

# GENDER AND CONSUMPTION IN HK: SEARCHING FOR SWEETNESS

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## **Abstract**

Humans, no matter men or women, were born to prefer the taste of sweet. The propensity for sweet substances is neurobiologically rooted in our brain (Armelagos 1987: 580). In contradiction to this innate human preference for sweetness, there is an overwhelming impression that more women like eating sweet edibles than men in the Hong Kong society. Why does this impression emerge? In other words, why do Hong Kong people think in this way? What are the gender expectations revealed by their thoughts? How do the products: sweet edibles, the services provided by the waiters/waitresses, and the places of selling sweet edibles relate to culturally constructed gender expectations and innate gendered sensations? How do the abovementioned factors influence our consumption of sweet edibles? What messages are conveyed from our consumption of sweet edibles? This paper will study the cultural meanings of the consumption of sweet edibles in Hong Kong with a focus of gender by attempting to answer these questions through the interviews of young Hongkonese.

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## Introduction

This study will focus on the thoughts of young Hongkongese towards consumption of sweet edibles in relationship to the prevalent practice of eating sweet edibles outside in the social gatherings among them. Therefore, the discussions will concentrate on their gendered consumption of sweet edibles which are offered by the restaurants/shops with sweet edibles as their major products. The restaurants/shops provide seats for customers to eat sweet edibles there. While this study may seem to be applicable to all situations of consuming sweet edibles, it contributes to the understanding of how gender relates to consumption of sweet edibles among young Hongkongese.

## Methodology

In this paper, ‘young Hongkongese’ refers to young (age: 20-29), unmarried, university-educated, Cantonese, local people in Hong Kong. They have lived in Hong Kong over twenty years and received their education primarily in Hong Kong from kindergarten to university.

Four individual, face-to-face, one-hour interviews were conducted. There were two male and two female informants. They were all young Hongkongese who like eating sweet edibles who share the notion that more women like eating sweet edibles than men in Hong Kong. Pseudonyms are used for the informants. Their details are as follows:

Pseudonym	Gender	Age
Gary	Male	22
Ben	Male	23
Annie	Female	23
Emily	Female	26

*Figure 1. Informants' Details*

## Conceptions of Sweetness and Sweet Edibles

Sweetness is defined as taste or flavor of sweet which is distinguishable from sour, bitter, salty and pungent. Sweet edible (甜野) refers to substance with sweetness and can be eaten as food or can be drunk as drink. As propensity for sweet taste and

substances are innate for all humans (Armelagos 1987: 580; Mintz 2001: 36), sweetness and sweet edible are supposed to be gender-neutral.

However, young Hongkongese interpretations of sweetness and sweet edible are unnecessarily to be consistent with the gender-neutral definitions. That is why the impression of more women than men like eating sweet edibles emerges in Hong Kong. Individuals are differentiated into gender categories of male and female according to their biological or physical characteristics by a particular society (Mascia-Lees and Black 1999: 1). Behaviors are shaped and judged by the cultural knowledge of gender (Gamburd 2008: 69). Therefore, gender matters in manifold aspects of our society including food-centered activities and ideology constructions (Moore 1988:6; Counihan 1998: 1). Young Hongkongese learn to think and behave with reference to their constructed gender roles within the Hong Kong cultural context. Their concepts of sweetness and sweet edible reflect their gendered perceptions. Sweetness lets Gary think of the color of pink, and beautiful, exquisite and cute desserts which are related to femininity and cuteness; Sweet edibles such as cakes, sweets (糖果) and desserts are female stuffs. Annie also agrees that sweet edibles are female possessions since the sweetness and the cakes with various bright colors seem to be girls' stuffs. She associates sweetness with love novels which are read by girls. Their sayings show that they project their gendered imaginations into the assumed gender-neutral sweetness and sweet edible.

The color of pink, the appearance of colorful, beauty, delicacy and cute are widely admitted stereotypical symbolizations of femininity in Hong Kong. When these symbolized meanings are intruded into the products: sweet edibles, these edibles become a kind of representation of femininity. As young Hongkongese tend to associate sweetness and sweet edible with women more than men, they share the notion of more women than men like eating sweet edibles in Hong Kong. Informants justify this notion by looking at their own social circles.

#### *Sweet Edibles: Symbolization and Identity Construction*

Sweet edible is a kind of product which symbolizes the consumers' identities through its cultural meanings given by individual interpretations. Capitalism breaks the individual dependence on the interdependent social webs, and results in an increase of space for individuals to define themselves (Mintz 2001: 106). Taking advantage of consumption to identity oneself becomes popular; Market is a mirror for us to see ourselves in the present and the ideal selves (*ibid*). Consumptions of food and drink are conspicuous symbolic actions since daily nourishment are required by people (Gamburd 2008: 68). Therefore, sweet edible as a type of food and drink has

symbolic meanings which connote the consumers' identities. In the capitalistic Hong Kong society, young Hongkongese make use of the consumption of the sweet edibles to identify themselves. Gender matters consumption (Horowitz and Mohun 1998: 2). As consumptions in all cultures are controlled by maleness and femaleness in relation to specific foods and rules (Counihan 1998:7), young Hongkongese consumptions of sweet edibles are constrained to the culturally constructed conceptions of femininity and masculinity.

*Sweet Edibles: Gendered or Not?*

Although the images of sweetness and sweet edible are inclined to femininity, it is important to note that not all the sweet edibles are completely gendered. Looking into the sweet edibles in the restaurants/shops in Hong Kong, it is possible to roughly categorize the sweet edibles into two mainstreams: 1) Hong Kong style syrups (港式糖水) 2) Western style desserts (西式甜品). In comparison, the first type is regarded as more gender-neutral whereas the second one is said to be more feminized.

Young Hongkongese classify the sweet edibles differently by their appearances and names. Most of the Hong Kong style syrups are carried in a bowl, occasionally with a plate underneath. There are flavored liquids in the bowl with toppings such as fruit and ice-cream, and/or with small flavored balls or cubes mixed inside the liquids. They give customers an impression that they are a mix of liquids and small trimmings (配料). The appearances of the syrups are not fastidiously concerned and spills are sporadically found around the bowls. Annie claims that the apathetically attended appearance of syrups make them look gender-neutral. In addition, their names are relatively normal in brief descriptions of the syrups, for example, 'sesame paste (芝麻糊)' is the name of a bowl of flavored paste made of sesame.

In stark contrast with the Hong Kong style syrups, the hairsplitting appearances of the Western style desserts symbolize femininity. Among the Western style desserts, cakes are the prominent symbolic figures of femininity. Ben remarks that women are comparatively emotional and hence, their attentions are easily drawn by the delicate, beautiful and cute appearances of cakes. On the contrary, men are more rational to see sweet edibles as food for the main purpose of filling up the stomach (to eliminate hunger) and thus, they do not pay as much attention as women to the cake appearances. He has never heard of any man who likes eating cakes in his social circle. He uses his cultural perception of personality differences between men and women to elucidate the gender differences in seeing the degree of appeal of cake appearances. Annie points out that the cakes with multiple bright colors make them look like girls' stuff.

The attractiveness of the beautiful and colorful cake appearances to women is not only evidenced by the cultural conceptions of young Hongkongese, but is also possible to be explained by the innate female biological preferences. Studies have shown that girls innately prefer ‘warm’ colors such as red, orange, green and beige whereas boys’ preferences are ‘cold’ colors including black, gray, silver and blue (Sax 2005: 21-24). Nowadays, most girls concern with their appearance in the first place (Sax 2005: 241). Their attention of appearance extends to substances with symbolic meanings of femininity. Consumption of symbolic substances implies their taste and sense of beauty; hence the beautiful appearances of cakes are of significance for constructing beauty-conscious identity. As the surfaces of cakes are beautiful and are largely composed of ‘warm’ colors, they are biologically more appeal to women than to their male counterparts.

The names of Western style desserts are feminized. Annie says the names of famous female cartoon or story characters are used as the names of desserts, for example, ‘Snow White (白雪公主)’ is a well-known name of a princess in a fairy tale. Gary proclaims that the names, including ‘Soufflé (梳乎厘)’ for soufflé and ‘Too Soften Heart (心太軟)’ for chocolate cake in pudding shape with creamy chocolate fluid inside, are feminine and more matched with images of women than that of men. The pronunciation of the Chinese translations such as ‘Soufflé (梳乎厘)’ sounds girlish. The symbolic meanings of ‘Too Soften Heart (心太軟)’ including weak, soft, gentle and delicate are closer to the description of women than men. The rhetoric used in these names creates and further strengthens feminine images of the desserts with their colorful dainty appearances.

The colorful, beautiful, exquisite and cute appearances and feminized names of Western style desserts fit in with both the culturally constructed gender roles of women and female biological desires. Thereupon, young Hongkongese regard Western style desserts as female stuffs. Goods are communication codes and are ‘markers for particular sets of social roles’ when they fit for consumption (Douglas and Isherwood 1996: xxi-xxiii). For constructing and disseminating gender identities, women tend to consume the desserts to symbolically fulfill their gender roles as female while men try to stay away from the cakes to sustain their masculinity.

#### *Gender Spatialization of Sweet Edibles*

In coincidence with the products: sweet edibles, the services and the settings of the Hong Kong style syrup restaurants are relatively gender-neutral while those of the Western style dessert shops are more associated with femininity. The differences in the age distributions of the waiter/waitress, their uniforms and attitudes, and the

decorations create different atmospheres and hence, certain consumptions are encouraged whereas at the same time, particular consumptions are constrained.

The decorations of the Hong Kong style syrup restaurants are comparatively simple (樸實簡單). There is a wider age range that the teams of waiter/waitress are formed by teenagers to middle-age people. Emily and Annie contends that most of the frontline staff are middle-age housewives (師奶). They are conceived as paying less attention to their appearances than the teenagers. The frontline staffs usually wear gender-neutral uniforms such as plain T-shirt or shirt polo and trousers. These elements constitute the syrup restaurant as a place welcome to diverse classes, ages and genders. Gary describes the syrup restaurants as places for permitting a large group of boys to speak loudly and yell around (大吵大鬧), so it is fine for them to go there. The syrup restaurants are more open to various types of class, age and gender groups.

On the contrary, most of the frontline staffs of Western style dessert shops are young women. They are more conscious about their appearances with neat and tidy uniforms which are designed in Western waiters/waitresses or maids styles. Attentiveness to beauty and tidiness is one of the stereotypical female characteristics. Moreover, the shop settings are more feminized. Emily argues that the fancy interior designs make the shops look feminine. Annie remarks that the clean environment, the beautiful decorations, and the concentrated lightings on the cakes make people think it is a place for girls.

The frontline staffs and the decorations create a girlish atmosphere of the Western dessert shops. They makes men feel unmatched with the place or uncomfortable to stay there without female accompanist. Gary perceives the dessert shops as girls places for female customers to gather, gossip and talk secrets (傾心事) under the dim lightings. Ben thinks eating cakes is very girlish. When he and his male friends want to find a place to take a rest (歇腳) and chat, they immediately think of the syrup restaurants instead of cake shops. The settings of the shops construct gender segregation of consuming sweet edibles in the public space. Emily notes that it is strange to see a big muscular man sitting in a cute dessert shop to eat tiny cute cakes. It shows that man are unexpected to go to the so-called 'girls place'. Masculinity from the muscles of man is regarded as unmatched with the feminine atmosphere of the shops. Large muscular bodies to small cute cakes, maleness to femaleness are conspicuous binary distinctions between men and women in the cultural perceptions.

In addition to gender differentiation of customers, some dessert shops are of obvious distinctiveness of class. A number of Western style dessert shops are designed with elegant images to serve high-class British afternoon tea since sugar was once a symbol of upper-class. The more privileged groups were the major consumers of this

scarce and valuable substance: sugar (Mintz 1986: 74-75). Emily has heard that rich old ladies like having afternoon tea in the shops in order to trace back their feelings about their first love. Ben points out that the high tea places are for people who have time and money to spend there. In short, the social spaces for consumption of sweet edibles in the Western style dessert shops are more segregated according to gender and class.

### *Gender Differentiation and Connection through Consumption of Sweet Edibles*

Consumption of sweet edibles is a channel to differentiate and connect male and female young Hongkongese. Food is often a means of distinguishing and connecting men and women as they define their masculinity and femininity, their similarity and difference through asserting different attributes with specific food (Counihan 1998: 5-7). From the aforementioned comparisons of the types of products, services and places of sweet edibles, it is conceivable that gender matters the consumption of sweet edibles. The consumer patterns are gendered (Cooper 1998: 68). Cultural perceptions relate sweetness and sweet edibles to women more than men. At the same time, a number of sweet edibles such as Western style desserts are packaged in colorful exquisite styles to fit in with the gendered cultural conceptions of and biological desires for colors and appearances. Young Hongkongese make their consumption decisions under the influences of cultural and biological gendered perspectives, and the designs of the attributes of sweet edibles including the products (objects) themselves, the services and the selling places. As a result, both men and women are considered as acceptable to consume the gender-neutral syrups. Yet, women dominate the consumption of Western style desserts in the public place.

Gender differences and inequalities are revealed through the gendered consumption of sweet edibles. Consumption patterns have power to include and also exclude (Douglas and Isherwood 1996: xxi). In contemporary Hong Kong society, the designs of many consumption places are for attracting female customers, at the expense of men literally (Tam, Fung, Kam and Liong 2009: 351). The physical structure of sites of consumption is shaped by gender (Horowitz and Mohun 1998: 2). A number of Western style dessert shops are prominent examples. Neutral goods have social uses as fences or bridges (Douglas and Isherwood 1996: xxi). The attributes of particular sweet edibles are used to draw borders to include women as customers while exclude male consumers. Women are welcome to consume there but men are culturally permitted or accepted as appropriate to get there in limited circumstances only, for instance, going with their partners (girlfriend, wife).

Gender inequality exists since male consumptions of Western style desserts are

restrained. Several Western style desserts are considered as women stuffs that men are not assumed to eat, and numerous Western style dessert shops are spatialized as female places that men are not supposed to go by themselves in most of the time. Power relations in society are reflected and reinforced by the socially constructed and historically contingent masculinity and femininity (Lubar 1998: 9). Power is allocated or denied by the society to men and women depending on their accessibility of and degree of control over food which is an essential resource (Counihan 1998: 1-2). Both men and women have innate propensity for sweet tastes and substances (Armelagos 1987: 580; Mintz 2001: 36), yet the gendered consumptions deprive men of their rights to have equal access to the resources, sweet edibles, in the public place. Men are less powered in this circumstance.

On the other hand, men and women are simultaneously connected by their consumption of sweet edibles. Your imagination of others' desires of you and their responses to you dominate your shopping (Miller 1998:3). For example, cakes and cake shops are regarded as female stuffs and places. A man still accompanies his female partner to eat cakes there since his female partner may desire him as her companion to go there, and she will be happy if he does it, and vice versa. He makes his consumption decision by considering his partner's desires and responses. Moreover, men and women try to achieve the most intimate union by using food and food metaphor (Counihan 1998: 7). The product: cake and the place: cake shop may have symbolic meanings of intimacy between couples. In addition to women social gatherings, cake shops are mainly for couples. A mix of male and female friend gatherings are rare in cake shops. Therefore, a man and a woman go there may have an implication that they are more than just being friends.

## Conclusion

Gender matters the consumptions of sweet edibles among young Hongkongese. In spite of the innate human preferences for sweetness, young Hongkongese share the notion that more women than men like eating sweet edibles since there is a tendency to associate sweetness and sweet edibles with women according to their gendered conceptions.

The attributes of sweet edibles, the cultural perceptions of gender roles and biological gendered desires are inextricably related. They influence on young Hongkongese consumptions of sweet edibles. The gendered consumptions of sweet edibles symbolize the gender identities of young Hongkongese. Gender differentiations and connections are resulted. Their constructed diverse gender identities are reaffirmed and maintained through their consumptions. Those gender

identities endow particular young Hongkongese with power to get access to resources in public places, and lead to gender inequalities in consumptions of sweet edibles. On the other hand, the consumption as a tool of showing cares and a food metaphor of intimacy connect men and women together. All in all, gender and consumption are hardly separable.

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