Customers' Perception of the Authenticity of a Cantonese Restaurant

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Abstract:

The term 'authenticity' is becoming more and more precious in this world full of hyper reality. Authenticity has been an important attribute of the tourism industry, as well as its food sector. This study explores the diners' perception of the authenticity of Cantonese cuisine, with Shang Palace of the Shangri-La Hotel Group as the study base. This study draws on a triple data source composed of in-depth interviews, online comments and participant observations. Systematic content analysis performed using the NVivo 10 leads to findings that food, ambience, and environment, as well as staff members, are important factors that influence the customers' perception of authenticity in the restaurant. Comparative analysis of the data confirms the importance of customers' knowledge and experience of Cantonese cuisine as a factor that influences their perception.

Keywords: culinary authenticity, Cantonese cuisine, diners' perception, Shang Palace, content analysis

1 Introduction

In this world full of hyper reality, the term 'authenticity' has become valuable. The development of virtual experiences engenders a loss of authenticity (Atwal & Williams, 2012), and the advancement of internationalization and commercialization has created a strong commonality. As a result, people are increasingly searching for authenticity, which is related to nostalgia, historic roots (Yeoman, Brass, & McMahon-Beattie, 2007), and identity (Molz, 2013).

In the tourism industry, authenticity has become an important attribute that attracts tourists, and has consequently become an important marketing strategy as exemplified by

building up brand experiences with authenticity as one of the most important attributes (Atwal & Williams, 2012). Creating or constructing 'authenticity' is a response to the consumers' desire for authentic experience.

The concept of authenticity is even more important in highlighting food or cuisines as ambassadors of culture and tourism (Jang, Ha, & Park, 2012). "Products of tourism such as works of art, festivals, rituals, cuisine, dress, housing, and so on are usually described as authentic or inauthentic in terms of the criterion of whether they are made or enacted by local people according to custom or tradition" (Wang, 1999, p. 350). The demand for authentic food experience is increasing (Beer, 2008), and in this regard, authenticity is one of the most important selection criteria for many diners (Oum, 2005). In many contexts, the customers demand 'traditional' and 'local' food, which can also be viewed as a quest for authenticity (Sims, 2009). "Customers may assess if the consumption experience will recreate the authentic feelings based on their past cognitive experience" (Wu, Hsieh & Fang, 2015, p. 204).

The commercial value of the concept of authenticity in the food industry is well noted and exploited through branding and other value added forms (Beer, 2008). For marketers who desire to create stronger brands, authenticity has become one of the important dimensions of brand identity (Alexander, 2009). Beverland (2006) uses the word 'cornerstone' to emphasize the importance of authenticity in contemporary marketing.

Hong Kong is a metropolitan city, and a popular international tourism destination, where one could easily find all kinds of cuisines, ranging from various Western cuisines, such as Italian and French, to all kinds of Eastern cuisines from Japan, Thailand, South

Korea, Mainland China, and other ethnic Asian cuisines. Browsing through OpenRice.com, a website in Hong Kong that provides a directory of restaurants, one can perceive that the case is almost 'you name it, we have it.' However, the most traditional cuisine in Hong Kong is probably the Cantonese cuisine, which is one of the eight cuisines in Greater China. Cantonese cuisine is the main home-cooking and eating-out choice for Hong Kong residents, who mostly have Cantonese origin. Cantonese cuisine is also the premier attraction for non-local visitors or tourists to Hong Kong. The cuisine itself bears significant cultural uniqueness that tourists often look for.

Based on the aforementioned context, exploring the diners' perception of the main local cuisine in Hong Kong, namely, Cantonese cuisine is of immense significance. Is authenticity important for the diners of Cantonese restaurants? What role does authenticity play in the customers' dining experience?

Given the abovementioned background, this study aims to address the following issues:

1. To understand the role of authenticity in Cantonese cuisine from the diners' perspective;
2. To investigate the relevant elements that may enhance culinary authenticity in the overall dining experience;
3. To understand local residents and non-local visitors' expectation of authenticity in Cantonese cuisine.

Through an in-depth understanding of these issues, the definitive goal of this study is to provide implications to restaurant operators and other stakeholders of the food business.

The findings of this study will also lay the foundation for the development of a measurement instrument, which will facilitate further understanding of the effect of the perceived authenticity of cuisines on the customers' behavioral intentions in a restaurant setting.

With limited studies in Cantonese cuisine, this study adopts a qualitative approach, which is achieved through interviews with local residents and non-local visitors who have patronized Shang Palace to compare the different perceptions of authenticity related to Cantonese cuisine. Online comments on Shang Palace from TripAdviser.com and OpenRice.com, as well as participant observations serve as supplementary data sources.

2 Literature Review

2.1 *Authenticity*

Understanding the connotation of 'authenticity' is difficult because the concept of authenticity is based on culture, which evolves over time. Hudgins (2005) uses the word 'slippery' to reflect the multi-fold nature of the concept. Several definitions are more straightforward. For example, the definitions Taylor (1991) include 'that which is believed or accepted to be genuine or real' (cited in Jang, et al., 2012, p.993); Arjun Appadurai states that 'Authenticity measures the degree to which something is more or less what it ought to be…' (cited in Molz, 2013, p. 54). Other definitions are complicated. For example, Alexander (2009) discusses three forms of authenticity, namely, objective, constructive, and existential; and the three sources of authenticity, namely, object, community, and self. Beer (2008, p.153) explains that '…our perceptions of authenticity involve an interaction between what we are considering (the thing), society (the others) and the individual that is contemplating this whole idea of authenticity (the self), particularly with reference to food.'

To further define the scope of this study, authenticity under discussion is more associated with the words 'traditional,' 'original,' and 'genuine.'

In spite of the diversified definitions of authenticity, the concept is becoming significantly more important. Authenticity is an important element in building up brand experience (Atwal & Williams, 2012). Gaytán (2008, p.315) argues that 'consumption serves as a means through which authenticity becomes a measure of the quality, efficacy, and legitimacy of one's experience in a particular setting.' Jang et al. (2012) have proven that the authenticity of food and atmospherics influence the diners' behavioral intentions. Authenticity has increasingly become an important criterion for restaurant evaluation (Oum, 2005). Above all, an increasing demand for authentic food experience from customers exists (Beer, 2008).

This heightened importance of authenticity has led service businesses, particularly the tourism and culinary businesses, to attempt to create or 'stage' authenticity to enhance customer experience. Molz (2013) investigates the effort exerted in Thai restaurants in the US to create a staged authenticity, which included the menu, ingredients, and decor unique to Thai restaurants. The design of the menu is associated with the regions in Thailand because cuisines differ from one region to another. Sims (2009) has studied two tourist destinations in the UK and determined that telling the story of food production could fulfill the tourists' desire for authenticity and consequently promote the development of products and services that would contribute to sustainable development. Using local food and ingredients, which symbolizes the culture of the place, has been seen as an important approach to authenticity (Sims, 2009). Hudgins (2005) explains that a few criteria have to be met before any traditional dishes can be reproduced in other contexts: first, the same

look, smell, and taste should be maintained using the right ingredients and cooking techniques; and second, the diners' own personal taste memory of the dish needs to be ensured, so that the standard of the culinary authenticity could be judged. Beverland (2006, p.257) identifies six attributes of authenticity, namely, 'heritage and pedigree, stylistic consistency, quality commitments, relationship to place, method of production, and downplaying commercial motives.' Lego, Wodo, McFee, and Slomon (2002) explores the methods and frames of reference that Irish pubs used to create themed environments and a sense of authenticity; they determined that bar owners adopted a range of theming strategies to create an authentic environment. Popular culture, such as movies, plays an important role and has been drawn on for reference, as reflected by the interior and exterior decorations. Market-generated culture has been clearly observed as well.

These efforts have mostly centered on food and environment. Many would agree that the authenticity of food is probably the most critical factor. Hudgins (2005) argues that culinary authenticity could be cloned in other parts of the world; if the recipe, ingredients, and cooking techniques (including cooking ware and sources) are the same, then the end product should have the same look, smell, and taste. Cultural decorations play important roles in creating an authentic dining environment. For example, native artwork, decorations, music, photos of important persons from the culture of the cuisine, posters, and paintings of important buildings, among others, are used in restaurants to engender an authentic experience for the customers (Molz, 2013). In authentic Mexican restaurants, the image of the Mexican cowboy suits the restaurant theme well (Gaytan, 2008).

2.2 Emphasis on Customers' Perception

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Many scholars argue that the concept of authenticity is subjective, negotiable, and socially constructed (Perterson, 2005), as well as subject to the consumers' own perceptions (Molz, 2013; Lu & Fine, 1995). 'Authenticity is in the eye of the beholder' (Lego et al., 2002, p.67), as well as 'on the tongue of the taster' (*ibid*.). People have their own sense of the 'authentic,' in which memory and experience play crucial roles in shaping people's expectation of a particular dish (Hudgins, 2005). In addition, the diners' rigidity and flexibility in items of acceptable variations of the cuisine affect their perception of authenticity (Hudgins, 2005).

Therefore, the consumers play a big part in judging whether something is authentic. To this end, Molz (2013) explores the diners' judging criteria for authenticity in Thai restaurants in the US and determines that the diners have their own set of criteria mainly based on their social experiences and previous travel experiences in Thailand. The criteria are often the decor and ambience, spiciness of the food, typical Thai ingredients, and even the staff members. Muñoz and Wood (2009) go one step further to explore whether the variation of proximity to the host country affects the customers' perception of authenticity of Mexican food; the result was in the affirmative. Hence, the farther the customers' residence areas are, the more stereotypical their experiences will be. Furthermore, the customers' residence area places more emphasis on the atmospheric components of the restaurants. Furthermore, Miller and Kim (2011) propose that the use of foreign language on the restaurant's signs might give a signal of authenticity of the food.

More comprehensively, Groves (2001) attempts to understand the consumers' perceptions of authentic British food products (food in general, including food from the market, as well as those in the commercial dining outlets) through a series of focus group

interviews, and has determined three basic influences, namely, product, situational, and personal. Based on Groves' findings, product-related factors include name and label, packaging, appearance, price, authority, traditional association, branding, product category, process of production, and origin of the product; situational factors include retail outlet and whether the consumer was a non-local visitor or a local resident; and personal factors include the knowledge and experience of the consumer, which leads to the kind of expectations they have. These factors significantly influence the consumers' perceptions of authenticity with food consumption (Groves, 2001).

The customers' perception of authenticity significantly influences their behavioral intentions. Jang et al. (2012) use authenticity as a construct to examine how the customers' perception of the authenticity of Korean food influences their behavioral intentions. They included two dimensions, namely, authenticity of food (presentation, taste, side dishes, and self-cooking BBQ) and authenticity of atmospherics (exterior design, interior design, decorations, and music) under the construct. The result of Jang et al.'s study has proven that the customers' perception of authenticity significantly influences their behavioral intentions.

2.3   Attributes of Authentic Culinary Experience

The customers' perceptions, acceptance, and expectations related to authentic dining experience are important information for restaurant owners and chefs; thus, prior studies have attempted to understand what attributes influence the customers' perception of authentic dining experience (e.g. Sukalakamala & Boyce, 2007; Tsai & Lu, 2012). Sukalakamala and Boyce (2007) investigate the customers' perception of the authenticity in a Thai restaurant in the US and develop a 12-item scale that falls under three dimensions

(i.e., environmental, food, and employee). The 12 items include the Thai style uniform, Thai style menu in the Thai language, Thai greeting, Thai style tableware, Thai music, Thai exterior design, Thai interior design, authentic ingredients, traditional hot and spicy tastes, only Thais preparing food, using Thai language for communication, and only Thai wait staff employees. Tsai and Lu (2012) adopt Sukalakamala and Boyce's scale, test it in the Thai restaurant in Taiwan, and confirm the three factors; however, only food and environment have been determined to have an influence on the customers' repurchase intentions.

Based on above definitions of authenticity, the culinary authenticity can be categorized into five dimensions, namely, food, environment, service and staff, tradition, and diners' personal factors. To summarize, Table 1 illustrates the attributes and influencing factors that shape the customers' authentic dining experience.

(Table 1)

2.4 Between Authenticity and Practicality

Customers or diners judge the authenticity level; thus, their experiences, memories, and perceptions are the most important factors for the chefs and restaurant operators to remember. Lu and Fine (1995) argue that, although restaurant owners and chefs desire true authenticity, they have to adapt from time to time to establish themselves in the market. Along with this argument, a balance between authenticity and practicality should be pursued, which is particularly true with ethnic restaurants in a mainstream culture. Thorn (2011) argues that it is important to 'find the balance between authenticity and practicality and between educating customers and feeding them what they want…' (p. 44); however, he admits that the process is challenging because customers want good food, and mostly

food they are familiar with. Lego et al. (2002) offer similar arguments: 'Adaptations of the food, setting, and representations of the culture are conducted to ensure that the consumer is experiencing an exotic experience, but not so much so that it falls out of the realm of their expectations of the culture' (Lego et al., 2002, p. 67). Gaytán (2008) interviews the owners and managers of Mexican restaurants in the US and determines that, although the owners and managers tried to maintain the authenticity of Mexican food in America, they had to compromise and make alterations because of the demand from the customers. The result is a type of hybrid preparation and production. Taco is a good example of this compromise. The aforementioned rationale often leads to a consequence that authenticity is negotiated and compromised to cater to the taste of the target customers (Lu & Fine, 1995).

These prior studies have identified the importance of authenticity for an enhanced dining experience. The attributes of authenticity in restaurants or the culinary business have been explored. Efforts have been exerted to create a sense of authenticity, which constitutes a marketing strategy. However, these studies are mostly based on ethnic restaurants in a mainstream culture; the Cantonese cuisine authenticity has been rarely explored. Therefore, the aim of the current study is to fill this research gap.

2.5 *Cantonese Cuisine*

The diversity of food in China is well-known. China has eight traditional regional cuisines, and Cantonese cuisine is one of them. Defining Cantonese cuisine has posed a few difficulties because of the lack of a unanimous definition; the cuisine itself has been continuously evolving. In terms of geographic regions, Cantonese cuisine refers to the traditional cuisine in Guangzhou, or Guangdong Province, and the Pearl River Delta area,

including Macau and Hong Kong (Klein, 2007). Cantonese cuisine could also refer to the cuisine of Cantonese speakers. Although the Guangzhou and Hong Kong cuisines have differences between them, the distinction is blurred on most occasions (*ibid*.).

In terms of quality, Cantonese cuisine, with lightness and freshness as the key features, is said to be superior to other cuisines in China (Klein, 2007). Cantonese cuisine boasts of original and natural flavors of whatever ingredients are integrated into the dishes (Klein, 2007). Moreover, health is always an important element in Cantonese cuisine. People in Hong Kong and Guangzhou use expensive ingredients, such as bird's nests, ginseng, abalone, and sea cucumber, among others, with the view that these ingredients are good for the health. Seasonality is another distinguishing feature of Cantonese cuisine (*ibid*.).

3 Research Methodology

This study adopts the qualitative approach, and draws on triple data sources, namely, interviews with diners, online comments from TripAdvisor.com and OpenRice.com., and participant observations. The explorative nature of this research and the scarcity of prior research in the context of the Hong Kong and Cantonese cuisine-related culinary business are the reasons for choosing the approach.

3.1 Study Context

The study context of this research is Shang Palace, which is part of the Shangri-La Hotel Group. In the official website of Shangri-La (Kowloon, Hong Kong), Shang Palace promises a 'sumptuous Cantonese dining' and that 'Shang Palace serves Cantonese specialties that evoke the grandeur of traditional China. The delicious food, ornate décor,

and friendly staff make dining here a truly wonderful and memorable experience.' The restaurant is well-managed and earned two Michelin stars, which has distinguished the restaurant from many others (Shangri-La Official Website, 2015).

Choosing Shang Palace of the Kowloon Shangri-La Hotel as the study context of this research is based on two rationales. First, Shang Palace (Kowloon Shangri-La Hotel) boasts of the traditional Canton style cuisine. Shangri-La Hotel in Hong Kong is well established, and so is Shang Palace, one of the Chinese restaurants in Shangri-la. Restaurant has been received two Micheline stars in Hong Kong and Macau Micheline Guide since 2009 till now. Second, Shang Palace attracts both local residents and foreign or non-local visitors; thus, it is suitable for the exploration and comparison of the perceptions of both local residents and non-local visitors.

3.2 Data Collection and Data Analysis

Data for this study were collected from three sources, namely, participant observations, online comments, and interviews with the diners. The participant observations and review of online comments were conducted almost simultaneously. After the researchers had decided on Shang Palace of Kowloon Shangri-La, the team set the agenda of participant observation for three times along the research process to obtain firsthand experiential data without being influenced by other diners. The team started the observation process from the table reservation, the dining experience, to the post-dining evaluations. Reflections and comparisons were made after each observation, which were recorded and converted to text files each time. The online comments collected from TripAdvisor.com and OpenRice.com were reviewed simultaneously; the relevant comments were extracted for analysis at a later

stage. TripAdvisor.com is one of the major online review platforms for global wide travelers and diners. OpenRice.com is the most popular restaurants review platform in Hong Kong. A total of 239 online reviews from both platforms were extracted from Feb 2014-Feb 2016. Mainly, TripAdvisor.com has more non-local diners' reviews and OpenRice.com has mainly local diners' reviews which can complement each other. The two approaches allowed the researchers to become familiar with the research context and acquire an initial understanding of the customers' perception of their dining experiences in Shang Palace.

With this understanding, the team went on to interview the customers who have had experience with Shang Palace, Kowloon, Hong Kong. The selection of interviewees was achieved through snow-ball sampling. The team approached four customers who were regular patrons to Shang Palace, Kowloon, as the first interviewees. These four customers further recommended their friends. The process went on until the team observed saturation in the data, that is, no new information was derived from the interviewees. Altogether 17 diners were interviewed. Most of them had good experience with Cantonese cuisine, and more than half of them are frequent patrons to the Shang Palace, Kowloon, Hong Kong. All the interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the interviewees. The interview language was Chinese or English, depending on the nationality of the interviewees. The recorded files were transcribed verbatim immediately after the interviews. For the interviews conducted in the Chinese language, the transcripts were translated into English before the textual data were content analyzed. A back translation approach was adopted to ensure the accuracy of the translation. The detailed data collection process is illustrated in Table 2, and the interviewee profiles are provided in the appendix.

(Table 2)

The above data collection agenda has generated a data bank including both texts and pictures. In order to code the textual data in a systematic and consistent manner, the researchers developed an analytical framework at the beginning of data analysis process. Three researchers coded 20% the data manually and individually, trying to categorize and sub-categorize the data according to the focus of the message from the comments, pictures, interview transcripts, and observation notes. Each message was broken down into text units. For example, the following comment was broken down into two text units – fresh sea food and dim sum, both of which fell under the category of food:

> 'Sea food in this restaurant has always been fresh (1), and dim sum is as good as usual (2). That has made the place the taste of Cantonese'. (Comment from TripAdvisor.com, 2015)

Since pictures are usually vivid evidence to back-up the statements in the comments and notes, they are treated along with the texts. For the pictures without comments, the researchers interpreted them into texts before further processing. The researchers then put all the text units into different categories and subcategories. Researcher developed a framework based on their respective categorizations. Rounds of discussions were held to reach an agreement (over 95%) on the framework. The Table below (Table 3.) is an agreed framework. Minor adjustment was made during the analysis process.

(Table 3)

The above framework was applied in further data analysis process, which was processed with the aid of NVivo software. The result is displayed and discussed in the subsequent section.

4   Findings and Discussions

The NVivo analysis generated the following categories and sub-categories:

(Table 4)

Based on Table 1. attributes and influencing factors of authentic dining experience, the findings of table 4 shows that food has the highest weight of 68% (413 text units), ambience and environment receives the second highest weight of 15% (91 text units), staff receives the third highest weight of 11% and followed by others receive 6% (39 text units). Food consists of six subcategories namely, ingredients (120 text units), menu/variety (110 text units), taste (90 text units), cooking method (50 text units), presentation (35 text units) and nutrition/health oriented (18 text units). Ambience and environment consist of decro and design (32 text units), overall ambience (22 text units), table setting and seating (12 text units) and background music (5 text units). Staff includes four subcategories namely, service staff (26 text units), service quality (21 text units), chef (20 text units), and service style (12 text units). A total of 39 text units were received by other category which includes three subcategories namely, innovation (18 text units), Micheline-starred (11 text units) and heritage/tradition (10 text units).

4.1   *Food*

Most of the interviewees and the comments from online (TripAdvisor.com and OpenRice.com) started with the ingredients, cooking method, and menu of the Cantonese cuisines. Typical dishes were always mentioned to start with, such as the most famous dim sum, Cantonese double-boiled soup, seafood, and barbecue meat, which are unique to this region. The freshness of the ingredients were repeatedly mentioned, particularly the seafood. This area enjoys good sources of seafood because of the geographic advantage. Healthy diet and nutritious elements were the other popular topics for the interviewees. One of the interviewees (interviewee 4) shared that the reason why Hong Kong people boast of the longest average life expectancy in the world is their healthy diet. Furthermore, interviewee 4 shared the characteristics of Cantonese cuisine which includes slow double-boiled soup, lightness of the food, fresh ingredients, and healthy menu items, such as ginseng and bird's nest. In addition, the cooking method in Cantonese cuisine is another distinguishing factor.

In addition, some have mentioned that it is time consuming to cook some of the Cantonese cuisine such as the double-boiled soup. It usually takes hours to cook the double-boiled soup with various traditional Chinese herbal medicine such as ginseng. However, in today's fast paced lifestyle, especially in Hong Kong, this type of traditional food has become a luxury at home, and therefore many customers would like to have it in restaurant. Moreover, the quick-paced and competitive living environment in Hong Kong has made people more nostalgic of the slow-cooked dishes from the traditional Cantonese menu.

Cantonese cuisine also requires craftsmanship for many dishes, which also takes time. The modern mass production rhythm has endangered craftsmanship. The chef's persistence in maintaining the craftsmanship in Shang Palace is much applauded. The presentation of

many dishes in the restaurant has created a lot of 'WOWs'. It can also be evidenced by many photos posted on social media to display the presentation of the dishes. Below is a comment reflecting diners' desire for this tradition:

'I like to read some of the genuine articles written by experienced connoisseurs to learn how they describe Cantonese culture during fifties and sixties. Some of the dishes have almost disappeared, mainly I think it was too much effort required for those dishes and the new generation of chefs have difficulties to master. Therefore, to be able to taste these authentic dishes is much like flipping through a history book, very precious. To harness traditional Cantonese specialties, but also a modern twist, it is not simple'. (Comment from OpenRice.com, 2015)

This online comment demonstrates the essential elements of creating authenticity in Cantonese cuisine which includes Cantonese culture, traditional specialties and the 'genuine' skills and passion. This finding supports Taylor (1991) that authenticity is believed to be genuine (Jang et al, 2012). Furthermore, it also echoes with Gaytan (2008) and Oum (2005)'s notion how authenticity becomes a measurement for restaurant ding experience (Beer, 2008).

4.2 *Ambience and Environment*

Ambience and environment includes five subcategories namely, décor and design (32 text units), overall ambience (22 text units), cultural feeling (20 text units), table setting and seating (12 text units) and background music (5 text units). The ambience and environment of the restaurant appeared to be equally important for the customers of Shang Palace. Most respondents expressed positively regarding the ambience of the restaurant. Among the few

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comments were 'this is in match with the food served.' (Interviewee 1) The details of the ambience and environment included the decorations of the restaurant, seating styles, tableware, background music, and the kind of cultural feeling that the restaurant is trying to create. Among all the features, both the interviewees and the online comments were based on the attraction to the red and golden color combination of the restaurant, which is both traditionally Chinese and a preferred color combination in Cantonese culture. The background music was elegant and in tune with the entire environment. The unique aroma of Shangri-La Hotel Group was mentioned by Interviewee 2. A few interviewees commented that the high-end feeling made them feel good about the restaurant. Others commented that the overall feeling in the restaurant made them want to come back again. Above findings demonstrate how personal perception of authenticity is closely related with ambience and environment which is subjective, negotiable and socially constructed. The findings support the notion by Perterson (2005). An example of ambience and environment:

'Shang Palace gives people a feeling of peaceful serenity. Hanging chandeliers, spacious layout, great service and innovative dishes, probably years Michelin star was awarded reasons'. (Comment from OpenRice.com, 2015)

This comment reflects how a diner appreciates a good balance of ambience, service, and innovative dishes in Shang Palace which echoes with Lego et al. (2002), Jang et al. (2012), and Molz (2013) on how environment can create a sense of authenticity.

4.3 Staff Members

The interview respondents appeared to be less explicit with the staff member category. Unlike the food and ambience/environment categories, in which the interviewees

voluntarily expressed their comments, the interviewees reflected on the staff item mostly when they were asked. While a few interviewees (Interviewee 10, and 11) argued that the chef being local was important, others did not have this kind of expression. Interviewee 4, who is local, claimed that 'being local is critical because the chef needs to understand the spirit of the cuisine, as well as the culture. Cuisine cannot be separated from culture. Another (Interviewee 9) said that 'It does not matter as long as the chef is properly trained.'

With regard to the service staff members, most of the customers agreed that being at least Chinese was important because foreign servers did not appear in tune with the feeling of the restaurant and may ruin the overall ambience. The ideal situation for them was that the servers speak Cantonese, although most expressed that it was acceptable if they did not.

For some interviewees and online reviewers, the service staff's knowledge in tea also adds to their authentic perception. This knowledge is reflected in the style they serve the tea. Selecting the right type of tea to accompany right dishes, timing of tea service, temperature of water, and so on, are all important in tea serving process. Apparently, Shang Palace has dedicated much effort in this. An example of tea service is shown as below:

'During our dinner dining, they have tea master who assists us to choose and blend two special Chinese tea… I do not have any knowledge of the art of tea. I only know after having these teas made me feel good'. (Comment from OpenRice.com, 2015)

Similar to a sommelier wine service, Shang Place provides tea master to assist diners to choose tea with their meal which enriches their overall dining experience. This unique service receives many positive comments and demonstrates their innovative service style. This service has also highlighted the importance of tea culture in Cantonese cuisine, and it

which supports Lego et al.(2002)'s argument on how the cultural experience enriches authentic dining experience as well as how this experience can build up diner's brand experience (Atwal & Williams, 2012).

4.4 Others

Apart from the aforementioned categories, both the interviewees and the online comments touched on other issues, such as the tradition of the restaurant, being a Michelin-starred restaurant, and the innovations in the restaurant. While the interviewees did not know many things related to the heritage of Shang Palace, many expressed that being a well-known brand under the Shangri-La Group boosted their confidence in the cuisine. The same was true with the fact that the restaurant is a Michelin-starred restaurant. One (interviewee 2) said that 'It must be authentic because this is a Michelin-starred restaurant.' Two other interviewees (3 and 4), who had been to Shang Palace many times, shared that it was some innovative dishes that made them come back constantly.

Nevertheless, some comments from OpenRice.com and TripAdvisor.com indicated that innovative ideas may carry away the authentic Cantonese cuisine. It is common to see similar feedback in upscale fine dining restaurants. Sometimes, the authentic cuisine may not require expensive and unique ingredient to prepare. One online reviewer commented that "this restaurant is not a place for classic/traditional dim sum, on the other hand, it may be a great place for innovative fusion cuisine" (Comment from OpenRice.com, 2013). To match with the reputation of Michelin-starred and brand image, chefs tend to incorporate different rare and valuable ingredients to please diner's palate. For example:

'It is hardly to taste the flavor of foie gras and black truffle. I think it is not necessary to add these two things which don't bring in any new flavor or taste even though the

name with foie gras and black truffle is more impressive'. (Comment from OpenRice.com, 2013)

Lastly, this study also found that diners cared about the sustainability of restaurant operation. One is about moon cake package by online comment from OpenRice.com, the diner described how he appreciated the simple and environmental friendly packaging for moon cakes. Moreover, Interviewee 11 also shared how chef used sustainable fish to display the elegant taste of dish which made her feel great to be able to save the environment.

4.6   *"Who the Customers are" Matters*

Comparing all the interview transcripts and online comments revealed that "who the customers are" mattered in shaping dining perceptions. The customers' knowledge, memory, and experience with Cantonese cuisine played critical roles in their perception of the authenticity of the cuisine in Shang Palace. This finding corresponds to a few assertions in the literature. For example, Hudgins (2005) argues that memory and experience influence the customers' perceptions in dining experience.

The differences in perceptions between the local residents and non-local visitors, who draw on different clues, were particularly contrasting. For the local residents, the attention was more on the food itself, whether the ingredients were fresh enough, whether the cooking process followed the traditional ways, and whether the taste remained true to the customers' everyday dining experience. Moreover, the local residents were more particular with the menu. They would be disappointed if their favorite dish was missing from the menu. Sometimes, they could order even without looking at the menu, and they were

particular with the combination of dishes, tea, and desserts (or sweet soup). Moreover, for many local diners, the authenticity of the food served in the restaurant is also a reminder of their identity and their origin, as one of the commenter said that this was the taste of Hong Kong that he remembered.

By contrast, the non-local visitors seem to pay more attention to the ambience of the restaurant, the strangeness of the food, the service style that appears unique. In addition, the type of tableware used, and the kind of dining process that the visitors are able to distinguish from cuisines from their own countries, or cuisines that they are familiar with. For non-local visitors, the kind of clue that they drew on was blurred between the Chinese dining atmosphere and Cantonese cuisine. One interviewee mentioned that the type of red and golden colored decoration was unique and reminded him of Cantonese cuisine, although this type of color combination was commonly used in other Chinese restaurants. However, the non-local visitors, particularly foreigners, remained superficial in judging the other elements because of limited knowledge and experience in the diversity of cuisines and dining culture from different regions in China. They often did not care significantly about the service staff members and the chef being Cantonese, although they expected Chinese staff members. In addition, for non-local visitors, sometimes the considerably limited knowledge and experience with Cantonese food may lead to negative experiences. For example, one online commenter said that he could not understand why people liked to eat chicken feet in this area. Another said that seeing a whole duck hanging in the window looked so scary that he/she lost his/her appetite. Table 5 provides the contrasts between the local residents and non-local visitors in their perception of the authenticity of Shang Palace.

(Table 5)

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5 Conclusions and Implications

The pervious literature has mainly focused on customer perception of authenticity of foreign cuisines in a new country, such as Thai restaurants (Molz, 2013; Sukalakamala & Boyce, 2007) and Korean restaurants (Jang & Park, 2012) in the US. This study investigates the Cantonese cuisine which is a local Hong Kong regional cuisine. The study has adopted a qualitative approach to understand the customers' perception of authenticity of a Cantonese restaurant in Hong Kong which revealed the role of authenticity from the diners' perspective as well as elements for enhancing overall dining experience.

The findings contribute to the understanding of the role of authenticity in Cantonese cuisine. Diners highly valued their authentic experience by prioritizing the sequence of weight, such as food, ambience and environment, staff, and others respectively, which supports the main findings in literature. With Cantonese cuisine itself, this study found that being nutritious and healthy are two key elements of authentic Cantonese cuisine which is also reflected via its cooking method, such as steaming and double-boiling. The typical menu served in most of the Cantonese restaurants such as various dim sum, barbecued meat, and various pro-healthy soups has distinguished the cuisine from others. Service style, ambience, and the whole environment are also important in fostering authentic experience with Cantonese cuisine. In addition, this study found that Michelin-starred rating and brand heritage -Shang Palace, Shangri-la Hotel are the positive aspects of how diners perceive its authentic quality and standard. Beside the authentic experience, the food and service innovation were highly appreciated by diners. For example, the innovative tea service strengthens the overall dining experience. Furthermore, casual conversation between diners and chef cannot only enrich dining experience but also

understand diners' needs, which is considered a win-win situation to understand diners' needs and wants. Based on the above findings, the restaurateurs and chefs are recommended to preserve the essence of the Cantonese cuisine when they design the menu and manage the set-up of the restaurants. They are also recommended to strike a balance between authenticity and innovation.

This study also confirmed that the customers'/diners' personal experience, knowledge, and memory of the cuisine are important factors that influence the customers' perceptions of the authenticity of a cuisine. This result has implications for restaurant operators in terms of understanding the diners' expectation, especially for non-local visitors. By introducing interesting stories of particular dishes, the restaurant can enhance the customers' dining experience. Given that a large percentage of guests to Shang Palace are foreigners / non-local visitors, it is essential to promote the Cantonese dining culture among the customers. Restaurant operation is a competitive business in Hong Kong, especially high in rental fee, imported food ingredients and labor cost make it more challenging for restaurant business.

6   Limitations and Future Research

Choosing Shang Palace generated some confusion with regard to the distinction between high standard and being authentic. Although this issue has been resolved through the discretionary explanations of the interviewers, an unavoidable association exists between the high standard of Shang Palace and the authenticity of food in the restaurant. Therefore, future studies should consider exploring other types of local restaurants, such as Lei Garden and Da Pai Dang

So far, this research has explored the diners' perception of authenticity with a Cantonese restaurant in a qualitative manner. To quantitatively measure the diners' perception of authenticity and the association with satisfaction, a measurement scale will be developed based on the findings of this research.

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Table 1. Attributes and influencing factors of authentic dining experience

Dimensions	Attributes and factors	References
Food	Menu	Molz (2013); Gaytan (2008);
	Recipe	Hudgins (2005);
	Ingredient	Molz (2013); Hudgins (2005); Sims (2009)
	Cooking method	Hudgins (2005); Jang et al. (2012)
	Presentation / look	Hudgins (2005); Jang et al. (2012)
	Smell	Hudgins (2005);
	Taste	Hudgins (2005); Jang et al. (2012)
	Origin of the ingredient	Sims (2009); Beverland (2006); Molz (2013)
Environment	Décor	Lego et al. (2002); Molz (2013); Jang et al. (2012);
	Themes	Lego et al. (2002); Hudgins (2005); Gaytan (2008)
	Music	Molz (2013); Jang et al. (2012)
	Art	Molz (2013)
	Table ware and seating	Sukalamal and Boyce (2007);
	Design	Molz (2013); Jang et al. (2012)
	Cultural ambience	Lego et al. (2002); Hudgins (2005)
	Signage	Miller and Kim (2011)
	Language	Miller and Kim (2011); Sukalamal and Boyce (2007);
	Other customers	Molz (2013)
Service and Staff	Serving process and style	Molz (2013); Sukalamal and Boyce (2007);
	Chef	Lu and Fine (1995); Tsai and Lu (2012); Sukalamal and Boyce (2007);
	Service staff	Molz (2013); Sukalamal and Boyce (2007);
	Managers	Gaytan (2008)
Tradition, brand, origin	Heritage	Molz (2013)
	Pedigree	Beverland (2006)
	Origin/ Association with the past	Gaytan (2008)
Diners' personal factors	Knowledge	Molz (2013)
	Experience	Hudgins (2005); Gaytan (2008)
	Memory	Hudgins (2005);

Table 2 Data collection process

Data collecting techniques	Targets	Researcher (s)	Timeline	Data
Participant observation	Shang Palace, Kowloon Shangri-La, Hong Kong	A team of four researchers	3 times, from September 2014 to January 2015	Notes, reflections, and pictures
Online comments	Comments on Shang Palace, Kowloon Shangri-La, Hong Kong, from TripAdvisor.com, OpenRice.com	The research team	All comments on Shang Palace, Kowloon Shangri-La, Hong Kong	Textual comments and pictures
Interviews	Customers who have had experience with Shang Palace, Kowloon Shangri-La, Hong Kong	The research team	From October 2014 to February 2015	Recordings and transcripts

Table 3. Data analysis categories and subcategories

Categories	Subcategories
Food	1. Ingredients
	2. Cooking methods
	3. Menu/variety
	4. Presentation/ look
	5. Taste
	6. Nutrition/ health orientation
Environment	1. Overall ambience
	2. Décor and design
	3. Table setting and seating
	4. Background music
	5. Cultural feeling
Staff	1. Chef
	2. Service staff
	3. Service style
	4. Service quality
Others	1. Tradition
	2. Innovation
	3. Michelin-starred

Table 4 Categories and sub-categories of customer perception on authenticity

Categories	Items	Salient points
Food 413 (68%)	Ingredients 120	➢ Fresh ingredients ➢ Fresh seafood ➢ Nutritious ingredients ➢ Ingredients that are traditionally deemed to be good for the health, such as ginseng
	Menu / variety 101	➢ Dim Sum, soup, barbecued pork，tea, seasonal soup, ➢ Several typical dim sum, such as shrimp dumplings，Pineapple Bun，not easy to cook, but special in this region ➢ Healthy menu ➢ Dessert ➢ Tea
	Taste 90	➢ Light ➢ Flavourful
	Cooking method 50	➢ Steam ➢ Do not use a lot of oil ➢ Varied cooking methods, such as boil and fry ➢ Double-boiled
	Presentation / look 35	➢ Good presentation ➢ Modern
	Nutrition / health oriented 18	➢ Light but nutritious, particularly the soup; seasonal soup
Ambience and environment 91 (15%)	Decor and Design 32	➢ Color: red + golden, which is typical Chinese ➢ Chinese style carvings in the restaurant ➢ Overall design and style: high end, and Chinese
	Overall ambience 22	➢ Overall feeling in the restaurant is in line with the Cantonese style
	Cultural feeling 20	➢ Feels like Chinese / Cantonese
	Table setting and seating 12	➢ Table ware ➢ Table setting ➢ Seating
	Background music 5	➢ Chinese music, music popular in Southern China, festive music, relaxing music
Staff 69 (11%)	Service staff members 26	➢ Language (Cantonese), service skill, well trained; uniform (Chinese style) ➢ Origin (being born in Hong Kong or Canton area gives them better knowledge of the Cantonese cuisine)
	Service quality 21	➢ High standard
	Chef 20	➢ Origin, experience, expertise
	Service style 12	➢ Chinese service style
Others 39 (6%)	Innovation 18	➢ The restaurant is good at creating new menu, which is also important
	Michelin-starred 11	➢ The fact that it is a Michelin-starred restaurant adds to the dining experience
	Heritage / tradition 10	➢ The heritage of Shangri-La ➢ The name of Shang Palace itself

Total	612 (100%)

Table 5 Different perceptions of authenticity between local residents and non-local visitors

Focus of attention	Local residents	Non-local visitors
Food	➢ Focusing on the specific details of the menu, ingredients, cooking methods, presentation, and taste of food, as it is distinguished from other cuisines in China	➢ Chinese, as it is distinguished from food in other countries ➢ The most famous items, such as dim sum and barbecue meat
Ambience	➢ Elements that are unique to Cantonese cuisine	➢ Chinese elements in the ambience
Service staff	➢ The staff members being local is important	➢ Cannot tell
Service style	➢ Service style that is unique to Cantonese cuisine, such as the sweet soup at the end of the meal	➢ Traditional Chinese elements, such as tea serving