

# Principles of the Hong Kong Kitchen Shorthand<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The Kitchen Shorthand (KS) has amused and bemused many Hongkongers but has hitherto not been systematically studied. This paper explains that KS principles are motivated by the imperative of efficiency and include redundancy removal, use of (near-)homophony, extraction of distinctive graphemes, use of convenient idiosyncratic symbols and strategic positioning of information on the writing space. Novel strategies like grapheme extraction and recombination speak to the cognitive properties that must underlie the Chinese scribe who despite possible low literacy may intuit the KS enabled by the sociocultural context of Hong Kong.

## Introduction

The Hong Kong Kitchen shorthand, henceforth KS, is a form of cryptic writing<sup>2</sup> used in Hong Kong eateries between the waiting staff and the kitchen, exemplified in the reproductions on the next page.

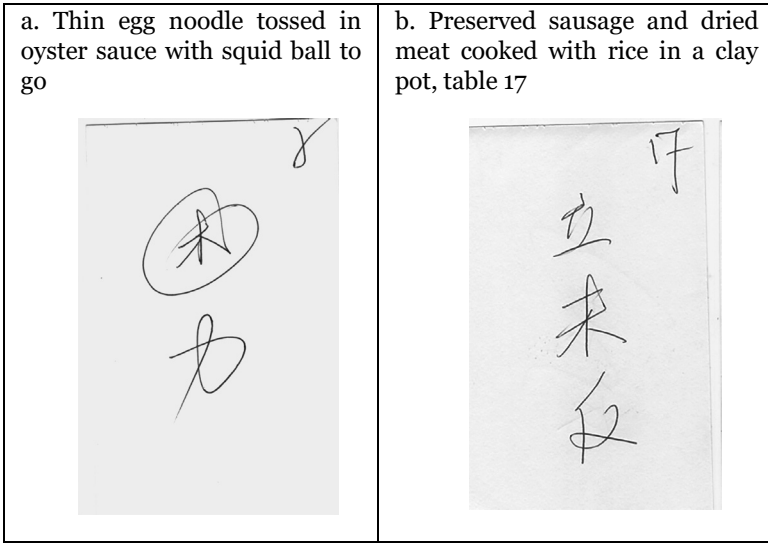
The examples show clear resemblances to Chinese orthography upon which the KS is based. For instance, three Chinese graphemes are discernible in (1b): the topmost graph 立 is literally “stand”; 未 “not yet”; and 反 “reverse.” When presented as seen in the figure in (1b), they are nonsensical to the uninitiated. The example in (1a) is much harder to discern, but is also made of Chinese graphemes. This paper explains the principles of KS as they encode complex and creative orders of the customers for a semi-literate kitchen (more in the following section).

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<sup>1</sup> All data from fieldwork by Wee Lian-Hee, mostly between 2000–2008, and continued observations since then through his established contacts in the food and beverage sector. He went so far as to open a small restaurant at Happy Valley which has since shuttered. The authors thank the editors and reviewer(s) for helpful comments, and the various people at the fieldwork sites.

<sup>2</sup> The term “shorthand,” as we understand it, is a form of writing, not to be confused with *slang*, *argot*, *code*, or *shortform* which may be written or spoken. We are thus careful not to confuse truncation in speech with KS. KS, like all orthographic systems, is a representation of language, not language itself. The oral day-to-day communication type of truncation is probably best understood as abbreviation rather than as *shorthand*. Abbreviation in speech is often treated in generative linguistics, and the explanations normally converge on the positional prominences in morphosyntactic and morphophonological contexts (see for example Beckman 1998, among many others).

While founded on the principles of Chinese orthography, KS has creative extensions that facilitate speed and intelligibility.



(1) Examples of Hong Kong KS<sup>3</sup>

For Hongkongers, KS is a distinctively local cultural artefact, although it is also used in Macau and many Cantonese-speaking restaurants in Chinatowns around the world.<sup>4</sup> Despite the opacity, KS is for Hongkongers strongly familiar and is a topic of amusement accompanied by pride when introducing local foodways. However, KS does not enjoy social prestige. It is hard to trace when KS began, but it must have been in widespread usage no later than the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> KS is quietly slipping into disuse with computerized communication systems so that waiters no longer write orders on a pad for the kitchen. The data informing the analysis provided in this paper comes from nine years of field work (roughly 2000–2008), during which one of the coauthors either apprenticed himself to some eateries as kitchen or floor staff, or as friends to others in the profession. This study reveals that KS uses a

<sup>3</sup> Reproduced from actual (but badly disintegrated) originals: (1a) from Wong Kee Noodle Stall, Nam Shan Estate, Shek Kip Mei circa 2002; (1b) from Sheung Hei Roast Meat Restaurant along Lockhart Road, Wan Chai circa 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Particularly those affiliated to Hong Kong circa the pre-1997 exodus. Cantonese communities not diasporic of Hong Kong do not use them, as for example earlier Guangdong migrants in Malaysia or Singapore. See Tan especially 1–22.

<sup>5</sup> The earliest “tea” restaurant is reported to be 蘭香閣 in Central, opened in 1946. From the same period, there was also 蘭芳園, opened 1952, which presently has a number of branches (Leung Po Chuen Research Centre).

number of techniques: (i) reduction of redundancy, (ii) displacement of complex forms with simpler ones through phonological resemblances, and (iii) extraction of distinctive graphemes to allow simpler writing while preserving visual identity. However, this paper is not a manual for KS writing any more than a paper on Chinese calligraphic principles is a manual for good penmanship.

The next section explains the workings in eateries where KS is used, thus providing context. After that, the remaining sections describe the methodology behind the data collection, and provide background descriptions of Chinese orthography to facilitate the understanding of the KS principles.

### **Kitchen Shorthand: Where It Is Used and How**

The Hong Kong Kitchen Shorthand is a product of the local culture. Its principles can be fully grasped only through the context of its use, i.e. the local Hong Kong eateries.

#### *The “Tea” Restaurant and Such Eateries*

Hong Kong locals eat out often, and lots of eateries cater to these needs. In fact, large Chinese restaurants capable of serving banquets are found in every neighborhood that would double up as *dim sum* places for breakfast and then more sumptuous lunches and dinners. For greater convenience and affordability, most people go to what are affectionately called *caa4 caan1 teng1*<sup>6</sup> “tea restaurants” and to more nostalgic *dai6 pai4 dong3* “hawker centers.” Unless digitalized with computers, KS is likely to be used in these eateries, including makeshift canteens in village-controlled industrial complexes (usually container parks, logistic warehouses and other various types of light industries like gravestone carving, junkyards, etc.) in the remote parts of the New Territories.

The “tea” restaurant is a good point of reference for understanding the spatial organization of things as other eateries are either a more elaborate or simplified version of it.<sup>7</sup> Tea restaurants often claim to specialize in tea, even if reluctantly, but only in one type—the milk tea. This is presumably inherited from Hong Kong’s colonial past, and locals continue to associate these as places for their late afternoon snack, i.e. “afternoon tea.” Tea restaurants are economical eateries found in every neighborhood and every factory complex. They serve breakfast (currently 7am to 11:30am) which flows into lunch (11am to 3pm),

<sup>6</sup> Cantonese words are Romanized using Jyutping (Linguistic Society of Hong Kong), the numerals indicate the tone category.

<sup>7</sup> Tea restaurants probably evolved out of a combination of 冰室 *bing1 sat1* “ice rooms” that used to be popular dating places where people could have dessert at a time when refrigeration was novel. See Cheng, Chinese Cuisine Training Institute and Ngan Lung Catering for various historical accounts.

followed by tea (2pm to 6pm) then dinner (until close). The uncanny overlap in the service hours for meal times is a consequence of trying to offer customers anything they want at any time.

The tea restaurant is a very cramped space, and is getting denser with sky-rocketing rents. In 2012, a small establishment called Dr. Roast in Yuen Long paid HK\$70,000/month for a space no bigger than 250 square feet, and shuttered when the landlord raised rent to HK\$200,000/month. To survive, as many customers had to be packed into the space as possible. To entice customers, food has to be cheap and varied (more in the next sub-section) and service fast. Kitchen space is minimal (to give more space to customers) but disproportionately complex to produce the varieties of food. The kitchen division of the tea restaurant is often divided into sections: (i) 味 *mei5* “roasts and meats,” (ii) 廚 *cyu4* “main kitchen,” (iii) 粉 *fan2* “boiled noodles,” (iv) 粥 *zuk1* “congees,” (v) bakery, and finally (vi) the bar where drinks, toasts and omelets are prepared. Tea restaurants may not have every section.<sup>8</sup> Everything must be compacted. Tables barely 24×36 inches would seat up to six people (e.g. the row of “car tables” on the right, in (2)).



(2) *Tea Restaurant during Non-Peak Hours (Photograph from Author's Fieldwork)*

Sections of the kitchen are often separated to fit into niches in order to maximize customer seating capacity. Kitchen staff, as mentioned earlier, are often semi-literate. Today literacy is much higher, but if one works in a cramped, hot place, it is unlikely that one would prefer 外賣

<sup>8</sup> Lucky Restaurant (幸福茶餐廳), last observed in 2009, at Wong Tai Sin lower estate had almost every section except its own bakery because there is one next door. The Honolulu (檀島) at Wan Chai has its own bakery.

墨魚丸撈麵 “thin egg noodle tossed in oyster sauce with squid ball to go” scribbled on a small slip of paper when it could be written as (1a). Lunch, tea and dinner are the peak hours. This is where the waiting staff—writers of KS—works.

### Waiting on the Restaurant Floor

The waiting staff has to communicate the orders of the customers to the dispersed kitchen and to ensure that the bill tab is properly presented to the cashier. To understand how challenging this is, one needs to know about the menu.

Tea restaurant menus are impossible to reproduce. On the table, the customer sees five to ten pages packed with hundreds of items, and then perhaps a hundred more would be pasted on the walls. If one thinks that there is thus just under a thousand entries so items can simply be given a code, then one is mistaken. To get a sense of the scale, consider the four-page menu shown in Appendix 1, taken not from a comprehensive tea restaurant but from a modest noodle stall—Wong’s Noodles<sup>9</sup>—at Nam Shan Estate, not far from the City University of Hong Kong. The owner once lamented to Wee during his incognito fieldwork there how he and his staff (who knew no English) wished to better serve the occasional non-local customers. The result was a bilingual menu, a page extracted in (3) below, where a westerner could point at the cell and the waiter can read off the Chinese.

 黃記牛雜粉麵 (單拼) Wong's Noodles (single topping) 											
牛腩 Beef brisket	牛肚 Beef stomach	牛根 Beef tendons	鮮滑牛肉 Sliced beef	雙丸 Double (Squid & fish) balls	鯨魚球 Dace fishballs	新鮮豬潤 Fresh liver	雞翼 Chicken wings	雪菜雞絲 Shredded chicken with preserved vegetables	魚蛋 Fishballs	豬手 Trotters	雲吞 Wontons
牛雜 Beef (visceral) mix	牛丸 Beefballs	沙爹牛肉 Satay beef	火辣牛丸 Fiery beefballs	豬肉丸 Meatballs	墨丸 Squidballs	醬爆貢丸 Sauce-filled meatballs	鳳爪 Chicken claws	魚餃 Fish dumplings	炸醬 Fried sauce	魚皮 Fish skins	水餃 Dumplings
可配 Choice of 粉 flat rice noodles, 麵 thin egg noodles, 米 thin rice noodles, 米線 thick rice noodles, 伊麵 加 \$2 extra for Yi noodles 10am-2pm 每碗 \$14 per bowl 配汽水加 add \$1 for soft drinks (假期除外 except holidays). After 2pm 後配汽水加 add \$3 for soft drinks.											

(3) Page 1 from Wong's Noodles Menu

<sup>9</sup> The establishment has since changed leadership.

As may be seen from (3), there are 24 choices of toppings. At the bottom there are five choices of noodles and an option for a can of soda ( $=24 \times 5 \times 2 = 240$  combinations). There is also a choice of three vegetables if one wants a side dish ( $\times 4$ ), which can be served in soup, oyster sauce, fermented bean sauce, beef gravy, or undressed ( $\times 5$ ) with or without sesame oil ( $\times 2$ ), and with or without extra vegetable oil ( $\times 2$ ), totaling 19,200 combinations. The customer can have more than one topping if she likes, and may choose up to three ( $=24 \times 23 \times 22 \div (3 \times 2 \times 1) = 2024$  combinatory options for toppings) before the bowl overflows. Thus one arrives at a whooping 1,619,200 possible orders for the meal! Finally, the customer may stipulate if s/he wants scallions for the noodles and if s/he wants more soup or less. There are also a number of side dishes that can be made by using the available toppings.

By playing with combinatory possibilities, the establishment gives the customer a feeling of variety and that the food is nearly custom made. In tea restaurants, the array of choices is even more staggering because of the various combinations of toppings, sides, staples, drinks, sauces, and cooking method. For example, one could order a “pork cutlet baked over fried rice and topped with curry together with iced coffee tea mix that is 30% tea, with less ice and extra sweet to be served with a local variant of the Russian borsch.”<sup>10</sup> Another could, with similar complexity, order “chicken chop, over stir-fried spaghetti with black-bean sauce together with a hot Coca Cola boiled with ginger”.<sup>11</sup> Tea restaurants also offer various types of set meals, and even then, the customer has choice of soup, drinks and sometimes side dishes. With so many items and variations possible, and also the separate sections of the kitchen (recall the previous sub-section), customer orders must be taken in great speed and communicated effectively. At the same time, calculation of the final bill must be made to the cashier, often located in a corner near the entrance.

To take orders and help the cashier ring up the bill, the waiter uses two pads, a thick jotter pad with blank slips roughly  $2 \times 4$  inches and a bill tab pad normally in white copperplate printed paper (roughly  $3 \times 5$  inches), the latter schematized below.

Each table<sup>12</sup> would have only one bill tab like (4), which although inadequate for the kitchen, suffices for the cashier to work out the total charges. The top corner of this tab indicates the table number (and if takeaway or delivery, an idiosyncratic mark is used), but the body

<sup>10</sup> In Cantonese, 焗豬扒飯炒底加咖喱汁，凍鴛鴦三分茶，少冰多甜，羅宋湯。

<sup>11</sup> In Cantonese, 雞扒炒意大利粉食黑汁、熱可樂煲薑。

<sup>12</sup> Which is a rather fluid notion. A table for four may be split by two pairs of customers who share the space, hence tabs would be suffixed with letters, e.g. Table 15 may have two tabs “15” and “15a” if a latecomer sits down and shares the space with the current occupant.

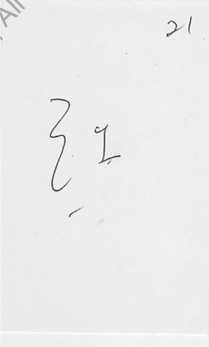
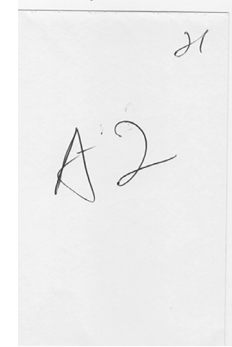
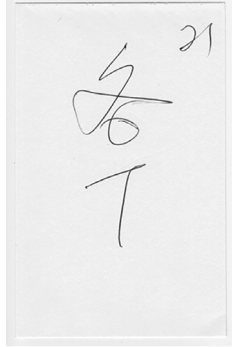
includes only bare information for calculation of price. The rather simple scribble above would capture the charges for a table of four where, for example, Peter wants Set A with borsch, prefers spaghetti not rice and wants iced lemon tea (\$2 extra); John also wants Set A but with Chinese soup and can go with rice, though he wants less oil and warm cocoa (no extra charge); Susan wants Set B with black pepper sauce for her steak but mushroom cream soup and tea with milk; and Mary prefers to order à la carte, and wants only a plate of toast with two sunny-side ups and does not want anything to drink. In addition, the table wants a portion of *char siu* “honeyed barbecued pork.” The waiter would often leave some space at the bottom of the tab in case the table makes additional orders, say if Mary changes her mind and wants iced red bean dessert.

拾號: 21 年 月 日	
Ax2	Two set As
1\$2	\$2 extra
B	Set B
KS for toast with egg	
KS for standard portion barbecue pork	
合計	

(4) Schematized Bill Tab<sup>13</sup>

To continue with this example, our waiter must take down the specific orders and hand them to the relevant kitchen divisions. Sets A and B goes to *cyu4* “main kitchen,” the barbecue pork to *mei5* “roasts,” and the toast and the drinks to the bar. Each item is written on a small slip of light brown jotter paper. In this example, 10 slips are needed, and each would have on the top-right (or top-left for some) corner the table number “21” so that the item would be delivered correctly. Illustration (5) presents the slips corresponding to Peter’s order.

<sup>13</sup> Actual sample unavailable because of proprietary rights.

21	21	21
		
a. Borsch	b. Set A, with spaghetti	c. Iced lemon tea

(5) Peter's Orders

The slip (5a) will go to the soup area and might be omitted if the waiter himself scoops it. Slip (5b) goes to the main kitchen and (5c) to the bar. Ready items are placed on the counter accompanied by their slips and any waiter can deliver. As the waiter scribbles the orders, she would sort them into the kitchen sections by using her fingers as separators, as in (6).



(6) Finger Separators

### Fieldwork and Data Collection

Data for this study is drawn from a two-prong ethnographic approach, firstly in taking up the role of waiting staff at two different establishments (role-immersion) and secondly in collecting examples at the eateries (casual collection). All fieldwork was done by Wee.



### Role-immersion

Role-immersion forms the main part of the data collection done in two locations, and includes various degrees of experimentation.

- (7) *Fieldwork location #1: Noodle Gourmet*<sup>14</sup>  
 Owners: Eleanor and Ken, married, from Hong Kong  
 Manager: Ringo, nephew of owners, from Hong Kong  
 Chef: Chau, formerly chef at a Hong Kong *daai6 paai4 dong3*  
 Opening hours (then): 11am to midnight  
 Delivery to nearby towns including New Brunswick, Highland Park, Piscataway and Livingston  
 Fieldwork period: 2000–2004, intensely in 2000, then sparsely till 2004

Even though it is called the Noodle Gourmet, this establishment is more like a Hong Kong tea restaurant. The owners, manager and chef migrated to the US as part of the pre-1997 exodus from Hong Kong. This is particularly important because their management style, repertoire of dishes, and aesthetic sense of dining thus belong to the pre-Handover period. When Wee compared his notes there with what was in Hong Kong in the same period, it was clear that post-1997 Hong Kong has lost much of its food culture.

Fieldwork was done by “infiltration,” when the owners needed two months off to attend to family matters in Hong Kong. Wee had already been a frequent customer<sup>15</sup> whom the owners knew from the nearby Rutgers University. He was readily accepted and co-managed the restaurant with Ringo. Wee’s involvement was intensive, running the establishment where he apprenticed himself to various stations.<sup>16</sup> After the owners returned, he continued to hang around daily. From late 2000 to 2004, Wee moved to Hong Kong, but would make fortnight-long visits every three months, boarding at the owners’ home and helping in the restaurant.

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<sup>14</sup> Easton Avenue, New Brunswick, NJ. The restaurant has since changed hands, and acquired a modern management style, website: <http://www.noodlegourmet.com>. Last contact 2008.

<sup>15</sup> It takes time to build trust and friendship.

<sup>16</sup> Wee knew he got it right when he was receiving US\$180 in tips on days when he did the waiting (each customer normally gives \$0.50). The money was given away to the crew when the day ended. Wee refused payment, tip or salary. His research plans were not revealed to anyone at that time to ensure accuracy of information.

(8)

*Fieldwork location #2: Wong's Noodle*<sup>17</sup>

Family-run stall, husband and wife team with one employee as chef and another as part-time waitress

Opening hours (then): 8am to 1am

Fieldwork period: 2002–2004

Wong's Noodle is a small establishment at the Nam Shan Estate about 10 minutes' walk from the nearby City University of Hong Kong. The community is generally poor and aging.

Fieldwork was also done by "infiltration." Every evening (around 7pm), Wee would arrive for dinner, and then order beer. Since beer was lucrative, and Wee would order up to ten bottles, Wee was always welcomed to hang around for as long as he pleased. Dressed very casually to fit in, Wee disguised his notetaking materials with a copy of the newspaper, to give the impression that he was reading the punter's guide and betting on horses as he loitered. Eventually, he became friendly with everyone. The chance came when the male owner was alone one evening (the employee was on leave, and the wife was busy with children at home) and there were too many customers. Wee started taking orders, and the owner even asked Wee to tend to the payments and cash till. The KS acquired in (7) worked equally well in (8). It is noteworthy that while the repertoire of food in (7) and (8) overlap, there are also many differences. Thus Wee had to write in (8) items that he had not written when in (7). This is noteworthy because for novel items to be writable, KS must be a productive system with principled means of encoding new things very much like learning a language.

Having two fieldwork sites, one in HK and one outside, is important for a number of reasons. Location (7) offers an important comparison and is a good basis for comparison with (8) because:

1. It represents a model tea restaurant of HK that moved out hence was untouched by post-1997 developments in HK
2. It comprises of a management and team that migrated from HK that were in the trade before migration
3. The site represents a group that have strong motivations to preserve their foodways
4. The preservation of pre-1997 HK foodways is evidenced by the repertoire of dishes that are only now in the living memory of local HK people as the local restaurants no longer serve them (for reasons of cost in labor and time)

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<sup>17</sup> Establishment changed hands in 2007. Names are withheld for anonymity. The lives of those in the lower rungs of the social ladder are very difficult, and often are at the margins of legality not because of malice, but because of low literacy that prevents proper applications. The same is true of unnamed individuals in (7).

Throughout 2000–2004, Wee shuttled between (7) and (8) making comparisons and also testing if new ways of writing KS hindered communication. Because Wee was on such familiar terms (and was always working for free) with both establishments, it became acceptable for him to write down whatever he wanted to eat and have the kitchen prepare it. This enabled experimentation for Wee to concoct unusual preparations and complicated demands that pushed KS writing to its limits. For example, for lunch at (7), Wee wrote into the kitchen for “pork cutlet with roast gravy over fried rice coated in egg sauce with less rice and a bigger slice of pork, with a serving of poached mixed vegetables to be put in the same plate.”<sup>18</sup> At (8), he might order “flat egg noodle, extra noodles topped with beef abomasum and tendon-ribbed brisket cooked to greater tenderness and a side dish of water spinach without oil dressing, but with fermented bean sauce with shredded red chillis.”<sup>19</sup> If all these sound a mouthful, that is precisely the point of the experimentation on KS.

### *Casual Collection*

Intensive fieldwork of the sort outlined in the above sub-section is inevitably narrow in scope. To ensure representativeness of the KS data, casual observations are made when patronizing eateries in Hong Kong, and also in eateries at Chinatowns in the USA. Because KS written slips go to the kitchen, it is not easily available to customers. One has to actively look for them. In tea restaurants and hawker centers, this is a lot easier because the slips are often left—with little care for hygiene—on top of or beside the food as they are brought to the table. The waiters would normally quickly take the slips and walk away before the customer complains. Wee would lie in ambush and casually remove them himself even before the food is set on the table, and then shoot a challenging glance at the waiter to send him away.

These actual slips of paper disintegrate easily. They are often soiled by food stains, and are tossed as soon as the food is served. Bill tabs are property of the establishments and kept for accounting purposes. All data collected here are thus transcripts copied by the fieldworker onto his notes. It is partially for this reason that role-immersion is important as that allows the fieldworker to internalize the KS. It is very difficult to summarize all the data collected, but selected examples will help unravel the underlying orthographic principles.

<sup>18</sup> In Cantonese, 燒汁吉列豬扒黃金炒底, 少飯大嚙豬扒加雜菜. Please do not make such complex orders as you would be very much disliked by those who have access to what you will ingest.

<sup>19</sup> In Cantonese, 牛沙瓜筋肺粗麵食脍、腐乳通菜走油加辣椒絲.

## The Orthographic Backdrop of Hong Kong's Kitchen Shorthand

Because KS is fundamentally based on the Chinese script, a quick introduction to the parts of Chinese orthography relevant to understanding KS is necessary.

Chinese writing, where monomorphemic characters are written within the space of a square, is typically described as ideographic. A more nuanced understanding, available since the 2<sup>nd</sup> century through Xu Shen's (許慎, AD 58–148) 《說文解字》 *Shuowen jiezi*, provides six categories in the design of the Chinese character.

- (9) *Liushu* (六書 the six script forms)<sup>20</sup>
- i. iconic (象形), e.g. 口 “mouth” resembles the open oral cavity
  - ii. indexical (指事), e.g. 上 “up” points upwards
  - iii. descriptive (會意) e.g. 酒 “wine” the radical for water shown here as three drops on the left and the container 酉 for fermenting things
  - iv. semantic rebus (形聲) e.g. 河 “river” has the water radical in the left and the 可 provides the approximate phonology
  - v. twisting (轉注). The meaning is unclear because Xu did not furnish adequate examples, but gave a rather vague definition as “through recognizing a category then associate them via meaning, such as 考 and 老”<sup>21</sup>
  - vi. phonetic rebus (假借) e.g. 足 “enough,” originally the character for feet, is phonetically appropriated being homophonous to “enough”

*Liushu* are six methods for constructing a Chinese character, and compounding the methods would certainly be possible to make complex forms like 鸚 “parrot,” which has a bird radical 鳥 on the right and a baby radical 嬰 on the left as the phonetic cue. The baby radical itself is made up of a female radical 女 in the bottom and a pair of 貝 “shells” (i.e. valuable since shells was used as currency) on top.

One extension of Chinese orthography needs to be mentioned, and its relevance will become clear later. This is the tablature—dating to the Tang dynasty (AD 618–907)—for notating *qin* (now commonly called *guqin*) music. Historical records tell of the *qin*'s high social status for the ancient Chinese literati, acclaimed by Confucius himself and remained revered until the end of Imperial China. After a long dormant period since the 19<sup>th</sup> century when China was weak, to be followed by the mayhem of the Cultural Revolution, the *qin* has been revived today

<sup>20</sup> Translation and examples ours, but see Coulmas 52, table 3.4 for an alternative.

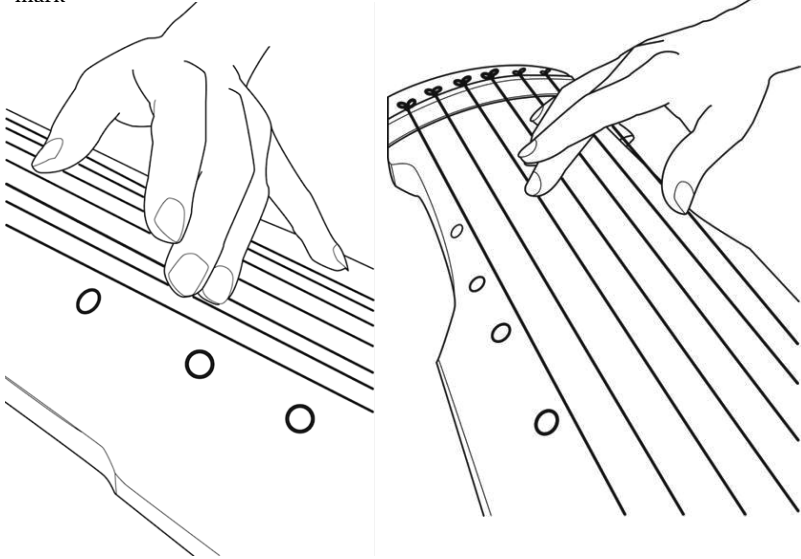
<sup>21</sup> Translation ours, original quote, “轉注者，建類一首，同意相受，考老是也” (*Shuowen Jiezi*: Preface).

so that in 2001, an antique *qin* once owned by Emperor Huizong (reign 1119–1125) of the Song Dynasty (906–1279) was auctioned in 2010 in Beijing for RMB¥136,640,000 (Zhou).

Because of the *qin*'s structure (seven strings strung over a resonating body that also doubles up as the finger board), music notation required information for which finger to use for depressing which position of which string to play and how the string should be plucked. Thus a single note is often notated as a full set of instructions like “the ring finger of the left hand depresses third string eight-tenths of the way from the tenth mark while the middle finger of the right hand hooks inwards,” shown in (10).

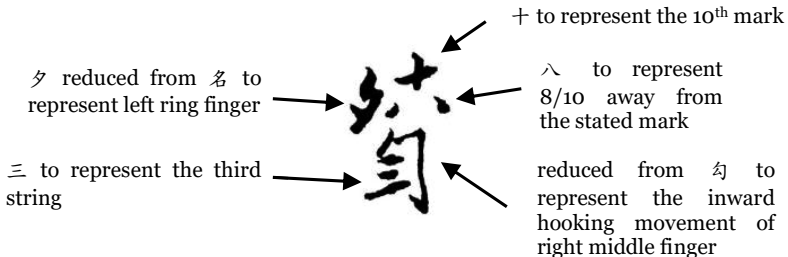
Left ring finger depressing 3<sup>rd</sup> string eight-tenths of the way from the 10<sup>th</sup> mark

Right middle finger hooking 3<sup>rd</sup> string



(10) Example of *qin* Tablature

- a. 左手無名指按十徽八分右手中指勾三絃, where the diminished characters may be omitted as redundant to a musician familiar with the terminologies  
 b.



The instructions needed would be lengthy if expressed as a full sentence (see 10a). Circa the Tang dynasty, a more effective notation was invented via clever manipulation of the orthographic conventions to produce the *jianzipu* 減字譜 “character subtraction score” (see 10b). The whole line would be reduced to one single character by extracting a grapheme<sup>22</sup> from some of the characters and then recombining them. Except for *qin* players, few people are familiar with this tablature. Interestingly, KS writers will independently discover for themselves the “character subtraction strategy.”

In general, the Chinese orthographic conventions would inform KS, although like other shorthand conventions, KS also employs abbreviations. Unlike the shorthand used for English, KS is not alphabetic in that it does not employ phonemic representations as would major systems like Pitman’s or Gregg’s.

## Principles of Kitchen Shorthand

### *Semantic Salience*

The first rule in KS is to keep length short. The full name of any item normally contains redundancy, which can be reduced if (i) the morphosyntax and/or (ii) the kitchen context allows recovery.

Starting with morphosyntax, some morphemes are either semantically null or merely indicate categories. For example, the 粉 *fan2* “powder” is used as a generic category for noodles made of rice meal, and is found in items such as 河粉 “flat rice noodle,” 米粉 “thin rice noodle,” 金邊粉 “Phnom Penh-style flat rice noodle,” 濠粉 “Vietnamese thin rice noodle.” In all these cases, dropping 粉 impacts little on semantic clarity. Similarly, with 麵 *min6* “wheatmeal,” which is the category for non-rice based noodles that would include 幼麵 “thin egg noodle,” 油麵 “oily noodle,”<sup>23</sup> 粗麵 “broad noodle,” 伊面 “Yi noodle,” 刀削麵 “knife sheared noodle,” 拉麵 “pulled noodle, ramen,” 公仔麵 “doll noodle,”<sup>24</sup> 出前一丁麵 “*demae-itcho* noodles,” 辛拉麵 “shin ramyeon” etc. In all these cases, 麵 can be omitted as well. In a restaurant where Shin ramyeon and ramen are both available, 辛 could be used to represent the former and 拉 the latter. As for the longer *demae itcho* noodles, a single 丁 suffices. The trick is to preserve only the characters that contrast with other items, which can reduce length

<sup>22</sup> A minimally meaningful graphic unit, e.g. 彳、糸 which may or may not be adequate to be a full Chinese character.

<sup>23</sup> Actually thick egg noodle, but precooked. Oil is added to prevent sticking.

<sup>24</sup> Actually, instant noodle. The Doll brand being most often used, hence the name. *Demae-itcho* noodles, also instant but of a different brand, are often available, but cost more.

drastically, as in 檸檬 → 檸 “lemon,” 豬仔包 “piglet roll” → 豬包 and more dramatically 西式炒飯底 “western styled fried rice as the staple” → 西炒底 “west stir-fried base,”<sup>25</sup> or 豆豉青椒排骨炒河粉 “fermented soy beans and green capsicum stir fried with pork rib and flat rice noodle” → 豉椒骨炒河 “bean-pepper bone fried river.”<sup>26</sup>

Division of the kitchen into sections puts a cap on the number of contrasts that needs to be made. For example, the boiled noodle section does not deal with stir frying which is done in the main kitchen. Also, there are defaults. In the boiled noodle section, the default is to have thin egg noodle, thus unless specified for other types of noodles, the waiter does not have to write<sup>27</sup> what noodle to use, and can get away with simply writing down the desired topping, hence, 牛筋牛腩撈幼麵 “beef tendons and beef brisket over tossed thin egg noodle” → 筋腩撈 “tendon-brisket toss.”

The semantic salience principle can be roughly stated as (11).

(11) *Semantic Salience Principle*

Preserve only the characters that are needed to identify the item.

Abbreviation from semantic salience may then be subject to further reduction. For example (豉椒) 骨炒河 “(bean-pepper) bone fried river” will eventually become C 召骨炒可, the derivation of which will become transparent in the ensuing subsections.

*Rhyme is Reason*

For quick communication, exact formal writing is unnecessary. In this aspect, KS makes an advantage of the lower literacy level of the kitchen staff. In KS, the character chosen only needs to sound close to the target syllable, even if semantically opaque. Thus the character 紫 “purple” can be written as 子 “son” as both are homophonic *zi2* in Cantonese. Similarly, 旦 *daan2* “day” can be used for 蛋 “egg,” 朱 *zyu1* “red” for 豬 “pork,” 尤 *jau4* “as if” for 魷 “squid,” 比 *bei2* “compare” for 髀 “leg,” 立 *lap6* (also pronounced *lap6*) “stand” and 未 *mei6* “not yet” for 臘味

<sup>25</sup> Obviously a local interpretation of what is “western.” This is simply rice stir fried with ketchup, green peas, carrot, corn, cheap sausages, and if one is lucky, ham and/or shrimp (cf. footnote 16 for golden fried rice). There are many types of fried rice, to which we shall not digress.

<sup>26</sup> 河 means *river*. The thick rice noodle was said to be made by washing through river water, hence the name.

<sup>27</sup> Although it can also be written in KS as 丐, see the sub-section “Extraction” below.

“preserved meats” (cf. (1b)), 可 *ho2* “can” for 河 “flat rice noodle,”<sup>28</sup> 九 *gau2* “nine” for 韭 “leek,” etc.

Full homophony is not necessary as long as there is adequate phonological resemblance to make the target association, e.g. 冬 *dong1* “winter” for 凍 *dong3* “cold,” 召 *ziu6* “convene” for 椒 “pepper,” 〇 *ling4* for 檸 *ning2* “lemon,” 木 *muk6* “wood” for 墨 *mak6* “ink (referring to squid),” 才 *coi4* “talent” for 菜 *coi3* “vegetable,” 2 *ji6* for 意 *ji3* “spaghetti.”<sup>29</sup>

The principle can be stated as (12).

(12) *Rhyme is Reason Principle*

Replace characters that require many strokes to write with simpler characters that sound similar.

The two principles (11) and (12) in combination can be seen in examples like 紫菜魚蛋湯河粉 “Flat rice noodle in soup with seaweed and fishball topping.” In KS it is simply 子旦可:

紫菜	“seaweed”	魚蛋	“fishball”	湯	“soup”	河粉	“flat rice noodle”
↓ X		X ↓		X		↓ X	
子		旦				可	

(13) *Flat rice noodle in soup with seaweed and fishball topping*

As illustrated in (13), the “X”s indicate characters that are removed following principle (11), and the changes are indicated by the downward arrows following principle (12).

While the “rhyme is reason” principle may be traced to the *Liushu* of Chinese writing (cf. the previous section, also Qiu 104ff), KS goes beyond that and employs also “extraction.”

*Extraction*

The principle in (12) is driven by the need to write quickly and also by the improved visibility from simplifying complex strokes. Imagine squinting the eyes under sweaty brows to read a character with all the steam and smoke in the kitchen. The extraction principle is driven by the same force. In this case, parts of a character are extracted to represent the full form. For example, 鴨 *aap3* “duck” → 甲 *gaap3* “armor” even if meaning and pronunciation are off. Similarly, from 鵝 *ngo4* “goose” → 我 *ngo5*, 飯 *faan6* “rice” → 反 *faan2*, 鳶 *joeng1*

<sup>28</sup> 河 “river” is pronounced *ho4*, but takes on the pronunciation *ho2* when used to refer to flat rice noodle via a complex morphophonological process of diminutivity and compound reduction from 河粉 *ho4 fan2* → *ho2 fan2* → *ho2* (*fan2*, elided).

<sup>29</sup> Via “Italy” 意大利, since spaghetti translates into Cantonese as Italian noodle.



“Mandarin duck” → 央 *joeng1*, 賓 *ban1* “guest”<sup>30</sup> → 兵 *bing1* (via the simplex script 賓), 擲 *lou1* “tossed” → 力 *lik6*, 粗 *cou1* “broad”<sup>31</sup> → 且 *ce2*, 奶 *naai5* “milk” → 乃 *naai5*, 麳 *min6* “noodle” → 丐 *min6* among numerous others.

Extractions can be ambiguous. For example, 艮 is extracted from 腿 “leg” (by extension, ham), but is also the extract from 根 “root” (homophonous to the more complex 筋 *gan1* “tendon”). The ambiguity does not arise in practice because tendons are available only in the 粉 *fan2* section of the kitchen, and ham at the bar and also the 廚 *cyu4* section. Similarly, 力 may refer to tossed noodles, but also stand as a homophone for the abbreviation of the beverage Horlicks. Again, ambiguity is no threat because the bar does not toss noodles. To ensure that, the waiter uses his finger separators (see (6)) to sort the slips accordingly.

Sometimes extractions produce forms that are not even a full Chinese character. The most noted among them is 久, which is extracted from 冬 “winter” (a near-homophonic replacement to 凍 “cold,” see the previous sub-section). For indicating the staple base (i.e. rice or noodle), the character would be 底 *dai2* “bottom,” from which 氏 is extracted. Another common one is 夕 for 餐 *caan1* “meal,” extracting only the top left grapheme. This is in spirit similar to the tablature system used in *qin* music (see the previous section), although it is unlikely that the secluded practices of the literati would have had influence on KS.

The demands of efficiency would push KS even further, to the extent of borrowing from other languages (particularly English) and using pictorial symbols.

### *Symbols from Beyond*

When efficiency trumps primness, the sacredness of the written word has little currency. In KS, symbols are borrowed from other sources as long as the kitchen staff understands. The pentagram ★, for example, is used to represent Singapore so that ★米 is KS for Singapore-style stir-fried thin rice noodle.<sup>33</sup> “Singapore” is formally written in Chinese as 新

<sup>30</sup> For 利賓納 *lei6 ban1 naap6* Ribena, a blackcurrant drink.

<sup>31</sup> Here as flat egg noodle, 粗麵 *cou1 min6*, literally broad noodle.

<sup>32</sup> 麳 *min6* continues to be the official character for “noodle” (Hong Kong Education Bureau), but the general public today uses 麵 (The Linguistic Society of Hong Kong does not list 麳). The 丐 *min5* “hidden (archaic),” near homophone of 麳, is an example also of extraction. Many however write 丐 *koi3* “beggar” because of visual similarity and familiarity.

<sup>33</sup> Not a real dish in Singapore. In Hong Kong, Macau and Chinatowns, this is stir-fried thin rice noodle with curry powder, egg, ham and shrimp—a concoction

加坡, but is 星 (literally “star” *sing1*) 加坡 for Cantonese speakers. ★ is therefore straightforward. 米 is from 米粉 *mai5 fan2* “thin rice noodle” (see the section “Semantic Salience” above).

Symbols are also taken from English. “T” for “tea,” instead of 茶. “H”<sup>34</sup> and “C”<sup>35</sup> are used for “hot” and “cold” respectively, thus “CT” is “cold tea,” which is served with milk as default. We also saw earlier that the Arabic numeral 0 is 檸 “lemon.” Thus, “久 C T” is iced tea and “久 0 T” is iced lemon tea (cf. (5c)). Needless to say, borrowings extend to the Chinese simplex script (the current PRC-sanctioned official writing system). Coca Cola 可口可樂 *ho2 hau2 ho2 lok6* is in KS the simplex character 乐 corresponding to 樂,<sup>36</sup> thus “C 0 乐” or “久 0 乐” would both be iced lemon coke. Because 0 has been appropriated to lemon, new products like Coke Zero would not be able to use 0 the same way; it would be “乐 Z” in KS.

Sometimes symbols can be derived from argot. For example, gravy from beef brisket is dark in color, and customers can ask for gravy in their vegetables or noodle dishes. The actual term would be 柱侯牛腩汁 *cyu5 hau4 ngau4 naam5 zap1* which shortens colloquially to 腩汁 *naam5 zap1* “brisket sauce.” This brisket sauce is called 色 *sik1* “color” in restaurant argot, and it is *sik1* that gets written into KS. *Sik1* is also used for soy sauce at the *mei5* “roasts and meats” section of the kitchen.<sup>37</sup> The argot term for sugar 糖 *tong4* in KS used to be 沙 *saai* “sand,” but has eventually fallen from colloquial use. A common pair of argot terms would be 紅 *hung4* “red” and 白 *baak6* “white,” the former normally referring to a tomato-based item and the latter a cream-based one (such as soups or pasta sauce). How argot terms come about would be quite beyond the scope of the present study. Argot in the industry is not born out of secrecy, but is an effort to escape the humdrum of dead-beat work with some creativity. A particularly entertaining example would be 抓住一大一細禽獸行街 *zaau2 zyu6 jat1 daai6 jat1 sai3 kam4 sau3 haang4 gaai1*, roughly translated as “grabbing one big and one small, the beast strolls the streets.”<sup>38</sup> What is really said is that a customer holding two children, one elder and one younger, has ordered beef for takeaway.

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presumably based on the stereotype that people from Southeast Asia eat curry with everything.

<sup>34</sup> Tea and a number of other beverages are served hot by default, so H is often omitted.

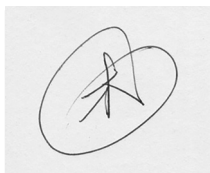
<sup>35</sup> C is also used as near homophone for 豉 *si6* “fermented soy,” but the ambiguity does not pose a problem because of kitchen division.

<sup>36</sup> 曲 *kuk1* (reported in Saan Dei Maa 36) and 6 *luk6* are also used as quasi-homophones, thus also symbols for Coca Cola.

<sup>37</sup> Thanks to Michael Tsang for pointing this out to us.

<sup>38</sup> Example from Fung Kwok-bong, who heard it in Tsuen Wan.

As a final example to this section, squid ball offers one of the most fascinating cases where the KS form is given below (from (1a)).

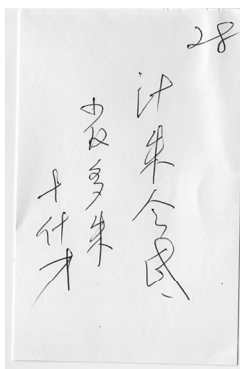


(14) Squid Ball

The reader might discern an encircled 木. Recalling the “Rhyme is Reason” principle, 木 is KS for squid due to phonetic similarity, and the circle here is a pictorial representation for *ball*. As such, even though there is a Chinese character 囿 *kwang3* “trap” that looks like (14), KS writers are normally mindful that the circle must be round and not angled, usually drawn as an anticlockwise flourish.<sup>39</sup>

### *Spatial Usage and Diacritics*

As far as the authors have been able to work out, the above discussion has exhausted the basic principles for creating and interpreting KS. There is one final note, which is that KS also uses diacritics to fine-tune the representation of the customer’s demands. Diacritics are largely made of symbols formed the same way as outlined above. Their status as diacritics are indicated by their position and size, exemplified below.



(15) 燒汁吉列豬扒黃金炒底·少飯大嚙豬扒加雜菜 “Pork cutlet with roast gravy over fried rice coated in egg sauce with less rice and a bigger slice of cutlet, plus a serving of poached mixed vegetables to be put in the same plate.”

<sup>39</sup> Also used is 勿 O, where 勿 *mat6* is used as near homophone for 墨 *mak6* as reference to squid. 勿 is also used to refer to honey at the bar. The O is a pictorial representation for *ball*.

The main characters in the center read 汁朱今氐, where 汁 is gravy, roast by default, 朱 is “pork,” 今 is the homophone for “gold” hence egg-coated rice, and 氐 extracted from 底 refers to the base staple. Since egg-coated rice is stir-fried, the method need not be stated. The smaller squiggles on the bottom left of (15) are ancillary; they read 少反多朱 + 什才, where 少 is less, 反 is the extract grapheme from rice, 多 is more, + is the mathematical symbol for addition, 什 is the simplex script for 雜 “mix,” and 才 is the phonetic stand-in for vegetables.

## Conclusion

This paper provides an analysis of the Kitchen Shorthand (KS) used in Hong Kong eateries, which include restaurants, hawker stalls and food centers offering local fare. Throughout this paper, it can be seen that KS was born out of necessity, so that efficiency trumps literary propriety. Without consciously appealing to orthographic scholarship, KS has evolved a number of principles that are mostly in line with Chinese orthography. The KS principles include the removal of redundancy, the use of (near-)homophony, the extraction of distinctive graphemes, the use of convenient idiosyncratic symbols, and the strategic positioning of information on the writing space. While KS draws from extant Chinese characters, it is not constrained by the semantic accuracy or the graphic fullness of those characters. It breaks up and combines extant characters as easily as it displaces them in favor of simpler forms as long as information is recoverable. In comparing with the formal scripts, KS is therefore livelier and bolder. On the one hand, KS speaks of a cultural phenomenon in the Hong Kong food and beverage industry. On the other, KS also speaks of deeper underlying principles that must be part of the Chinese cognition for orthography.

The central contribution of the paper is to first make clear, explicitly and rigorously, the nature of the phenomenon. KS is a phenomenon that has implications on many fronts (creativity, linguistic practices, code-switching, writing, etc), all of which may have to wait for future papers.



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## Appendix 1. Noodle stall menu, Nam Shan Estate, Shek Kip Mei, circa 2002

 <b>黃記牛雜粉麵 (單拼)</b> <b>Wong's Noodles (single topping)</b> 												
牛腩 Beef brisket	牛肚 Beef stomach	牛根 Beef tendons	牛根 Sliced beef	鮮滑牛肉 Fried beefballs	雙丸 Double (squid & fish) balls	鯪魚球 Squidballs	新鮮豬潤 Sauce-filled meatballs	雞翼 Chicken wings	雪菜雞絲 Shredded chicken with preserved vegetables	魚蛋 Fishballs	豬手 Trotters	雲吞 Wontons
牛雜 Beef (visceral) mix	牛丸 Beefballs	沙爹牛肉 Satay beef	火辣牛丸 Fried beefballs	豬肉丸 Meatballs	墨丸 Squidballs	醬爆貢丸 Sauce-filled meatballs	鳳爪 Chicken claws	魚餃 Fish dumplings	炸醬 Fried sauce	魚皮 Fish skins	水餃 Dumplings	
可配 Choice of 粉 flat rice noodles, 麵 thin egg noodles, 米 thin rice noodles, 米線 thick rice noodles, 伊麵 加 \$2 extra for Yi noodles 10am-2pm 每碗 \$14 per bowl 配汽水加 add \$1 for soft drinks (假期除外 except holidays). After 2pm 後配汽水加 add \$3 for soft drinks.												

 <b>黃記牛雜粉麵 (雙拼)</b> <b>Wong's Noodles (double topping)</b> 											
牛腩魚蛋 Beef brisket & fishballs	豬手雲吞 Trotters & wontons	鳳爪魚蛋 Chicken claws & fishballs	牛雜牛丸 Beef mix & beefballs	雙丸牛根 Double balls & tendons	魚皮水餃 Fish skins & dumplings	牛根墨丸 Beef tendons & squidballs	雞翼雲吞 Chicken wings & wontons	魚蛋豬手 Fishballs & trotters	魚餃牛丸 Fish dumplings & beefballs	牛肚水餃 Beef stomach & dumplings	牛腩雞翼 Beef Brisket & Chicken Wings
墨丸牛雜 Squidballs & beef mix	豬肉丸豬手 Meatballs & trotters	雞絲雲吞 Shredded chicken & wontons	牛丸水餃 Beefballs & dumplings	貢丸牛雜 Meatballs & beef mix	沙爹牛肉魚蛋 Satay beef & fishballs	鮮滑牛肉水餃 Sliced beef & dumplings	牛丸牛肚 Beefballs & beef stomach	牛腩貢丸 Beef brisket & meatballs	鯪魚球牛肚 Diced fishballs & beef stomach	牛雜鳳爪 Beef mix & chicken claws	牛根雲吞 Beef tendons & wontons
可配 Choice of 粉 flat rice noodles, 麵 thin egg noodles, 米 thin rice noodles, 米線 thick rice noodles, 伊麵 加 \$2 extra for Yi noodles 10am-2pm 每碗 \$19 per bowl 配汽水加 add \$1 for soft drinks (假期除外 except holidays). After 2pm 後配汽水加 add \$3 for soft drinks.											

 <b>黃記牛雜粉麵 (撈麵)</b> <b>Wong's Noodles (soup-on-the-side)</b> 										
撈麵類每碟 Beef stomach 牛肚 Beef tendons 牛根 Sliced beef 鮮滑牛肉 Double (squid & fish) balls 雙丸 Dace fishballs 鮫魚球 Beef (visceral) mix 牛雜 Chicken wings 雞翼 Beef brisket 牛腩 Fishballs 魚蛋 Trollers 豬手 Wontons 雲吞	牛丸 Beefballs	沙爹牛肉 Satay beef	火辣牛丸 Fiery beefballs	豬肉丸 Meatballs	墨丸 Squidballs	醬爆貢丸 Sauce-filled meatballs	鳳爪 Chicken claws	魚餃 Fish dumplings	炸醬 Fried sauce	水餃 Dumplings
	可配 Choice of 粉 flat rice noodles, 麵 thin egg noodles, 米 thin rice noodles, 米線 thick rice noodles, 伊麵 加 \$2 extra for Yi noodles. Double toppings 雙拼加 \$5 extra 10am-2pm 配汽水加 add \$1 for soft drinks (假期除外 except holidays). After 2pm 後配汽水加 add \$3 for soft drinks.									
	\$18									

 <b>黃記牛雜粉麵</b> <b>Wong's Noodles</b> 													
特價粉麵 特價粉麵 after 2pm 後 \$12	雙丸 Double (squid & fish) balls	鮫魚球 Dace fishballs	牛丸 Beefballs	豬手 Trollers	雞翼 Chicken wings	三寶粉 Terrific Trio Fish dumplings, squidballs/beefballs, fishballs	四寶粉 Fantastic Four Fish dumplings, squidballs, beefballs, fishballs	加底 Extra noodles	加紫菜 Extra seaweed	油菜 Vegetables (Chinese lettuce 生菜, Choy sum 菜心, Kale 芥蘭, Water spinach 通菜) Without oil 走油 with beef gray 滷汁 or with fermented bean sauce 腐乳	淨麵 Plain noodles	紫菜湯 Seaweed soup	蠔油撈麵 Noodles with oyster sauce
	可配 Choice of 粉 flat rice noodles, 麵 thin egg noodles, 米 thin rice noodles, 米線 thick rice noodles, 伊麵 加 \$2 extra for Yi noodles. Double toppings 雙拼 \$19 配汽水加 add \$3 for soft drinks.												
	\$16												
	\$18												
	\$4												
	\$2												
	\$8												
	\$8												
	\$5												
	\$11												

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