



The Taste of Childhood

by Ian Cheng, Matthew Leung and Sabrina Poh



The aroma of freshly-baked pastries and cakes wafts over from the back of the store where the bakers are hard at work, kneading dough and checking the ovens.

In the front of the shop area, a young child puts several coins into a wrinkled hand and takes away a *zyu zai beng*, a biscuit shaped like a pig that is often eaten during the mid-Autumn festival.

A woman with curly white hair counts the coins carefully. There is no computerised cash register to record the transactions. Listening to an old radio, the shopkeepers seem to be working at a slower pace than the average rushed Hong Kong citizens. The shop blends in effortlessly with its surroundings in an old neighbourhood in Sheung Wan.

Chuk Yuet, a traditional Chinese bakery, has stood in the district for 22 years. Customers come here for their baked goods, but they also come to meet their friends and share the details of their daily lives.

Some of the regulars like to stay for long chats and may even offer help when the shopkeepers are too busy.

It is a far cry from the big chain bakeries, where

customers simply pick the items they want, pay and leave. Conversation is rare and if there is any, short. The atmosphere is totally different from the familiar, cozy and comfortable ambience of the old Chinese bakeries.

Apart from such warm feelings, the freshness of the products is another reason people keep coming back to traditional Chinese bakeries. Customers prefer freshly-made bakery products to pre-packaged goods mass-produced in factories a few days before.

Looking over the shoulders of the shopkeepers, you will spot Shum Chun-kit, the baker, working in the kitchen. Shum believes that customers have greater confidence in the products knowing they are made in Hong Kong and do not contain preservatives.

There is one drawback to cakes that are not preserved with chemicals; they have a shorter shelf life.

That does not prevent people coming from afar to seek Chuk Yuet's most popular treat, *gwong sou beng*, also called Chinese shortbread, a round, flat rusk-like biscuit with a light, crumbly texture.

But they can be disappointed because the shortbread has already sold out. Shum shrugs about this. "See how many pairs of hands we have



got? Customers will have to come another day.”

This unpredictability actually adds to Chuk Yuet’s appeal because it makes their products special and precious.

Hongkongers have become more health-conscious these days and tastes have changed over the years. “Some customers will ask for less oily [cakes],” Shum says.

But the baker insists on sticking to the old recipes. “[Otherwise] it is not the original cake anymore,” he says.

Some may say he is conservative but without bakers like Shum preserving the traditional cakes, Hongkongers would not be able to reminisce about the nostalgic tastes from the past.

In the last few decades, chain stores have taken over the high streets and shopping malls. They place advertisements in different media, bring out new products and renew their packaging from time to time.

In the face of the competition, the old traditional Chinese bakeries have to struggle harder in order to claim their market share. One way is to have constant evaluation and improvement.

Another traditional Chinese bakery, Tai Tung in Yuen Long, tries hard to keep up and stay in the game.

Tai Tung is an old Hong Kong brand, now in its 69th year. Owner Tse Ching-yuen is open to changes and new ideas. “Our Chinese cakes have changed a lot,” says Tse. “We have more than 100 types of products now. We used to have 20 or so only.”

Tse says most of his customers are regulars and old timers; some have been patronising the shop for several decades. “Even if people move away [from Yuen Long] they still come back looking for our store,” he says.

The same goes for Chuk Yuet. Once people have found what they like, they keep going back for more. The allure of traditional, old-fashioned Chinese cookies and cakes will always hold a special place in the hearts of Hong Kong people.



Simmi Malhotra, an Indian lady, buys *zin deoi*, a chewy glutinous rice flour ball coated with white sesame seeds, for her Chinese friend in England. Malhotra points to one item after the other, asking for their names and ingredients.

Though it is small and old-fashioned, Chuk Yuet intrigues her. “These [traditional Chinese bakeries] feel more home style, and I think it has a very good appeal of its own.”

Both Chuk Yuet’s Shum and Tai Tung’s Tse face the same challenges; they find it hard to hire young cake-makers. Shum calls his trade a “sunset industry”. With sweat all over his face, he asks: “Enter the industry? Will you do it if you have only two long holidays in a year?” Shum says many apprentices would rather learn the Western style of baking than traditional Chinese baking.

Shum explains that bakers who master western baking skills will have no problem working in average bakeries. After all the demand for sausage buns and sandwiches are greater than that of *zyu zai beng* and wife cakes.

Yet, for Chuk Yuet, the most pressing problem is not the shortage of manpower. The most serious concern is the rising rent. The shop may be forced to close if rents keep going up.

Shum shakes his head. “We are talking about 100 per cent, 150 per cent and 200 per cent [rental] increases!” In Chuk Yuet, where a packet of four *gwong sou beng* sells for six dollars, it is obvious that the soaring rent is a threat to their business.

Despite all the uncertainties, Shum is determined to keep the business running. “I will keep doing it. It is not time to think about leaving, not until after 10 to 20 years,” Shum says firmly as he continues kneading the dough. ▽