From the Common Pot
Feasting with Equals in Chinese Society
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1. Introduction

It is by now commonplace in anthropology to treat food as a code that reflects, in Mary Douglas’s words, ‘different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across . . . boundaries’ (1971: 61). The use of food to express complex social messages is highly developed in India. Much the same can be said of China although the published ethnography on this subject is rather sparse in comparison to the vast body of work now available on Hindu food symbolism. K. C. Chang notes that ‘appropriate food must be served [at Chinese banquets] since the parties involved know exactly what is being said’ (1977: 16). This does not mean that the messages are universally apparent; in fact, ‘the language of food takes many years to learn’ (1977: 17). The present paper deals with one, hitherto unexplored aspect of China’s culinary tradition, namely the use of food as a social levelling device. The custom described in this study represents a militant rejection of the hierarchical values that normally find expression at Chinese banquets.

The higher one ascends the social hierarchy in China the more elaborate and complex the rules of entertainment become. This is particularly true when food is involved. At banquets, for instance, the quality and diversity of dishes reflect the status of the diners (cf. Anderson and Anderson 1977: 372–373); hosts must make very careful calculations to avoid turning a guest into an enemy. Imperial banquets, of course, were the most sumptuous. The Sung court (mid-twelfth century) employed over a thousand chefs and kitchen assistants. Daily meals prepared for the emperor were so opulent that 40 serving boxes were required to carry the dishes to the dining room (Freeman 1977: 157). A banquet given by a prince to honor the emperor in 1151 consisted of over 30

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3 The best source on China is ‘Food in Chinese Culture,’ a collection of original essays edited by K. C. Chang (1977); see also items cited in note 5 below, plus Anderson and Anderson 1969, 1972; Cooper 1986; Pilsbury 1975; Strauch n. d.; and R. Watson n. d.
4 Many Ch’ing (Manchu) emperors had simple tastes and did not indulge regularly in extravagant foods. Nonetheless they were presented with the full complement of dishes once a day, only to have it all returned to the kitchens. Most of the meals they actually consumed were
courses; the finishing course alone was served in 50 bowls made of jade and silver (1977: 166).

Banquets sponsored by the Sung imperial state were graded according to the status of guests: high officials received 11 courses, third rank officials 7 courses, fourth rank 5, and fifth rank 3 (1977: 166). During the Manchu era (1644–1911) the court celebrated public events with six grades of Manchu banquets and five grades of Chinese (Spence 1977: 282). The reinforcement of social hierarchies by feeding different kinds of food to different types of people was also prevalent among commoners. Ordinary peasants played the game as well as anyone in the realm. For instance, foods presented to gods, ghosts, and ancestors were ranked in a clearly identifiable hierarchy – with different categories of supernaturals receiving different offerings. There can be little doubt that Chinese of all social stations were (and still are) familiar with the complex language of food and food exchanges.

First-time visitors to China are often mystified by Chinese dining customs. The absence of specialized eating utensils (one set of chopsticks rather than rows of flatware) and the relaxed demeanor of hosts (actually an art that takes decades to cultivate) leads many outsiders to assume that little of consequence is being communicated by the arrangement and conduct of banquets. Quite the opposite, of course, is true.

The rules of etiquette for Chinese dining (see Cooper 1986) have little to do with polite conversation or mastery of complex instruments as in the West (cf. Elias 1978: 84–129; Goody 1982: 140). In China emphasis is placed on the orchestration of the event by the host, rather than the performance of individual guests; the latter, in fact, are expected to behave passively and respond to the host’s lead in all matters of eating and conversation. Seating arrangements are paramount, given that guests are ranked according to their proximity to the host.

Obviously the greatest of care must be taken to avoid inviting people who might be rivals for the same post or office (only one person can be treated as guest of honor, all others are subordinate depending on where they are seated). Toasts and counter toasts are another common feature of Chinese banquets. Although it might not be apparent on first encounter, precise rules govern the sequence and context of toasts (i.e., when to take one’s turn and what to say). Even the raucous drinking contests follow prescribed conventions; one must know how to disengage without causing offense. In other words, what might appear on the surface to be a relaxed dinner among friends may in fact be a highly charged social event, representing months of careful planning (for parallels in Japanese culture see Befu 1974).

2. Village Banquets: In Defiance of Convention

Like many anthropologists who work in Chinese society I began preparing for my first field trip by studying intensively with a language tutor who also served as cultural informant. This tutor, a retired instructor at Hong Kong

6 During the Ch’ing (1644–1911) an annual banquet was held for local worthies in the Kwangtung county of Hsin-an (part of which later became the Hong Kong New Territories). The county gazetteer reports the following arrangements (Ng and Baker 1983: 93–94): ‘The senior official of the prefecture or county acts as host, retired officials act as assistant hosts, and selected local worthies of advanced age are secondary guests, being seated in order of seniority. The host sits in the south-east, with the chief guests in the north-west, assistant hosts in the north-east and secondary guests in the south-west. Scholars attached to the academy sit in the west in order of rank and facing the commoner guests who sit in the east in order of age.’

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prepared by personal chefs (Spence 1977: 281–287; see also Wang 1983). The presentation of elaborate foods in this case assumed the character of a daily ritual, stressing form rather than content. Spence (1977: 286–287) notes that many of the dishes were inedible, having been prepared days in advance. Given what we know about food prestations in other contexts, it is tempting to argue that the emperor is being treated much like a deity. Supernatural beings are also presented with foods they do not consume (see items cited in following note).

University, spent many hours teaching me the etiquette of eating and dining. He insisted that I learn the finer details of where and when to sit, whom to serve, and - most importantly - how not to embarrass my hosts. He tried, in other words, to turn me into a civilized human being: One who knows how to eat.

Months later, during my second week of residence in the village of San Tin, Hong Kong New Territories, I was invited to a banquet and given what I assumed would be an opportunity to display these newfound skills. At noon on the appointed day I accompanied my male neighbors to San Tin's largest ancestral hall. We waited at the entrance until a party of eight had arrived. One of our party, the man standing nearest the kitchen, was handed a large wooden basin filled with mixed food. Each guest collected his own chopsticks from a tray and picked
up an individual bowl of steamed rice. The basin was carried to an unoccupied corner of the hall. Earlier arrivals were already eating at the few makeshift tables that had been assembled near the kitchen. I could not help but notice that one of the wealthiest men in rural Hong Kong (an emigrant millionaire) was sitting between a retired farmer and a factory worker. Our basin of food was placed on the floor and the party of eight squatted around it; without a word my neighbors proceeded to dig in, fishing out bits of pork, chicken, beanscurd, turnips, and fish. No ceremonies of any kind were performed; no complicated codes of etiquette were observed. No one acted as host for our small group and there was no ranking of diners, nor was there a head table reserved for important guests. People were fed on a first come, first served basis. No speeches were delivered and no toasts proposed. Everyone ate at their own pace and left when they pleased.

A fellow diner, the local rice merchant from the Ch‘ao-chou region of Kwangtung, later confided in me that he too had been astonished when he first attended a banquet in San Tin. ‘It’s a very strange custom, isn’t it? And I really hate to eat that food, all mixed up like that. I nearly choked on a pig bristle once. But we have to go, don’t we? We have to eat from the common pot along with the local people. It shows that we all trust each other.’

Such was my introduction to the culinary custom known in colloquial Cantonese as sikh puhn (shih h‘en in Mandarin). Sikh puhn literally means ‘eat pot’ or ‘eat basin’; perhaps the best translation is ‘to eat from the common pot.’ There are, of course, analogous forms of food presentation in other parts of China, most notably ta kuo ts‘ai or ta kuo fan – a large wok containing foods that have been cooked together into an unidentifiable and largely unappetizing mass. Food prepared in this manner is normally reserved for armies, schools, or work gangs. Sikh puhn is different in two important respects: (1) it is banquet fare, not everyday food, and (2) the ingredients are cooked separately and later mixed together, just prior to eating. The deliberate act of mixing foods that are ordinarily served separately is the central feature of this Cantonese banquet style.

Given how sharply this particular form of communal dining diverges from what most observers take to be the standard form of Chinese banqueting, I have been fascinated by sikh puhn since the day I first encountered it. What follows is an attempt to understand the custom and place it in the wider context of Chinese social organization.

3. The Setting: Food and Ethnic Boundaries

This paper is based on ethnographic data collected in Hong Kong’s New Territories, a 365-square-mile section of Kwangtung Province leased to the British Crown in 1898. The 99 year lease expires in 1997, at which time the New Territories together with Hong Kong island and the city of Kowloon revert to Chinese control. Although the colony of Hong Kong is renowned for its cosmopolitan urban centers, significant elements of traditional peasant culture still survive in the New Territories – not the least of which are culinary forms. I have concentrated most of my attention on one particular village called San Tin (hsin t‘en in Mandarin, meaning “New Fields”), the home of the Man (Mandarin weng) lineage (J. Watson 1975b). This study also draws on ethnographic surveys that I have carried out in other Hong Kong villages.

The communities in question are inhabited by Cantonese speakers, most of whom trace their ancestry to Han (i.e., ethnic Chinese) pioneers who settled along the Canton Delta during the Southern Sung era (twelfth century). This region is dominated by corporate lineages that owned the best agricultural lands and controlled regional commerce. San Tin, in fact, is a single-lineage village which means that all males (save for a handful of slave descendants) share the surname ‘Man’ and trace descent from a common founding ancestor. Chinese lineage villages are well covered in the ethnographic literature (see, e.g., Baker 1968; Freedman 1966; Potter 1968; R. Watson 1985), so there is no need to belabor the obvious in any detail here. It should be noted, however, that the communal banqueting custom (sikh puhn) explored in this essay is not restricted to powerful lineage communities, nor even to the small-
er, satellite villages inhabited by hereditary tenants of the major lineages (J. Watson 1977). *Siik puhn* is found throughout Yuen Long District in the northern sector of the New Territories and across the Anglo-Chinese border in Hsin-an and Tung-kuan counties. The distribution of this custom is as yet unclear but it appears to be associated with the dominant ethnic group of the Canton Delta — namely the Cantonese-speaking *pen-ti* (lit. 'native' or 'indigenous people').

Communal dining from a common pot is not evident among the Hakka-speaking minority of the New Territories, at least in the district under study. My Cantonese informants constantly made reference to this ethnic distinction: 'Hakka,' they would say at every banquet I attended, 'do not know how to make *siik puhn*. The recipe is a secret known only to native Cantonese.' Since at least 1750 the ethnic rivalry between Cantonese and Hakka has been marked by overt hostility and frequent violence, sometimes on a massive scale (Cohen 1968: 276–280). The main source of tension was the constant struggle for land and water as settlers from both groups spread into the Kwantung hills. In Hong Kong today the indigenous Hakka are fiercely proud of their ethnic heritage and nurture it with a distinctive cuisine (Cantonese villagers claim to loath Hakka food). It seems unlikely that the Hakka would emulate a culinary tradition (*siik puhn*) that evokes such pride among their chief rivals, the Cantonese. Although more research needs to be done in other parts of South China before one can be certain, it appears that *siik puhn* is an important boundary maintenance mechanism separating the Cantonese from other, competing ethnic groups.\(^7\)

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\(^7\) Eugene Anderson (personal communication) reports that *siik puhn* is not found among the boat people, a caste-like minority of fishing specialists who live on boats along the Kwantung coast. Although the majority of boat people in the Hong Kong region speak Cantonese, they are considered by land people to be a separate ethnic group and are treated with great suspicion (Anderson 1970). It is not surprising, therefore, that the boat people do not share a common culinary tradition with land-based Cantonese peasants.

4. Village Cuisine: Two Kinds of Banquet Food

Banquets are joyous occasions in Cantonese villages, particularly for older people who may have little else to occupy their time (on the entertainment value of feasting see J.-Watson 1975b: 147–152). Until recently, banquet fare presented a welcome contrast to the daily meals served in most village homes — bowls of steamed white rice with a few slivers of meat or fish and seasonal vegetables when available. A rise in the standard of living, tied to factory wages and emigrant remittances, have allowed villagers to improve their daily diets in recent years. Accordingly, banquets have lost some of their culinary appeal but they are still popular in most villages.

The structure of everyday food in Cantonese villages conforms closely to the standard complementarity of *fan* (rice/starch) and *ts'ai* (meat/vegetables) cited by Chang as a core feature of Chinese cuisine (1977: 7–8). The normal preponderance of *fan* over *ts'ai* is reversed at banquets where there is an abundance of meat and fish. Among the Cantonese rice is served at the end of a feast, almost as an afterthought. It would be considered extremely rude to eat more than a spoonful of this rice; to do so indicates that guests have not had their fill of luxury foods.

Older Cantonese villagers (those over age 55 in 1978) draw a clear and unambiguous distinction between two kinds of banquets: *siik puhn* and *siik pui*, the latter referring to celebrations held in restaurants. Both terms are defiantly, one is tempted to say triumphantly, colloquial; they are not usually recognized by urbanites or by speakers of Cantonese who have had little direct experience of country life.\(^8\)

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\(^8\) My Cantonese tutor, a sophisticated urbanite, had never heard the term *siik puhn* and was appalled when I described the custom to him months later. However, this form of communal dining is known among some urban Cantonese and a rather upmarket version of the dish was even served in elite households on special ritual occasions, such as the eve of the Hungry Ghost Festival (personal communication, Anthony Yu; on the ghost connection see R. Watson n. d.).

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Sikh pihn literally means ‘eat ticket’ but is perhaps better translated as ‘eating by ticket’. The reference here is to a red card, or voucher, that must be presented at the door when attending a restaurant banquet (a practice designed to guard against gate crashers). More will be said about restaurant celebrations in a later section but it is important to note that ‘eating by ticket’ is now recognized as the most prestigious form of dining in the New Territories. This is reflected in new linguistic forms that have become popular in recent years: restaurant food is sometimes called sheung jik (M. shiang hsi, lit. ‘upper banquet’) while village fare is referred to as hah jik (M. hsia hsi, lit. ‘lower banquet’).

From the villagers’ point of view the distinctive feature of restaurant cuisine is the style of presentation — it is always served in a sequence of courses (usually nine) on separate plates. In fact, the most common term for restaurant food is gau wun (M. chiu wan, ‘nine dishes’). Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the communal banquets in villages is that the ‘eat basin’ (sikh puhn) also contains nine distinct ingredients that are cooked separately. The key items are: fat back pork, chicken, fish balls, white turnips, dried pork skin, dried bean curd skin, dried fish, fresh fish, and dried squid.

Every Cantonese village has two or three men who specialize in sikh puhn banquets. Women may help prepare the raw materials but males always do the actual cooking. This is a reversal of the usual sexual division of labor among rural Cantonese. My informants (in this case males) explained that only men were allowed to learn the secret blend of spices and oils required to make a proper banquet. A skillfully prepared sikh puhn can be surprisingly good with each of the nine ingredients having a distinctive taste; a poorly cooked batch, on the other hand, is truly awe inspiring in its vileness. Master chefs are always in great demand, particularly during the Lunar New Year season when villagers prefer to hold weddings.

5. Origin of the Common Pot

Whence did this custom emerge? Is it simply a convenient way to feed a large number of people? None of my informants offered this as a reason and I would be wary of proposing such a simplistic explanation myself.

When asked, village elders recount some version of the following myth to explain the origin of sikh puhn: The hero of our story is the Ch’ien-lung Emperor, who reigned from 1736 to 1796, an auspicious 60 years. This emperor, my informants argue, sometimes grew bored with court life and disappeared into the countryside for months at a time, dressed as a common peasant. Once, while travelling in Kwangtung, so the story goes, he came upon a wedding banquet in the town of Fo-shan. This had been a typical nine-course banquet, with dishes served in a sequence. The emperor was very hungry and had no money, but the cook, a generous man, said: ‘Don’t fear, old friend, I’ll fix you something to eat from all these leftover dishes,’ and proceeded to fry up the ingredients in peanut oil. He tossed everything together in a large bowl, added secret spices, and presented it to the wandering emperor who instantly recognized it as the best of all possible country foods. Later (the myth continues), when he returned to Peking, he commanded his chefs — the best in north China — to imitate the procedure but, not being Cantonese, they could not. Finally, the emperor ordered his most trusted minister to visit Fo-shan and learn the secret. The official returned and prepared sikh puhn...
for his master, who was so impressed with the results that he ordered it served henceforth at all important court occasions.

This, village informants maintain, is the origin of sihk puhn. No one, of course, believes the story and it is always told with tongue in cheek (or the Cantonese equivalent thereof.) The sub-text of the myth is not, in my view, an attempt to claim imperial charter; rather, it has more to do with the levelling of social hierarchies and the pursuit of egalitarian ideals – themes I shall return to in the conclusion.

Before delving too deeply into the symbolic domain, however, something needs to be said about the material aspects of eating. In most cases, anthropologists have studied Chinese village life during the affluent, post-war era and, as a consequence, we often tend to underestimate the practical side of feasting and banquetting. One must remember that, in the villages under study, meat was a luxury prior to the mid-1950s. Many elders reported eating meat only at banquets during their youth. One person who married in the late 1940s said that every scrap of food, every tiny morsel, disappeared when his father held a sihk puhn for over 400 people. Today, with meat a regular feature of the daily diet, sometimes less than half of the food is consumed. Why, then, do the villagers cling to the custom? For an answer we must look beyond material concerns and consider the social implications of feasting.

6. Banquets and Legitimization

Sikh puhn banquets all have one feature in common: They serve to legitimize a social transition. It is best, perhaps, to refer to them as legitimation banquets. Eating from the common pot is the single most important act confirming the transfer of a bride from one family to another. Women who have not had their marriages celebrated with a sihk puhn banquet are not considered legitimate wives. A restaurant feast may also be held but this, in itself, is not sufficient. Those who marry abroad must hold a sihk puhn at the earliest opportunity upon their return, no matter what kind of celebrations were held in Europe. To ask, 'Have they had their sihk puhn?' is to inquire whether a union is recognized as legitimate.

Sikh puhn banquets are also held to mark what might be called the social birth of males. Thirty days after biological birth, a public celebration (muhn yuht, m. man yueh, lit. 'full month') announces the coming-to-personhood of a new member of the family (see, e.g., R. Watson 1985: 110-114). Until recently this celebration was reserved for males. The lineage as a corporate unit also celebrates the collective birth of new males once a year with a large sihk puhn feast held in the central ancestral hall. In San Tin, infants who have been presented at this celebration are considered legitimate members of the lineage, which in turn makes them shareholders in the ancestral estates. Emigrant fathers are always careful to have their newborn sons represented at the annual rite (J. Watson 1975b: 148-149).

Males who choose to adopt an heir must legitimize the transaction by holding a sihk puhn banquet for all who are directly affected.

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12 Eugene Anderson observes (personal communication) that the story recounted here is very similar to myths explaining the origin of chop suey among American Chinese: Someone who cannot be refused (e.g., governor or president) arrives at a Chinese restaurant just before closing time. All the standard items having been consumed, the chef has no option but to chop up what is left and serve it, mixed, to the guest. The new dish is a great hit and becomes part of American culture. Versions of this myth are found in many parts of the United States.

13 In the past, villagers were so unaccustomed to eating meat that they often became ill after banquets. This also happened in the aftermath of the annual division of pork sponsored by lineage ancestral halls. Although pork was a prized luxury food, most people could tolerate only small portions. Today, of course, the proportion of meat in the daily diet is relatively high and tolerance is no longer a problem.

14 In 1978 a wealthy emigrant couple married in England, where a civil ceremony was held. The occasion was celebrated with an expensive feast for over 100 guests in one of London’s leading Chinese restaurants. A year later, upon their return to the groom’s home village (Ha Tsuen), their first act was to hold a sihk puhn banquet in a local hall. Even the most ‘modern-minded’ youths, who reject what they consider to be ‘feudal’ aspects of the traditional wedding rites, never fail to sponsor sihk puhn banquets at the time of their own marriages.
by the change. In cases of non-agnatic adoption (i.e., selecting a child from outside the lineage) the costs can be extremely high, given that every elder and leader in the lineage must be invited. Not only do guests expect the best quality food and drink, they must also be paid for signing a red cloth banner that verifies the entry of a new member into the corporate kin group (J. Watson 1975a). It is never certain that everyone will sign and, hence, the adopting father must make every effort to please his guests. Complaints about the quality of the food can be disastrous under such circumstances.

Lineage elders (males age 60 and over) must also approve the annual selection of village guardsmen who watch crops and protect property for the community. The selection process is controlled by the manager of the main ancestral hall but the elders retain the power of veto. Village guardsmen must be presented to the elders at a sikh puhn banquet held during the first lunar month. All expenses are paid by the leader of the guard or his backers. If the guests wish to approve the appointment, they eat the food and sign a document that gives guardsmen power to act for the community during the next twelve month. However, if a significant number of elders refuse the food, the selection procedures must be repeated (this happened once in San Tin during the 1950s).

It is obvious, therefore, that ‘eating from the common pot’ is a very special form of dining. Sikh puhn is associated with events or decisions that affect the entire community – not just a single family or set of neighbors. Attendance at sikh puhn banquets in the two New Territories villages of San Tin and Ha Tsuem (1969–1970, 1977–1978 data) averaged over 400 people. At wedding feasts every household in the community is expected to send one representative; in addition, all elders are invited to attend. Public dining, in fact, is one of the primary duties of elderhood.

What, exactly, are these people – elders and household representatives – consuming at village banquets? More than just food is involved, given that every guest represents a larger collectivity and is therefore ‘eating for’ others. In this sense, the host symbolically feeds the entire community and, by eating the proffered food, the community signals its acceptance of a social transition.

7. Restaurant Feasts: A Recent Innovation

The restaurant feast is a recent addition to the cultural repertoire of Cantonese villagers. During the past two decades there has been a steady transformation from less to more formal banquet styles in the New Territories. The innovation began in the 1960s when wealthy villagers hired catering firms to arrange feasts in local ancestral halls; the caterers brought everything to the village, including the chairs and tables. In the affluent 1970s and 80s, the feasts have gradually moved to fancy restaurants in the larger towns of the New Territories – and the financial burden has escalated accordingly.

The cost (per guest) of restaurant banquets is five to six times more expensive than sikh puhn celebrations. In villages the host pays no rent for the use of public halls and, equally important, most of the labor associated with sikh puhn banquets is provided by neighbors and close kin. On the mornings of village feast days 15 to 20 women, each representing a household, can be counted upon to appear – without prompting – to help with the marketing, cleaning, and food preparation. The patterns of labor exchange are generalized and no (obvious) accounting is kept. The obligation to reciprocate is a central feature of women’s sub-culture in Cantonese villages (see R. Watson 1981: 609–610). At restaurants, of course, this traditional pattern of cooperative labor is replaced by a cash transaction. The sikh puhn chef must be paid for his services but this is a relatively minor expense and it is often waived if the two men are members of the same lineage branch.

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15 In 1977–1978 sikh puhn banquets in Ha Tsuem village cost approximately HK$ 12/person, whereas restaurant banquets in the nearby market town of Yuen Long cost HK$ 50–70/person. A typical (restaurant) wedding banquet included: a roast suckling pig and steamed fresh fish for each table, crab and shrimp platters, several kinds of mushrooms, shark’s fin soup, special bean curd dishes, steamed/stir-fried chicken, various noodle dishes, fresh fruits, and other dishes.
Sikh puhn banquets are community affairs and, accordingly, individual invitations are never distributed. Local custom calls for the posting of an announcement in the village but even this is pro forma. News of the event spreads informally and no one needs to be told who is eligible to attend. Quite the opposite is true for restaurant banquets in nearby market towns. Personal invitations are required, in the form of printed cards delivered by post; even elders must be invited individually, not as a group (which means that many are excluded). Guests are expected to bring red envelopes containing sums of money that vary according to one's relationship to the host; and, unlike village feasts, a public record of gifts is kept for all to see.

The most obvious difference between nine-course banquets and Sikh puhn affairs is the painful display of etiquette at the restaurants. Save for a few political leaders and businessmen, villagers are generally uncomfortable with the formal rules of urban banqueting behavior. Hierarchical seating arrangements are observed; specific tables are reserved for certain categories of guests. Formal toasts are offered and speeches delivered. Everyone is expected to wear formal clothing, not the everyday garb common at village banquets. The scene could not be farther removed from the easy informality of traditional Sikh puhn celebrations.

In spite of the growing popularity of nine-course dining, Sikh puhn remains the dominant form of legitimation for marriage and other social transitions in New Territories (Cantonese) villages. Restaurant banquets are secondary elaborations in the sense that they have been added to the established wedding routine. It is undeniable that expensive nine-course banquets are fast becoming a way of enhancing family status, but they are not essential for claiming legitimacy.

8. Conclusions: The Banquet as a Levelling Device

Much has been made recently of the distinction between cultures that have nurtured high cuisines and those that have not. Jack Goody (1982) notes that there is a correlation between hierarchical, class-based societies, and the emergence of elite cuisine: China is his primary example (1982: 105-114). He contrasts the hierarchical Chinese and Indian systems of dining with those found in most parts of Africa, where the cuisine is not marked by social differences. In Africa, according to Goody, everyone eats essentially the same kind of food at every meal, irrespective of social station. A feast is 'a time of plenty rather than a time of difference,' given that special dishes or rare ingredients are not served (1982: 78). The uniformity of cuisine reflects the egalitarian social structures that predominated in precolonial African societies (1982: 204-205, 208; see also Goody 1971).

Cross-cultural comparisons of this nature are always dangerous but they do provide insights that might not otherwise emerge. In attempting to understand and analyze Cantonese customs of communal dining, I find it useful to keep Goody's concern for class and social hierarchy firmly in mind.

It is strikingly significant that a plebeian culinary form, such as Sikh puhn, emerged precisely in that part of China most noted for its exquisite cuisine — namely the Canton Delta. This is also a region renowned for its wealth and complex class hierarchy. Sikh puhn represents, in my view, a consciously-maintained form of low cuisine, created and supported by villagers who have always been very much aware of the alternatives. Since at least the mid-Ming (fifteenth and sixteenth centuries) lineage leaders, local entrepreneurs, and landlords have been exposed to the high cuisine of their culture; they travelled to Canton and other metropolitan centers more often than one might imagine and they ate at the best urban restaurants whenever they had the chance. Trips of this nature constitute some of the fondest memories of my older informants. In many Cantonese villages there are voluntary associations dedicated exclusively

16 For example, in 1985 Mr. Man Tso-chuen, an 84 year old elder from San Tin, could recall every minute detail of a restaurant meal he had eaten in Canton 70 years earlier. He is not unusual. Recounting fabulous meals is a favorite pastime for people of all ages in Cantonese villages. When I returned to San Tin after a visit to China in 1978, everyone I met quizzed me at length about what
to eating. San Tin has several t’ung nien hui (‘same year societies’) for people who share the same birth symbol (year of the tiger, dragon, rooster, etc.); the sole activity of these small associations is to collect money for an annual feast in one of Hong Kong’s better restaurants.

Given the range of culinary choice, it is significant that sihk puhn has survived in the New Territories.\(^\text{17}\) Had it not been for its central significance as a legitimization ritual and as a symbol of village cohesiveness, eating from the common pot would no doubt have disappeared long ago.

It is surely no accident that sihk puhn emerged as it did. The symbolism of the food is obvious: The components are cooked separately and then mixed together in a common pot. The blending of foods in this way is a blatant reversal of elite models of preparation and presentation. It is done purposely, by design, to attain a desired effect. And that effect is one of levelling: All who eat from the common pot are equals. They are communal with each other on a level not found in ordinary life. On all other occasions Cantonese dining procedures are hierarchical: guests before hosts, elders before juniors, agnates before affines, officials before commoners, rich before poor. Here, in the sihk puhn, all social barriers are breached. Just as the food is purposely mixed together, so too are those who choose to eat it.\(^\text{18}\)

It should be noted that the villages in question are not mere collections of farmers and laborers. Inhabitants represent many classes, from the very wealthy – even millionaires in San Tin’s case – to the very poor (on class distinctions see R. Watson 1985). But they are all, equally, members of the community. Ways must be found to keep them equal, at least in a symbolic sense, if the village is to continue functioning as a cohesive community. Sihk puhn is perhaps the best, but by no means the only, example of ritual levelling in the Cantonese cultural repertoire.

One must conclude, therefore, that sihk puhn is quite obviously more than a simple feast devised as a convenient way to celebrate festive occasions. It is a central symbol of community life. Those who eat from the common pot are bound by a special relationship. The very act of sharing this low cuisine has the symbolic effect of obliterating class and status differences. Periodically, even the wealthiest entrepreneurs and the most exalted of local politicians must shed the trappings of their class and eat with their fellow villagers – squatting on the floor along with everyone else, digging in the pot, searching for a prize piece of chicken. This, in my view, is why the custom is retained by the people of the New Territories: In sharing the common pot, villagers manage to negate the status differences that govern their everyday lives and create for themselves – momentarily at least – the illusion of social equality.

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Judith Strauch (1942–1985), friend and colleague in New Territories lore, companion at many a feast.

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at a symposium on ‘Feasting and Rites of Commensality in Chinese Society’ (organized by Rubie S. Watson) held in conjunction with the 1985 Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies and at harmony (Girardot 1983: 29 ff.). Stews, soups, dumplings, humble pies, and mixed dishes of all kinds have a special place in the food semantics of ancient China because, in Girardot’s words, ‘they bring low and high, yin and yang, and the five elements together at a single rustic setting where the honored dish was ritually prepared’ (1983: 33, building on Chang 1977).

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the Ritual and Religious Studies Seminar, University of Pittsburgh. The author wishes to thank the following people for their help and advice: Eugene Anderson, Chris Fuller, Cho-yun Hsu, Elizabeth Johnson, Evelyn Rawski, Man-lu Sun, Rubie Watson, and Anthony Yu. A special note of thanks is due to three sikh puhn chefs: Man-Tso-chuen (San Tin village), Teng Tim-sing and Teng Siu-sing (Ha Tsuen village). The recipe cited in note 9 was provided by Teng Siu-sing.

Cantonese terms (C) are in Yale romanization and Mandarin (M) equivalents follow the Wade-Giles system. The character numbers in the following glossary correspond to those in Mathews’ ‘Chinese-English Dictionary’ (Harvard University Press, 1963): M fan 1787; C gau wun (M chiu wan) 1198, 7022; C bah jik (M hsia hsi) 2520, 2502; C Man (M wen) 7129; C muhn yuht (M man yueh) 4326, 7696; M pen-ji 5025, 6198; C San Tin (M hsii tien) 2737, 6362; C sheung jik (M shang hsi) 5669, 2502; C sikh piu (M shih p’iao) 5810, 5192; C sikh puhn (M shih p’en) 5810, 5023; M ta kuo fan 5943, 3731, 1787; M ta kuo ts’ai 5943, 3731, 6671; M ts’ai 6671; M t’ung nien hui 6615, 4711, 2345.

Abstract. — Cantonese villagers in the Hong Kong region celebrate births, marriages, and other social transitions by holding communal banquets in public halls. Unlike feasts in restaurants or private homes, the menu consists of a single dish called sikh puhn (lit. ‘eat pot’), a large wooden basin containing foods that have been cooked separately and later mixed together. This paper explores the symbolism of this unusual custom and concludes that it represents a purposefully-designed form of low cuisine, in contrast to the high cuisine enjoyed by the Chinese elite. By sitting at the same table and eating from a common pot participants accept each other as equals. The elaborate etiquette and hierarchical seating arrangements so characteristic of upper class dining is conspicuously absent during these village celebrations. Thus, in sharing the common pot, villagers manage (momentarily) to negate the status differences that govern their everyday lives and create the illusion of social equality. [China, Cantonese, Food, Banqueting, Social Organization]

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