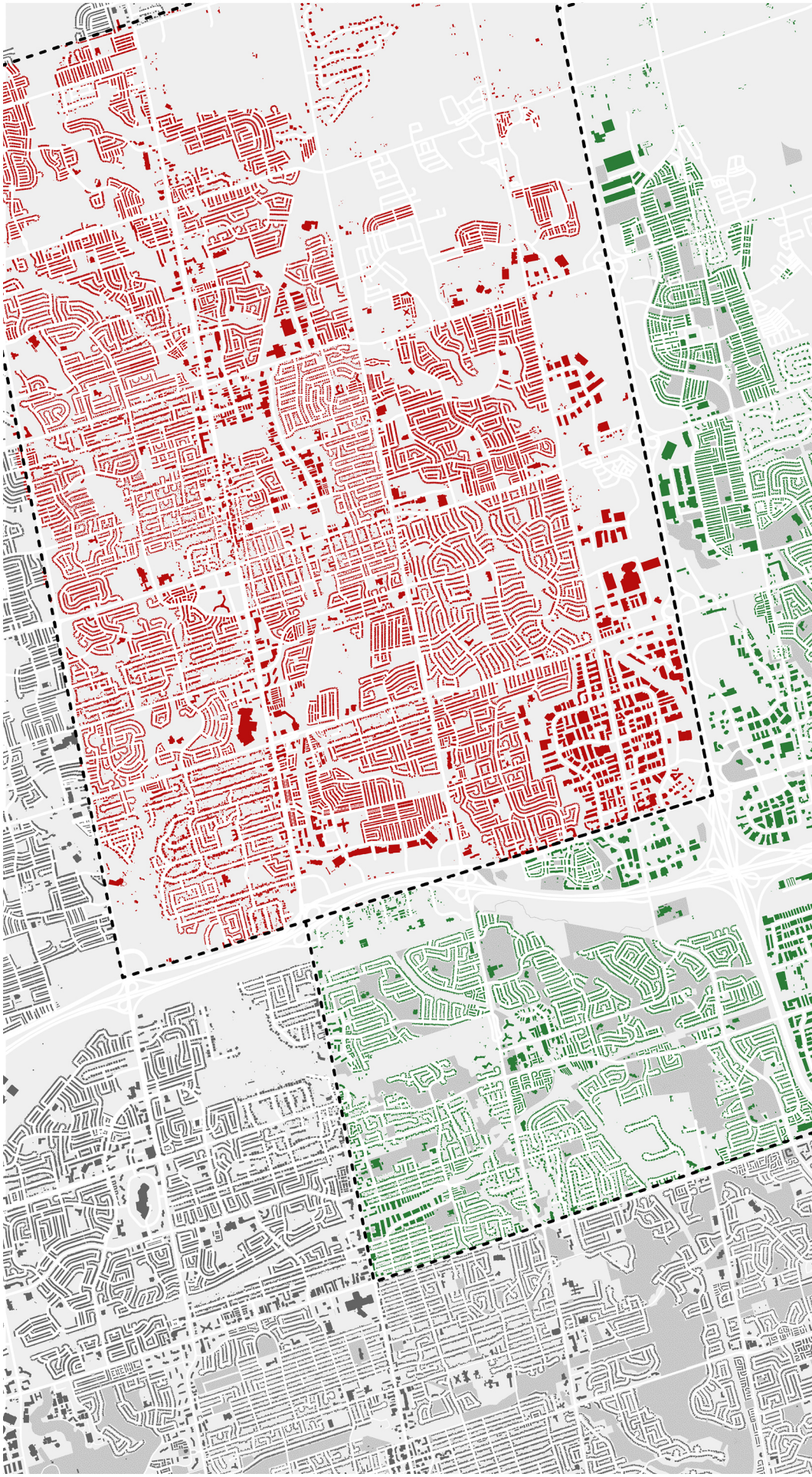
With less restrictions on job opportunities in Canada, the distribution of Chinese immigrants between provinces became much more even. By the 1970s, Ontario had overtaken British Columbia as the landing point for Chinese immigrants, welcoming 43 percent of 100,000 immigrants landing from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China in 1971 and 1980. Comparatively, British Columbia welcomed 30 percent, and Alberta welcomed 12 percent.[46]

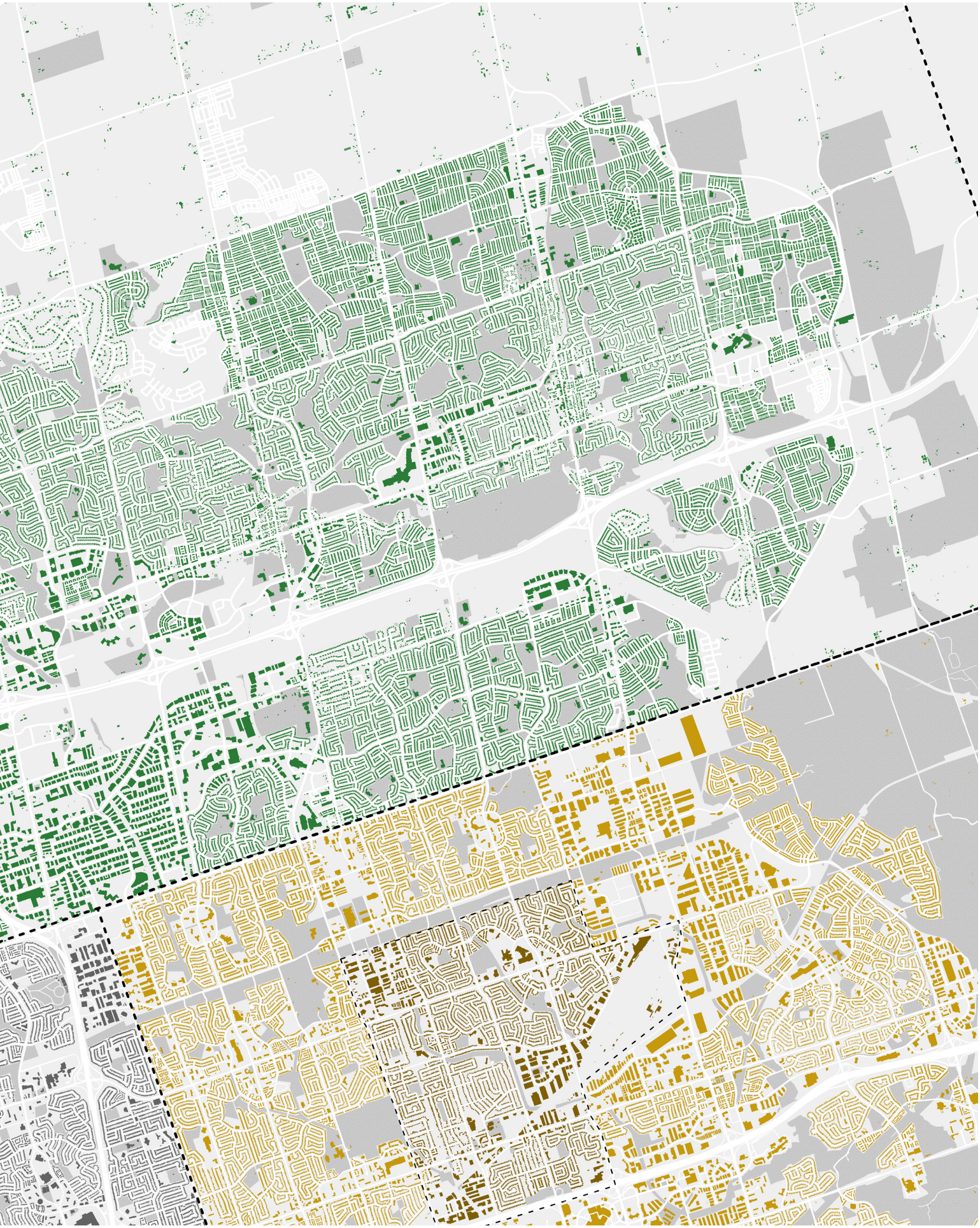
44. David Chuen-yan Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns Within Cities in Canada*. (British Columbia: The University of British Columbia Press, 1988), 102-116

45. ibid.

46. ibid.

Fig. 3.8 *Ethnoburbs in the Greater Toronto Area*, by author





3.4 Ethnoburbs

Approaching the final large wave of Chinese immigrants in the late nineties, Canada began to see a much younger group of immigrants coming to the country; educated businessmen, with families or wives with the prospect of starting families, would move to Canada looking for business opportunities, much like the first wave of immigrants from China over 100 years prior. This group was well-educated and spoke English, with wide varieties of skills and experience, as a result of living in a British colony. Immigrants of this group were able to assimilate into the Canadian business landscape with ease.[47] The newer wave of immigrants were no longer looking to move into neighbourhoods that were close to railways or gold mines, but were looking for schools for children, grocery stores, and churches, places where community was already established and a life could be built. What had barred Chinese people from branching outside of Chinatowns – the anti-Chinese attitudes and strict immigration policies – were less of a concern, and there began a large migration within the provinces of Canada for Chinese immigrants from the downtown core to the suburban neighbourhoods of the Greater Toronto Area.

Similar to the Chinatowns in the downtown cores of cities, the movement into the suburban neighbourhoods occurred in groups, grandparents moving with their children and in-laws to be close to their grandchildren, friends sticking together to alleviate the stress of moving to a completely new neighbourhood. This migration gave way to what geographer Wei Li refers to as "ethnoburbs," suburban ethnic clusters in large urban areas, featuring fully functional communities, with integrated socioeconomic structures.[48] Ethnoburbs provide a secondary hub for immigrants, where they are able to run businesses and make a living through their own networks, much like the downtown Chinatowns. The appeal of the ethnoburb, Li affirms, is that it provides a place where they may "...eat their own types of food, shop in Chinese supermarkets, speak their mother tongue, and keep close ties to their countries of origin by reading newspapers in Chinese and listening to the radio or watching TV in the various Chinese dialects. In other words,

47. Arlene Chan, "*From Chinatown to Ethnoburb : The Chinese in Toronto.*" (2012). https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/59585/items/1.0103074.

48. Wei Li, *Ethnoburb : The New Ethnic Community in Urban America.* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 29-42

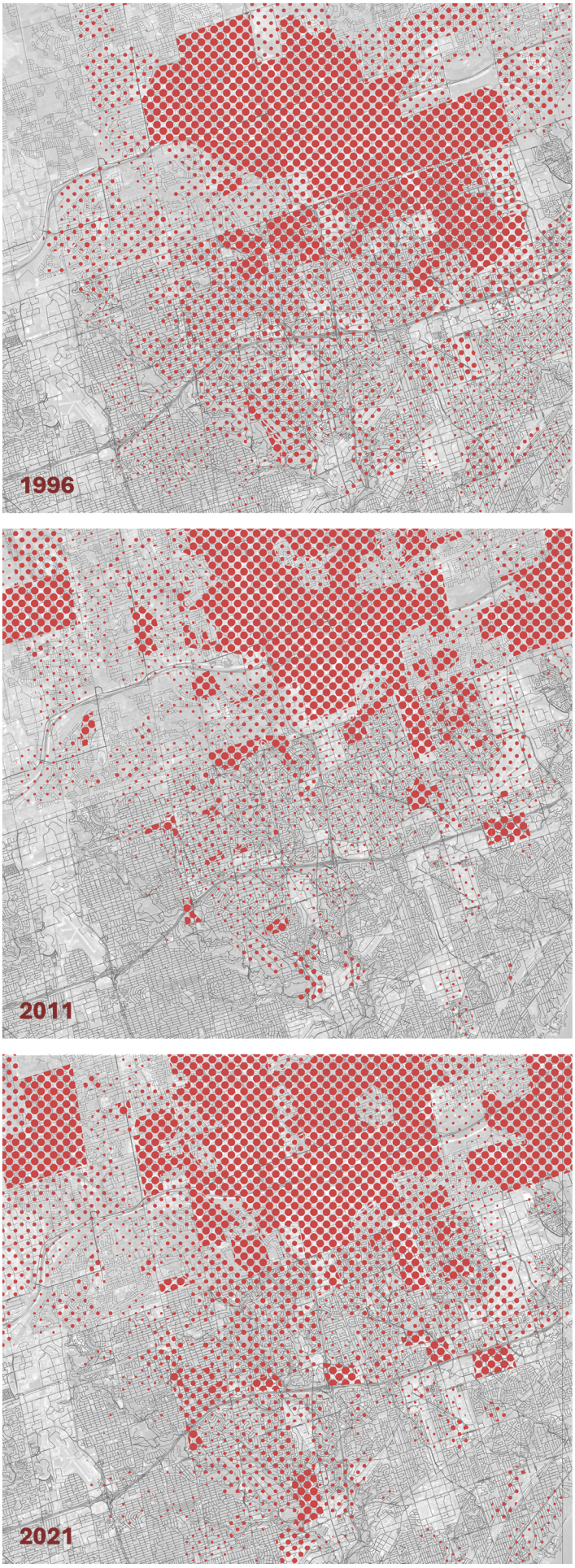


Fig. 3.9 *Concentrations of Hong Kong immigration in the Greater Toronto Area*, by author

the ethnoburb makes these new arrivals feel at home".[49]

The Greater Toronto Area houses three predominant Chinese ethnoburbs in Markham, Richmond Hill, and the northern part of Scarborough, particularly Agincourt (Fig. 3.8).[50] This move began gradually in the 1970s from downtown Toronto and was subsequently increased by the next major waves of Hong Kong immigration in the 1980s following the Investor Act, and the 1990s amidst the handover. By 1996, there were 338,265 Chinese residents living in the GTA, and of those residents, only 18 per cent lived in the City of Toronto,[51] with the "...inner suburb zone of East York, Etobicoke, North York, Scarborough, and York [accounting] for 47 per cent of the total Chinese population in the GTA [and the] outer suburb zone, including Markham, Mississauga, and Richmond Hill [housing] the remaining 35 per cent. In upscale Markham and Richmond Hill, the Chinese population accounted for 20 and 25 percent, respectively, of the total population."[52]

Hong Kong and Chinese-Canadian immigrants moved first to Scarborough, closest in proximity to the downtown Chinatowns, to the neighbourhood of Agincourt, along Sheppard Avenue between Kennedy and Markham Road. In 1984, it was reported that "...half of Agincourt's Chinese residents came directly from Hong Kong or Taiwan, while the rest had lived downtown in Toronto's Chinatown."[53] It was in this neighbourhood, that the first Chinese-themed shopping centre, Dragon Centre mall, opened in North America in 1984, attracting even more Chinese residents from across the Greater Toronto Area.[54] Hong Kong-Canadian residents also chose to move further north in Richmond Hill, an attractor to the Hong Kong businesspeople with their expensive homes and large lots. The main attraction, however, was the name. In hopes of prosperity and wealth, many Hong Kong immigrants moved to Richmond Hill because of the word "Rich" in its name – a sign of good luck.[55] The third area that attracted Hong Kong-Chinese residents was Markham. As the self-proclaimed "High Technology Capital," with the largest IBM software lab in Canada and consequently a high concentration in high-tech jobs, educated and wealthy Chinese immigrants were influenced to move. To top it off, in 2010, Markham, along with neighbouring towns Unionville, Aurora, Vaughan, and Newmarket, introduced a ruling that allowed residents to change the street numbers of their home – enabling superstitious Cantonese-speakers to change their house numbers if they included

49. Wei Li, *Ethnoburb : The New Ethnic Community in Urban America*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 119

50. Pui Yue Iris Ip, "*Greater Toronto Chinese Downtown.*" (University of Waterloo, 2023). http://hdl.handle.net/10012/19060.

51. ibid. Chapter 8, Page 177-78.

52. ibid.

53. Mark Stewart, "*An Oriental Star is Rising Over Agincourt*". (Toronto Star. 1984).

54. Arlene Chan, T*he Chinese in Toronto from 1878 : From Outside to inside the Circle*. (Dundurn, 2011)

55. ibid.

the number four, as the word sounds similar to "death," and is known to bring bad luck on homes and businesses and lower property value.[56] With new jobs, residents, and a boost in the economy, and an influx in interest from wealthy Hong Kong developers, Markham was able to grow rapidly in the retail and hospitality industry. With its greatest addition, Pacific Mall, in 1996 - a 270,000 square feet shopping mall with an expansive food court, made to resemble Hong Kong's street names and market culture.[57]

The ethnoburbs in the GTA have their own specific attractors to prospective Chinese residents, be it auspicious nomenclature, land value, or Chinese-owned developments.[58] Their main attractor, however, is space. Hong Kong's main infrastructural issue is its density – their housing complexes are large, their streets are packed tightly with podium-style buildings, and their apartment buildings involve intense unit layouts that maximize the number of tenants. Visitors of Hong Kong will often make it a point to visit the colourful, tightly packed apartment buildings,[59] attracted to the "Instagram-worthy" facades, or their pop-culture relevance as backgrounds in movies or music videos. It makes sense, then, that when Hong Kong citizens immigrated to Canada, all they were really looking for was more space (Fig. 3.14), "... [moving] to city outskirts neighbourhoods with new, modern homes on large lots – a luxury few could afford in Hong Kong,"[60] no longer having to live above grocery stores or medicine shops, not realizing that what they were trading was the daily human interaction they had grown accustomed to living in packed apartment buildings. Unlike the Chinatowns along Dundas Street in the west and Gerrard Street in the east of Toronto, the ethnoburbs are spacious, and the businesses and amenities are distilled to what is necessary for the community. In the suburbs, there are less souvenir shops and tourist-centric attractions, and more medicinal stores, Chinese groceries, and restaurants. Shops and businesses aren't lined up along the sidewalk but nestled within plazas.

In the ethnoburb, the plaza becomes the facilitator of the human interaction missed from the busy streets of Hong Kong, or downtown Toronto's Chinatowns. The plazas in Markham, Richmond Hill, and Scarborough (Fig. 3.10) are plentiful, driving down Kennedy Road or Highway 7, you will see multiple plazas placed next to one another. Plazas, particularly Chinese established ones, with Chinese

56. Arlene Chan, T*he Chinese in Toronto from 1878 : From Outside to inside the Circle*. (Dundurn, 2011)

57. ibid.

58. Arlene Chan, "*From Chinatown to Ethnoburb : The Chinese in Toronto.*" (2012). https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/59585/items/1.0103074.

59. Time Out Hong Kong. "*Hong Kong's Most Photogenic Housing Estates*." (TimeOut (blog), May 2020). https://www.timeout.com/hong-kong/things-to-do/hong-kongs-most-photogenic-housing-estates.

60. Arlene Chan, T*he Chinese in Toronto from 1878 : From Outside to inside the Circle*. (Dundurn, 2011)

Fig. 3.10 *Ethnoburbs in the Greater Toronto Area*, by author







Hong Kong/Chinese Developments

SCARBOROUGH

1. Bamburgh Gardens
2. Splendid China Mall
3. Golden Link
4. International Gourmet Street
5. China City
6. Maxum I & II
7. Midland Court
8. Milliken Square
9. Sky City Shopping Centre
10. Agincourt Commercial Centre
11. 1-19 Glen Watford Drive
12. Dragon Centre
13. Mandarin Shopping Centre
14. Uni Plaza

MARKHAM

15. First Markham Place
16. Peachtree Centre/New Kennedy Square
17. Langham Square
18. Goldbright Plaza
19. Denison Centre
20. Hollywood Square
21. Warden Centre
22. Metro Square
23. New Horizon Centre
24. Pacific Mall/Kennedy Corner Shoppes

RICHMOND HILL

25. Bayview Hill
26. Richlane Mall
27. Wycliffe Village Plaza
28. Ho-View Plaza
29. Golden Court Plaza
30. Doncrest Market Place
31. Jubilee Square
32. Commerce Gate
33. Times Square
34. Shoppes of the Parkway

0 2.5km

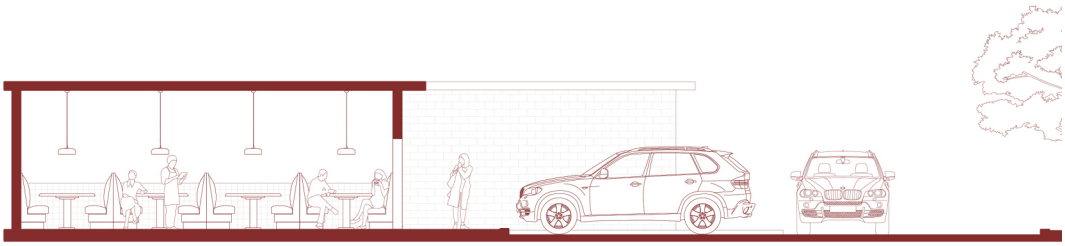
restaurants, banks, grocery stores, and specialized herbal shops, become activated cultural hubs where many of the residents of the area, and even visitors from any of the three other large ethnoburbs, may come to socialize with others. They become a condensed replacement for the sidewalk conditions in Hong Kong, with *cha chaan tengs* that spilled out onto the streets, the corner produce vendor whose voice plays over an audio recording, reciting the daily specials on bananas or oranges. Considering the programming of the plazas in the Greater Toronto Area, the Chinese restaurants provide the only place to sit and gather for lengthy amounts of time. In these plazas, aunties may bump into one another at the grocery store, spend twenty minutes standing at the cart return chatting, and choose to sit instead at a cafe in the plaza to continue their conversation. In this sense, they are a crucial component in the socialization of the cities in which they reside and present the perfect third place for Chinese communities.



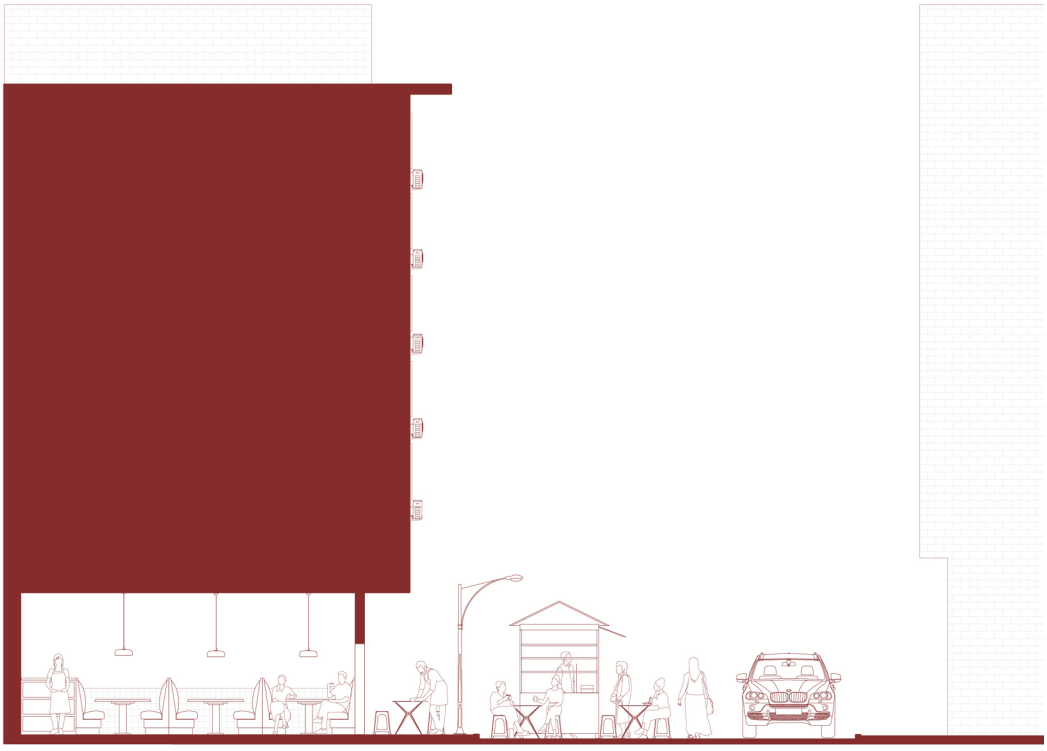


Fig. 3.11 (top) *First Markham Place*, Markham, image by author, 2025

Fig. 3.12 (bottom) *Times Square Plaza*, Richmond Hill, image by author, 2025

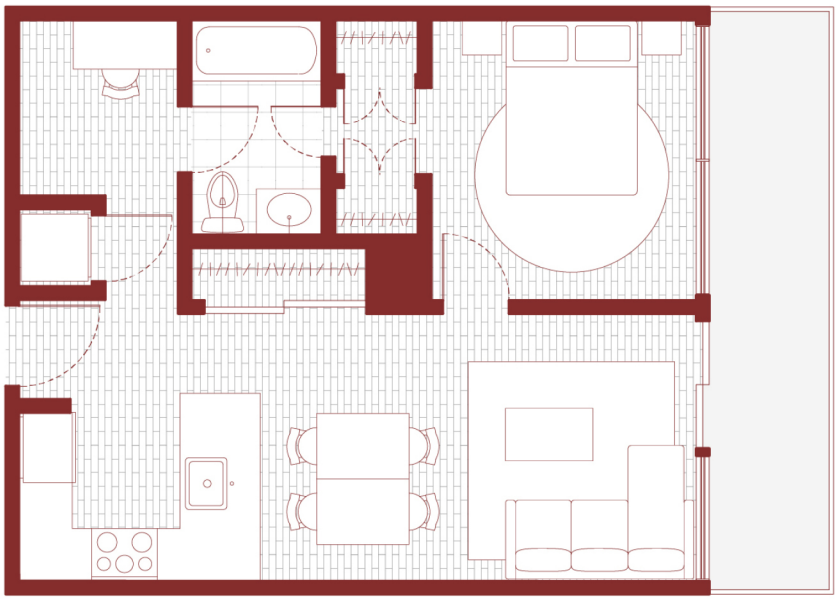


Canadian restaurant exterior condition



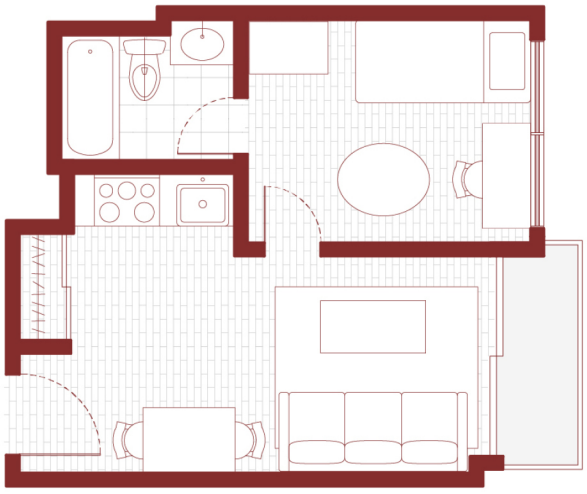
Hong Kong restaurant exterior condition

Fig. 3.13 *Canadian and Hong Kong exterior restaurant conditions*, by author



Toronto Apartment Plan*
One Bed + Den
550 sqft
$1200/sqft

** The Madison at Yonge and Eglinton, via condos.ca (2025)*

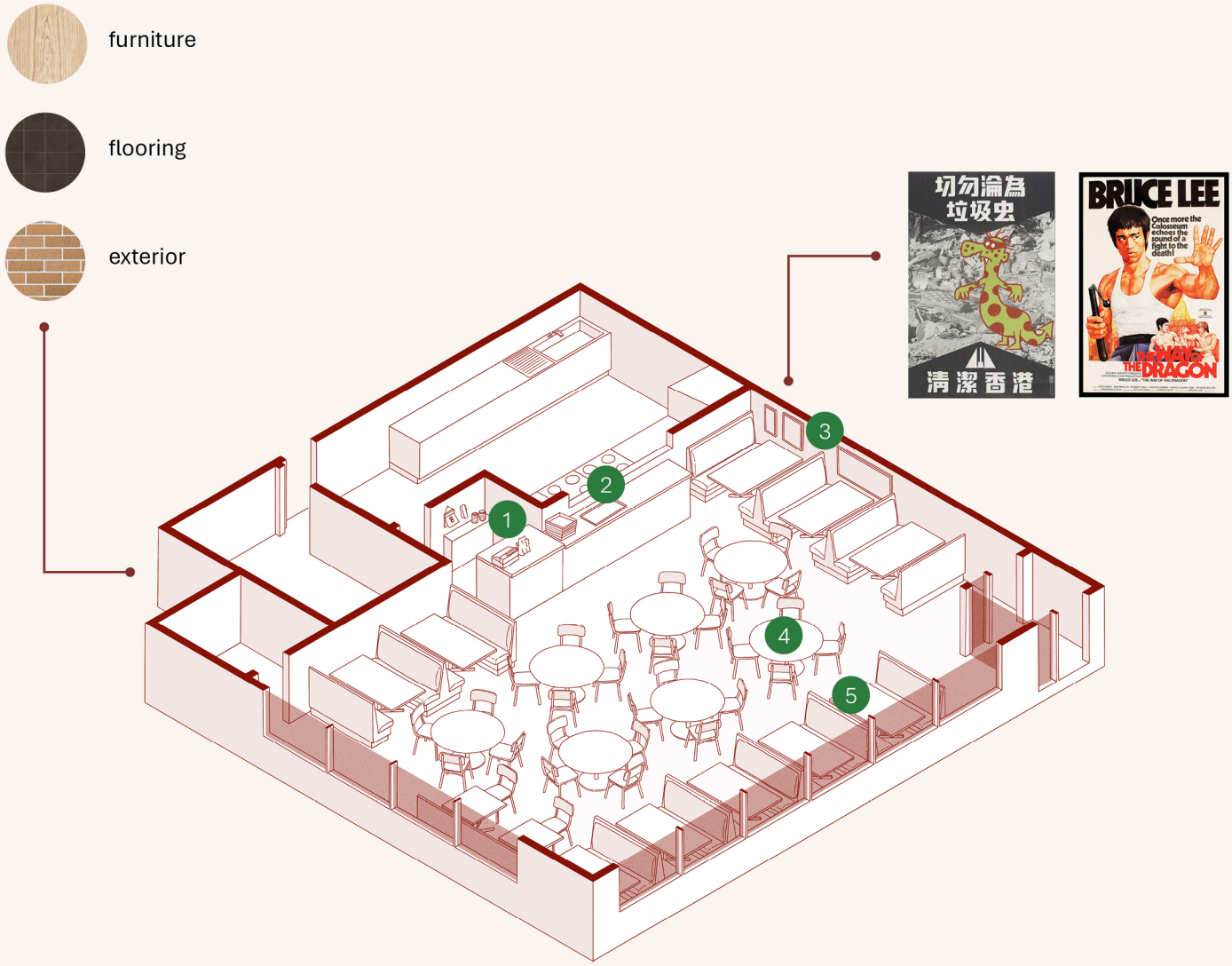


Hong Kong Apartment Plan*
One Bed
354 sqft
$5200/sqft

** Monaco Condos at Kai Tak Harbour, via monaco.hk (2025)*

Fig. 3.14 *Canadian and Hong Kong dwelling units*, by author

0 2.5m



1. symbols of prosperity on walls and shelves by entrance or cash
2. service window
3. vintage Hong Kong posters and advertisements
4. flexible, light furniture at the centre, easy to move
5. booth seating along the perimeter

Fig. 3.15 *Axonometric diagram of a typical cha chaan teng*, by author, modelled after New City Restaurant in Markham, ON

3.5 Cha Chaan Tengs

The Hong Kong-style cafe is a type of restaurant that is much more popular in the ethnoburbs of the GTA than in the downtown core. In Markham, you will encounter a handful of these cafes, known as *cha chaan tengs* or "tea restaurants" within a ten kilometre radius from one another. These restaurants, carried over from Hong Kong in the 1970s and 1980s with the influx of Hong Kong immigrants to Canada, are a product of British colonialism in Hong Kong, and represent a time of globalization. Overseas, the *cha chaan teng* is a symbol for a home away from home, proudly serving Westernized food items, but in Hong Kong, the *cha chaan teng* is a symbol for British colonization. With its unique layouts and hybridized menu, the *cha chaan teng* symbolizes the globalization of Hong Kong as a key cultural differentiator from mainland China. Overall, it becomes the "...Hong Kong style of life, [...] diversified but also unique, changing but with a long history, traditional but also modern, Chinese but also ethnic."[61]

Originally known as *bing sutt*, an mirror of the British coffee shops and Western lifestyle,[62] these ice rooms originated from Guangzhou, and served cold sweet drinks and basic snacks with a Western twist.[63] Though different from the Western food offered in high-class hotels, the *bing sutt* offered an imaginative menu of hybridized food such as milk tea, chilled red bean drinks, canned meat sandwiches, and deep-fried buttered toast. From the 1940s, these restaurants operated under a "*bing sutt* license," which prohibited the use of open flames and, consequently, elaborate menu items. In the 1960s, with a shift in regulation resulting in the *cha chaan teng* license, these spots expanded into lunch and dinner menus, transforming into the *cha chaan teng* widely known of today.[64] Since its opening, the *cha chaan teng* menu has evolved to encompass not only the "...interaction between the colonizers and their subjects in the colonial days,"[65] but includes the diasporic cultures that have immigrated to Hong Kong since then, serving Malaysian styles of beef curry, Singaporean fried rice with vermicelli, and Japanese ramen soups.

61. Selina C. Chan, "*Tea Cafés and the Hong Kong Identity: Food Culture and Hybridity.*" (China Information Zhongguo Qing Bao. 33, no. 3 2018).

62. ibid.

63. Hei Kiu Au, "*The Evolution of Cha Chaan Teng: Exploring Hong Kong's Iconic Dishes and Local Dining Culture.*" (Michelin Guide (blog), April 2025). https://guide.michelin.com/my/en/article/features/evolution-of-cha-chaan-teng-hong-kong-s-iconic-dishes-and-local-dining-culture.

64. ibid.

65. Selina C. Chan, "*Tea Cafés and the Hong Kong Identity: Food Culture and Hybridity.*" (China Information Zhongguo Qing Bao. 33, no. 3 2018).





Fig. 3.16 (top) *Bolton Cafe*, Tsim Sha Tsui, Hong Kong, image by author, 2025

Fig. 3.17 (bottom) *Mido Cafe*, Yau Ma Tei, Hong Kong, image by author, 2025





Fig. 3.18 (top) *Cafe de Hong Kong*, Markham, image by author, 2024

Fig. 3.19 (bottom) *Goldsor Restaurant*, Richmond Hill, image by author, 2024

The layout of the *cha chaan teng* also reflects this hybridization. Typically, a *cha chaan teng* will have booths located on the perimeter of the dining room, with smaller tables at the centre for smaller groups of people, pairs, or individuals stopping in. The key to these tea restaurants is efficiency, and the seats at the centre of the restaurant provide the quickest turnaround time. The booths along the perimeter are an imitation of the seats in Western coffee shops, offering privacy between patrons, as is the usual placement of a bar in plain sight of the visitor.[66] Typically, Chinese dining can be linked to optics – how things may look to others. Similar to the way a dim sum restaurant provides a performative space for the patrons to view what other families may have, be it university graduates or new grandchildren, the bar in the *cha chaan teng* offers something to be shown – most often the making of the milk tea, the act of pulling the tea through a strainer in a medicinal pot – which *heunggong yan* regard with high esteem.[67]

In Hong Kong, the *cha chaan teng* is a reliable spot for the working class people. At lunch hours, you will find a businessman sitting solo in a corner, next to construction workers quickly sharing a plate of noodles amongst three to four of them, and a group of students in blue uniforms. For Hong Kong, the key point of the *cha chaan teng* is to be consistent, quick, and cheap, the most frequent point of interaction between patrons is being asked to switch seats to accommodate a larger group or being seated at the same table as strangers during peak hours. The *cha chaan teng* in Canada allow for these same interactions, also providing consistent, quick, and cheap service, but their interiors often seem to be stuck in a time that the *cha chaan teng* in Hong Kong have since moved past. Similar to Hong Kong's longing for the past – their constant grip on old markers of Hong Kong, from the Toyota Comfort taxis to neon signs - these items represent "...a growing consciousness among the people in Hong Kong about things which could represent Hong Kong"[68] amidst the handover in the late 1990s. For Hong Kong immigrants in the diaspora it represents a similar sentiment, but it is also a reminder of home, from so far away. Not only does the diaspora long for an old Hong Kong, free from the Chinese government, but it longs for the Hong Kong they used to call "home".

Cha chaan tengs in the diaspora become much more of a social opportunity for the communities in which they reside. In Hong Kong, the plethora of street food and *dai pai dongs* offer the chance for

66. Selina C. Chan, "*Tea Cafés and the Hong Kong Identity: Food Culture and Hybridity.*" (China Information Zhongguo Qing Bao. 33, no. 3 2018).

67. Jennifer Bain, "*Hong Kong-style milk tea is cause for competition*" (Toronto Star, 2010) https://www.thestar.com/life/food-and-drink/hong-kong-style-milk-tea-is-cause-for-competition/article_d472e335-7a91-5b43-8bca-7b1d4b19ebfa.html

68. David Y.H. Wu, "*Chinese Cafe in Hong Kong.*" (Changing Chinese Foodways in Asia, 2001), 71–80.

gathering, reserving the Hong Kong *cha chaan teng* as a place for quick bites between work and school. The *dai pai dong* in its original form was not necessary for the diaspora in North America, and therefore was not carried over completely. Remnants of the original, however, can be found in Chinese grocery stores with cooked food sections with small dining areas or food courts in Chinese malls such as First Markham Place or Pacific Mall. Though these spaces provide easy and quick access to food and an open space to gather and meet, much like Hong Kong *dai pai dongs*, their positioning within a grocery store or a larger mall, make it a much less desirable space for families and friends to gather for a meal, if they are not already at the grocery store or mall for other reasons. The *cha chaan teng* becomes the main social hub for Chinese ethnoburbs. The socialization is casual, over snacks and lunch, and tends to serve groups of friends as well as families. Here, in comparison to the *cha lau – dim sum* restaurant – the interaction between different parties seated next to each other, or parties of differing generations, is much less deliberate. The *cha lau* being an establishment that often requires a reservation, knowing who will be attending *yum cha* days or weeks in advance, and the *cha chaan teng* being a place to stop in, or decide to visit on a whim.

3.5.1 Garden Hong Kong Cafe

Garden Hong Kong Cafe is one of many *cha chaan teng* situated in one of many plazas in Markham. At South Unionville and Kennedy Road, Langham Square houses a variety of bubble tea shops, Asian beauty stores, Chinese medicinal shops, in addition to the Hong Kong-style cafe, anchored by T&T, the Chinese grocery store. Single units are narrow and long, leaving room for only a central route of circulation in Garden Hong Kong Cafe. Despite its size, it boasts a large crowd of people dining, or waiting to dine, on any given day of the week, at any given hour.

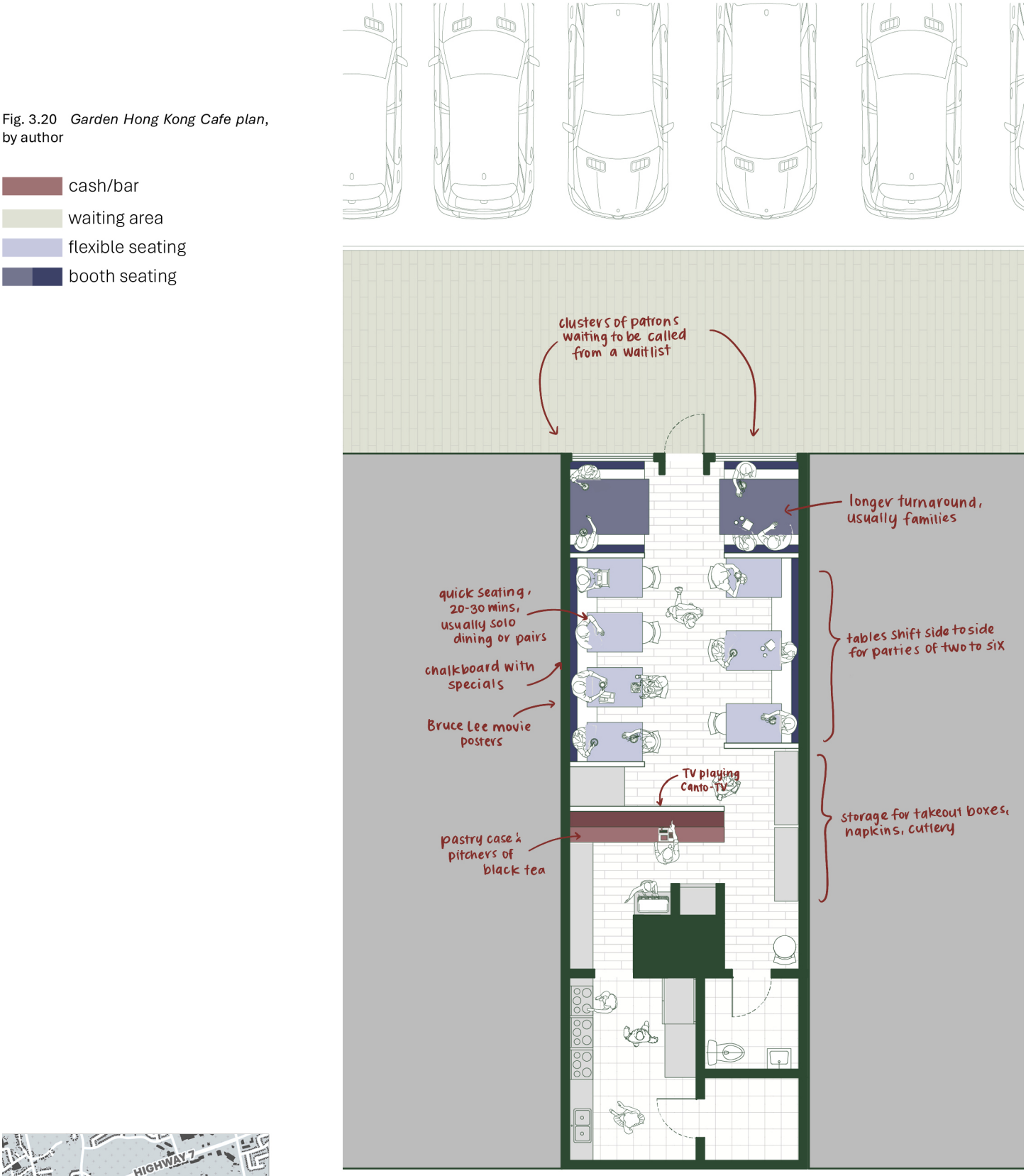
The small footprint of the unit lends itself to the booth seating of the typical *cha chaan teng*. A singular upholstered booth runs the length of the wall on either side, with tables and chairs that can be slide left and right across, to accommodate parties of any size. There is a television at the back end of the restaurant that plays CP24 and a variety of Cantonese dramas, sitting just above the cash counter. The walls are an orange colour, and painted signs with Chinese calligraphy are hung in red, green, and yellow, alongside a chalkboard that lists the weekly specials - from which everyone seated is ordering a Hainanese steamed chicken and a hot milk tea.

In Garden Hong Kong Cafe, you are able to observe how a typical *cha chaan teng* runs - their smaller number of seating urging them to move people from their seats, and to work as quickly and efficiently to produce a higher customer turnover. The dishes are served as quickly and efficiently as they are ordered, served up on the counter where pre-brewed teas are placed in pitchers in a row, ready to be mixed with evaporated milk for Hong Kong-style milk tea.

Solo diners sit on the booth side, watching a video from their phone while they eat their meal, men in suits bring their parents for an afternoon snack, and families sit together for a little something to get their restless children to sit still before dinner. Regardless of age or profession, diners are seated and space is made for them, the flexibility

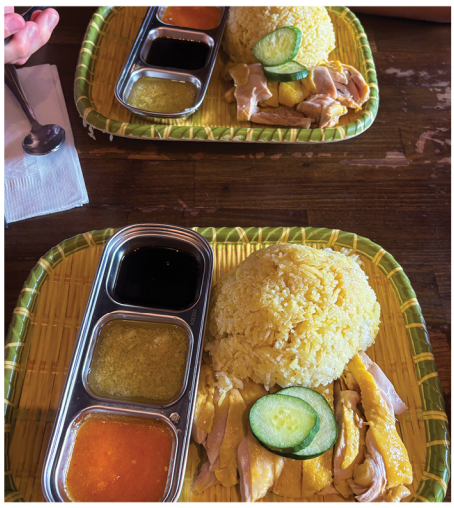
of the tables and chairs of the cha chaan teng accommodating their every need. To allow as much sunlight as possible, the restaurant's one exterior wall has floor-to-ceiling glazing, where there are crowds of people on the sidewalk trying not to stare too closely at the patrons inside, seeing what they've ordered, or how long it'll be until they've paid their bill and freed a spot for them to come inside.

Fig. 3.20 *Garden Hong Kong Cafe plan*, by author











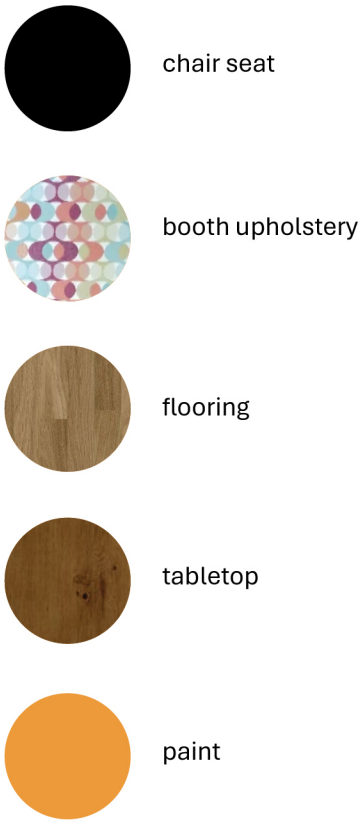


Fig. 3.21 (left) *Service counter at Garden Hong Kong Cafe*, Markham, image by author, 2025

Fig. 3.22 (right) *Hainanese chicken at Garden Hong Kong Cafe,* Markham, image by author , 2025

Fig. 3.23 (bottom) *Garden Hong Kong Cafe perspective sketches*, by author

3.5.2 Cafe de Hong Kong

Cafe de Hong Kong is a *cha chaan teng* in Markham, nestled in a plaza just outside of First Markham Place, a Chinese mall. Off of Highway 407 at Highway 7 and Woodbine Avenue, Cafe de Hong Kong is bright and bold with decor, keying into the nostalgia of Hong Kong as its main source of branding. Like Hong Kong Garden Cafe, it is packed at every point of the day, and accepts no formal reservations, but a Yelp waitlist to manage the crowds of people that form outside on the sidewalk and in the full-glazed vestibule inside. Eager potential patrons peer into the large windows, waiting for their names to be called from the hostess' iPad.

Like a typical *cha chaan teng*, Cafe de Hong Kong is laid out with black leather upholstered booths along the north and east walls of the plaza, where larger groups of families and friends are seated. Solo diners, couples, and smaller families are seated in the cluster of smaller wooden tables at the centre, constantly switched around and moved. The waitlist allows the servers to anticipate larger parties, preventing patrons from being moved around as often, and with its close proximity to First Markham Place, Cafe de Hong Kong sees a wide variety of customer groups - from parents with children in pre-K, high school, university, or even in their own established careers, couples sharing a quick bite, or high schoolers pooling their money together to split a large brick of french toast.

Key menu items are featured on the wall on slim red tablets, written in white Chinese calligraphy underneath a television that plays the news in Cantonese. Though they do not offer weekly specials, Cafe de Hong Kong provides an afternoon tea menu with meal sets, including modern takes on classic snacks such as the pineapple bun burger with black truffle, or the salted egg yolk and pork floss Hong Kong style french toast, served with a complimentary Hong Kong milk tea or a lemon tea.

Along the west wall is a bar where drinks are mixed and bills are paid in cash, with shelves of old Ovaltine and small vintage knick-knacks

behind the counter. On the east wall is a gallery of framed vintage posters, Chinese advertisements for Western products such as Coca-Cola, Schweppes, Astroboy posters, and the iconic anti-litter mascot, Lap Sap Chung. In opposite corners of the room, there are colourful red, green, and yellow LED signs on the walls. Opened in 2021, there are not many other *cha chaan tengs* in the Greater Toronto Area with this decor, particularly in Markham, where the majority were opened in the early 2000's - 2010's, before the age of social media. *Cha chaan tengs* of a similar style to Cafe de Hong Kong gain traction for their decor and Instagrammable photo opportunities, and play into the idea of a Hong Kong that often pre-date the owners of the establishments, longing for something they have only heard of or seen second-hand, reminiscent of the second-generation immigrant experience.

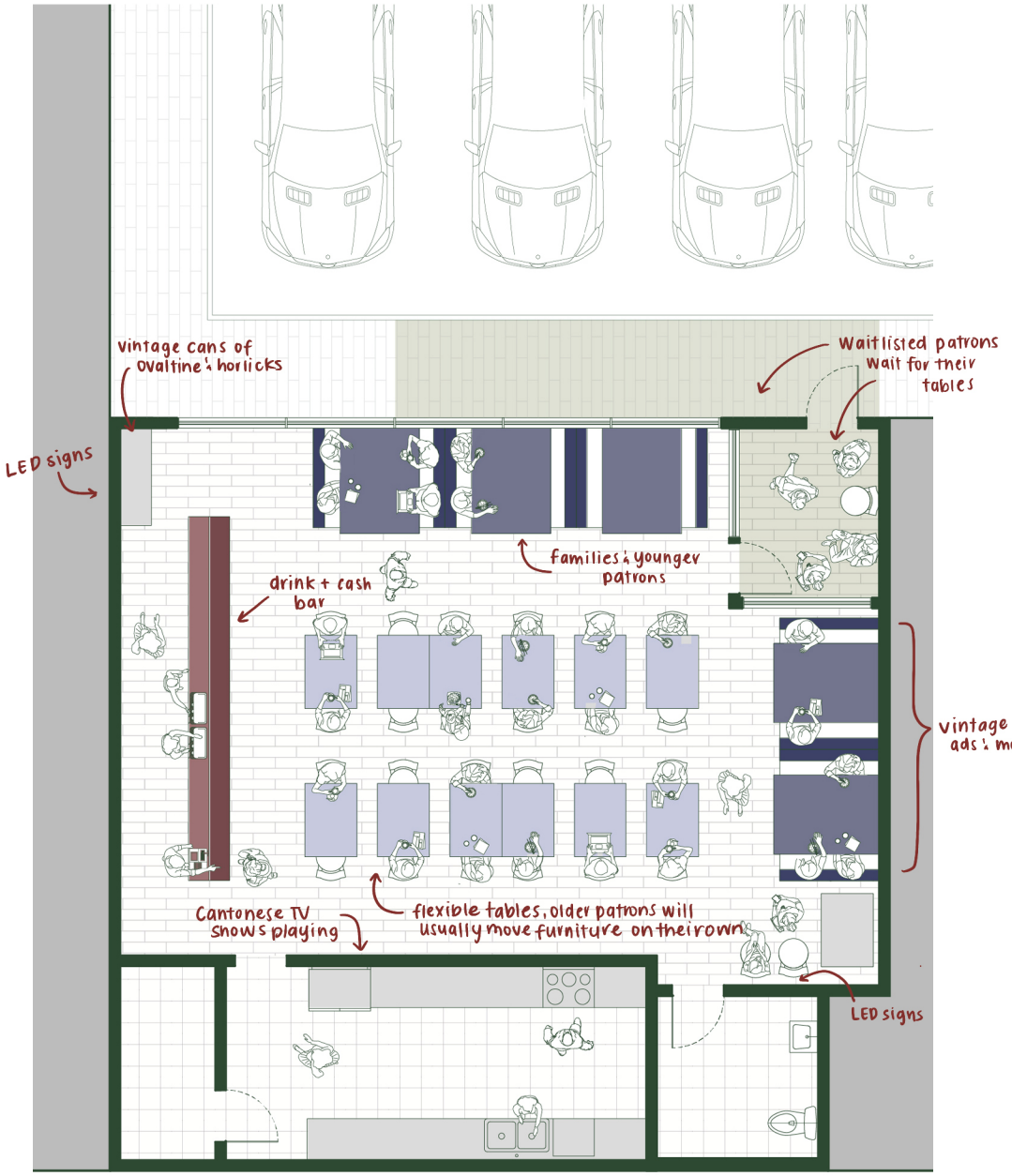
Fig. 3.24 *Cafe de Hong Kong plan*, by author

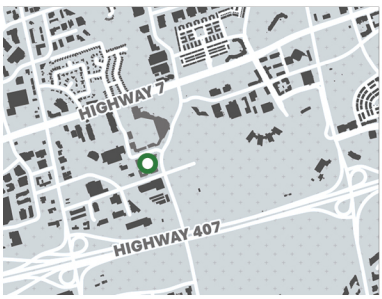
cash/bar

waiting area

flexible seating

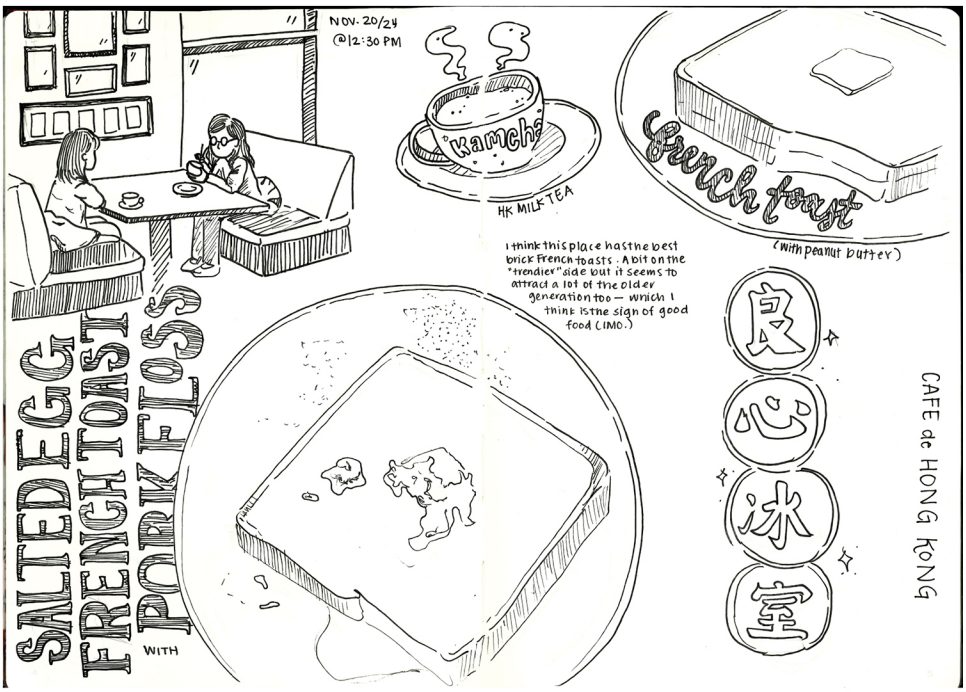
booth seating











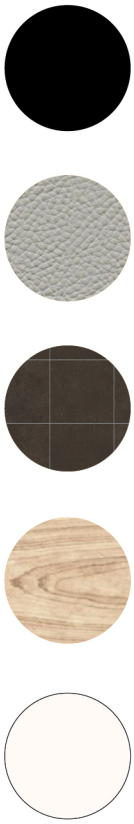


Fig. 3.25 (left) *Patrons in Cafe de Hong Kong*, Markham, image by author, 2025

Fig. 3.26 (right) *Vintage Hong Kong posters,* Markham, image by author , 2024

Fig. 3.27 (bottom) *Cafe de Hong Kong perspective sketches*, by author

3.6 Conclusion

The *cha chaan teng* was born from Hong Kong's position as a British colony, a prime example of the globalization and, specifically, Westernization, that Hong Kong underwent as a colony and as a hub for business and trade. Its layout and menu items point to the region's hybrid-positioning between the United Kingdom and mainland China, and it is now seen as a symbol for nostalgia, an attractor for both Hong Kong people and others, because of its "retro and eccentric" elements. However, the *cha chaan teng* symbolizes, more importantly, the importance of community – both in Hong Kong and in its diasporic settlements. As a casual place with affordable meals, the *cha*

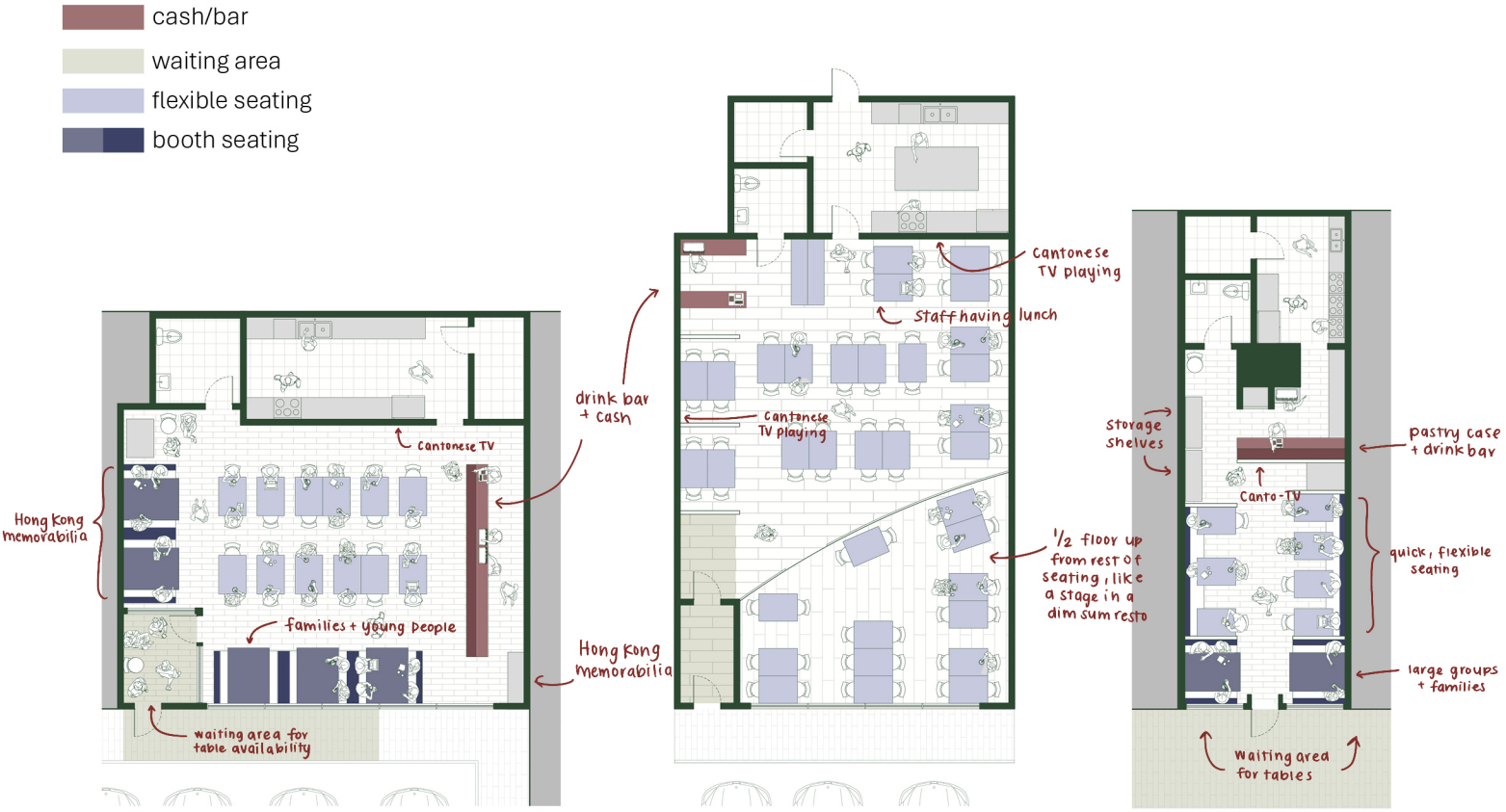


Fig. 3.28 *Cha chaan teng layout comparison*, by author

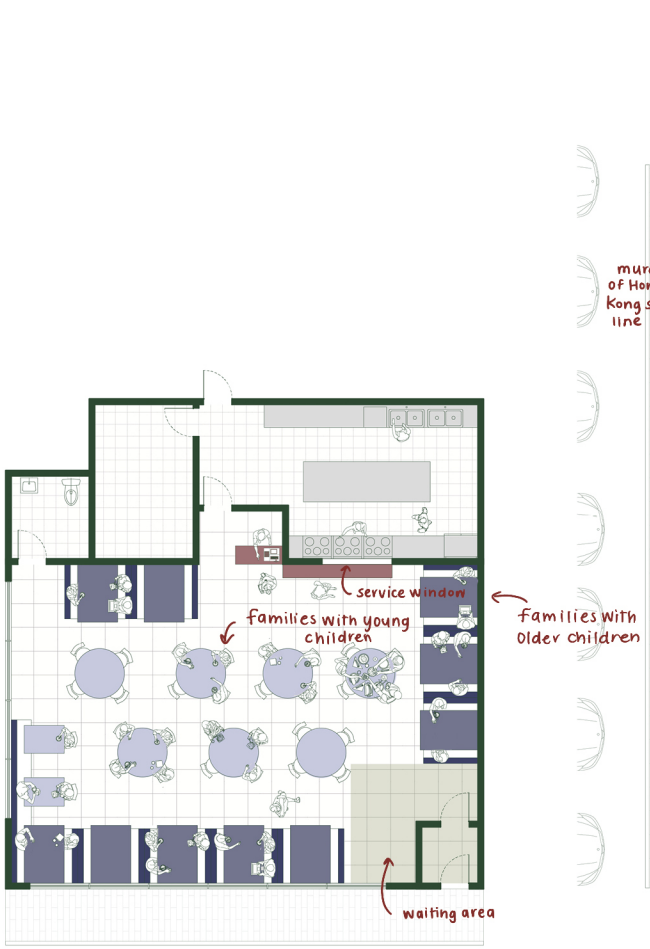
Cafe de Hong Kong, Markham

Goldsor Cafe, Richmond Hill

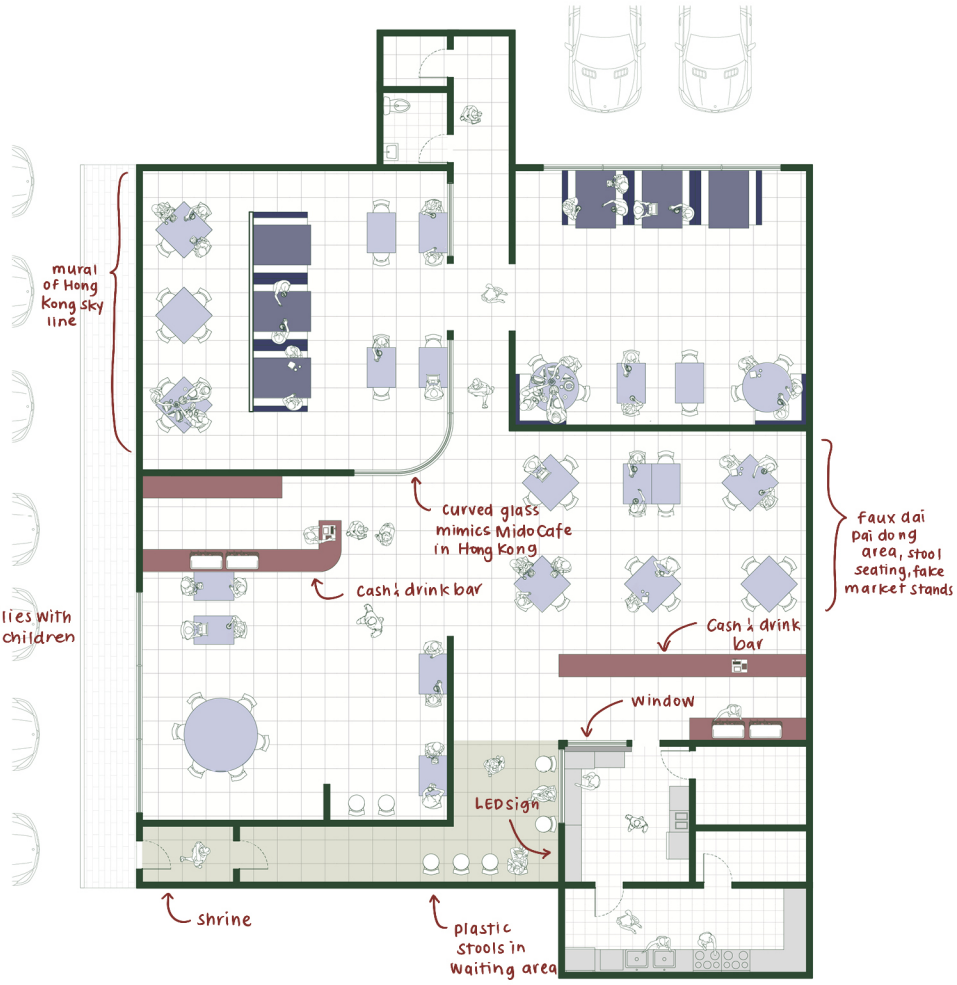
Garden Hong Kong Cafe, Markham

chaan teng provides a space for people of all professions, ages, and backgrounds to gather for a quick meal in an environment that is so confined, it is almost comforting.

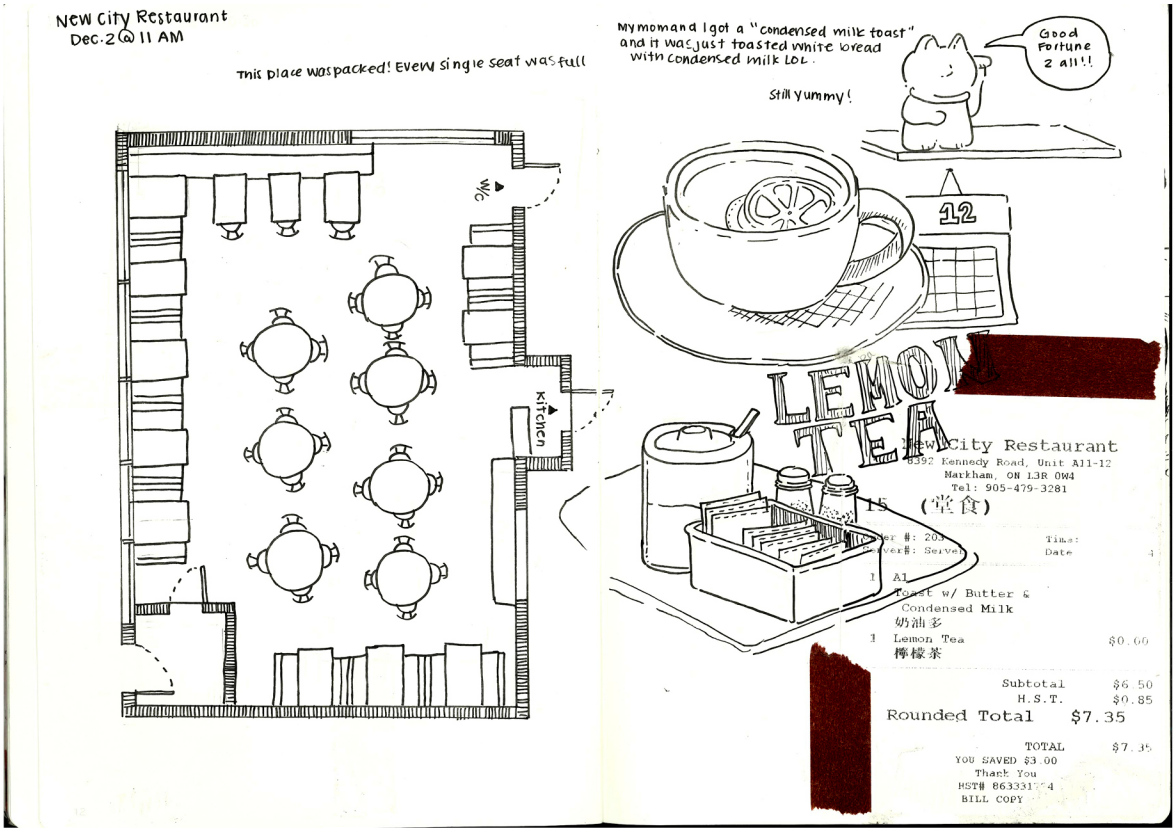
With a complicated relationship between Hong Kong and Canada of push and pull, between being allowed and prohibited to enter the country, Canadian *cha chaan tengs* are a place for the diasporic community. The *cha chaan teng* in Hong Kong may be presented as a "must visit" restaurant for visitors to gain a true sense of Hong Kong culture and dining, but in Canada, the *cha chaan teng* is most regularly visited by Hong Kong immigrants and their families, wanting a small taste of home.



New City Restaurant,
Markham



Cafe le Majestik,
Scarborough



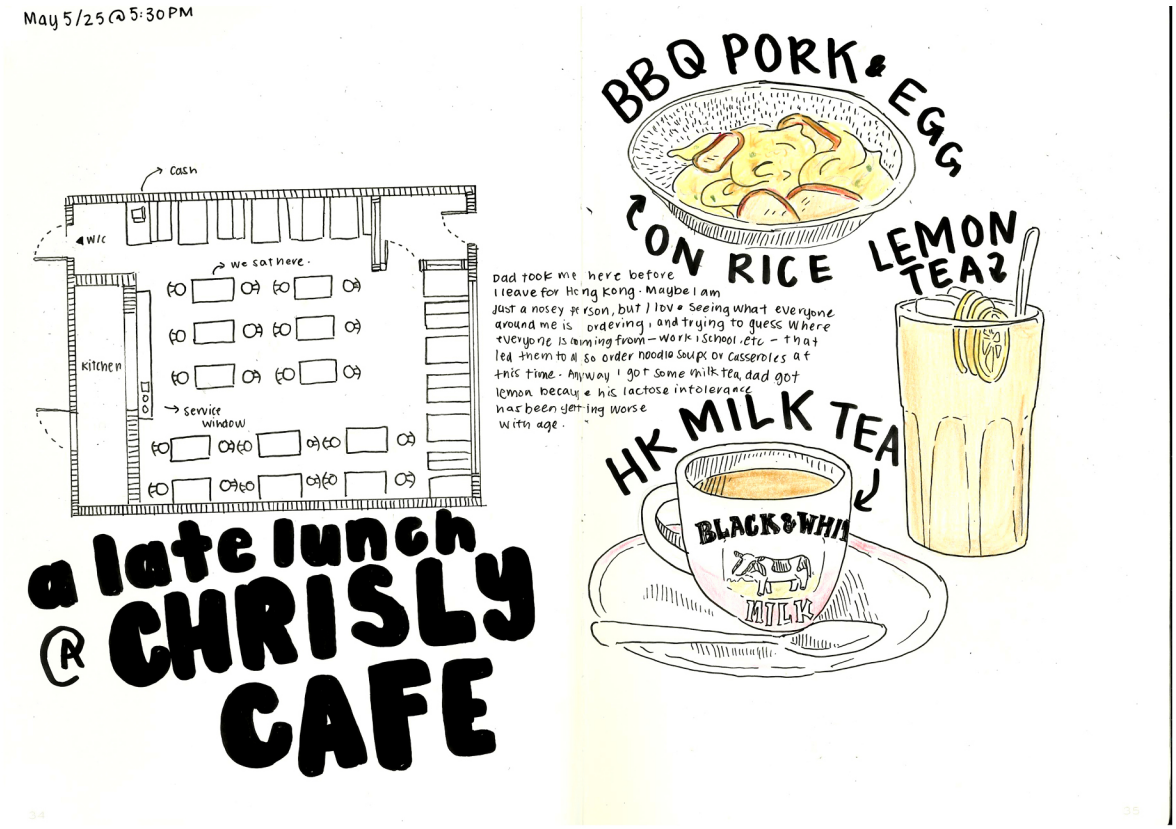
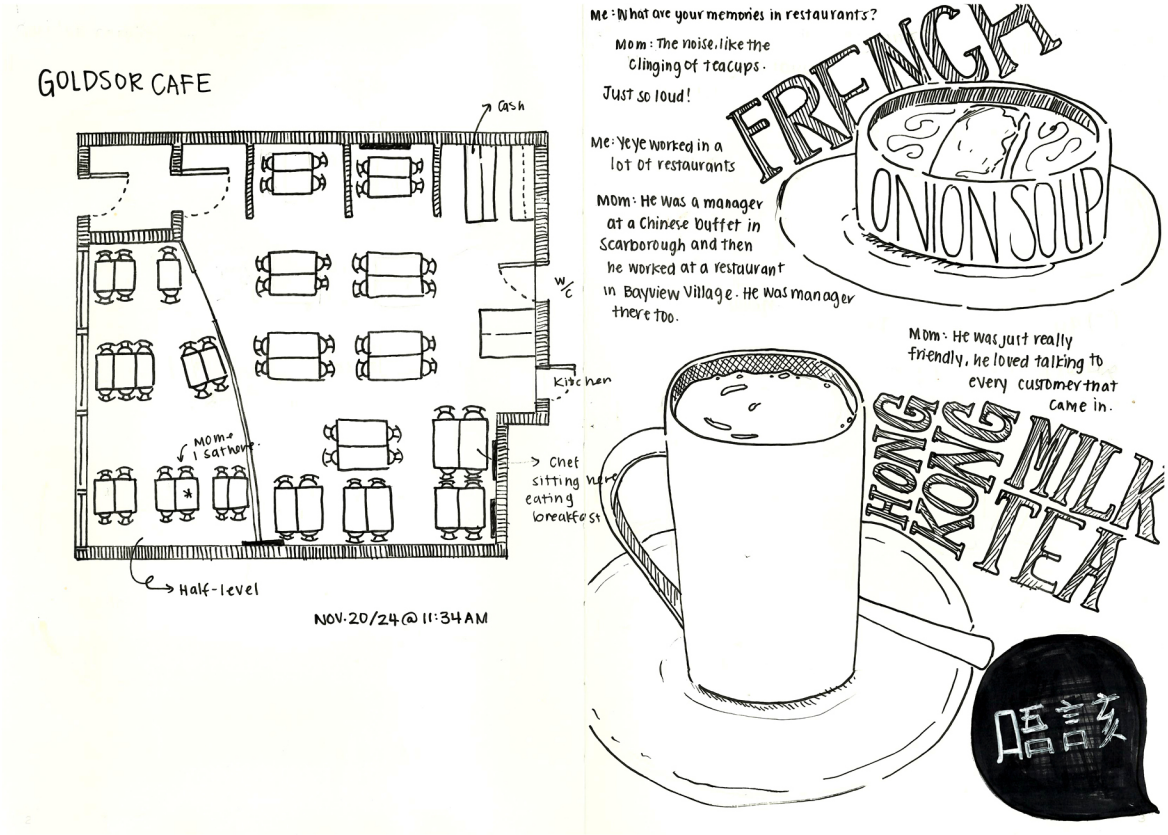


Fig. 3.29 (top) *New City Restaurant sketches*, by author

Fig. 3.30 (bottom) *Chrisly Cafe sketches*, by author



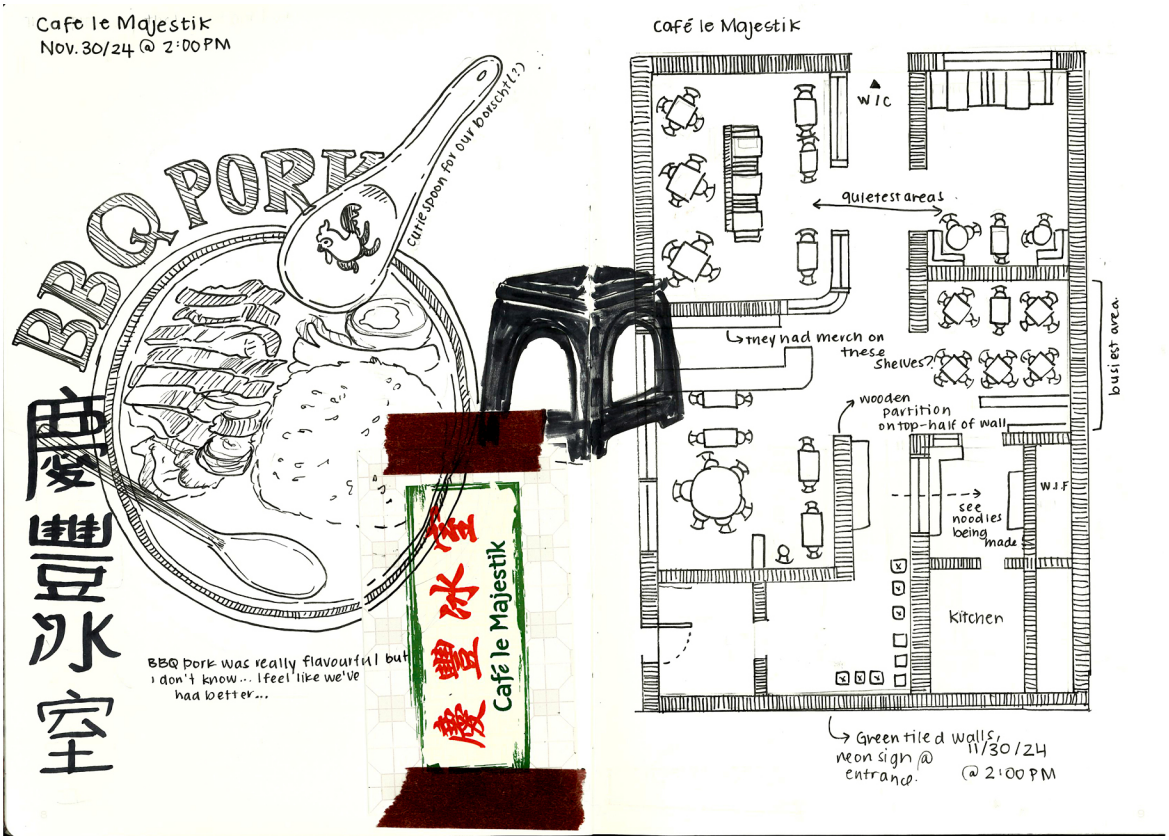


Fig. 3.31 (top) *Goldsor Cafe sketches*, by author

Fig. 3.32 (bottom) *Cafe le Majestik sketches*, by author

4.0 A Restaurant for Learning

"A family with an old person
has a living treasure of gold".[0]

家有一老，如有一寶

0. Chinese proverb

Mama, my paternal grandmother, sits next to me at a round clothed table, two fingers on the glass of the Lazy Susan, a porcelain bowl nestled in her left hand. My family and I sit quietly, watching as she controls the glass disc in front of us, waiting for her cue to eat, and her cue to stop. My father, seated on the other side of her, says something I can't quite catch, just under his breath, and she laughs, rebutting in Cantonese. My siblings and I stare across the table at my aunts, uncles, and cousins who burst into laughter, waiting for a translation - "She says she won't talk to him unless he speaks Chinese."

After the meal, we delegate leftovers to each other - my cousins will take the leftover *har gow*,[xiii] but we'll take the fried squid because we like it more – and we look around for someone to bring us some takeout boxes. Sitting there, watching my parents and uncle and aunt fight over the bill while my grandmother has already slipped away to pay at the front (solely in vouchers, might I add), I think of my *yeye*, in the midst of all the chaos, the rushing servers and clinking of porcelain bowls and cups, the chatter of Cantonese that scatters across the carpeted floor. I think of myself sitting at a similar table, on a similarly clothed seat, which I sank into out of embarrassment as he ventured behind a counter to get the boxes himself. My family would laugh at him as he helped himself to plastic containers, and he'd say, defensively, "They're busy anyway!" If he was at lunch today, we'd have the boxes by now.

xiii. 蝦餃 - *har gow*
Shrimp dumpling

At the dining table, there exists countless examples of undisputed traditions, carried down from as far as dynastic China, things that have trickled down through generations, into oceans, finding their way into diasporic communities across the world, without a rhyme or a reason. Grandparents themselves may not understand why these traditions

exist, but they're important to them all the same. Away from home, they must be guarded – protected and kept sacred in fear of letting them slip away.



Fig. 4.1 *Peter and coworkers on break*, date and place unknown

4.1 Diasporic Memory & Intergenerational Learning

Diasporic and globalized communities rely on shared memory and intergenerational transfers of knowledge to maintain culture and tradition. Intergenerational learning is considered to be the "...informal vehicle within families for 'systematic transfer of knowledge, skills, competencies, norms and values between generations' [where] the elders or grandparents of the family share their wisdom and are valued for their role in perpetuating the values, culture, and uniqueness of the family."[1] Though these interactions are most common between family members, intergenerational learning may occur between any member of a younger and older generation in social settings as well. Examples of intergenerational interactions that foster learning are as follows:

> At least two non-adjacent generations learn together about each other (ageing issues, experiences, values, aspirations);
>
> Two different generations learn together about the world, people, and/or historical and social events relevant to them; and
>
> Two different age groups share learning experiences and training activities designed to develop academic knowledge and skills and prepare their social service skills.[2]

Though the focus of this thesis is on the first generation immigrant's impact on its newer generations, the process of intergenerational learning is reciprocal, and therefore mutually beneficial. Examples of intergenerational transfers of knowledge are displayed in areas such as suburban community centres, where high school students volunteer for activities with seniors or even the Apple store, where young employees hold technology-based workshops for seniors on weekdays.

In the city of Toronto, there are many associations and clubs that are

1. Sally Newman, and Alan Hatton-Yeo. "*Intergenerational Learning and the Contributions of Older People.*" (Ageing Horizons 8, no. 10 2008), 31–39.

2. ibid.

particularly concerned with fostering relations between the older and younger generations of Chinese immigrants, to allow the sharing of stories and transfer of skills. These groups organize events such as co-mapping sessions, that foster dialogue and collaborative work to piece together memories of Toronto's Old Chinatown, or mahjong nights where beginners are able to learn how to play an age-old game of strategy and skill.

Within a family, intergenerational learning is naturally founded on the close relationships developed between grandparents and grandchildren. In the Hong Kong diaspora, where three generations of families are relocated to the suburbs, grandparents are tasked with the care of grandchildren, often living within the same house or neighbourhood. Relationships fostered between the two create the opportunity to teach new languages, expose children to cultural food and etiquette, such as eating every last bite of a meal or refraining from scraping the sides of the bowl, as it resembled the manners of beggars in ancient China.

Intergenerational learning becomes a driving force in diasporic communities in order to preserve a "diasporic memory."[3] As described by researchers Bahar Baser and Camilla Orjuela, diasporic memory addresses the "...memories and processes of remembrance that individuals and groups in the diaspora maintain and enact, which revolve around their identification as a people that was once dispersed from a homeland, and that continues to relate to and identify with that homeland."[4] Diasporic memory becomes increasingly important as years go by – once the word "home" begins to refer to the semi-detached home in Markham, where roots have been planted and grandchildren have been born - it becomes a tool that allows traditions and culture to be preserved and not forgotten. In doing so, younger generations inherit language, customs, and memories, while also inheriting "...the responsibility to carry forward their legacy."[5]

3. Bahar Baser and Camilla Orjuela. "*Diasporic Memory*." *in The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Memory Studies*, (Springer, 2024).

4. ibid.

5. ibid.

4.2 Chinese Superstition in Business & Dining

Chinese traditions and culture are rooted in legends and old stories of ancient China. If there is anything the people of mainland China and Hong Kong can agree on, it is that these traditions and – what some may call – superstitions can guarantee the failure or prosperity of a home, relationship, or business. Children grow up watching their parents frantically clean their house on Chinese New Year's Eve, making sure linens are washed and floors are vacuumed before midnight, to ensure that any luck that comes with the New Year is not washed or swept away. This generation's grandparents and parents may not even know why they follow these traditions or understand the origins, but what they do know is that if not followed closely or done correctly, they run the risk of losing their luck, money, or health.

Like Chinese New Year, there are many Chinese holidays that follow certain customs or traditions or are even founded on stories that date back to ancient China. Many of these holiday traditions are centered around food – be it the dining hall in which it must be eaten, or the actual dishes themselves. For example, the dishes eaten for Chinese New Year hold significance because of their linguistic similarities. Dried oysters, known as *hou shi fa cai*,[xiv] has a similar sounding *hou si*[xv] - it is believed that if you eat dried oysters on Chinese New Year, you will be welcoming good performance for your business. Similarly, it is tradition to eat *zong zi*[xvi] for the Dragon Boat Festival. However, this tradition doesn't follow a guarantee of prosperity, but an old Chinese legend of China's first known poet, Qu Yuan. The legend entails the poet drowning himself in the river, after being sent to exile by the emperor. Upon hearing of his disappearance, the people of the Chu Kingdom decorated their boats with dragon heads, racing along the river in search of his body and throwing *zong zi* in the river to prevent the fish from eating Qu Yuan's body.

These traditions and superstitions permeate the lived environment as well in the form of *fung seoi*,[xvii] the "practice of designing space to create balance and harmony, drawing on the movement and quality of energy,

xiv. 蠔豉 髮菜 - *hou shi fa cai*
Dried oysters and black moss

xv. 好市 - *hou si*
Good market performance

xvi. 粽子 - *zong zi*
Glutinous rice dumpling

xvii. 風水- *fung seoi*
Wind and water; Taoist practice of arranging objects to balance the qi in the environment

or *qi*, through the environment."[6] In Chinese tradition, the alignment and orientation of a space can dictate the relationship between the person and the environment, and effect even greater things such as luck and prosperity. *Fung seoi* influences the exact location on a given street people may buy their houses, open their businesses, or the exact location of furniture, emblems, and decor (Fig. 4.2, 4.3, 4.4). In Chinese businesses, there are many components that are carefully curated to optimize *fung seoi*, and masters in the craft are often employed to ensure there are no gaps for failure.

Studies on *fung seoi* in the service industry[7] enlisted a handful of Chinese restaurants in Singapore, Hong Kong, Macau, and China to discern what parts of *fung seoi* both physical and non-physical were commonly used across businesses and why. This sample showed a recurring theme of abundance amongst artefacts displayed in the restaurants, such as money toads, dragons, and waving cats, as well as ponds of dish and abacuses to attract wealth.[8] From the study's interviews, it seemed that while many business owners may not be superstitious themselves, they still followed these rules of *fung seoi*. On one hand, it can be seen as a precautionary measure, as to not take any chances, but on the other, it could be possible that the artefacts and layouts associated with *fung seoi* have become consequently associated with successful Chinese restaurants, that businessowners employ these tactics to attract more customers and convey a sense of luck and wealth to the potential patron.

Similar to the Cantonese avoidance of the number four in house numbers, business storefront locations, and the like, for its close resemblance to the word "death," *fung seoi* is very closely related to numbers as well. This particular detail of *fung seoi* is especially important to business owners, dictating the day the restaurant may open, the number of customers that should come in first (best if a couple is the first patron), or the number of pastries or food displayed in the display cabinet. A Singaporean restauranteur interviewed in the study shared, "Every morning when we start we will make sure that the first row where we place our displays on the display cabinet, will always have five different types, or five of the same fruit. It will always be five...it can be five baguettes, five pastry [...] You know, believe it or not, that on certain days when I don't put in the five in front, I find business tends to get really slow."[9] The same restauranteur shared that

6. Madeleine Ogilvie, Danny Ng, Erwei Xiang, Maria M. Ryan, and Jaime Yong. "*Using Traditional Rituals in Hospitality to Gain Value: A Study on the Impact of Feng Shui.*" (International Journal of Hospitality Management 72 2018), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2017.12.010.

7. ibid.

8. ibid.

9. ibid.







(from top to bottom)

Fig. 4.2 *Abacus entrance at Lee Restaurant, symbolizing wealth, prosperity, and financial management*, Joshua Best, August 2023.

Fig. 4.3 *Decor wall at Ayla Upstairs, full of plants, and ceramic cabbage pieces, symbolizing wealth and prosperity,* Shlomi Amiga, February 2025

Fig. 4.4 *Ceramic fish, symbolizing abundance, at Ayla Upstairs*, Shlomi Amiga, February 2025

when facing a difficult customer, she will "...take out three match sticks and I will break them, throw it away. It's like breaking away the bad luck, this is a difficult customer, I don't want anymore difficult customers for the day."[10]

Another influential element to Chinese business is *gwaan hai*[xviii] – which directly translates to relationships or connections. *Gwaan hai* as a concept is understood to be "...friendships with the implication that there will be a continuing exchange of favours"[11]- in a sense, the notion in Chinese culture that we should treat our business partners as friends in order to facilitate better deals. It is discrete but is often accompanied by the sacred Chinese principle of "giving face" - looking good to peers as a sign of dignity.[12] The competitive nature of Chinese grandmothers to secure the largest table at Chinese New Year, to gather families at their regular dim sum spots to celebrate graduations, engagements, where they may ensure their peers are also eating at nearby tables to see, and the friendship they have with servers, restauranteurs – a reciprocal understanding that if they continue to bring the restaurant loyal and unwavering business, the host will give them the best seat in the room, are all common examples of *gwaan hai* and the preservation of dignity in effect.

10. Madeleine Ogilvie, Danny Ng, Erwei Xiang, Maria M. Ryan, and Jaime Yong. "*Using Traditional Rituals in Hospitality to Gain Value: A Study on the Impact of Feng Shui.*" (International Journal of Hospitality Management 72 2018), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2017.12.010.

11. Kenneth L. Wall, Joanne C Preston, and Runtong Zhang. "*Conducting Trade with Chinese Family Businesses*." (Organization Development Journal 27, no. 2 2009) 53–68.

12. ibid.

xviii. 關係 - *gwaan hai*
Relation, connection





Fig. 4.5 (left) *Grand opening flowers, as a display of gwaan hai*, via Alethea Gifts, Markham

Fig. 4.6 (right) *Grand opening flowers, as a display of gwaan hai*, via Shu Flora, Ottawa

4.3 Yum Cha - from Mainland to Hong Kong

Since the dynastic periods of China, the ritual of enjoying tea has gone hand-in-hand with the importance of food, both synonymous with the principles of gathering. This can be traced back to the Qing Dynasty when Emperor Qianlong ordered a cease of foreign trade from the capital to all coastal provinces except Guangzhou. During this time, Guangzhou received all tea, porcelain, and silk from all over the country, leading to the prominence of teahouses in the province.[13]The earliest teahouse in Guangzhou is said to be Er Li Guan. Geared toward the working class in the area, Er Li Guan "...provided tea, fast-food meals, and places to communicate with colleagues,"[14] standing out amongst other teahouses in the province. When the old teahouses vanished with the fall of the Qing Dynasty, Er Li Guan's accessible and unique nature allowed it to withstand disappearance, acquiring the name *yum cha*.[15]

Yum cha is often associated with morning tea – a Cantonese tradition of breakfast with steamed dishes, otherwise known as *dim sum*. The tradition of enjoying a breakfast between tea and steamed dishes follows the popular saying "*yat zung leung gin,*"[xix] which refers to "... the customs of serving patrons with two delicacies to complement the tea."[16] Often served in bamboo steam baskets, *dim sum* consists of small serving-sized dishes that can pertain to a certain purpose, "...such as banquet dishes, seasonal dishes, weekly dishes, travel-friendly dishes, holiday dishes, house signature dishes, etc."[17] The act of enjoying *dim sum* is a social ritual, common amongst elders who "... enjoy their morning after the early exercise of Tai Chi or a walk,"[18] and is also considered a place for housewives to gather and connect with friends. The ritual "...provides a practical and acceptable channel for old friendships to nurture and new bonds to build."[19]

The tradition of *yum cha* has grown and transformed to epitomize the cultural identity of the people of the southern regions of China, as well as regions like Hong Kong and Macau. As a whole, the tradition of gathering to drink tea and enjoy dishes is a sacred ritual to the people of these areas, what Hong Kong actor Stephen Chow popularized as

13. Kaiwei Guo, Na Zhang, Jianfen Zhang, Man Zhang, Mingzhu Zhou, Yue Zhang, and Guansheng Ma. "*Cantonese Morning Tea (Yum Cha): A Bite of Cantonese Culture.*" (Journal of Ethnic Foods 10, no. 1 May 2023), 12. https://doi.org/10.1186/s42779-023-00180-9.

14. ibid.

15. ibid.

16. ibid.

17. ibid.

18. ibid.

19. ibid.

xix. 一盅兩件 - *yat zung leung gin*
One cup, two pieces

"*chodai yum bui cha, sik gor bau*"[xx] a short and simple saying that wraps the power of yum cha into a small phrase, like a package of sticky rice in a steamed lotus leaf. *Yum cha*, and the accompanying dishes, *dim sum*, reflect a Taoist worldview to maintain a balance between taste and substance within the human body system – something that translates through all of China and its special administrative regions, regardless of political differences.[20]

The origins of the teahouse date back to the Tang Dynasty,[21] followed by its transformation into *yum cha* and its accompanying *dim sum*, influenced by the trade that occurred along the Silk Road and the socioeconomic changes of China throughout history. Ingredients such as wheat flour were brought to the southern Chinese province of Guangdong from the Middle East and Central Asia and were incorporated into staple dim sum dishes such as dumplings and steamed buns,[22] a testament to the notion of globalization that is present in different aspects of Chinese dining today.

In old Guangzhou, *yum cha*, considered to be the privilege of leisure, was granted to mainly merchants, eating with their employees on the shop floors. On less crowded days, bosses would leave their shops and venture out to teahouses to drink tea with others. These teahouses were categorized according to the food, the atmosphere, and the patronage, but were connected, above all, by *tan cha*[xxi] – savouring the tea at a leisurely pace.[23] Though originally offered as a place of respite from the workplace, in commercial centres like Guangzhou, teahouses became settings for information exchange and negotiation, earning their role as a "...second office [with] *yumcha* as regular albeit informal business meetings."[24]

Hong Kong's *yum cha* culture was no different. As a bustling centre for business, teahouses in Hong Kong carried the same weight of being a place for informal business meetings and general work. As Hong Kong continued to develop in the late 40's,[25] the city began to surpass Guangzhou as the centre of South China's food culture, earning the title "*meisik tintong*" - heaven of delicacies.[26] This shift confirmed then, more than ever, the need for the Hong Kong distinction from mainland China, thus resulting in the definitive fork between yum cha styles – *guangsik* (Guangzhou style) and *gongsik* (Hong Kong style).[27] This distinction provided Hong Kong with the ability to establish its own

xx. 坐低，飲杯茶，食個包 - *chodai yum bui cha, sik gor bau*
Sit down, drink a cup of tea, eat a bun

20. Siumi Maria Tam, "*Eating Metropolitaneity: Hong Kong Identity in Yumcha*." (The Australian Journal of Anthropology 8, no. 3, 1997), 291–306. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1835-9310.1997.tb00169.x.

21. Natalie Yee Chu, "*The Impacts and Significance of Yum Cha for the Cantonese Diaspora*." (Asian American Research Journal 3, 2023). https://doi.org/10.5070/RJ43060697.

22. ibid.

23. Siumi Maria Tam, "*Eating Metropolitaneity: Hong Kong Identity in Yumcha*." (The Australian Journal of Anthropology 8, no. 3, 1997), 291–306. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1835-9310.1997.tb00169.x.

24. ibid.

25. ibid.

26. ibid.

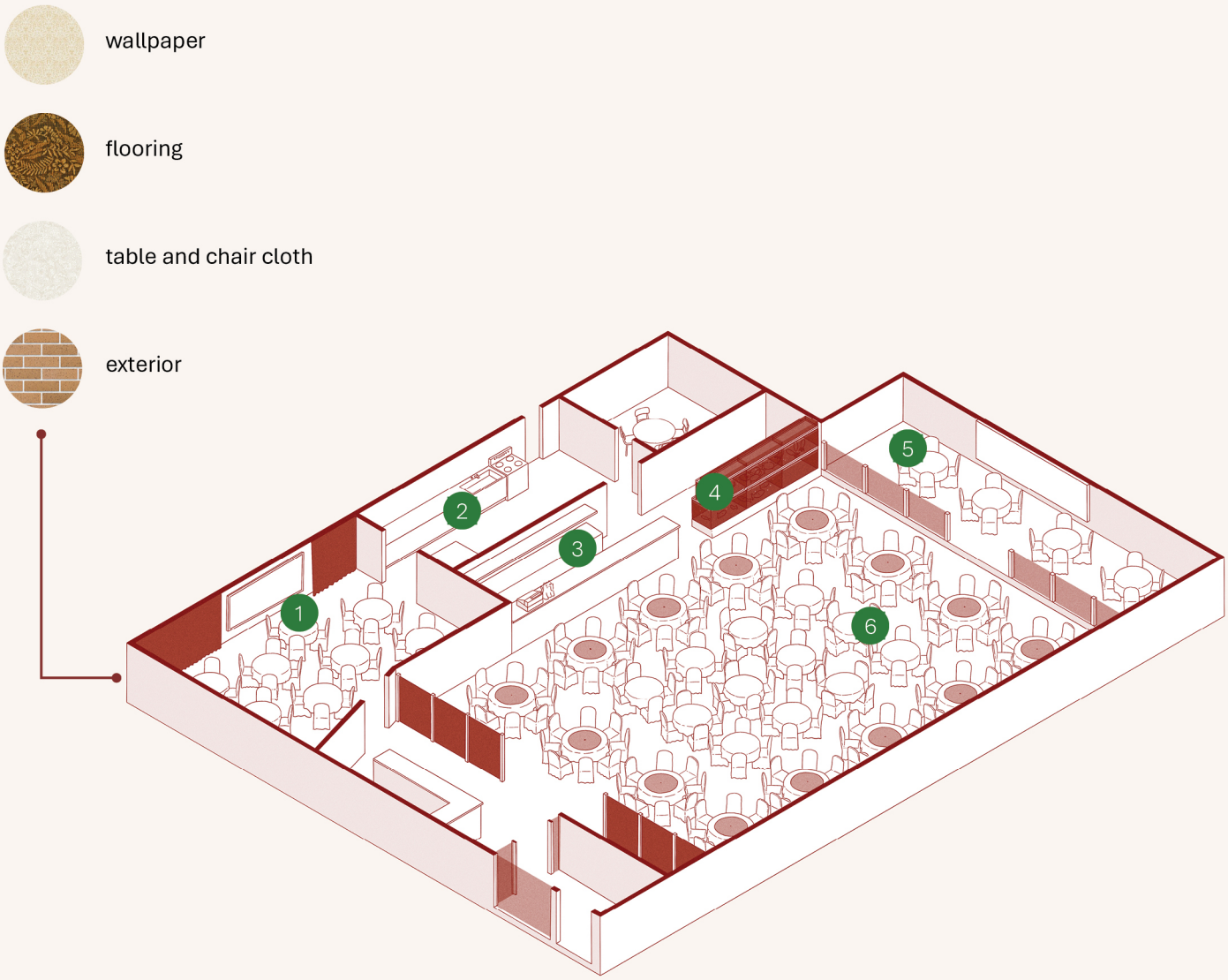
27. ibid.

xxi. 叹茶 - *tan cha*
Enjoy tea

identity. Often referred to as a "cultural desert"[28] - never quite Chinese nor British enough – *gongsik yum cha* offered the opportunity for Hong Kong to communicate their own language through food.

In this region, *yum cha* began to take shape into what is more commonly seen in diasporic settlements today. Previously a symbol the slower pace and the enjoyment of consuming tea and dishes, yum cha transformed into a quick, almost fast-food-adjacent option for eating, to reflect the rapid economic development in Hong Kong at the time. The food and service needed to be efficient, to allow workers to eat and go between shifts, or for mothers to feed their children before school.

28. Siumi Maria Tam, "*Eating Metropolitaneity: Hong Kong Identity in Yumcha*." (The Australian Journal of Anthropology 8, no. 3, 1997), 291–306. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1835-9310.1997.tb00169.x.



1. private dining room
2. kitchen is completely concealed
3. cash and bar counter
4. fish tanks for live seafood
5. elevated stage for events
6. round clothed tables around centre of room

Fig. 4.7 *Axonometric diagram of a typical cha lau*, by author, modelled after Ritzy Palace in Markham, ON.

4.4 Cha Lau

The role of *dim sum* and *yum cha* has transformed across continents, naturally, and plays a different role for each generation of Hong Kong-Canadian immigrant. For the first generation – *dim sum* is considered to be an everyday thing, to gather in a large venue and have breakfast with friends. It is a reminder of Hong Kong, and the children they used to be, running around in streets they would have called home. When interviewing my paternal grandmother, my *mama*, she shared that when she was a child, her father would spend every free minute at the local teahouse, having *dim sum* with colleagues and friends. When she couldn't find him at home after school, she would run to the teahouse, knowing he would be there. At the time, *dim sum* looked similar to how Canadian dim sum restaurants look today. With large clothed or glass-top tables, on weekday afternoons businessmen would sit with caged birds, sipping tea and picking away at steamed dishes.

It seems as though the *dim sum* restaurants – *cha lau* - in Canada had been picked up from my grandmother's version of Hong Kong and placed gently in the expansive plazas of the GTA. The *cha lau* here have large floor areas, typically in their own buildings within plazas, or at the end of a long strip. Due to their placement in these plazas, they are often unassuming on the exterior, and seem to double in size when you step inside. Floors are carpeted, round tables are clothed, and glass Lazy-Susans spin on top, where families sit in similarly clothed chairs. The interiors of the Canadian *dim sum* restaurant convey a sense of regality, with chandeliers and crown moulding, and the stages at the backs of the dining halls provide a multipurpose use for the room, for large banquets and weddings. A variety of fishtanks stack on top of each other by the front door, or line the walls of other restaurants; at some, you can pick out the exact fish you want. *Dim sum* carts are a rarity in the Greater Toronto Area, but the environment is bustling all the same, with tables filled with loud chatter and hands waving check-boxed paper menus to be taken from them.

In Canada, *dim sum*, for most second and third generation immigrants,





Fig. 4.8 (top) *Luk Yu Teahouse*, Central, Hong Kong, image by author, 2025

Fig. 4.9 (bottom) *Upper floors in Luk Yu Teahouse, for non-regular customers*, Central, Hong Kong, image by author, 2025





Fig. 4.10 (top) *Yum cha at Providential 9*, Markham, image by author, 2025

Fig. 4.11 (bottom) *Private dining section in Ritzy Palace*, Markham, image by author, 2025

becomes a meal saved for special occasions. Be it the upscaled interiors, the overwhelming social aspect, or the lack of smaller-sized tables, it is regarded as a venue reserved specifically for *yum cha* with grandparents, or occasional large outings with friends.

In North America, the *dim sum* restaurant has changed in its structure and protocol, but never its form or programming. Components of the *dim sum* restaurant have altered to address the changing landscape – the elimination of push carts following Covid-19, for example – but they have generally stayed the same, and have done little to change or present a new face. This is where Canadian *dim sum* differs from Hong Kong *dim sum*. In Hong Kong, where food access, convenience, and efficiency are of the utmost importance, *dim sum* has taken a rapid transformation into the world of fast food. This can be attributed to the busy life of Hong Kong, where businesspeople need quick meals, it can also be attributed to the lack of space in Hong Kong for these larger venues that are seen in Canada. Many of these banquet-hall-style *dim sum* restaurants that exist in Hong Kong are veteran businesses that have been around for decades, and span multiple floors. What is more common in Hong Kong is the casual restaurant as a venue for *dim sum*, the street vendors that sell classic steamed dishes, and the 7/11's on the corner where you can pick up *siu mai* and fish balls. This way of eating *dim sum* is cheaper, faster, and attracts a much younger and more regular crowd, blending in with the rest of the dining landscape of Hong Kong with their *siu mei* stalls, their convenience stores, and chain restaurants, and bear the same typical principles of dining seen in Canadian *dim sum* restaurants.

4.5 The Great Educator

The event of going out to eat *dim sum* with friends and family, particularly in the diasporic settlements across North America, presents an opportunity to be on display, and see everyone else. As a cuisine, *yum cha* is heralded as "...*the* Hong Kong way of eating,"[29] considered to be "...the most popular or even the only weekend activity for many of Hong Kong's urban dwellers."[30] It has become a regular part of routine in Hong Kong, infiltrating even the common greetings between friends and family. In Cantonese, it is common to say "*yum zo cha mei aa?*"[xxii] and "*dak haan yum cha*,"[xxiii] instead of the typical "hello" and "goodbye."[31] Its effortless integration into daily life, through actions, routine, and even through words, creates a place where human interaction is so frequent - it is guaranteed to penetrate parts of our subconscious that we are unaware of.

Anthropologist Siumi Maria Tam describes the *cha lau* as a "public arena,"[32] a place where just as much happens within the small ring or stage of your immediate table, as on the surrounds of it as well. You, as well as every other patron there, are on display for others to see – to the same effect of the Chinese principle of giving face. In the *cha lau*, you watch as families of similar ages around you fall into the same roles as your own – the adults speak amongst themselves, exchanging weekly happenings while simultaneously discussing what to order, and "[t]he familial hierarchy is conjured up when tea is poured by the offspring for their parents, and teenage grandchildren volunteer to *wan waih*, or to 'find or book a table.'"[33] As a child, you bear witness to your role at the dining table at this very moment, and for the next five decades to come, all from the same clothed seat. The walls of multi-level *cha lau* feel as though they are moving closer in as staff move swiftly to bring out more and more tables and chairs to fit families in their business, and families are made to feel togetherness and security, through the mimicked sensation of being together in a large dining room at home. Support is felt by family members sitting closely to one another, shoulder-to-shoulder.[34]

xxii. 饮咗茶未啊？ - *yum zo cha mei aa?*
Have you had your tea yet?

xxiii. 得閒飲茶 - *dak haan yum cha*
Let's have tea when you have time

29. Siumi Maria Tam, "*Lost and Found?: Reconstructing Hong Kong Identity in the Idiosyncrasy and Syncretism of Yumcha*." (Changing Chinese Foodways in Asia, 2001), 49–70.

30. ibid.

31. ibid.

32. ibid.

33. ibid.

34. ibid.

In the ethnoburbs of North America, the daily integration of *yum cha* into everyday life may hold true for the first generation of immigrants, but progressively becomes less the case for the newer generations in Canada. In the early 2000's perhaps, it may have been more commonplace to have *yum cha* twice or even three times a week as a family, an easy tradition to carry on from home, but as the years have gone by, and the second and third generation of immigrants that arrived in the 80s and 90s get older, it has become less convenient to take hours out of the day to have breakfast together as a family before starting the day for work and school. Nevertheless, the importance of the human interaction that occurs within a *cha lau* becomes even more prominent in Chinese diasporas across North America because they reveal the same things about familial hierarchy and day-to-day etiquette as those in Hong Kong do, but are then coupled with the task to reveal cultural notions as well. In many Western households, food becomes the first pathway to learning about culture.

4.5.1 Skyview Fusion

The Chinese ethnoburbs in the Greater Toronto Area are abundant in *cha lau*, serving as anchors for typically Hong Kong-developed plazas in the neighbourhoods they reside. Along Woodbine Avenue, there are a handful of large units in every plaza, fronted with large parking lots to accommodate the many families coming and going on weekends and weekdays. Many of these restaurants, such as Ritzy Palace or Lobster Port, both situated off of Woodbine Avenue, have opened in or relocated to this area, bringing with them a loyal customer-base that have travelled from relocation to relocation through word of mouth, or the never-failing *gwaan hai*. In interviews with young chefs from Markham, and children of family-owned businesses, Skyview Fusion, another *cha lau* off of Woodbine Avenue, was mentioned as a go-to spot, or referred to as a baseline when speaking about "the *dim sum* experience."

Skyview Fusion sits at the end of a long and narrow plaza, anchoring its position across the lot from a Costco. It is a *cha lau* in every typical sense of the word - large, with chandeliers and a stage, carpeted floors and clothed tables. From the parking lot you are greeted from the side by four tall and large red tents, housing an outdoor version of the seating that continues inside. Perhaps a condition that arose from Covid-19 when indoor dining was still prohibited, the space outside is quieter and less full - only in use during optimal weather, or for patrons that simply do not want to wait for a table inside.

Upon entrance, a stone statue of a turtle greets patrons - a symbol for longevity and resilience in Chinese tradition. Use of nooks and partial partitions create privacy and sense of separation in rooms in an otherwise large and open space, and as you walk from the host's table at the entrance, the room expands to reveal rows of large circular tables covered in pearl jacquard cloths spread equally across the patterned carpet floor. On walls adjacent to the kitchen are fish tanks filled with live seafood from crabs, lobsters, eels, and fish, where patrons may choose the exact catch they want to eat.

At one end of the restaurant furthest from the entrance, the floor is elevated two steps up onto a stage, where three to four round tables sit. During events, this space is reserved for the guests of honour - brides and grooms on their wedding days, host families on Chinese New Year - but on regular days, these seats are treated the same as the others on the floor, with equal access to view and be viewed by everyone else in the restaurant, except for the two private rooms on either end of the stage. Along with the raised stage, there is a moveable wall at the opposite side of the restaurant, indicating the existance of a multitude of possibilities for the restaurant to transform into banquet halls, event spaces, and more.

The round tables on the floor are accompanied by clothed seats in a similar jacquard fabric, with a single row of pankou fasteners along the back spine. There is a glass Lazy Susan that sits at the centre of each table, holding warm dishes and pots of tea, some with the lid flipped upside down to signal to the servers that a refill is needed. During our visit, a family seated at a table on the stage sings Happy Birthday in Cantonese, falling into the background noise as I clean my dinnerware with the jug of hot water on the table ; a key first step to any meal at a *cha lau*, something I had learned from my mother, who had learned from my mama. My friends watch, almost as though it is a performance, their backs turned from the actual stage itself, ready to to do the same with their own dinnerware. The performance continues as my friends watch the server make their way to the table, making a beeline straight to the only Chinese person at the table, expecting an order in full Cantonese and sighing when I shyly ask for a General Tso's chicken.

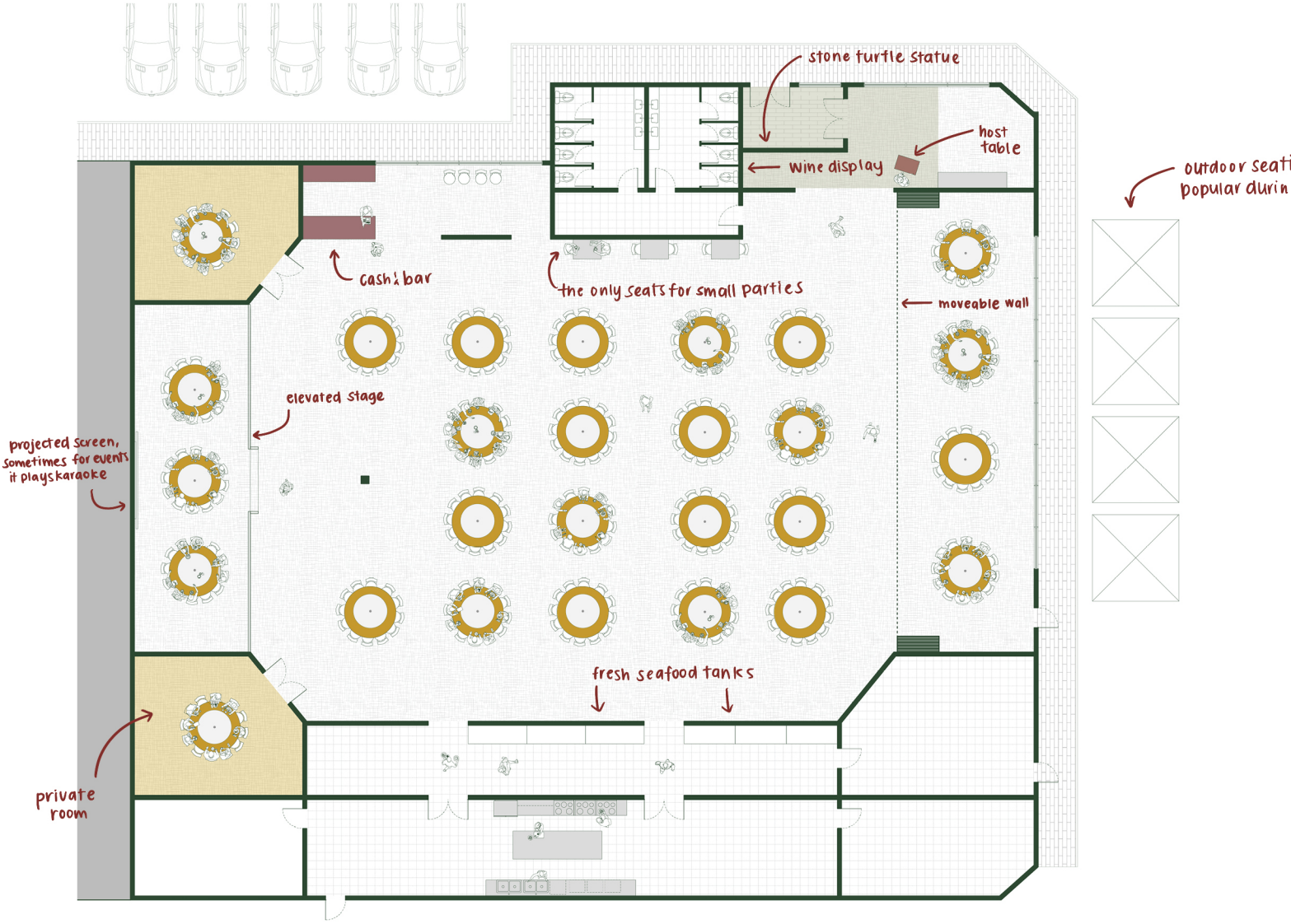
Fig. 4.12 *Skyview Fusion plan*, by author

cash/bar

waiting area

traditional banquet tables

private rooms





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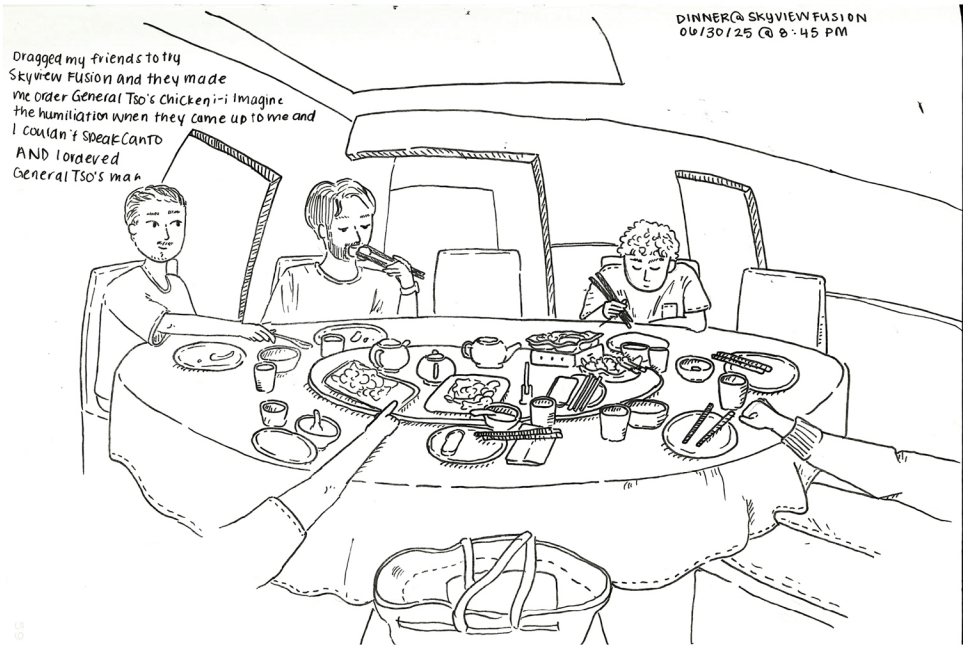




flooring

upholstery



wallpaper

Fig. 4.13 (left) *Skyview Fusion interior*, Markham, image by author , 2025

Fig. 4.14 (right) *Skyview Fusion extra seating,* Markham, image by author, 2025

Fig. 4.15 (bottom) *Skyview Fusion perspective sketches*, by author

4.5.2 Providential 9

Further north on Woodbine Avenue is Providential 9. Aside from the neighbouring golf store, Providential 9 is in a standalone building, occupying more than 75 per cent of it with its large dining area, and complicated parking lot. Notorious for its long queues, the *cha lau*'s sophisticated design and menu items bring a large group of people waiting to dine on weekends and even weekdays.

Two traditional Chinese lion sculptures greet patrons on either side of the entrance, symbolizing power, fortune, and protection. Upon entering the space, you are greeted by a much quieter level of noise than the typical *cha lau* offers. Less clanging of porcelain, a lower level of chatter, due to the use of partitions and sectioning to create private sections of the space. Overall, the *cha lau* is designed with a much darker style than the typical, older *cha lau* in the neighbourhood, calling back to a style that plays off of ancient Chinese temples. Circular motifs fill the room, not just in the shape of the tables, but in wall cut-outs and entryways into private rooms, a common symbol of harmony and wholeness.

The dining room is organized into three sections - the south side, which houses a selection of larger and smaller tables, the middle, housing a collection of smaller tables, and the north side, where the private rooms are placed. The south side, closest to the entrance, is long and narrow, with one solid wall adorned with traditional Chinese painted screens, and the other side sectioned off by an open structure topped with pagoda-style embellishments and a sloped eavestrough to ward off spirits. The structure has a woven blind that pulls down to create separation between the south side and middle of the dining room, so tables may be placed directly next to one another on either side of the structure, while still providing privacy. On the ceiling in the south wing, there are metal tracks with wooden panels attached to their end, allowing for the south side to become sectioned off for more private dining spaces. On either end of the south dining wing, there are two wooden and rattan cabinets where to-go boxes and plastic bags are

hidden. The centre section, housing smaller tables of four to six people, is the largest section of the dining hall. This emphasis on smaller tables sets Providential 9 apart from other *cha lau*, allowing the opportunity for smaller groups of people to dine in the space, without occupying a table that is typically meant for groups of eight to ten. At the end of the section is a projector, with doors to the kitchen and bathrooms on either side. The north side of the dining hall is quiet and closed off, a row of private rooms with a similar circular motif are arranged along the wall, with a gap in between the structure and the doorways to create a hallway.

The decor elements of Providential 9 are more minimal and rigid than the typical *cha lau* - the floors are a cool grey tile, and the chairs are a dark wood finish with upholstered seat cushions - yet the experience in Providential 9 is much more intimate than others, due to the careful curation of spatial sectioning to create quiet corners, the use of dim, recessed lighting instead of the regal chandeliers, and the employment of smaller tables, curates a quieter space for people to gather. Back in the parking lot, behind the building, is where the noise is - an open door to the kitchen lets the smell of food and the sound of metal utensils and woks escape its confines. On the sidewalk in front of the door is a man in chef's whites, lighting a cigarette and wiping his forehead, next to empty boxes from the morning's deliveries.

On my visit, there are no celebrations being held in the main dining hall, perhaps they are being hosted in the private dining rooms, but from where I am seated, across the floor, I cannot hear or see where they are. On the south side, where we are seated, the wing is filled with people meeting friends of similar ages - married couples sharing lunch with other couples, groups of mothers seated around tables, chatting about their children's new jobs or academic endeavours. In the select few tables that seat larger families, there are older children enjoying *yum cha* with their grandparents before they are sent off to summer school, the hostess is sure to come by and say "Hello," gawking at how big they have grown.

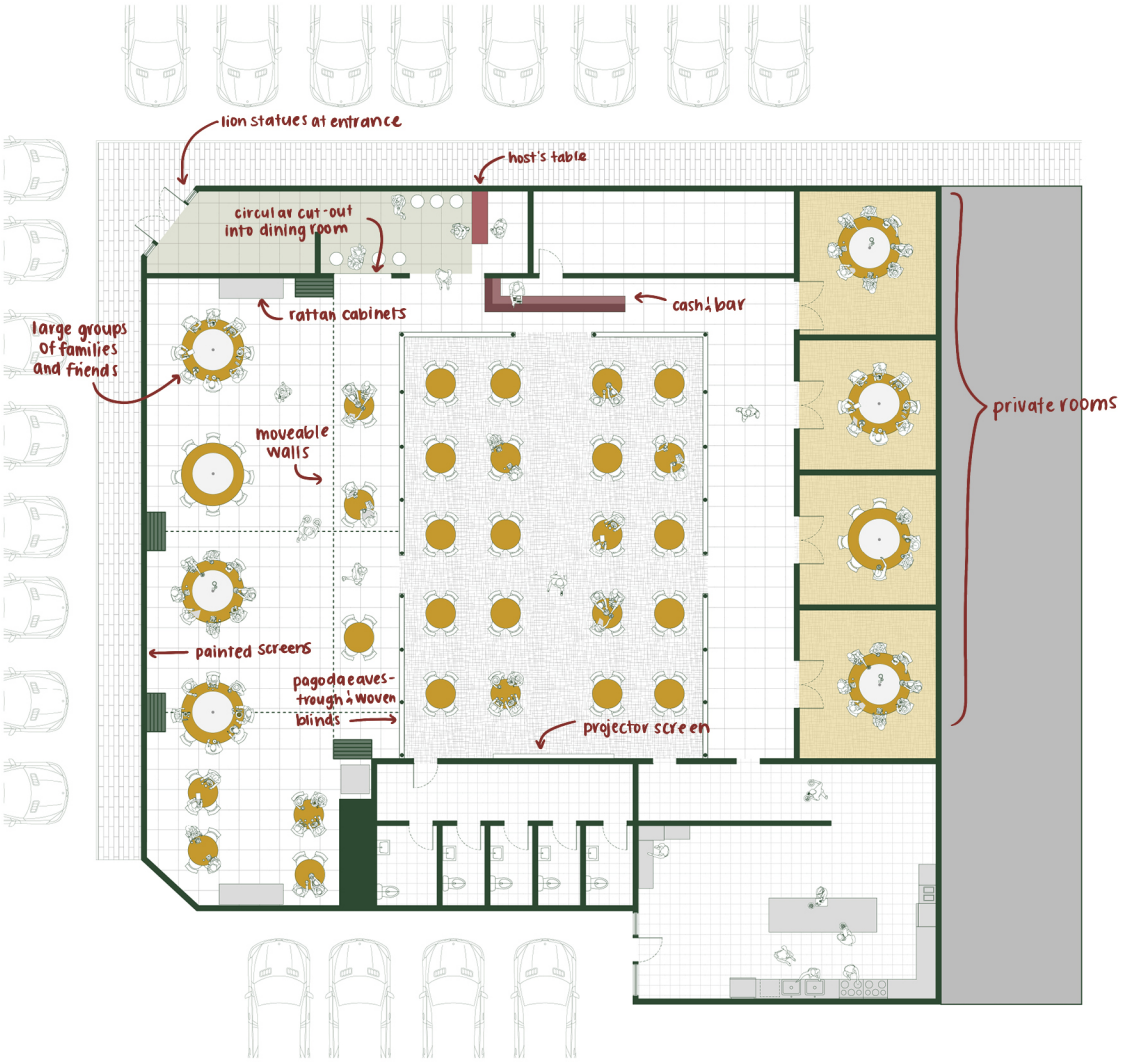
Fig. 4.16 *Providential 9 plan*, by author

cash/bar

waiting area

traditional banquet tables

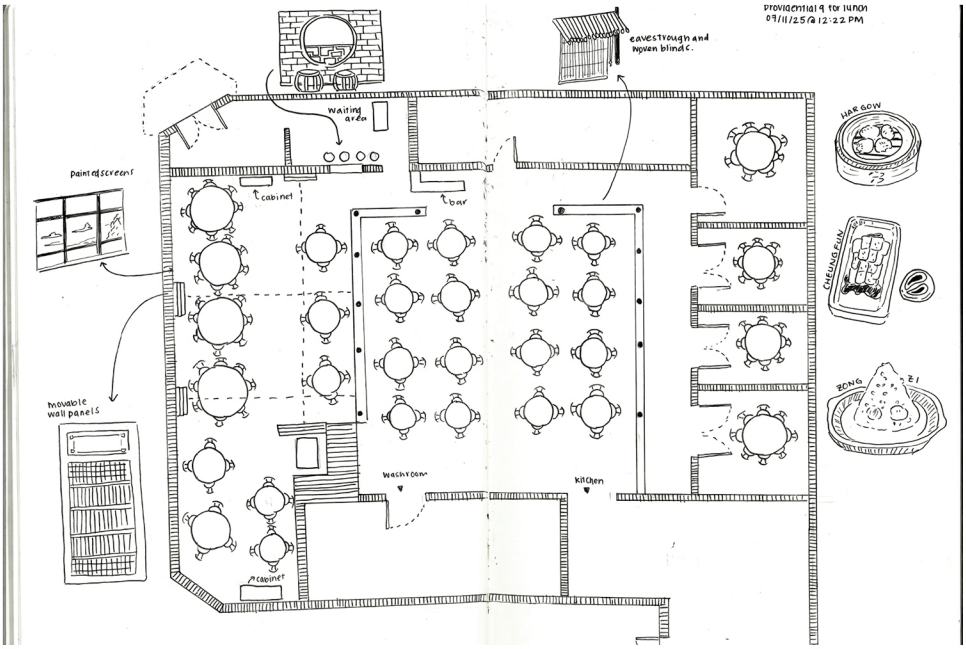
private rooms













wood finishes



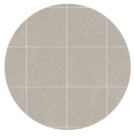
rattan



upholstery



wall covering



flooring



carpeting

Fig. 4.17 (left) *Providential 9 dinnerware*, Markham, image by author, 2025

Fig. 4.18 (right) *Providential 9 interior,* Markham, image by author, 2025

Fig. 4.19 (bottom) *Providential 9 perspective sketches*, by author

4.6 Conclusion

The Canadian *dim sum* restaurant provides an ecosystem of sorts to observe and teach one another about Chinese culture. Coupled with the Chinese principle of "giving face," the dim sum restaurant can be often regarded as an "arena" to eat in where you may become the spectator and the spectated. Here, unbeknownst to the patron, you become an active part of a performance, where you are learning about the etiquettes, culture, and traditions of Chinese dining, all in the span of two hours, and mostly in one seat.

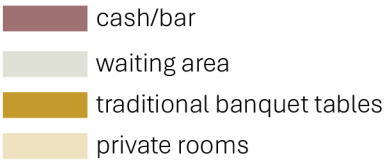
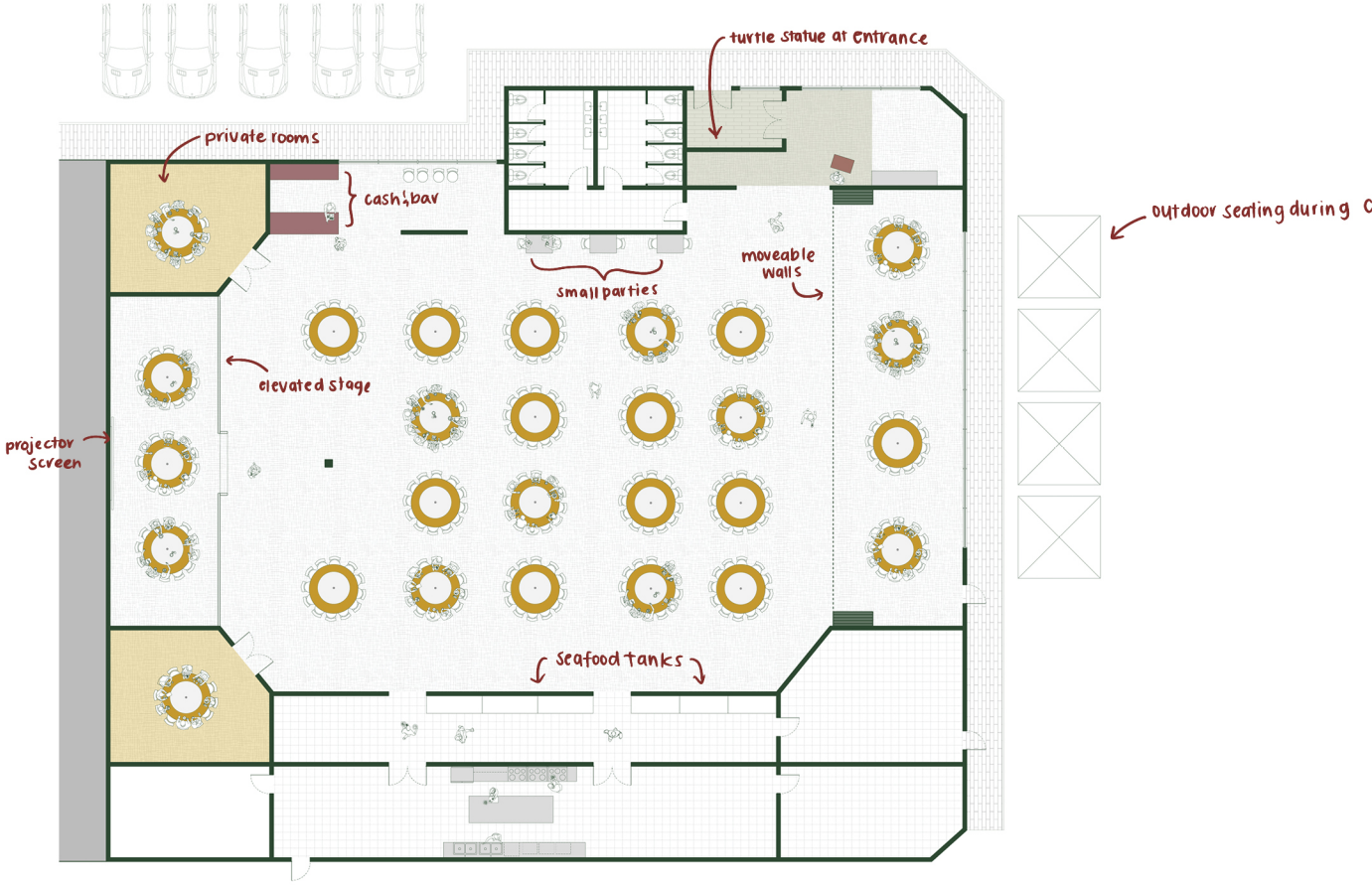
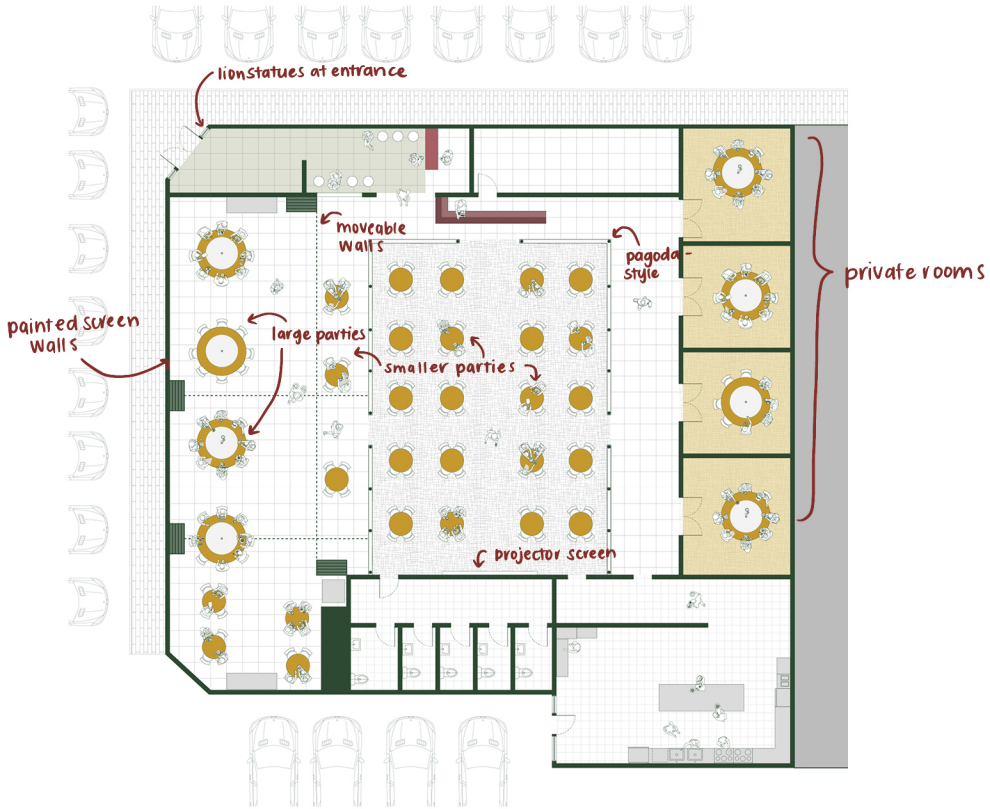


Fig. 4.20 *Cha lau layout comparison*, by author

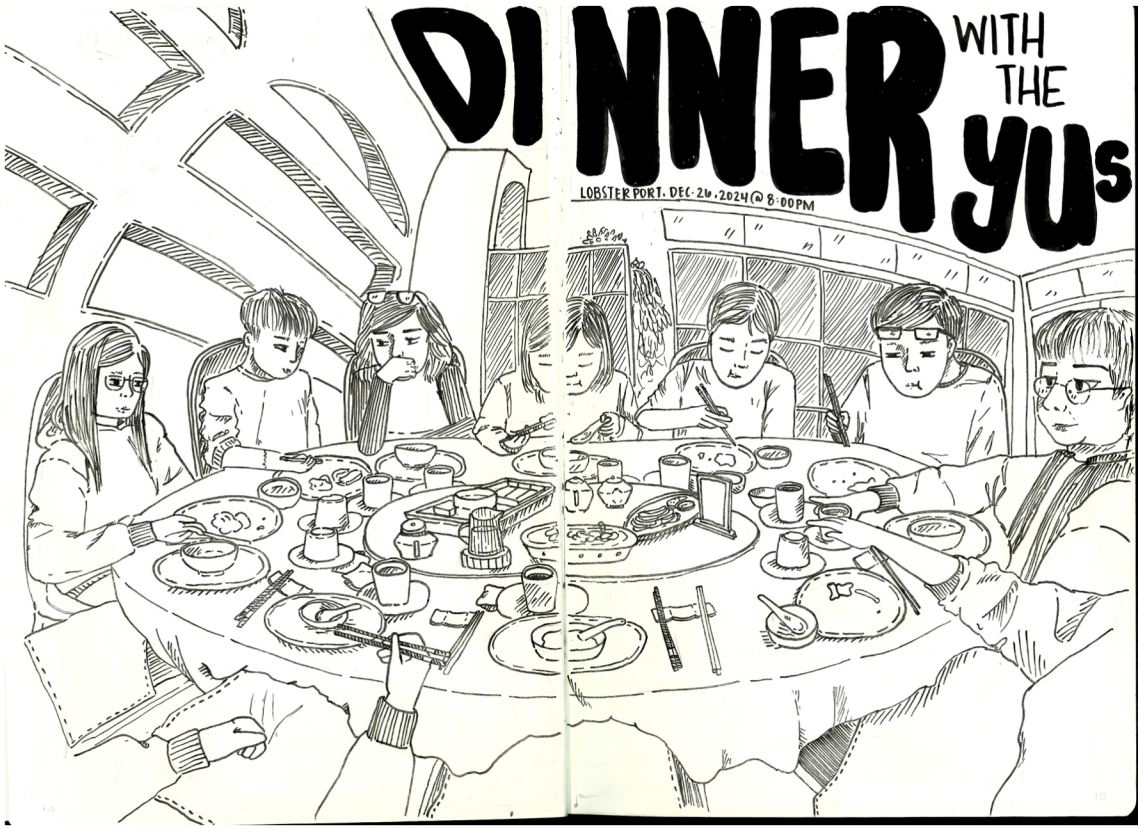


Skyview Fusion, Markham

With round tables splayed over an expansive dining hall, the patron becomes privy to the knowledge that eating *dim sum* at a *cha lau* is part and parcel with engaging in an ancient part of Chinese culture that has existed since dynastic periods. Throughout time, these elements change, hanging bird cages are removed and women pushing carts of steamed baskets are replaced, but the memory of their existence lives in the walls. More importantly, their memory lives in the people that still dine in these spaces, passing on stories of when these elements were commonplace, some time ago.



Providential 9, Markham



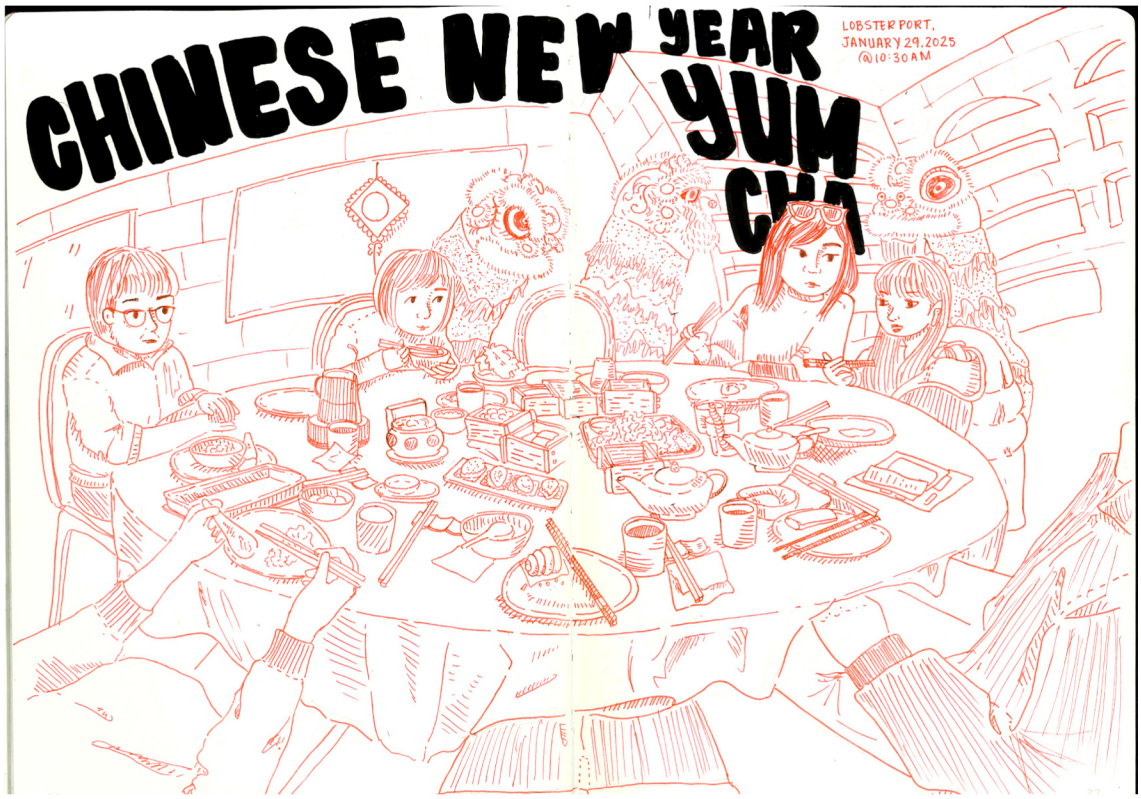
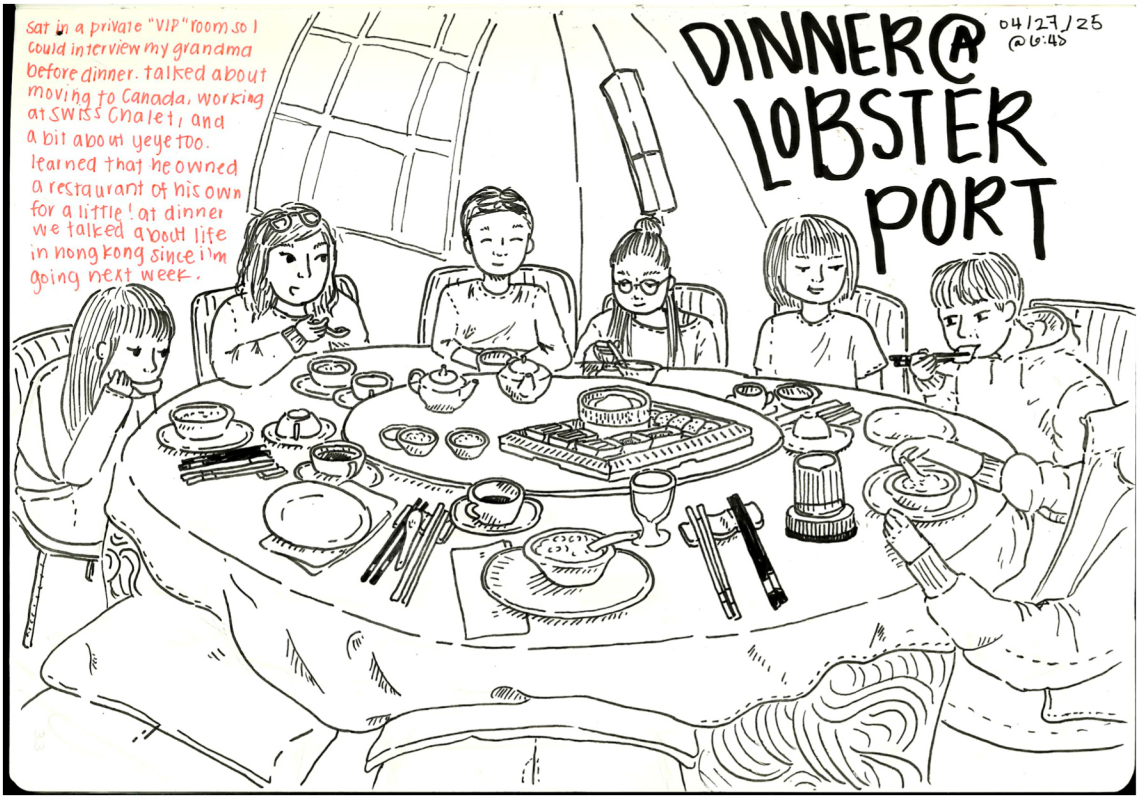


Fig. 4.21 (top) *Dinner at Lobster Port sketch*, by author

Fig. 4.22 (bottom) *Chinese New Year at Lobster Port sketch*, by author



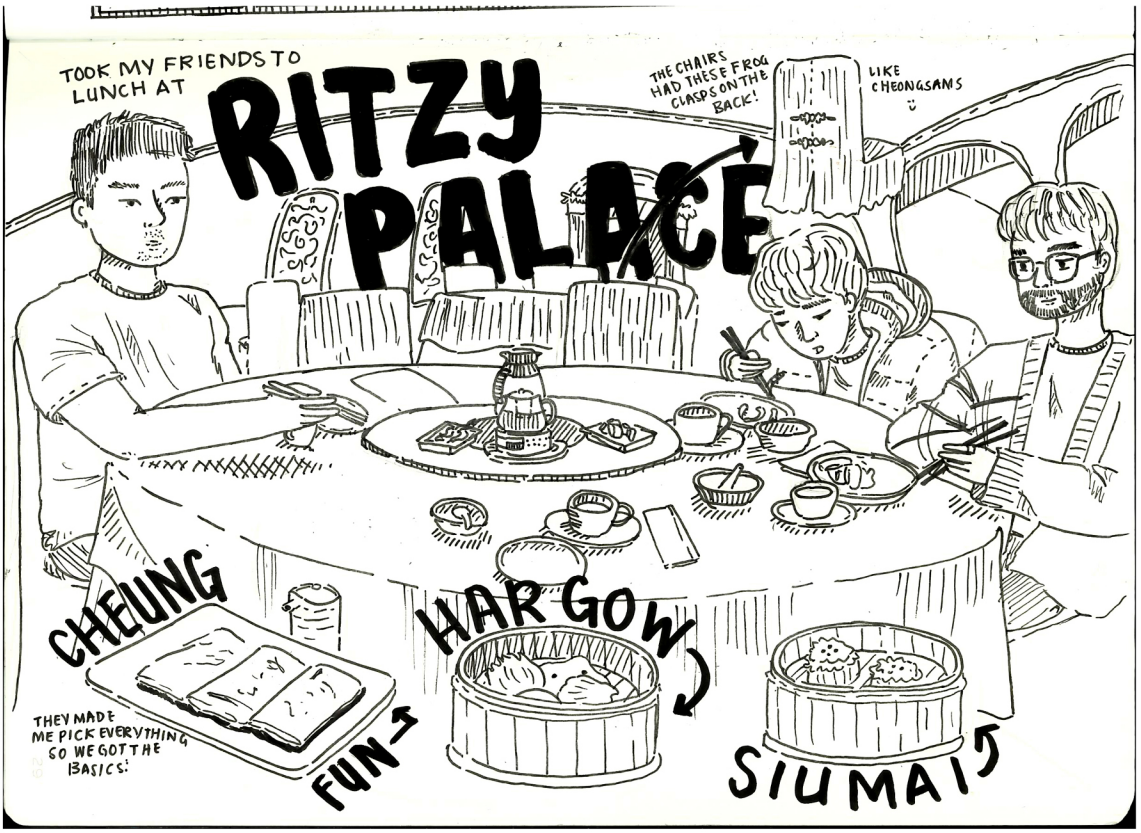


Fig. 4.23 (top) *Dinner at Lobster Port sketch*, by author

Fig. 4.24 (bottom) *Lunch at Ritzy Palace sketch*, by author

5.0 A Restaurant for Us

" I will use this sharp pain to penetrate my daughter's tough skin and cut her tiger spirit loose. She will fight me, because this is the nature of two tigers.

But I will win and give her my spirit, because this is a way a mother loves her daughter."[0]

Seated in the food court in front of Great Fountain Fast Food, patrons watch as the owners, a mother and father from Toisan, shout various order numbers as they slide trays of food across a stainless-steel counter top. Their daughter is seated at a table across from me for our interview, squeezing her eyes shut at the thought of her parents retiring in just a few short years. She hopes to take over when the time comes, citing her customer base and the amount of effort it's taken to build the following and relationships they have. In 2020, she began working with her parents in the restaurant on a full-time basis. Fresh out of university, she credits her parents' immigration from China with their hard work and dedication to running a business as motivators to follow in their footsteps. She waves at regulars and glances over to check on her parents, ensuring it doesn't get too hectic, recognizing that, "... running a business is very hard. [My parents were] never home and I barely ever [got] to spend time with them [while growing up]. And when I do spend time with them, I realize they're super duper tired all the time. [...] How do I pay my gratitude back towards my parents for, you know, moving [to Canada], raising me and my brother up in this really nice environment - how do I give it back?"[1]

This notion of giving back – paying back an almost generational or cultural debt – is not uncommon for second and third generation Chinese immigrants. Recognizing, now in their early to mid-ages of adulthood, the sacrifice it must have taken for their grandparents or parents to leave their entire lives behind across the oceans and take

0. Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*. (New York : Putnam's, 1989)

1. Interviewee A, interview with author, June 25, 2025.

a leap into complete unknown territory. At Great Fountain, however, as I sit across from a from a second-generation daughter of Chinese immigrants, I realize just how rare her particular stance is on this topic – to work with her parents and potentially take over the business is something that many other second and third generation immigrants with similar stories are pushed away from, encouraged to become doctors or engineers. Herein lies the issue: our grandparents and parents are growing to the ages of retirement, boasting successful businesses that they've dedicated their entire lives to growing, with no one to pass them on in the next five to ten years.

The following chapter looks forward in time to the shift in ownership, generation, and experience that will inevitably impact the restaurant industry in the coming years. In a way, the first generation of Canadian-born Chinese are growing into adulthood, making sense of what it means to be a second or third generation immigrant. With that, a recent influx in Hong Kong immigrants to Canada, is also signalling a shift to the younger Chinese population in Canada, and what their needs and wants could mean for the future of the Chinese restaurant.



Fig. 5.1 *Lunchtime at Great Fountain Fast Food*, Scarborough, image by author, 2025

5.1 Next Wave of Hong Kong Immigration

In the first few waves of Hong Kong immigration, common contributing factors included the political stability of Hong Kong and its relations with China, the strength of a Canadian citizenship, and opportunity for international education. However, Canada's historic "unfavourable economic conditions" - the 2008 recession, for example – prompted many Hong Kong immigrants to move back to Hong Kong in the late 2000s to early 2010s.[3] When Canada opened its doors to immigration in the 1980s with the introduction of the Investment Act, many Hong Kong immigrants were reluctant to commit completely to settling in Canada. Parents would bring their children to Canada to make use of the government's aid and support in immigration, while "...many breadwinners engaged in a transnational commute between Hong Kong and Canada, leaving spouses and children in Canada to financially sustain their families."[4] This family dynamic became widely known as "astronaut families" or "satellite kids."[5] Upon receiving Canadian citizenship, however, many Hong Kongers chose to move back to the region, contributing to the 67% of an estimated 300,000 Canadians that now live in Hong Kong.[6] This has been quantified in Toronto's census data from 2016 and 2021 – displaying a five percent decrease in total immigrants from Hong Kong (38,820 in 2016 to 36,850 in 2021).[7]

Canada and Hong Kong have shared this push and pull of immigration and re-migration for the past three decades, with a gradual increase in immigration back to Canada from Hong Kong in more recent years. Under consistent tension with the Chinese government, Hong Kong social movements have become more frequent since the 2010s, with the anti-national education movement in 2012 and the Umbrella Movement in 2014, once again striking uncertainty about Hong Kong's political outlook for the years to come.[8] In 2020, as Hong Kong's political outlook hung in the balance once again, with China's National People's Congress Standing Committee's passing of a resolution that outlined, "...lawmakers [would] be disqualified if they support Hong Kong independence, refuse to acknowledge China's sovereignty, ask foreign forces to interfere in the city's affairs or in other ways threaten national

3. Miu Chung Yan, Ching Man Lam, and Sean Lauer. "*Return Migrant or Diaspora: An Exploratory Study of New-Generation Chinese–Canadian Youth Working in Hong Kong.*" (Journal of International Migration and Integration 15, no. 2, May 1, 2014), 179–96. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-013-0274-8.

4. Kennedy Chi-pan Wong, and Miu Chung Yan. "*Leaving the Homeland Again for My Family's Future: Post-Return Migration Among Hong Kong Canadians.*" (Journal of International Migration and Integration 24, no. 2, June 1, 2023), 467–86. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-022-00955-0.

5. Miu Chung Yan, Ching Man Lam, and Sean Lauer. "*Return Migrant or Diaspora: An Exploratory Study of New-Generation Chinese–Canadian Youth Working in Hong Kong.*" (Journal of International Migration and Integration 15, no. 2, May 1, 2014), 179–96. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-013-0274-8.

6. ibid.

7. Data from Statistics Canada Census Profile, 2016 Census and Statistics Canada Census Profile, 2021 Census

6. Kennedy Chi-pan Wong, and Miu Chung Yan. "*Leaving the Homeland Again for My Family's Future: Post-Return Migration Among Hong Kong Canadians.*" (Journal of International Migration and Integration 24, no. 2, June 1, 2023), 467–86. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-022-00955-0.

security,"[9] Canadian immigration was strongly encouraged to follow the schemes of the United Kingdom and Australia by implementing a "lifeboat scheme," split into three sections that addressed young Hong Kong residents with youth work visas, Hong Kong residents seeking asylum, and Hong Kong residents looking for expedited family reunification with members already living in Canada.[10]

With this scheme, Canada received 2,295 permanent residents from Hong Kong, over double the amount from 2020, and 49 percent more than 2019, before Covid-19.[11] The real spike, however, is in young students and Hong Kong immigrants looking for work. The lifeboat scheme saw Canada issuing 6,370 study permits to Hong Kong residents in 2021, and 5,550 work permits through the International Mobility Program, displaying a near 200% and 169% increase from previous years, respectively.[12]

Hong Kong immigrants in this current wave are younger than previous waves, gravitating towards the bustling downtown-core of Toronto where they are able to live, walk, eat, anywhere without the need of a car. Currently in school or recently graduated, the newer wave of Hong Kong immigrants are not looking for single-detached homes in the suburbs to accommodate families, they are looking for places that are new, convenient, and near their friends, classmates, their places of work or school. Immigrants that landed in the first waves in the 1980s were westernized to a point - having lived in a British colony, with experience in global business - but the young Hong Kong immigrant is now westernized to a much different scale, coming from American or English high schools, and the enormous shift Hong Kong has taken both towards westernization, but also its reassimilation into mainland China in recent years.

Though they are not landing in the city of Toronto to open new and trendy restaurants, they are sure to find comfort in the restaurants in the Greater Toronto Area that call back to a Hong Kong that may often predate them. There is a parallel here between the first waves of Hong Kong immigrants and this recent one, and their affinity for the Hong Kong of the past. It comes with a slight twinge in the heart for today's Hong Kong newcomers to be seated at a cha chaan teng in Markham and be reminded of the Hong Kong they long for, and not the one they "...no longer recognize to be Hong Kong."[13]

9. Hong Kong Watch. "*Canada's Lifeboat Scheme for Hong Kongers: HKW Explainer*," November 24, 2020. https://www.hongkongwatch.org/all-posts/2020/11/24/canadas-lifeboat-scheme-for-hong-kongers-hkw-explainer.

10. ibid.

11. Colin R. Singer, "*Hong Kong Immigrating to Canada in Record Numbers.*" (Immigration.Ca (blog), May 11, 2022). https://immigration.ca/hong-kong-immigrating-to-canada-in-record-numbers/#:~:text=Then%2C%20the%20new%20pathway%20was,TFWP)%20also%20jumped%20last%20year.

12. ibid.

13. Interviewee B, interview with author, July 7, 2025

5.2 Rise of the Jook-Sing

On a tangential plane, the generation of children and grandchildren of Hong Kong immigrants are exiting post-secondary education and growing into the workforce. Canadian and American-born Chinese, often plagued with the nickname "*jook-sing*,"[xxiv] are pressured academically by parents to strive for high degrees in STEM backgrounds - consequently causing the rift in the restaurant industry we are beginning to see today. There is now an absence of inheritors for the Chinese-owned and legacy-built businesses, as the owners - parents and grandparents - begin to contemplate retirement. Mom-and-pop restaurants close or are handed over to children, but in both cases end up as a rebranded product that highlights a certain "fusion" - in cuisine, cultures, and generations - bringing in a fresh perspective to age-old traditions.

xxiv. 竹升 - *jook sing*
Bamboo rod; in reference to Chinese individuals born and raised into Western culture

The *jook sing* experience is different for every second and third generation immigrant, thus there are many avenues for which the "new" Chinese restaurant may take shape. A "Big Mac Bao" at Dai Lo, or the Yan dining experience at Hong Shing, a veteran restaurant from Old Chinatown, point to a newer take on Cantonese cuisine and an even larger shift to the new generation emerging in the industry. The shared sentiment is quite clear amongst the second and third generations that have come into owning their own restaurants or inheriting their parents' - it comes down to, in large part, what they owe their parents. For their sacrifice, their hard work, the ability to pursue cooking and the restaurant industry as a passion or a sign of appreciation, as opposed to a mode of survival, shows a great deal how times have changed.

The rise of social media has given way to a change in dining for the broader restaurant industry – an emphasis on natural wines, tasting menus and tapas, and the occasional pop-up or residency – has begun to appear in cities like Toronto, New York, Vancouver, and Hong Kong. An emphasis is placed on the experience of dining – where the younger generation, struggling to deal with the financial pressures of recessions and owning homes, turn to purchasing small "wins" or

"treats" to enjoy luxury at a much more palatable scale. From this, a new generation of Cantonese chefs have also emerged into the space, receiving professional training and wanting to return to their cultural roots with a sophisticated twist, wanting to share a story that is unique to their experience.

In a sense, the growing generation is taking what was once regarded as "unwanted" - the label of the "*jook-sing*," the meaning of Cantonese-Canadian cuisine as "fake Chinese" - and reinterpreting it to reflect a new experience of being "between two worlds".[14] The chop suey style, with beef and broccoli or orange chicken, that had been catered to the Western palate, is no longer needed to represent Cantonese cooking. Instead, what is being introduced is a style of Cantonese cuisine that does not dilute the traditional dishes, but adds onto them as a way to acknowledge "...this is where I come from, but this is also where I grew up."[15] Menus may not include *egg foo yung* or sesame chicken, but they introduce dishes like Iberico *Char Siu*, from Toronto restaurant Ayla, that presents the classic *char siu* with a Brazilian rich green sauce, not to be palatable, but to be different, and not to erase the original, but to recognize it.

The intergenerational transfer of knowledge in these establishments becomes a transfer of knowledge between the old-guard and the new – restauranteurs sharing tips and tricks with the younger folk, or new Chinese restaurants emerging at similar times, learning with and from one another. At Hong Shing Restaurant, recently inherited by the original owner's son, the front-of-house staff consists of young people in their late teens to early twenties. The owner and general manager, in their early thirties, have taken the initiative to learn how to cook on the wok, and have implemented activities at social events such as challenges where guests are dared to see how long they can hold a wok for, to bring attention to the skill and strength it takes to work in the industry.

14. Interviewee B, interview with author, July 7, 2025

15. ibid.

5.3 Shifting Dining Culture

The restaurant industry is not unfamiliar with rapid change and growth, bracing multiple facelifts to adjust to changing lifestyles of patrons, and advancement of technology and social media. The growth in recent years, however, particularly concerning technology and social media, has catapulted the industry to transform at a pace that can cause concern for local culinary veterans, the go-to spots and family-run restaurants that had opened decades ago with the plazas themselves. In most cases, the Covid-19 pandemic can be seen as the major event that caused noticeable growth and change in the restaurants in the Greater Toronto Area which is proven in the shift towards favouring takeout options over dining in, the increase in food delivery options, and the rising concern for health and food safety.

In the Greater Toronto Area, it is commonplace for restaurants, particularly those located in plazas, to have short lifespans. These businesses are known to close permanently, making room for new and trendier businesses to move in, or to change ownership, often sacrificing integrity in menu, service, or the relationship with the neighbourhood. Along Highway 7, in the car with my parents, they'll point out every business that has been there since they were in high school, noting Saigon Star, the Lucullus Bakery we visit every Sunday to grab bolobao, and shaking their heads as we pass by Times Square Plaza, where Richmond Court used to be. Richmond Court was what many would consider to be a true community staple. If one were to ask any Chinese-Canadian, of any generation, that had grown up in Scarborough, Markham, or Richmond Hill if they knew of Richmond Court, they would look at you as though you had asked them if the sky was blue. One of the few restaurants in the uptown area opened past midnight, Richmond Court offered classic *cha chaan teng* snacks and barbecued meat throughout the day, *dim sum* in the mornings, and a bakery by the cash register, it was a place that was busy from the minute it opened to the second it closed – bustling with uncles gathering after a long day to share a meal and a laugh. After the pandemic, Richmond Court's loyal customer-base remained, though less frequent, with the

shortened hours and health concerns, many families were choosing to stay in for dinner, or order through takeout apps. In September of 2023, Richmond Court fell victim to one of two cases of arson in the plaza,[16] and closed for a brief period before reopening in the new year, with a much different look. The new and improved Richmond Court erased any evidence of a glass pastry case at the front entrance, or heated rack where roasted duck and barbecued pork hung by the cashier – replaced with chandeliers, carpeted floors, and round clothed tables, Richmond Court was made to look like any other dim sum restaurant in the neighbouring plazas, closed for lunch and open for *yum cha* and dinner service. This shift was not well-received by the community, now at a loss for a key third place in the neighbourhood and unmotivated to visit a new dim sum restaurant with a handful of similar establishments that had gained the community's stamp of approval just doors down, Richmond Court was forced to close at the end of 2024.

The burden of generational change does not fall solely on the business and its decisions, but the change in its people, too. Closure and the inability to keep up with health code changes and social media trends is not something that is isolated just to one restaurant; Richmond Court was not the only business that felt forced to change to keep up, it is just an outlier that made the wrong move. In *cha lau* across the Greater Toronto Area, as well as in Hong Kong, the main noticeable shift is the move away from push carts. *Dim sum* was first served to residents of Hong Kong by male servers, holding trays of steamed baskets strung around their necks, shouting the names of each dish loudly over the chatter of the patrons seated for yum cha. Service later shifted to what Hong Kong *dim sum* is more commonly known for, women pushing carts of food between tables.[17] The people in these positions require physical strength and interpersonal skills, making small talk with patrons as they bring the carts around. After the pandemic, however, the carts began to disappear, replaced with individual order cards, allowing patrons to tick off the dishes they wanted themselves. Like many other components of the service industry that are now considered to be a rare skill, such as cooking with a wok, having the ability to understand regulars and patrons alike to the degree of knowing their favourite dishes and knowing which tables to visit when a certain steam basket lands on your cart, has become gradually pushed out to make way for the most efficient and cost-effective solutions.

16. Melissa Wallace, "*Suspects Sought after 2 Fires Set in 2 Days at Times Square Richmond Hill*." (Richmond Hill The Liberal (blog), September 6, 2023). https://www.yorkregion.com/news/suspects-sought-after-2-fires-set-in-2-days-at-times-square-richmond-hill/article_9afe117b-6af2-58e7-af1c-7e574aef220a.html.

17. Siumi Maria Tam, "*Eating Metropolitaneity: Hong Kong Identity in Yumcha*." (The Australian Journal of Anthropology 8, no. 3, 1997), 291–306. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1835-9310.1997.tb00169.x.





Fig. 5.2 (top) *Sunny's Chinese interior*, Toronto, image by author, 2025

Fig. 5.3 (bottom) *Hong Shing Restaurant interior*, Toronto image by author, 2025





Fig. 5.4 *Ayla Upstairs entrance*, Toronto, images by author, 2025

Hong Kong has experienced intense change in infrastructure and technology – from the elimination of bamboo scaffolding,[18] the replacement of iconic neon signs,[19] and the eventual replacement of the Toyota Crown Comfort taxis with electric cars.[20] This change signals a much larger shift not only in Hong Kong but in mainland China as well, to a more efficient, legislated, and clean lifestyle. Though the shift has been gradual, and ultimately a result of globalization, a key driving factor in the concern for health, efficiency, and labour cost was the Covid-19 pandemic, accelerating the country's technological advancement. The advance in technology can be seen in robotic carts that move through tables, programmed to stop at certain ones to deliver food, robotic or automated woks that tell young chefs exactly how something must be cooked, or "ghost kitchens" that replace cashiers and servers with screens.

These progressions drive attention to businesses on social media for unique dining experiences, increasing tourism in cities for "living in the future" or providing a new spot to try for locals in the area. They ensure a fast and efficient way of delivering food, crucial for regions like Hong Kong that are extremely fast-paced and business-centred, and the increase in food safety by mitigating the "...risk of foodborne disease transmission and outbreaks."[21] Though these advancements shorten turnaround time between patrons, what becomes lost is the opportunity for human interaction. Customers are now able to experience dining at a restaurant without interacting with another person. Almost dystopian, this societal turn toward automation puts the role of the restaurant as a third place at risk, and creates a disconnect between person and establishment. A restaurant loses the opportunity to become a favourite when it does not offer value at the personal level – without a host that recognizes your face as soon as you walk in, seating you in a particular server's section that knows your favourite dish and exactly how you like your eggs to be served. How can a restaurant become a favourite when it is diluted down to four walls, a self-service kiosk, and a robot to serve you?

Dining in North America is not quite as quick to change, making restaurants that offer these automated services, particularly robotic servers and chefs that serve "robot-cut noodles," for example, a novelty to many, but the threat of a full-blown shift akin to that of China's is still present. What Chinese restaurants in North America face is the

18. Catharina Cheung, "*Hong Kong Will Start to Phase out Its Iconic Bamboo Scaffolding*." (TimeOut (blog), March 20, 2025). https://www.timeout.com/hong-kong/news/hong-kong-will-start-to-phase-out-its-iconic-bamboo-scaffolding-032025.

19. Blair Sugarman and Jenny Leung. "*Hong Kong Neon Signs: A Guide to Caputring the Best Neons in Hong Kong*." (TimeOut (blog), May 18, 2024). https://www.timeout.com/hong-kong/things-to-do/hong-kong-neon-signs.

20. Catharina Cheung, "*New Colourful Taxi Fleets Will Soon Be on Hong Kong Roads*." (TimeOut (blog), March 5, 2025). https://www.timeout.com/hong-kong/news/new-colourful-taxi-fleets-will-soon-be-on-hong-kong-roads-030525.

21. Ying Tuan Lo, Wenbo Ma, Andrew Huey Ping Tan, et al. "*Predicting the Impact of Restaurant Automation and Food Safety in China: Identifying Key Factors for Smart Dining Experience*." *in Advances in Intelligent Manufacturing and Robotics*, edited by Andrew Tan, Fan Zhu, Haochuan Jiang, Kazi Mostafa, et al., (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2024), 181-87

advancement in media, the rapid pace at which it develops and spreads to all corners of the Internet, and therefore the world.

> Basically, things that are trending, places that have people's attention – that's where the younger folk generally go to. I mean, even the older generation now, before, they didn't have social media, but now they do, a lot of the older folks are on Facebook or on Little Red Book [xiaohongshu]. So now, even our parents and their parents are on this kind of social media thing. So it's kind of like if you aren't on these platforms as a business to kind of grab people's attention, people are literally going to forget about you and then move on to the new [restaurant] that's opening down the street or, you know, try this place that everyone's talking about, stuff like that. [...] I don't think it's necessarily to do with old-time restaurants just not having good food to pull people back, and I think it's really just people's attention and interest and focus has shifted to places all across rather than their neighbourhood spot.[22]

22. Interviewee A, interview with author, June 25, 2025.

At Great Fountain, we spoke about their recent virality and growth on social media - what began as a daughter's trial run into bringing in a different stream of business to help her parents, turned into a full-time marketing tactic, collaborating with other Toronto-based restaurants for limited edition dishes, desserts, and merchandise. This shift has brought in much younger crowds in comparison to their regulars, who typically range from their fifties to sixties. Now, along with young students who visit, student cards in hand to redeem the student lunch discount, Great Fountain sees groups of twenty to thirty-year-olds, mentioning they had found them through Instagram or TikTok. The movement onto social media has opened the doors for businesses to reach people all over the city, expanding past the confines of being the "local neighbourhood joint" for members of the community, a famous dish or quirk – in Great Fountain's case, their extensive photo menu that covers the entire facade of their food court unit – can spread through the Internet like wildfire. This places "old-time restaurants" in a difficult situation – where they are forced to adapt to the young, trendy ways of generating press, either on their own or by hoping their business is in the right place at the right time for a moment of virality.

5.3.1 Sammi Toronto

In Toronto's Greek Town, situated on the Danforth between Greek restaurants and local grocers sits Sammi – a restaurant with a c*ha chaan teng* style menu. Common to other *cha chaan tengs* across the Greater Toronto Area and in Hong Kong, the menu at Sammi includes a list of set meals, from satay beef noodles to macaroni soup, that include a complimentary Hong Kong-style milk tea or a lemon tea. Strolling down the Danforth, save for the large number of Cantonese patrons sitting inside, the restaurant bears no resemblance to a Chinese restaurant of any kind. The classic *cha chaan teng* table settings, with the condiments in stainless steel containers that reside on each table, are replaced with stone-coloured clay condiment bottles, and Lap Sap Chung, Hong Kong's iconic anti-litter mascot, is nowhere to be found on the walls.

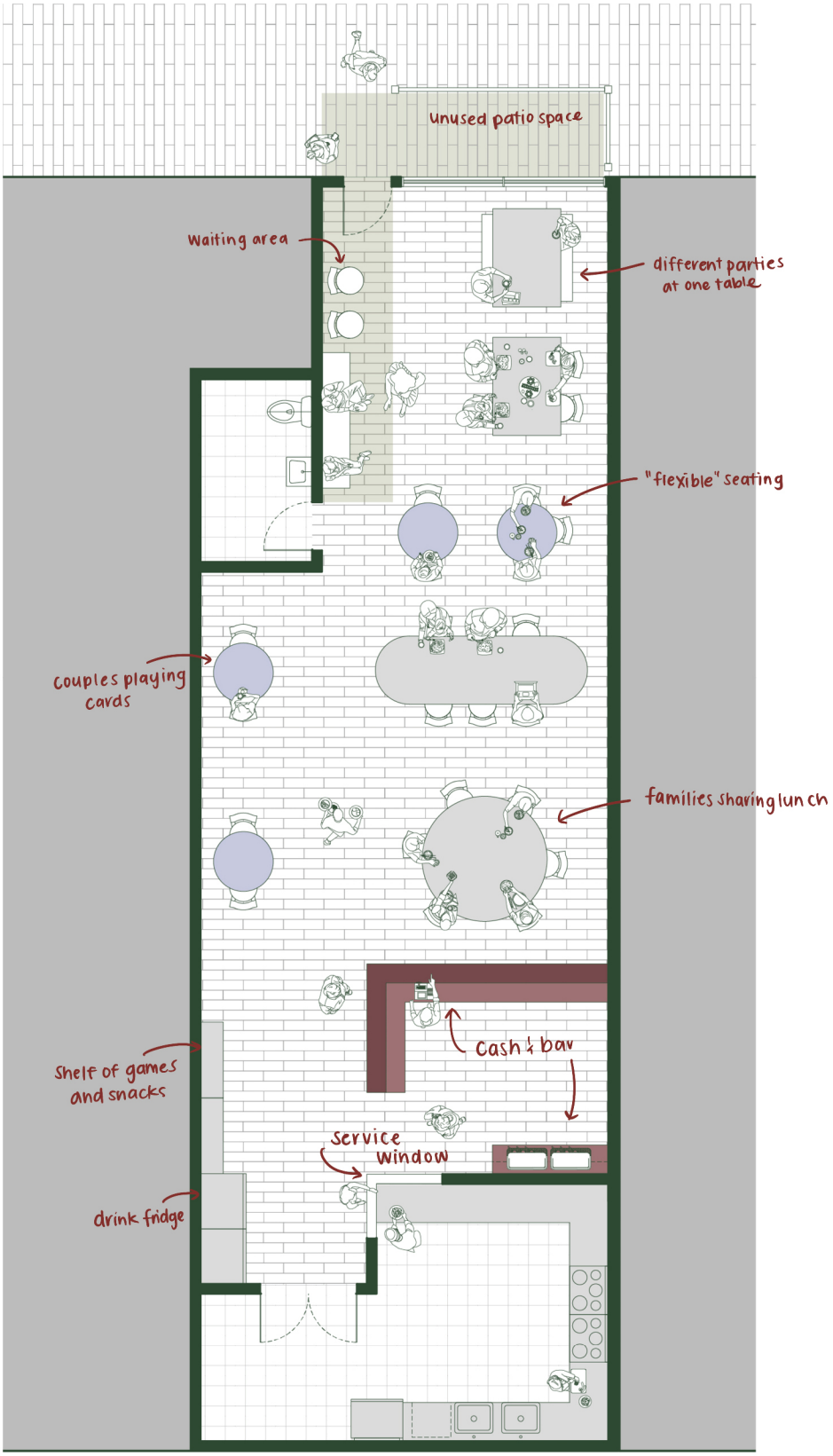
The service counter, kitchen, and even the bar where drinks are made are tucked away behind a tall counter, not to be noticed by patrons or people passing by in the windows. The facade is an off-white cream colour, the signage unassuming and simple, "sammi" reads in lowercase behind a patio umbrella. Inside, a mix of round wooden-top tables with rattan-backed chairs and bench-style seating serve a wide variety of customers. In this cha chaan teng, there are no booths to line the perimeter, the staff is young, and the service is intentionally slow – with no aunties to rush you through ordering and leaving to serve the next guest. In fact, on a busy day, when there are patrons along the wall waiting to be seated, there are other patrons looking through shelves of board games to play while they sip leisurely on their iced teas.

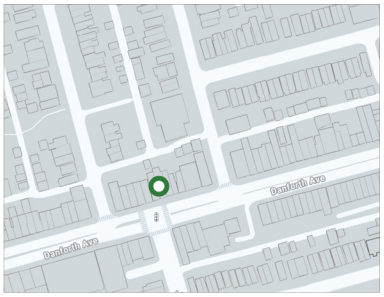
Patrons are not asked to move tables mid-bite to accomodate larger groups, and the style of service seems to be much more North American. During my visit, an older couple enjoys their tea, waiting for their meals, when a family enters the restaurant and greets them. They seem to have bumped into each other at Sammi by chance. The couple remains seated at their table while the family stands next to them, chatting away, and when the family's table is ready, they ask the

young gentleman seating them if they can pull up two more chairs, so the couple can join them for lunch. The family is treating their son and his girlfriend, who is not Chinese, to lunch, and I can hear them from my seat, telling her stories of the interesting dishes – the pork chop casserole that is served on rice, the eyebrow-raising macaroni soup – and why they love them. It's a small interaction, but shows the sharing of intergenerational and inter-cultural knowledge sharing at play.

Fig. 5.5 *Sammi plan*, by author

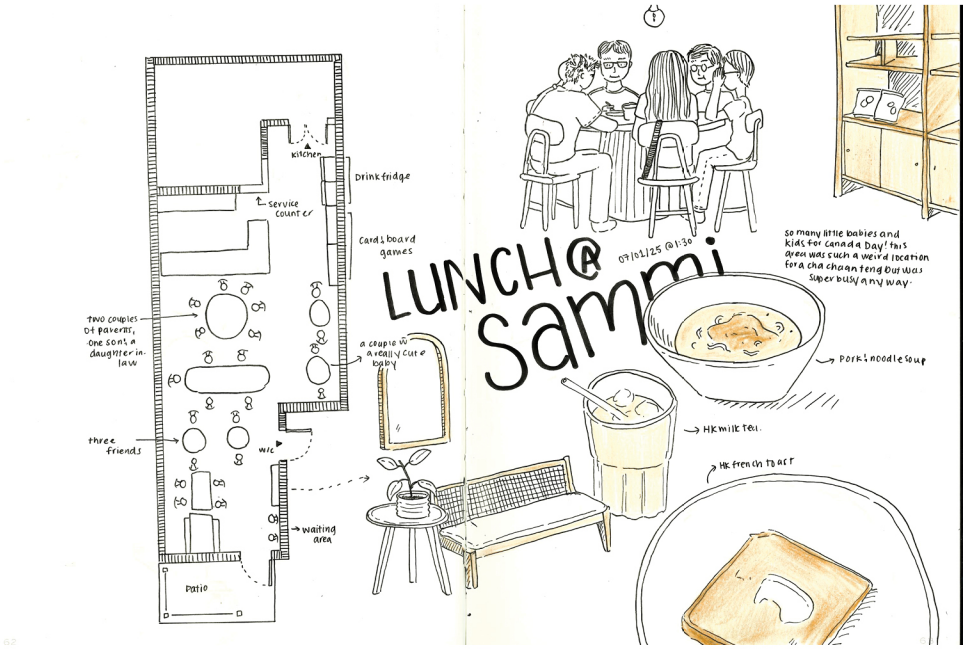
- cash/bar
- waiting area
- flexible seating
- booth seating
- traditional banquet tables
- private rooms





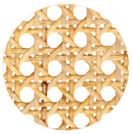








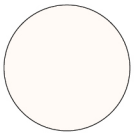
wood finishes



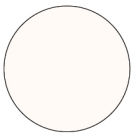
rattan



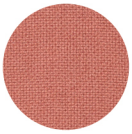
flooring



tabletop



paint



upholstery

Fig. 5.6 (left) *Sammi waiting space*, Toronto, image by author, 2025

Fig. 5.7 (right) *Sammi interior seating*, Toronto, image by author, 2025

Fig. 5.8 (bottom) *Sammi perspective sketches*, by author

5.3.2 Sue Fung's Dim Sum Canteen

In Hong Kong, I had noticed how much more accessible *dim sum* was than in North America. Aside from the traditional tea houses where families frequented for Sunday morning *yum cha*, *dim sum* was served at all hours of the day, in all types of settings. On the corner, you could find a ground floor unit that consisted of just a kitchen and a service counter, with no seating, where people would line up to grab bags of *har gow* and *siu mai* on the way home, at the 7/11's, you could pick up small *dim sum*-style snacks behind the cashier, and the everyday *dim sum* can be found at chain restaurants, set up in a style much more similar to a typical North American restaurant, with booth seating and moveable tables that are easy to clean. In these establishments, the floor is wood or tiled, not carpet, and there are no chandeliers or regal crown mouldings on the walls.

These alternate businesses that offered dim sum were often just as populated as the traditional tea houses, and as I sat at Tim Ho Wan – a popular *dim sum* chain – I watched as a group of old friends sat next to me, switching between Cantonese and English. It was clear one of their friends was less fluent in Cantonese, but they switched just enough to include him, while still feeling comfortable to speak in their mother tongue – they explained words that their friend didn't know the meaning of, while sharing updates on how their parents were doing – in fact, I even learned some more Cantonese myself, just by sitting next to them. When they finished their meal, they argued over who would pay the bill. A generational trait – stubbornness – passed all the way down.

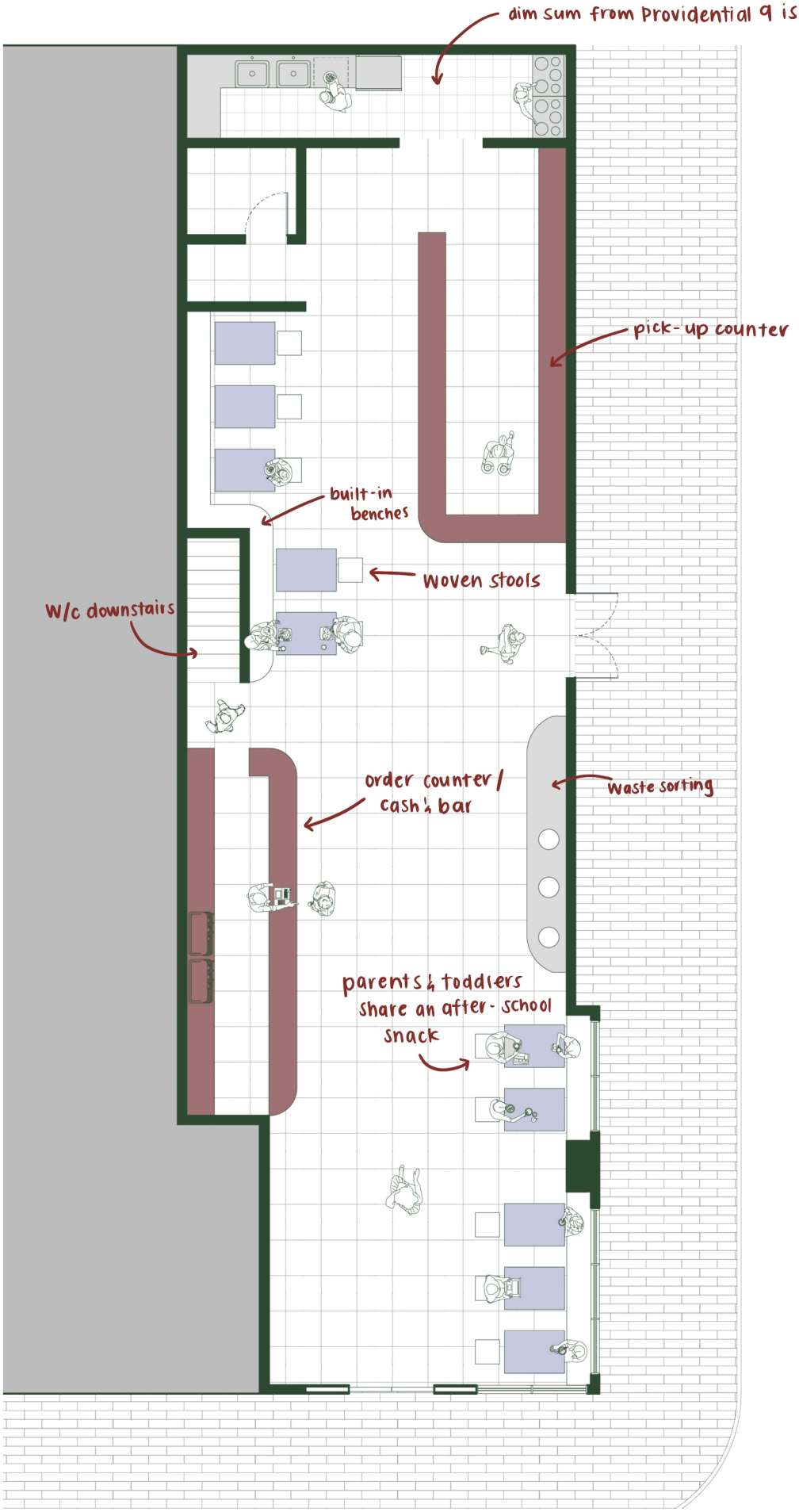
The expansion and frequency of *dim sum* restaurants in Hong Kong was not something that was carried over in the diaspora – restaurants like Tim Ho Wan, or convenience store-level access to these dishes are much harder to find in the Greater Toronto Area, and yet it seems to be where dining is headed. The *cha lau* that exist in the ethnoburbs are less accommodating of the smaller parties of people that are dining on a day-to-day basis, and the large venues they offer for events such as weddings and Chinese New Year parties have become less in-demand

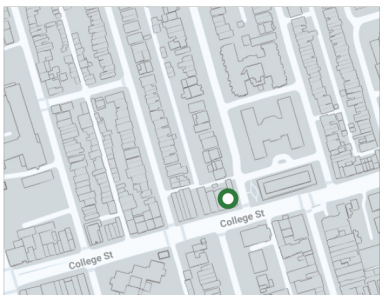
not only due to Covid-19, but because the younger generation is no longer looking to host the extravagant party their grandparents were.

Further west in downtown Toronto, just outside of Kensington Market, is Sue Fung's *Dim Sum* Canteen, outfitted with a clean and minimal design, with colourful patterned tile on the floor, and curved brick-clad counters. There are built-in wooden benches against the windows, with a matching wood finish on chairs and tables. Service is mainly confined to the counter closest to the back of the restaurant, where patrons go up to order, and are called to pick up their orders on wooden trays in recycled paper containers. The owners of Sue Fung also own a *dim sum* restaurant in Markham, Providential 9, that follows a much more traditional take on the dining experience, with painted screens that line the walls and pagoda style eavestroughs, it seems that Sue Fung and Providential 9 are on opposite sides of the spectrum in terms of interior design, though they share many of the same menu items – as Providential 9 supplies most of Sue Fung's *dim sum*. Like Sammi, save for the word "*dim sum*" in its name and the colourful mural of dumplings in a steam basket on the front facade of the store, the unknowing pedestrian would be unable to guess the food served at Sue Fung.

Fig. 5.9 *Sue Fung's Dim Sum Canteen*, by author

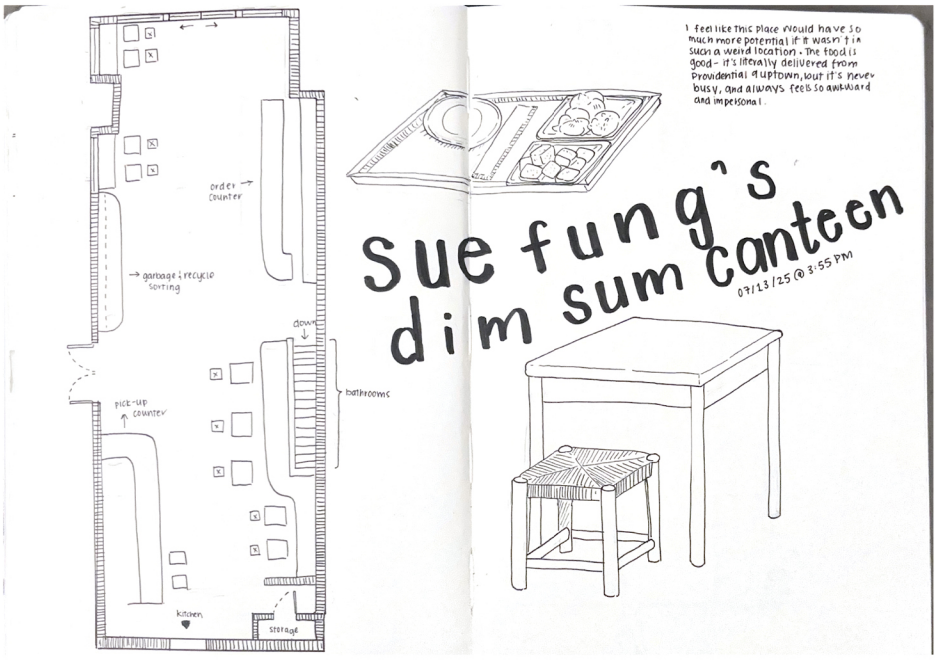
- cash/bar
- waiting area
- flexible seating
- booth seating
- traditional banquet tables
- private rooms



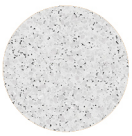






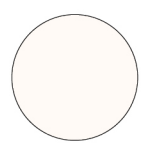



flooring


flooring


interior wall


furniture


paint


service counters


wall covering

Fig. 5.10 (left) *Sue Fung's Dim Sum Canteen order counter*, Toronto, image by author, 2025

Fig. 5.11 (right) *Sue Fung's Dim Sum Canteen kitchen and pick-up counter,* Toronto, image by author, 2025

Fig. 5.12 (bottom) *Sue Fung's Dim Sum Canteen perspective sketches*, by author

5.4 Looking Forward

The Chinese restaurant swings on a pendulum between drastic, unrecognizable change, and being left in the dust to be forgotten. When articles, land trusts, and movements bring attention to the harmful and real changes occurring in these neighbourhoods, it is difficult to accept change of any kind with grace. The Chinese restaurant is a looking glass into the community as a whole - quicker to change than a housing complex or a shopping mall - when a change begins to occur in the ethnoburb or in Chinatown, the restaurant is the first to show the signs. Change, however, does not mean erasure, and in the case of Chinese business, with the current shift in generations and leadership, change is the sign of the second and third generation Hong Kong immigrant grappling with whether honouring their parents and grandparents means keeping everything in the establishment as-is, or changing to keep up with the trends, in order to keep the business afloat.

The Chinese restaurant typology is beginning to see a transformation as a result of a larger shift in placemaking in Chinese culture and the continuing globalization of Hong Kong and its people - even those three generations removed. Placemaking has been known to shift for each generation in the diaspora. First, it was used to create space for labourers to establish business, and have places of gathering that were safe and welcoming. This naturally expanded into making business. The restaurant, so closely tied to their own personal lives, where parents would spend every waking hour at work, would take the form of whatever the family would need. Conditions like walls covered in children's drawings, framed family photos scattered at the entrance, televisions in the dining rooms, were products of the overflow of the work-life into the home-life. Now, placemaking is used in the restaurant as a form of expression. For the second and third-generation, it is a way to communicate their personal experiences of growing up in a diaspora and coming to understand two sides of culture. This takes shape in restaurants that overly play into nostalgia with vintage posters and LED signs.

This nostalgia for an old Hong Kong is a nostalgia for a Hong Kong that experienced a high and intense force of globalization at the hands of colonization. Immigrants in the North American diaspora mourn a Hong Kong that was free from Chinese rule, yet the symbols of their freedom - the American advertisements, the vintage taxis, and English menus - are also symbols of their role as a British colony. This manifests in the restaurant in their layout and furniture, with booth seating in the cha chaan tengs, and in their menu items, with pork chop casserole dishes and Borscht soup. These hybridizations at the time of their conception were a way to respond to the American or British individual - to mirror their lifestyles for their own, or to appeal to their lifestyles to bring in business. In more recent years, the globalization that has taken place is more in the style of a mirror of the owner, and their own personal globalization - young Hong Kong immigrants are pursuing culinary educations in North America and in Europe, and are using techniques found overseas to communicate an experience of growing up as a hyphenate: Hong Kong-Canadian, for example. It reflects not only in the dishes they create, but in the styles of the restaurants they open - light palettes, wooden and rattan finishes, terracotta tiling, are styles that may bear resemblance to newer restaurants in Hong Kong as well, but both restaurants, in Hong Kong and Canada, are pulling from cafes across the world, mostly in Europe.

Rich with culture, knowledge, and community, it is important to understand the key components of the Chinese restaurant – the *cha chaan teng* and the *cha lau*, amongst many others – that retain the community's attention. Generally, amongst these establishments, the design of the restaurant can go a long way. From the layout, offering round tables and booths to provide both private and public seating, and the ability to change to accommodate any party, to the decor – finding common elements amongst restaurants across the city that can indicate, just by one glance, whether the food will be good or not. Sensing deliberate elements placed to promote *fung seoi*, inspecting the state of the fish tanks in a *cha lau*, or debating between whether a true *cha chaan teng* with minimal decor is better than a new one with its neon signs and vintage Hong Kong advertisements, these interior elements point to their own version of tradition, passed on from generations of restaurants, both in the diaspora and in Hong Kong.

Many colour choices, even font choices for signage in some older







[top to bottom]

Fig. 5.13 *In the Mood for Love*, Wong Kar Wai, 2000

Fig. 5.14 *In the Mood for Love*, Wong Kar Wai, 2000

Fig. 5.15 *As Tears Go By*, Wong Kar Wai, 1988







[top to bottom]

Fig. 5.16 *Chungking Express*, Wong Kar Wai, 1994

Fig. 5.17 *Chungking Express*, Wong Kar Wai, 1994

Fig. 5.18 *Fallen Angels*, Wong Kar Wai, 1995

restaurant's cases, are products of a tradition made during times where Chinatowns were the only place a Hong Kong immigrant could settle, where facades had to be as ornamented and "exotic" as possible to attract a crowd that would otherwise avoid Chinatown at all costs. It indicates a much larger phenomena with the Hong Kong-Canadian immigrant, or any Hong Konger for that matter, that holds a soft spot for nostalgia (Fig. 5.13-5.18). Embedded deep in the culture with an "if it's not broken, don't fix it" attitude, the reason a lot of these establishments have not changed in their style has to do with the simple fact that the success of these restaurants in the past has proven that the decor and layouts simply work, with no need to innovate for new. Newer style restaurants, particularly *cha chaan tengs* that pander to the nostalgia, feature plastered walls filled with posters or over-the-top recreations of a *dai pai dong* on the streets of Mong Kok nestled in a small 5x5 metre space with plastic stools and a faux awning, and are able to see the same success as the originals because of their understanding of the effect "old Hong Kong" has had on each generation of immigrant.

The most important element of the Chinese restaurant, I have learned, is not the architecture or layout, but the people – and it has been that way since before the Gold Rush, before the wars and invasions. The people that work in the restaurant, that frequent the restaurant, and that suggest the businesses to their friends in the neighbourhood, the younger kids who suggest the businesses to their friends on the Internet, are the foundation of the Chinese restaurant. Much of Chinese business exchange has to do with the aforementioned concept of *gwaan hai*, that plays a key role in dictating where business will go. Loyal customers will follow people in the service industry from restaurant to restaurant as they open, close, and change ownership. In this regard, the human relationship is crucial to the Chinese restaurant's ability to sustain itself against their typical short lifespan. It increases business and shows that an establishment is worth coming back to. In this same vein, the community that is fostered not only between the employees of a restaurant and their patrons but between the patrons themselves is a crucial component. Interactions like those at Sammi, where old friends can bump into one another and invite one another to have lunch together on a whim, is something that is unique to the Chinese restaurant, and the culture as a whole. Without it, with a ghost kitchen, or a QR code ordering system, human interaction is diminished to nothing. If you were to imagine Spadina Avenue, where the colourful

storefronts were replaced by white, sterile restaurants with no one inside – a kiosk on the wall to place your order and a window that automatically opens and closes to reveal your plastic bag of food, with no visible difference between the two other than the dishes served, what would bring you back to the establishment the next week, and the week after that?

In a Chinese restaurant, the noise - the shouting of orders and chatter amongst patrons, the clanging of utensils and the faint echo of the kitchen that is likely on par in noise level with the dining room – is expected, considered to be part of the experience. Though it goes unnoticed, it is the first thing a customer notices upon walking into the lobby of a *dim sum* restaurant, waiting for the host to greet them, or in a vestibule of a *cha chaan teng* where families are lined up and peering through the glass to see who will be the first to give up their seat. The noise, the hustle and bustle, the *dim sum* carts, are a part of the performance that we, as patrons, are invited to partake in, bringing grandchildren to expand their palate, children and in-laws to meet for the first time, old friends to introduce to a completely different culture.

The Hong Kong diaspora in Canada and the Chinese restaurant are surely facing an unprecedented shift. From pandemics to technology and advancements in media, there are certain things even the wisest cannot predict. With that, it is difficult to pinpoint what the Chinese restaurant needs to stay alive or where the new generation will take it. Yet there is an underlying sentiment amongst the second and third generation immigrants, whether they are the type to keep the restaurant exactly the same as their parents had left it, or if they intend to change and flip it completely, and that is honour - for the sacrifices and hardships their parents and grandparents endured in landing in Canada so many decades ago. For the new restaurants, sleek in interiors, dim in lighting, and pristine in plating, they honour their past and their culture by acknowledging that Chinese food does not have to be served in the "stereotypical" style of fast and greasy. For the revamped restaurants, with new mascots and social media collaborations, they honour the culture by adapting so it may be seen by the masses.

Undeniably, there is a change occurring that is unfathomably fast - trends and forecasts of trends with life expectancies of weeks or even days - but there is no other place than the Chinese restaurant,

with its moveable tables and chairs, its hidden circular tabletops to accommodate larger families at *yum cha*, and their moveable walls for private dining and event spaces, that could adapt and renew just as quickly.

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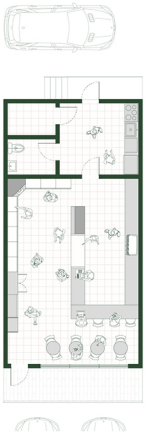
Appendix



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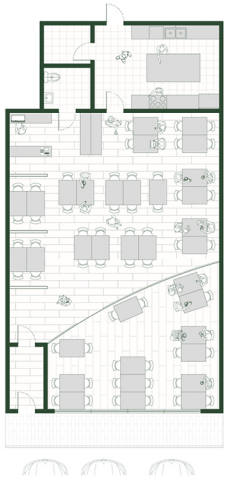

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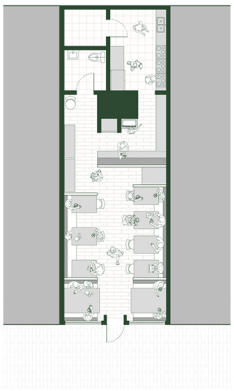

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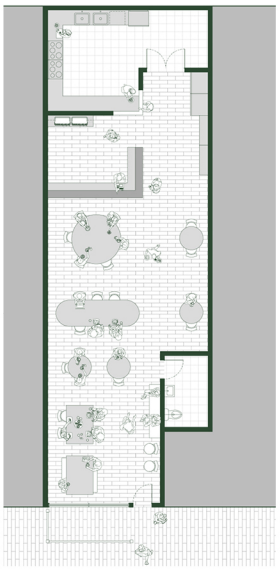

sammi, Toronto



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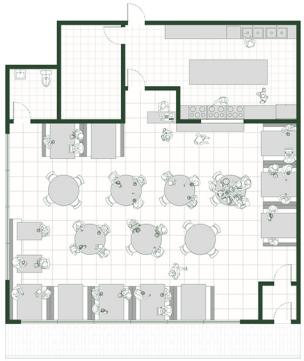

New City Restaurant,
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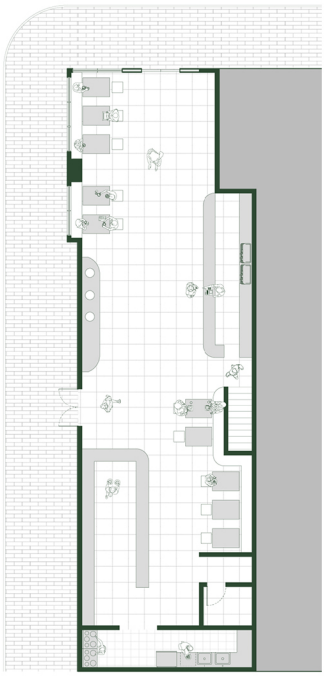
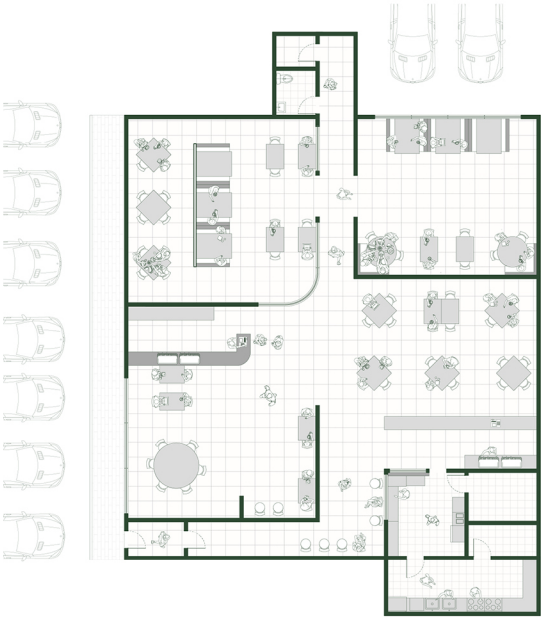
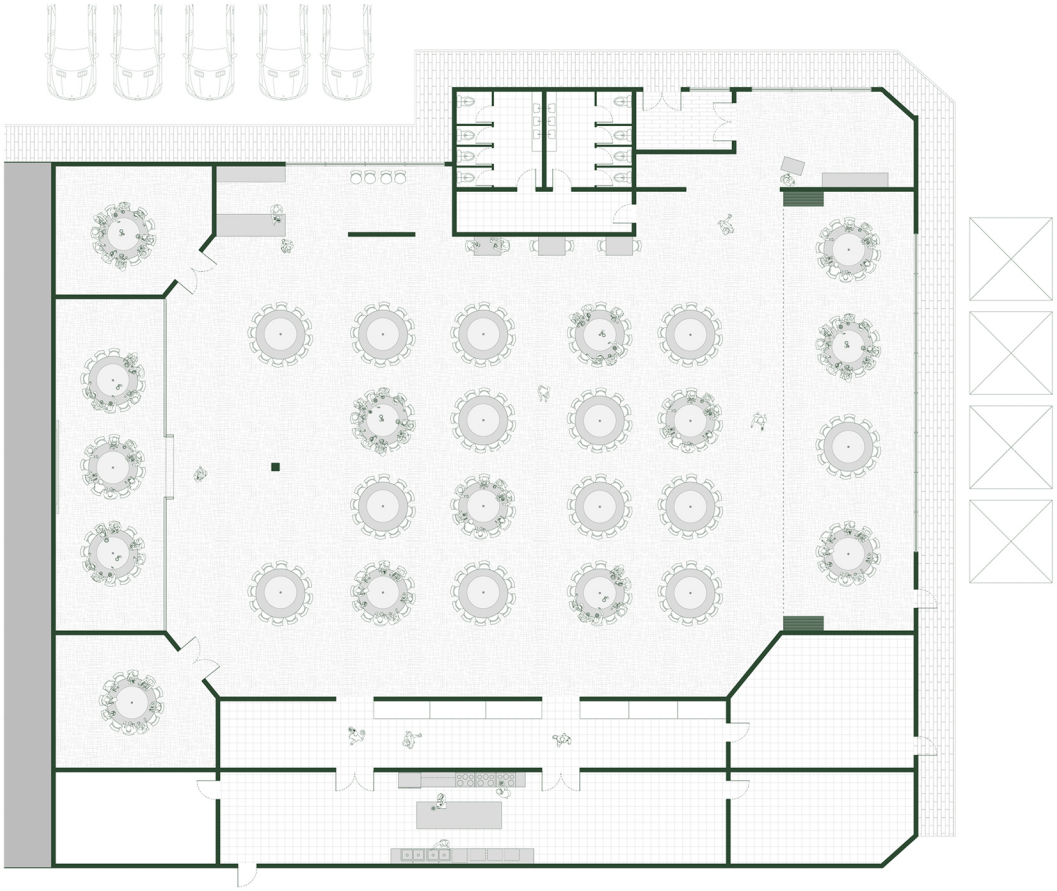


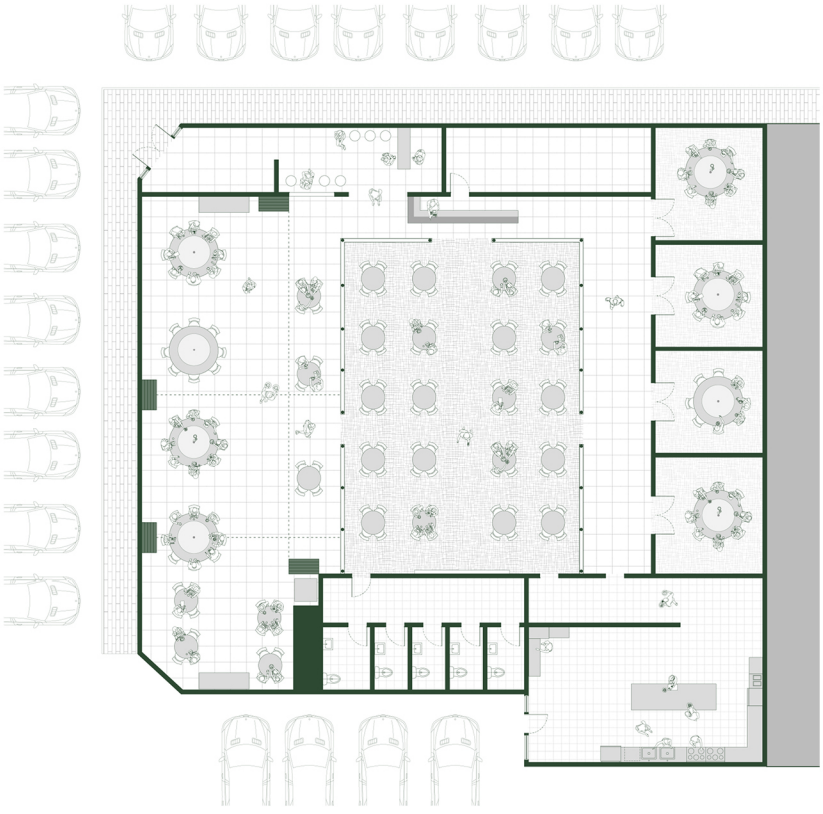
Sue Fung's Dim Sum Canteen, Toronto



Cafe le Majestik,
Scarborough



Skyview Fusion, Markham



Providential 9, Markham