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Cantonese morning tea (Yum Cha): a bite of Cantonese culture

Kaiwei Guo¹, Na Zhang¹, Jianfen Zhang¹, Man Zhang¹, Mingzhu Zhou¹, Yue Zhang¹ and Guansheng Ma^{1,2*} 

Abstract

Among various types of breakfast in China, Cantonese morning tea (Yum Cha) is unique in its form and feature. Morning tea is a Cantonese tradition of morning activity, originated in the Qing dynasty. After years of change, it has evolved to the current form, serving an assortment of small dishes (dim sum) alongside Chinese tea. The classification of Chinese tea is based on the colors, shapes, aroma, and fermentation degree. Several types of dim sum dishes in Guangdong are categorized according to the region, ingredients selection, taste, and cooking methods. Yum Cha has a unique etiquette that is different from the folk cultures in other areas. Morning tea plays an essential role in influencing the dietary patterns and eating habits of Cantonese people. In addition, morning tea supports social interactions and connections of daily human life, providing a practical and acceptable channel for old friendships to nurture and new bonds to build. As a symbol of local culture, morning tea shapes Cantonese people physically and mentally. Therefore, the Yum Cha culture should be valued and propagated.

Keywords Cantonese morning tea, Yum Cha, Dim sum, Food culture

Introduction

Since ancient times, breakfast has been a carrier and microcosm of the Chinese food culture [1]. Among the daily three meals, breakfast is often considered the most important meal of the day, providing sustenance and energy to support daily activities [2, 2]. Breakfast has become part of nutrition policies in some countries. About 90 countries around the world have formulated dietary guidelines, most of which mention the importance of breakfast [4]. Some countries established a complete legal system of nutrition policies including breakfast like Japan and America [5]. China also has

successfully introduced a series of nutrition policies and measures to emphasize the importance of breakfast, such as the China Food and Nutrition Development Outline. Breakfast has developed into a culture in China. From the perspective of food culture, various regions have formed unique breakfast styles due to the differences in local produces and taste preferences, such as Beijing Fermented Soya-bean Milker, Wuhan Hot-dry Noodles with Sesame Paste, Lanzhou Beef Noodles, and Henan Soup with Pepper. Simplicity is a common feature of breakfast in most regional Chinese food cultures. However, Cantonese morning tea, containing tea and dim sum, is an exception.

Morning tea, also known as “Zao Cha (早茶)” in Mandarin, is a typical and distinct morning activity in Cantonese people. In Cantonese, the practice is named “Yum Cha,” meaning “drink tea.” The term is also used interchangeably with “Tan Cha (叹茶),” which colloquially translates to “enjoy tea” [6]. The main characteristic of a Cantonese-style breakfast is dining dim sum or various snacks outdoors [7]. There is a popular saying, commonly known as “One bowl with two pieces” (一盅两件), which

*Correspondence:

Guansheng Ma
mags@bjmu.edu.cn

¹ Department of Nutrition and Food Hygiene, School of Public Health, Peking University, 38 Xue Yuan Road, Hai Dian District, Beijing 100191, China

² Laboratory of Toxicological Research and Risk Assessment for Food Safety, Peking University, 38 Xue Yuan Road, Hai Dian District, Beijing 100191, China



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refers to the custom of serving patrons with two delicacies to complement the tea [8]. For locals, morning tea is more of a social gathering than a “feeding session.” It is a reserved time of the day to socialize and connect with friends and family. In its long history, morning tea has developed as something beyond mere cuisine but culture.

Tea drinking is a constituent part of Chinese culture. There are various tea drinking habits and customs in different nationalities and regions [9]. The Chinese tea culture spread over to many regions through cultural exchange. Cantonese morning tea is a very local cultural tradition, and it is a representative type of Chinese tea culture. Nowadays, Cantonese morning tea is widely known. It has a certain influence in China or even in the world. Cantonese teahouses can be seen in abroad, and many of them are directly named by “Yum Cha.” Contemporary morning tea culture affects more and more people and gradually spreads the Chinese traditional tea culture to the world. In this article, we reviewed the origin, development, components, services, and etiquettes of morning tea to help people have a deep understanding of Cantonese morning tea culture and inherit such tradition. Further, we introduced the function and future of morning tea to understand the fitness of morning tea to modern society.

The origin and development of the morning tea

The origin of Cantonese morning tea can be traced back to the Qing dynasty [10]. In 1757, Emperor Qianlong of the Qing dynasty promulgated a decree from the capital to the coastal provinces and ordered the cessation of foreign trade except for Guangzhou. Because of this policy, tea, porcelain, and silk from all over the country were continuously shipped to Guangzhou and marketed worldwide. Guangzhou became the largest logistics center in China at that time, which led to the unprecedented prosperity of Guangzhou’s economy. As commodities become more available, the tea is affordable for public consumption, seeding the formation of the Cantonese morning tea culture. Yi Li Guan (一厘馆) is believed to be the founding place of morning tea. Initially, Yi Li Guan started the business as a street vendor with only a few wooden tables and benches available, offering a casual place to rest and socialize. As the scale of the storefront expanded substantially, Yi Li Guan was upgraded to the Er Li Guan (二厘馆) [11], the earliest teahouse in Guangzhou. Er Li Guan was located in an area with a dense labor force, such as the docks and food markets. Designed for the working class, the Er Li Guan provided tea, fast-food meals, and places to communicate with colleagues. Such vision spread fast, lead to the emergence of Cha Ju (茶居) and Cha Lou (茶楼). Cha Ju, meaning “the tea place,” intended to serve businessmen

and merchants, people with high socioeconomic status. However, the popularity remained low since the economy of Guangzhou showed a downward trend. Cha Lou, meaning “the tea house,” appeared in the late Qing Dynasty, mainly targeting the Manchu bureaucracy. After the Qing Dynasty collapsed, the old teahouses quickly vanished due to the loss of consumers. In the meanwhile, uniqueness of Er Li Guan stood out, acquiring the name “Yum Cha.” After the rapid modernization and globalization in Guangdong, such traditional culture is still thriving and becomes increasingly indispensable in Cantonese leisure life. On the other hand, globalization introduces the “Yum Cha” culture to other countries, like Vietnam, Australia, and the USA. Nowadays, morning tea is famous and widely accepted worldwide.

The components of the morning tea

Morning tea is a Cantonese tradition of breakfast, serving variety of steamed dishes alongside Chinese tea. China is an original producer of tea and is renowned for its skills in planting and making tea. China has a centuries-old tradition of tea production and consumption. The tea planting is located mostly around Yangtze river and other southern regions. The industry produced around 3.2 million metric tons of tea in 2021, accounting for 45% of the world. China is not only the world’s largest tea producer, but also the leading exporter, supplying the world with over 350 thousand metric tons of tea annually [12]. The consumption of tea in Guangdong is related to the eating habits of Guangdong. It is the basic market of tea product consumption in China [13]. Based on the color, shape, aroma, and fermentation degree, teas are classified into multiple kinds. The common ones in teahouses are Oolong tea, Pu-erh tea, and chrysanthemum tea. Oolong tea, also known as Wulong cha in Mandarin, is a semi-fermented tea, mainly processed by picking, withering, kneading, fermenting, and baking [14]. Such procedure integrated processing methods of both green tea and black tea, endowing Oolong tea the fresh and floral fragrance of green tea and mellow taste of black tea. Pu-erh tea, made from the leaves and stems of the *Camellia* plant, is a Chinese dark tea. It contains two major types: unfermented Pu-erh tea and fermented Pu-erh tea [15]. The unique fragrance of Pu-erh tea is characterized by a long-lasting fragrance, orange color, and a strong and mellow taste. Because of the strong taste, which is enhanced over time, Pu-erh leaves can be brewed several times. Thus, aged Pu-erh tea is revered in Chinese tea culture. Chrysanthemum tea is a flower tea made from fresh chrysanthemum flowers by baking and drying in the shade or under the sun [16]. The tea is commonly transparent but sometimes lightly colored, ranging from pale to bright yellow.

Another component of the morning tea is Dim Sum, a traditional small-serving-size Cantonese dish served on bamboo steam baskets. There are thousands of dim sum dishes in Guangdong, differing in their flavors, textures, cooking styles, and ingredients [17]. The dishes are sometimes classified according to the purpose, such as banquet dishes (筵席点心), seasonal dishes (季节点心), weekly dishes (星期美点), travel-friendly dishes (旅行点心), holiday dishes (假期点心), house signature dishes (招牌点心), etc. In addition, they can also be distinguished by regional differences, ingredients selection, and taste, such as Lingnan folk snacks (岭南民间小吃), Pasta snacks (面点), and Western desserts [18]. Moreover, Dim Sums are categorized by the cooking methods, either dry Dim Sum (干点) or wet Dim Sum (湿点). In general, a complete Cantonese dim sum includes steamed dishes, fried dishes, congees, and desserts. Many of them are made by wrapping seafood, chopped meats, and vegetables.

Shrimp dumpling (虾饺) (Fig. 1), originated in the 1920s, is a typical Cantonese Dim Sum dish. The main ingredients are wheat starch, shrimps, pork fat, and bamboo shoot. Wheat starch is first used to prepare the crystal wrapper of the dumpling. The filling includes shrimp, pork fat, bamboo shoot, green onions, ginger, sesame oil, mirin, salt, and pepper. After mixing and seasoning, a heaping teaspoon of filling is placed in the middle of the wrapper. Once the filling is fully wrapped in a pleats style, the edges must be pinched to seal. After approximately ten minutes of steaming, shrimp dumplings are ready to serve.

Sticky rice chicken (糯米鸡) (Fig. 2) is another popular and representative Dim Dum dish with a sticky, moist, and rich texture. Sticky rice, chicken, fork-roast meat, spareribs, salted egg yolk, and mushrooms are wrapped



Fig. 1 Shrimp dumpling: have a history of a hundred year. They are filled with fresh shrimps, pork, bamboo shoots, etc. The skins of the shrimp dumpling incorporate various colors



Fig. 2 Glutinous rice chicken: glutinous rice wrapped in a lotus leaf that typically contains egg yolk, dried scallop, mushroom, and meat (usually pork and chicken)

by lotus leaves. During steaming, rice is soaked in the unique aroma and flavor of the lotus leaf, generating the distinctive fragrance of the dish.

The service of the morning tea

Since morning tea is a routine of Cantonese locals, repeat customers often have a preferred spot to sit in. After being seated, the guests are served with a menu card. A “Tea fee” is applied to each seated customer [19]. Most teahouses will ask the patrons to choose their preferred tea at first, such as green tea or oolong tea. Nowadays, some teahouses are even serving cold milk tea and sodas. Once the accompanied drinks are selected, customers will start ordering the dim sum.

Traditionally, an assortment of dim sums is served on carts pushed around by servers [20]. Instead of ordering from the menu, the dishes are cooked in advance and placed on pushcarts for the dinners to choose [21]. Thus, patrons often prefer tables nearest the kitchen since servers and carts pass by these tables first. When serving, the server calls out the name of the items, and the customer notifies the server of the chosen dishes. Therefore, the place is usually loud but jubilant, filling with fulfillment and human connection. Typically, dishes are charged based on five categories, “small,” “medium,” “large,” “extra-large,” or “special.” The cost of a meal was calculated by the number, size, and type of dishes, which is recorded on a bill card. In traditional teahouses, servers commonly record the orders using a rubber stamp or an ink pen on the bill card when serving the dish. The final bill is calculated based on the number of stamps or quantities on the bill card by the servers. However, many teahouses now are using an online ordering system or papered checklist-style method.

The etiquette of the morning tea

The Yum Cha etiquettes, Jie Gai Xu Shui (揭盖续水) and Kou Zhi Cha Li (扣指茶礼) for instance, represent an idiosyncratic folk culture [22]. Jie Gai Xu Shui means flipping the cup lid open or offset the teapot cover to signal the server to refill an empty teapot. Such etiquette was established in the late Qing Dynasty period. An aristocrat went to a teahouse after a big loss in a bird-fighting game. He decided to gain his money back by planning a scam. Thus, he took an empty teapot and put his bird into it. The bird flew away when the server opened the lid to fill up the pot. The aristocrat furiously demanded compensation for his loss. Fortunately, a martial arts master intervened and dissolved the situation. However, the teahouse owner established a rule for the customers to open the teapot lid themselves for refill ever since then. Kou Zhi Cha Li, tapping the table with the middle and index fingers, is an etiquette to express gratitude to the person who refills your teacup. According to the legend, the undercover emperor Qianlong of the Qing dynasty once visited a teahouse with his servants. The emperor took a teapot and poured his servants some tea. The servants were unable to thank the emperor by kneeling due to the fear of revealing his identity. Thus, they knocked on the table three times with three fingers curled to symbolize kneeling three times instead. There are different ways to knock, depending on your relationship with the person pouring the tea. To elders, you should knock with a closed fist, to symbolize prostration and admiration. Between people of the same generation, knock with your index and middle fingers, much like cupping one fist as a sign of respect. Toward younger people, just a single finger rap is needed as a nod of thanks.

There are several dinner manners as well. To show respect, the oldest person is the first one to start eating when the meal begins or when a new dish is served [23]. Another way to show respect is ensuring the table is still when someone is taking food from a dish. It is disrespectful to spin the Can Zhuo Zhuan Pan (餐桌转盘, it is a turntable placed in the center of table to aid in distributing food) when others are picking up the food. When there is no Can Zhuo Zhuan Pan, one should only pick up the food in the front. In addition, the final piece or serving for others is commonly offered to guests or other friends. Another interesting etiquette is competing to pay the bill, a way to express hospitality and kindness. Moreover, chopsticks should not be inserted into the food vertically since it resembles incense offerings for the deceased [24]. These distinctive etiquettes represent the lifestyle and habits established by the Cantonese people over the past century.

The function of the morning tea

As breakfast, morning tea may generate multiple beneficial health impacts. Tea contains a variety of biologically active components and trace elements. Thus, moderate tea consumption is beneficial to human health [25]. Accumulating evidence from clinical and epidemiological studies shows that tea consumption is associated with a lower risk of various diseases, such as diabetes, stroke, cardiovascular disease, ovarian cancer, and gastric cancer [26]. Locals believe that tea drinking is a way to calm the nerves, enhance self-preservation, and even help the body to heal. Drinking tea allows a brief relaxation before starting the hustle and bustle of the busy day. Research has indicated that stomach irritation may occur if consume tea on an empty stomach [27]. Therefore, drinking tea alongside dim sum dishes may avoid such undesirable consequences.

Dim sum is rich in nutrients because it contains copious food items, such as flour, seafood, and vegetables. The main ingredient is carbohydrates, a crucial energy source for the human body. Most seafood contains a lower proportion of saturated fatty acid and is rich in n-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids [28]. The Chinese Dietary Guidelines (2016) showed that n-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids play an important role in reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke [29]. On the other hand, various condiments and ingredients are added, such as animal fat and sugar, when processing dim sum [30]. Excessive fat and sugar intake may increase the risk of obesity [31]. Therefore, consumers need to limit the consumption of certain dishes.

Cantonese local people and culture are the basis of developing such unique food culture. Therefore, morning tea functions as a bond among local residents that supports social interactions and connections of daily human life. Yum Cha is a ritual for the elders to enjoy their morning after the early exercise of Tai Chi or a walk. Housewives also attend the morning tea to socialize and connect with friends. Patrons of teahouses are commonly a group of friends and relatives who chat, read, and even discuss business [32]. Cantonese morning tea provides a practical and acceptable channel for old friendships to nurture and new bonds to build. Compared with the current popular fast-food culture, Cantonese morning tea has become an interactive mode for contemporary Cantonese people to participate in the public sector.

The future of morning tea

With fast globalization and urbanization, Western food culture has assimilated in the local Yum cha culture, forming a distinctive food culture of China. At the same time, Yum Cha has undergone a series of changes

caused by social and cultural shifts. Traditionally, locals of all ages and socioeconomic status are gathered in the tea house to enjoy the morning tea. However, the main consumer groups of morning tea have also transformed due to changes in lifestyle. Especially because of the pressure of the work, some young people have no time to Yum Cha in the morning and at the same time ignored the Cantonese morning tea culture. Only middle and elderly people still maintain the behavior of Yum Cha in the morning. A study analyzed data of 1100 participants from Guangdong [33]. The results showed that 74.2% of morning tea consumers were over 45 years old. Although the number of young people who Yum cha is gradually decreasing, they still use teahouses as their first choice for socializing or discussing business. In the process, the Yum cha culture was spread.

According to the data, the market size of Cantonese morning tea industry was 19.54 billion yuan in 2018, and the market size of Cantonese morning tea industry was 21.53 billion yuan in 2019, an increase of 10.2% over previous year [34]. The morning tea market has been steadily increasing as the aging population is surging. However, more and more foreign fast food has entered the catering market in Guangdong, attracting the consumption of the young people and making the traditional Cantonese morning tea under great pressure in the development process. Therefore, in order to preserve the traditional culture in today society, it must strengthen its own fitness in modern society. We should consolidate advantages of morning tea by preserving traditional crafts and form and improving nutritional quality. An evaluation of the nutrition intake situation of Cantonese morning tea has shown that the morning tea consumers have the problem of unbalanced energy intake and excessive fat intake [33]. Therefore, it is essential to reduce the amount of fat, improve the cooking methods, and consider the rational collocation of food when making dim sum. Additionally, we should conform to the situation of national cultural governance. In China, cultural governance has been used to support the collective pursuit of modernization and economic development through promoting cultural tourism. Therefore, we can also make a place of cultural heritage and establish a cultural festival for tourism purposes in Guangdong, showing the connotation of Cantonese morning tea culture to people from home and abroad. By this means, we can not only spread traditional food culture but can cultivate Chinese cultural and national identity.

Local food is a cultural heritage, representing indigenous history and believes. Yum Cha is a regional custom and eating habit, mainly common in Guangdong, Fujian, and Hainan provinces [35]. Yum Cha not only provides essential nutrients, but also symbolizes the local

culture. In 2007, Yum Cha culture was entitled the Intangible Cultural Heritages of Guangzhou [36]. Yum Cha has shown a more critical role in the new urban development situation. It records the local living habits and influences the economic development of Guangdong. For Cantonese, morning tea narrows the gaps between people and strengthens their emotional ties, promoting physical and mental health. Therefore, Yum Cha is a crucial Chinese tradition and culture to preserve. Such valuable culture should not vanish since it has fed, connected, and educated generation to generation in Guangdong.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Cantonese morning tea is constantly integrating regional customs and products, gradually forming a distinctive food culture after hundreds of years of development. To this day, it remains one of the most famous local cuisines in Guangdong. In contrast to a typical breakfast, morning tea offers a wide variety of dim sum in addition to a unique service style and table manners. The etiquette enriches Cantonese morning tea and deepens its connotation and cultural roots. The etiquette and traditions of Cantonese morning tea are full of vitality and a sense of ritual, posing significant influences on Cantonese people's daily life. Despite its nutritional value, morning tea links relatives and friends closer. Thus, Yum Cha, a cultural symbol of a region that records the local tradition, habits, and lifestyle, should be valued and propagated.

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