

# A Taste of the Heart: Love Apportioned in *Dim Sum*

JANICE PANG



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WRITER'S COMMENT: *When a phrase is translated from its native language to a foreign tongue, its true meaning, unfortunately, tends to become diluted; this essay is an attempt to restore that meaning to the words dim sum. In writing this essay, I wanted to depict not only the sensory elements triggered by dim sum, but the emotional evocations and cultural associations as well. UWP 18 with Karma Waltonen provided me with a rare and rewarding opportunity to explore this unconventional subject through the power of narrative.*

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: *UWP 18: Style in the Essay is a unique class in that it allows us to focus deeply on 'how' we say something instead of just 'what' we're saying for a full ten week quarter. In keeping with this focus, I assign a word study essay, in which students can explore a word or phrase from another language without a direct English equivalent. Janice's essay excelled at integrating narrative, giving sensory details, and exploring both the denotation and the poignant connotation of the phrase.*

—Karma Waltonen, University Writing Program

Heaven, I have learned, is not a fictitious space in the clouds, nor is it the temple of a glowering God. Rather, Heaven is witnessing the steam emanate from a plate of *har gow* – plump shrimp carefully wrapped in a delicate skin of flour. Heaven is unraveling the fresh-scented lotus leaf of a *lo mai gai* to uncover a treasure chest of chicken, mushrooms, and sticky rice. Heaven is sinking your teeth into the white, doughy exterior of a *char siu bao* and flooding your tastebuds with the immense flavor of pork cubes bathed in a sweet barbeque sauce. Heaven is *dim sum*.



Comprised of two Chinese characters, 點心, *dim sum* refers to the various foods served in traditional Chinese tea houses; the phrase also encompasses the conversations and overall togetherness experienced by the members present during the meal. In Chinese calligraphy, the first character, 点, signifies a small mark or touch. 点 becomes “dim” in pinyin, the English transcription of Chinese characters. When spoken, however, 点 resembles the English pronunciation of the word “deem.” The second character, 心, means “heart”; the pinyin and spoken forms of 心, *sum* are the same. While the characters 點心 directly translate to “small heart,” the colloquial translation of “a small touch of the heart” best captures the essence of the phrase.



In my family, Sunday afternoons following church are reserved for *dim sum*; having been spiritually fed, we seek to satisfy our physical appetites.

At 11:15 a.m., we arrive at an authentic tea house four blocks from the church. Fifteen minutes after the restaurant’s opening, a line has already formed outside.

“*Yi sahþ fahn joong. Lay yew mm yew dun?*”

The wait, a greeter informs us, will be at least fifteen minutes. Do we want to wait? My grandmother nods earnestly in response: yes, we want to wait – and so do seven other families.

Twenty-five minutes later, we are seated.

Before taking her seat, my grandmother makes her way from table to table. Donned in her Sunday’s best – a crimson silk blouse, pleated

black pants, sensible black loafers, and a matching necklace-and-earrings set of pearls –, my grandmother greets the other grandmothers and grandfathers who have come to enjoy post-church *dim sum* with their families. When she finally returns to our table, my grandmother informs us that *Poh Poh* Wang's granddaughter has been accepted to Harvard and that *Poh Poh* Kwan is bitter because her grandson has only been accepted to UCLA. *Poh Poh* Kwan, of course, did not explicitly say this, but my grandmother could tell by her pursed lips.

The kitchen door creaks, alerting the patrons of a new round of food carts. Aged workers emerge from the kitchen and skillfully navigate the carts brimming with bamboo steamers of traditional Chinese dishes around the strategically arranged tables. A robust woman with an uncompromising face arrives at our table and loudly announces, “*Char siu bao!*”

She uncovers one of the lids to reveal four perfectly round, gleaming pork buns. The eyes of my family members widen.

“*Yut,*” my father says determinedly, requesting one order of *char siu bao*.

The woman stamps the food card and places the dish on the lazy susan. She briskly makes her way to another table, her proclamations of “*Char siu bao!*” a murmur among the clamor of the restaurant.

My family faces a dilemma: there are five of us, but only four *bao*.

Following Chinese tradition, my father first offers the dish to his mother, the eldest, swiveling the lazy susan in her direction. Following Chinese tradition, my grandmother turns the lazy susan towards me, insisting that I, the youngest, am offered the first choice. Following Chinese tradition, I obediently select the largest *char siu bao* with my chopsticks, knowing that my grandmother would object had I chosen otherwise. The poor pork bun barely touches my plate before being transferred to my expectant mouth.

Following an ambitious bite into the *char siu bao*, I ask my grandmother, “*Deem guy ngoh day wah dim sum? Hai mm hai sai sum?*”

In broken Cantonese, I had asked her why we referred to this – this gathering of loved ones over a lazy susan of delectable foods – as *dim sum*. Didn't that mean ‘small heart?’

“*Dim* – can be ‘a little bit,’ or can be ‘touch,’” my grandmother clarifies in broken English. “*Sum* – heart.” She places her hand over her heart.

“*Dim sum* means ‘touch heart?’”

My grandmother tilts her head from side to side, signaling that I had not fully understood the phrase. “These dishes, small. Four or five pieces. These like small pieces of my heart, my love,” she explains. She moves her hand from her chest and points her index finger at my heart. “I give to you.”



*Dim sum*, I have learned, is not simply a dish in a bamboo steamer. Rather, *dim sum* is a once white food card overwhelmed by red stamps, indicating a varied and fulfilling meal. *Dim sum* is my father and grandmother arguing over the bill, each insisting that it is his or her own turn to pay. *Dim sum* is indeed “a small touch of the heart,” a symbol of love apportioned in each bao and dumpling. *Dim sum* is an unspoken understanding that we will reconvene next Sunday.