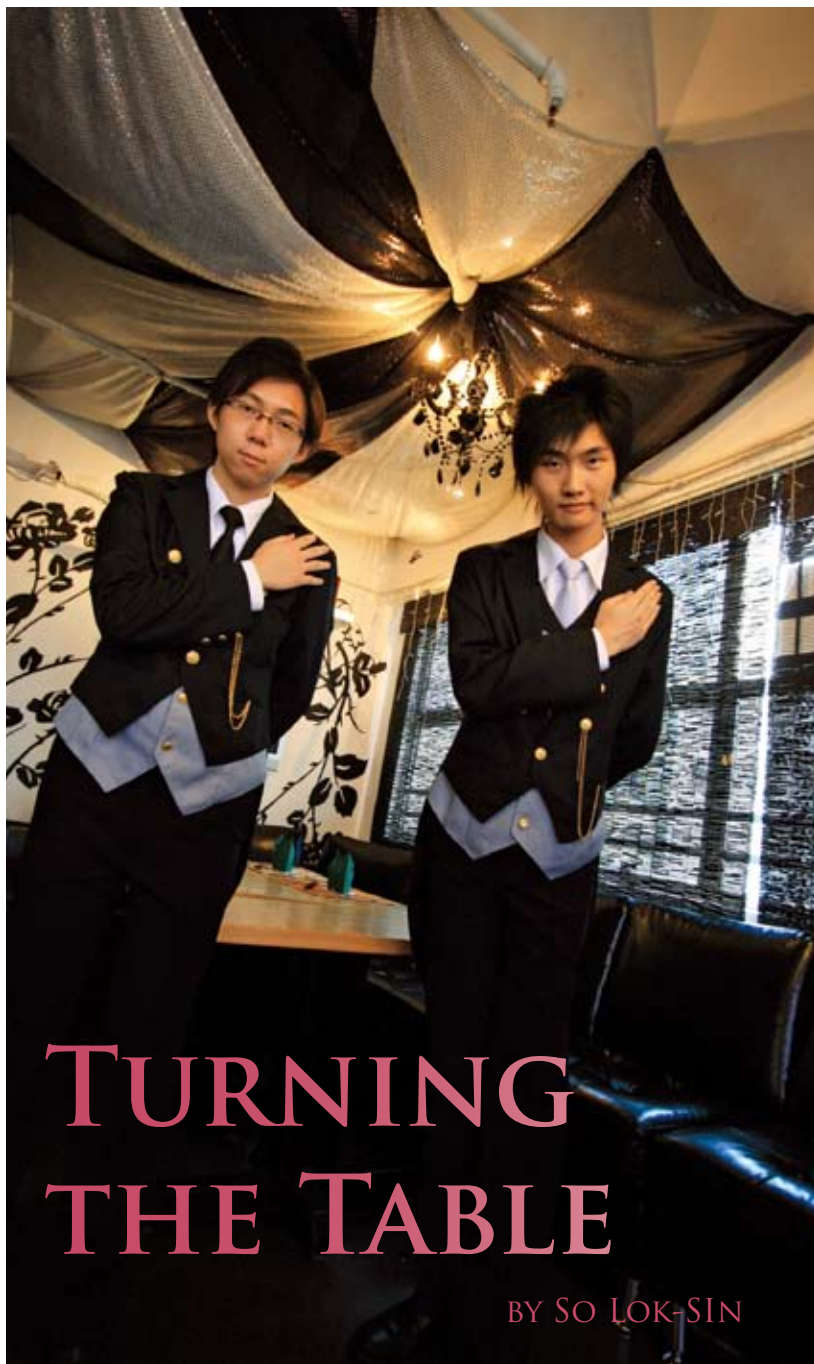


BUSINESS & CAREER



TURNING THE TABLE

BY SO LOK-SIN

Be-coming a member of the upper class can now be achieved at an affordable cost. Originally from Japan, Shitsuzi cafe offers its customers a chance to get a taste of being an “honourable master”, even if it only lasts for a few hours.

“The Japanese word ‘Shitsuzi’ refers to butlers, male servants in a large household. In Japan, Shitsuzi cafe is all about a high class environment,” said Eddie Chan, owner of J-point Cafe, which held a two-week Shitsuzi cafe promotion in May this year.

“Customers can read quietly and enjoy a cup of quality red tea. The Shitsuzi stands aside to prevent disturbance. You can actually treat the whole experience as if you were dining in the Peninsula.”

Before he launched the two-week promotion, Mr Chan invited some media outlets to a presentation. Several customers who knew nothing about Shitsuzis were also invited to try out the new experience.

“After we had finished our presentation, people asked, ‘is that it? What else have you got?’ Obviously they felt bored. Customers here simply have different expectations.”

“One of them asked if Shitsuzis could feed the masters,” Mr Chan said. This would be an uncommon request from a customer in Japan. “As devoted servants, we accepted the request to satisfy our masters. Of course it was done upon request but it turned out to be quite a gimmick.”

The presentation made Mr Chan realise that they could not copy and transplant the whole concept of Shitsuzi Cafe from Japan to Hong Kong. “Because people who do not have much understanding about the culture might not accept it easily,” he added.

To localise the concept, Mr Chan held a number of brainstorming sessions with his butlers after the promotion.

“At first, only one Shitsuzi knew how to play magic tricks. Soon, other Shitsuzis found it a successful way to entertain their masters. Then they initiated learning magic tricks.”

“Some female customers had asked me and other Shitsuzis to take photos with them that are rather intimate.”

“In Japan, Shitsuzis stand at a distance awaiting requests from the masters, as they are only servants. But here, our Shitsuzis chat with customers about whatever they like, from mobile phones to beauty tips,” he added.

Lead Lai, who Mr Chan complimented as the most popular Shitsuzi, has been a part-time waiter in J-point Cafe for more than a year. The 19-year-old student transformed into a Shitsuzi during the promotion. Mr Lai said he did not just do it for extra cash.

“Men in Hong Kong are often called ‘the macho man’ and there have been criticisms about us being rude and inconsiderate of the feelings of others. I want to prove that men can serve women right.”



COURTESY OF J-POINT CAFE

A Shitsuzi serves his customer as if she was the master.

“My rationale is that customers come first,” said Mr Lai. “Here over 80 per cent of customers are female. The ladies often ask me to carry their handbags and that’s alright by me.” But there were times when customers raised more challenging orders.”

“A female customer asked me to cut her grilled hamburger into pieces. Well, that is fine. But then she said she wanted them cut into a hexagonal star-like piece, a heart shape piece and a cat shape piece.”

“Inside, I was like ‘What?’. It was so unexpected. But of course I did not say a word,” said Mr Lai.

Apart from dealing with customers, Mr Lai also found it difficult to deal with people who mistook the nature of his job.

“They thought Shitsuzis were something like hookers,” said Mr Lai. “Some of my friends even asked why I did such a disgraceful job against my dignity.”

Mr Lai tried hard to explain to his friends the difference between a Shitsuzi and a maid, in order to be rid of the misunderstanding.

“We do not speak in a coquettish and seductive tone. Maids take the initiative to interact with customers while our interactions with customers are upon their request. We try our best to satisfy the reasonable requests of masters,” he said.

Mr Lai’s colleague Ho Shi-sing had also met some people who took Shitsuzis to be male maids.

“Maids are known for being amenable and submissive to the orders of masters. But Shitsuzis are highly courteous and humble, like the waiters in superior restaurants,” said the 20-year-old student, who has been doing part-time jobs in the catering business for a few years.



COURTESY OF J-POINT CAFE

Shitsuzis have to learn how to serve a glass of wine elegantly.

“Physical contact is considered inappropriate. Some female customers had asked me and other Shitsuzis to take photos with them that are rather intimate, like putting our hands on their shoulder and waist, even hand in hand.”

“It sounds weird for girls to make such requests to complete strangers,” said Mr Ho. He said he was shocked when he heard about this. “All these requests would be turned down politely,” Mr Ho added.

To manifest the honourable identity of customers as masters, the butlers in J-point Cafe belittle their position through addressing themselves as *Geboku*, a Japanese term of address which carries a meaning of ‘your servant’.

“Some of my friends even asked why I did such a disgraceful job against my dignity.”

“Addressing us as *Geboku* is just a way to comply with the theme. This is only a part of the job. Our action, language and attitude still combine

to create a classy feel,” said Mr Ho. Although the promotion in May was successful in grabbing attention for J-point café, its owner said he was pessimistic about running a Shitsuzi cafe as a long-term business.

“Trends change so fast here and people in Hong Kong get bored very soon,” said Mr Chan. “If Ocean Park operates a haunted house for a whole year, no one will be going after a while.”

“It is also difficult to find employees who possess the quality to be a long-term Shitsuzi,” Mr Chan added. “They will not respect their job or be proud of what they are doing... It is the nature of Hong Kong people.”

Unlike J-point Cafe, Japanese Culture Laboratory (JCL) has continued to hold two “Shitsuzi days” every month since April 2009. The “Shitsuzi days” are held in the name of Greenwood Cafe. Thomas Choi, one of the owners of JCL, said bookings on “Shitsuzi days” are always full, while the Shitsuzis working here are in fact all volunteers.

“The volunteer and the employees have different mindsets. Volunteers are particularly committed,” said Mr Choi, who also works as a Shitsuzi in JCL.

To equip the volunteers with the proper etiquette, JCL has held two Shitsuzi training classes so far. “Shitsuzi should be sophisticated, from the way they talk and pour wine, to the angle of their bows in different circumstances,” Mr Choi added.

“Each time, we have around 5 or 6 volunteers coming, most of them are ACG (Animation, Comic and Games) fans.” Other volunteers come from diverse backgrounds. “There are some students, a photographer, and even a medical practitioner,” said Mr Choi.

Mr Choi added that the majority of customers on the “Shitsuzi days” are female. Most of regular customers show respect to the butlers when interacting with them, but occasionally there were people who came to make fun of others.

“Shitsuzis originated from the rich residences of Europe. Only wealthy and prominent families could afford hiring these male servants. I suppose the ladies there are elegant. But here were customers who deliberately made demanding requests and gave the Shitsuzi a hard time,” he said.

“I think it is easier to explain what Shitsuzi do when compared to maids. In Japan, there are AVs (Adult Videos) and ACG featuring maids as their main characters, but no Shitsuzi so far. This has eroticized the nature of maids. People may misunderstand Shitsuzis when they think it is something like



COURTESY OF

Japanese Culture Laboratory not only holds “Shitsuzi days” every month, they also hold activities about Japanese comics, musics and movies regularly.

midnight cowboys.”

A 25-year-old volunteering butler, who prefers to be named as Satsuki, said he was lucky that he had never encountered such situations.

A drum teacher, Satsuki described himself as “an ACG fan and quite an *Otaku*”. *Otaku* is a Japanese word referring to people who are big fans of, keen on investigating and possess in-depth knowledge about a certain subject. He said most of the customers are those who are interested

in Japanese culture.

“Some female customers are *Fujyoshis* who always fantasise about BL (Boys Love). To satisfy their imagination, we do not talk to each other in the casual way normal boys do.”

“We lean towards the ears of each other and whisper at a low volume,” said Satsuki.

“If the customers see our girlfriends waiting in the cafe, it will destroy their fantasy. We have to maintain our image. It is not a problem to me because there are different rules in different workplaces.”

To him, being a butler is “an interesting Cosplay experience”. Cosplay refers to costume role play, a type of performance art in which participants wear costumes and accessories to represent specific characters.

“Actually I am playing the role of Shitsuzi and the customers are playing the role of honourable masters. There is good interaction when we both do our part right. I feel very energetic when customers commit to their role,”



SO LOK SIN

Thomas Choi, one of the owners of JCL, said volunteers are particularly committed in his Shitsuzi cafe.