

Topic: Japanese taste culture ---sushi in Hong Kong

INTRODUCTION

It is well known that sushi is very popular Japanese food in the world. In the past, sushi is an exotic and expensive food served at luxurious hotels and high class restaurants in Hong Kong. It seems a kind of class reflection. However, sushi starts to localize the taste to fit local customers. It becomes more popular than the past. Many sushi bars and restaurants offer affordable prices as localization nowadays. So, it is interesting to take a deep look into the taste and localization aspects towards Japanese taste culture.

This paper examines the growth of a sushi culture in Hong Kong from historical aspect. It discusses the history of sushi and the reasons for its popularity in Hong Kong. Also, it examines the making of the sushi culture and industry and looks into different aspects of taste and localization. By identifying the characteristics of the sushi culture in Hong Kong and locating sushi in the context of globalization of Japanese popular culture. It aims to deepen our understanding of the mechanism of taste and Japanese popular culture.

In Hong Kong, many people start to run sushi restaurants with inexpensive price. They also localized the taste and prices. Hong Kong is advanced in terms of localization of Japanese sushi such as the *kaiten* sushi (revolving sushi on a conveyor belt) restaurants and take-away sushi outlets. Hong Kong is leading this “sushi boom” and sushi is making its way in people’s daily diet. It is a kind of Japanese popular culture and consumer culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

METHODOLOGY

HISTORY OF SUSHI **source**

Sushi is a typical Japanese food with over a thousand years of history and tradition. It has become the most visible example of Japanese cuisine in other countries. Sushi is the combination of raw fish and seasoned rice. It seems so exotic to foreigners, is a supremely logical food in Japan. Sushi is the combination of raw fish and seasoned rice that seems so exotic to foreigners. It is a supremely logical food in Japan.

Sushi began one century ago in Japan as a method of preserving **source** fish. It is told that the origins of sushi came from countries of Southeastern Asia. Cleaned, raw fish were pressed between layers of salt and weighted with a stone. After a few weeks, the stone was removed and replaced with a light cover, and a few months after that, the fermented fish and rice were considered ready to eat. Some restaurants in Tokyo still serve this original style of sushi, called narezushi made with freshwater carp. Its flavor is so strong that it obscures the fish's identity altogether, and narezushi is something of an acquired taste.

Sushi is perhaps Japan's best-known contribution to world cuisine. Although sushi seems like a simple food, sushi preparation is actually a highly developed discipline. The choicest, tender morsels of fresh raw fish are artfully arranged on individual "fingers" of vinegary rice by a skilled chef, and then placed on a gleaming cypress counter in front of the eagerly waiting customer a few seconds later. Absolute freshness of the fish is the all-important factor for good sushi. **How about the original prestige of sushi in Japan?**

Nowadays, the number of Japanese restaurants grew dramatically. The number of Japanese restaurants is more than a hundred **source** in Hong Kong. Most of them are located in business and shopping districts such as Mongkok, TsimShaShui. Sushi

seems a must in the menu of all Japanese restaurants. Hong Kong people become the main consumers of sushi.

The sushi business is booming and has continued to expand in the market. The expansion of the Japanese community and the impressive economic growth in Hong Kong has helped increase the popularity of Japanese cuisine. Also, many Japanese expatriates are culturally exclusive and want to maintain the Japanese way of life in Hong Kong. So, Japanese cultural such as restaurants, supermarkets and shops have increased. **transition**

Hong Kong is one of the fastest growing and most vibrant economies in Asia. People have more money to spend on good foods and dining out has become very common. It also calls “food paradise” where residents and tourists can taste different types of foreign foods. Hong Kong is a multi- racial place so that we can enjoy various cuisines such as Malay, Indian, Thai, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Indonesian and Peranakan. As a result, Hong Kong becomes an attractive place for investment in the food business for the above reasons. Hence, Hong Kong people have interested in running Japanese restaurants. Nowadays, sushi has become quite popular among young people who have strong consuming power and high adaptability.

WHY SUSHI IS SO POPULAR IN HONG KONG?

Localization is an important reason in the sushi culture. Sushi has been transformed from an exclusive and exotic Japanese food into an affordable and localized Japanese food. In addition, the flavor and content of sushi have been altered to accommodate the local taste in Hong Kong.

Exotic appeal is another factor of success. Sushi has been localized enough to suit the local taste, but not too much to undermine its exotic appeal. But sushi is still Japanese.

Young people think it is fashionable to eat sushi. Eating sushi seems more fashionable and not traditional for them. Sushi is more than a food or a commercial product, it also has cultural and national meanings. Eating sushi itself can be a cultural encounter.

People are impressed by many things they experience in a sushi restaurant, including the display of plastic sushi in the window, the use of beautiful Japanese utensils, the Japanese greetings and hospitality, the conveyer belt and the colors and the taste of sushi. As a result, eating sushi is not only can make Hong Kong people feel Japanese, but also international. The status of Hong Kong is an international city with a multi-racial and multi-cultural society. Sushi can be seen as a form of Japanese popular culture. The boom of Japanese popular culture in Hong Kong boosted the consumption of sushi. Nowadays, sushi is a must in high tea, buffet and reception

parties in hotels and luxurious restaurants. Sushi is not only a food and a business, but also a tradition.

Some people see globalization as generating increasing homogeneity, while others see it producing diversity and heterogeneity through increased hybridization.

Globalization and define its causes and effects especially in relation to environmental and cultural development.

Globalization as a highly complex, contradictory, and thus ambiguous set of institutions and social relations, as well as involving flows of goods, services, ideas, technologies, cultural forms, and people (Appadurai 1996).

Globalization means different things to different people. Some say it is the movement of people, language, ideas, and products around the world. Others see it as the dominance of multinational corporations and the destruction of cultural identities.

LOCALIZATION OF SUSHI

Sushi in Hong Kong has been localized in various aspects. Localization makes sushi affordable to Hong Kong people. Because there is kaiten sushi, sushi counters in supermarkets and sushi stalls in food courts in Hong Kong while Japan does not. The

forms of eating sushi, the content and the taste of sushi and the management of a sushi restaurant are the forms of localization.

Sushi is a meal in Japan but Hong Kong is a snack or light meal. In Hong Kong, sushi restaurants have many other Japanese foods such as ramen, fried tofu, udon and tempura, sometimes they have green tea ice-cream, mango pudding and cheese cake as desserts but Japan only has sushi. Hong Kong people usually try different kinds of dishes with sushi. People buy a few piece of sushi and a few want to fill their stomach only with sushi. Moreover, customers usually drink green tea after they finish their meal in order not to damage the taste of sushi. Sake also can be drunk before eating. But there is no regulation at drinking in Hong Kong sushi restaurants. They can drink coke, juice or beer if they want.

In addition, the taste of sushi is very local. We make sushi as “Hong Kong sushi”. In Hong Kong, the rice is different from those used in Japan. In Japan, they must use the best quality of rice while Hong Kong is not. Japanese rice is more experience than Hong Kong’s. So the texture and flavor is not as good as Japanese rice. Also, flatfish, sea bass and abalone sushi are very popular in Japan but are unpopular in Hong Kong. This kind of sushi does not have market in Hong Kong.

The taste of sushi in Hong Kong is not likely Japanese. It is more salty, spicy and oily to localize the taste. Chili, curry and black pepper and other hot local flavors are added to make new kinds of sushi such as spicy tuna maki and soft shell crab sushi. It is more creative in Hong Kong. Also, the use of wasabi and ginger reflects localization. Every sushi with raw meat has wasabi in Japan but there is little or no wasabi in Hong Kong. Because Hong Kong people do not like its strange flavor, staffs give a small plate of wasabi for customers' personal consumption. Also, business companies offer very affordable prices. Localization is added in order to cut cost and to attract local customers.

On the other hand, the management of sushi restaurants in Hong Kong is not likely Japanese. Most of them are owned by Hong Kong people. In Japan, many sushi chef have received many years of training such as preparing poisonous blowfish sushi. They have to pass a special license from the Japanese Sushi Association. But in Hong Kong, the chiefs are only employed locally with no professional training. The local employees know little about the Japanese language. They can say a few greetings in Japanese only such as "welcome"(irashaimase) and "thank you"(arigato gozaimasu). But the pronunciation is not totally correct. Waiters and waitresses wear Japanese clothes, speak Japanese in order to offer a very warm service to make their customers

feel like they are in Japan. Hong Kong people like sushi because it is affordable, interesting and care-free.

CONSUMPTION: TASTE REFLECTION

On the other hand, sushi culture is a kind of commercial product or taste reflection?

Does it reinforce social inequalities through the construction of “taste”? In fact, sushi is not food only but also reflecting high class. It also reflects the taste of upper class.

P. Bourdieu's theory (1984) of socio-cultural distinction through "taste" and consumption. There are three sorts of capitals, habitus as a mediator between the class structure and the "culture of taste" and as a framework for lifestyles, those differ through the indicator of "taste". The concept of taste is discussed in the relation of culture. **How good taste be constructed in our society?**

Consumption of food is a kind of taste reflection. On the other hand, it is a medium of social representation, identity building and distinction in the modern capitalist societies. Sushi is very popular Japanese food in the world and it is an exotic and expensive food served at luxurious hotels and high class restaurants in Hong Kong. So, eating sushi is a kind of representation of higher status in the society. It is a kind of

consumer cultures which represent social value and status in Hong Kong. Although the price of sushi is localized and no longer as expensive as before, people still like to have dinner in sushi restaurants. Such as Japanese Casual Restaurant which is very popular in Hong Kong. People need to wait for the seat almost an hour in order to have dinner.

Taste seems so personal a matter and so subjective. It tied up with our image of ourselves as mature people. Bourdieu (1984) sets out to demonstrate that there are social patterns in matters of taste. Tastes are connected to major social divisions like class reflection and gender, divisions between provincials and cosmopolitans, and between the highly and poorly educated. Also, tastes are used in whole structures of judgment and whole processes of social distinction. It produces substantial barriers between such social groups. Bourdieu's (1984) work should be read as a description of tastes and not an evaluation of them. He is not condemning the popular taste. And his sympathies lie in exposing the falsely universal nature of elite tastes. So, taste is always used to maintain boundaries and reinforce social distinctions. **So how is this explicitly manifested then in terms of consumption of sushi?**

In order to explore further the relationship between culture and consumption, this study focused on the consumption of sushi in the Hong Kong. Sushi is a typical

Japanese food with over a thousand years of history and tradition and has become the most visible example of Japanese cuisine in other countries. The sushi product has been described as being important to the process of self-definition among Japanese. Now sushi in Hong Kong is a consumer good that has been described as having a vital role in communicating and reflecting the social categories of gender, age, and social class. It is a kind of taste reflection. The perception that sushi is culturally representative exists despite Japanese being a multicultural nation. It explores the relationship between culture and consumption of food. Sushi was selected for analysis that is characterized by high levels of cultural significance.

Consumption has become a recreational activity. The consumption process is enjoyable and reflects the taste and class of people. Consumers are viewed as thinking, feeling subjects who have more choices and latitude in consumption than ever before. People choose in their efforts to mould their self-determined self-images in consumption.

But in contrast, there is a very different interpretation of the relationship between culture and individual consumers. The cultural environment is viewed as a major determinant of consumption behaviour (Kilbourne, 1996), with consumers acting out the roles dictated to them by those wielding cultural power. Cultural ideals are

manufactured by marketers and powerful leaders. In this interpretation, the world of consumption exists to perpetuate the dominant culture. It is accomplished by the reinforcement of existing cultural practices through the presence of consumer goods (Firat, 1991).

Although simple observation of individuals' consumption behaviours suggests that people choose freely between product alternatives, their choices are more likely to be a reflection of their social, ethnic, religious, and regional backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1984).

CONCLUSION

Although sushi culture is very popular in Hong Kong, the sushi culture in there is still in its early stage of development. It has not yet become a national culture. Also, young people and females like eating sushi more than males because they think sushi is a cute and healthy food. People consider its cute size and colors. In addition, female are more concern healthy diet. They think that sushi is a healthy food because it is digestible, fresh and hygienic. It contains very low fat, sugar and calorie with high in protein and vitamins. Also, consuming sushi is a kind of taste reflection. It reinforces social inequalities through the construction of taste and reflects class structure. The

choices of people are more likely to be a reflection of their social, ethnic, religious, and regional backgrounds

In the globalization of Japanese popular culture, Japanization and localization are the two sides of views. We are consuming Hong Kong sushi but not Japanese sushi. Sushi is remade and consumed in Hong Kong. So, the acceptance of sushi in Hong Kong and overseas should be viewed as the result of hybridization and localization. As a commercial and cultural product, sushi has been localized to different nation. In Hong Kong, localization is the main element to the birth of a sushi culture. Without the localization of sushi, it would not become so popular.

Because the popularity of Japanese popular culture continues to grow, sushi will be more popular in Hong Kong. As localization progresses, its Japaneseness will further dilute. In the future, sushi will become a universal food or global mass culture without a clear national boundary. Eating sushi will no longer consume its national and cultural label. Sushi may become a kind of global product one day. Globalization of culture is not a one way direction but that a cultural product in the process of globalization is bound to be hybridized. We may have fishball sushi or satay sushi that we can imagine. Globalization of commercial and cultural products will fuse

different cultural traditions and tear down national and cultural barriers. It will be an inevitable trend which mass consumption in the post modern world.

THE END

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