



Ca' Foscari
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**Market Adaptation of Italian Coffee Culture in
East Asia: Focus on the Hong Kong Coffee
Market**

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Abstract

This thesis examines how Italian coffee culture has found its footing—and in many ways transformed itself—within Hong Kong's peculiar and endlessly fascinating culinary landscape. I draw on frameworks from cultural globalization studies, production of culture theory, and glocalization scholarship to trace how Italian espresso traditions have been transplanted, reinvented, and sometimes barely recognisably altered within a market shaped by over 150 years of colonial history, strong regional Asian influences, the specificities of Hong Kong's post-colonial economic identity, and the particular demands and sensibilities of Hong Kong consumers. The research follows Hong Kong's coffee story through three broad waves: from the cha chaan teng era where coffee was frankly an afterthought, something you drank after dinner, heavily sweetened, more habit than passion through



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the Starbucks-dominated second wave that introduced the concept of the café as a destination in its own right, to today's vibrant specialty scene with its almost obsessive attention to extraction times, single-origin beans, and the kind of quality discourse that would have seemed absurd to a Hong Kong coffee drinker in 1975.

Italian coffee has woven itself through this entire evolution in surprising and often indirect ways, arriving via direct brand expansion (Lavazza finally opened a standalone store in 2025, which struck me as remarkably late given how strong the city's coffee culture already was by then), Italian expats missing their morning ritual and deciding to do something about it, and Hong Kong entrepreneurs who had fallen hard for Milanese espresso bars during gap years or business trips and came home determined to recreate something of that experience. What I have found, essentially, is that success in this market requires a kind of cultural code-switching. Brands that insist on pure authenticity tend to struggle; those willing to adapt, while keeping the quality standards that make Italian coffee worth caring about in the first place tend to thrive. This is not homogenization, though. What has emerged in Hong Kong is something genuinely hybrid: part Italian tradition, part American coffeehouse format, part Japanese minimalism, and part stubborn local innovation. The yuenyeung, that strange and wonderful coffee-milk-tea combination, remains defiantly Hong Kong and shows no signs of being absorbed into any global format.

The thesis traces several pivotal moments: Jennifer Liu's 2003 launch of Habitu during the post-SARS economic gloom, when she set out to create what she described as "Hong Kong's own version of the Italian coffee experience"; Mario Barbagli bringing Caffè Pascucci and actual Tuscan food and culture to the Western District in 2008; and Lavazza's Central opening in late 2025, which signals that major Italian brands have finally recognised Hong Kong as more than a footnote in their Asia strategy. With roughly 250 cups consumed annually per person, this is a serious coffee market that deserves more serious scholarly attention than it has received.

Methodologically, the study relies on historical analysis, market research, and case studies, working primarily from company documents, industry reports, trade press, and the admittedly scattered academic literature on coffee globalization. The broader argument is that Hong Kong's coffee story



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exemplifies culinary globalization at its most creative: not one-way transmission but genuine cultural exchange, shaped at every turn by the city's unique historical position as a place where East and West have been colliding, negotiating, and creating something new for well over a century and a half.

Keywords: Italian coffee culture, Hong Kong, specialty coffee, cultural globalization, glocalization, espresso, market adaptation, third wave coffee, cha chaan teng, East Asian coffee markets, British colonialism, post-colonial identity

Chapter 1: Introduction

There is something almost absurd about the global triumph of Italian coffee when you stop to think about it properly. A preparation method developed in early twentieth-century urban Italy, quick, intense, consumed standing at a bar, integrated into the rhythms of a workday rather than designed for lingering, has somehow become the default template for "good coffee" from São Paulo to Singapore and pretty much everywhere in between. Since the 1990s, espresso-based drinks have swept across markets that had perfectly functional coffee, and in many cases tea, cultures of their own. They were carried partly by American chains like Starbucks that borrowed Italian vocabulary and aesthetics and scaled them up into something recognisably different but undeniably connected, and also by a broader Italophilia that treats the morning espresso as a marker of sophistication, cosmopolitanism, and a kind of effortless good taste that other cultures aspire to but rarely manage to claim.

Hong Kong makes for a particularly interesting case study in this global story, and not just because I happen to find the place genuinely fascinating. Unlike European markets where coffee culture developed over centuries through incremental social change, Hong Kong's specialty coffee scene essentially compressed something like a hundred years of evolution into barely two decades. The territory went from a cha chaan teng culture—where coffee was an afterthought, the thing you ordered when you simply did not want any more tea, to hosting World Barista Championship finalists and producing baristas whose palates are internationally recognised, and this happened in what genuinely feels like the blink of an eye when you



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stand back and look at it historically.

Italian influences run through this whole remarkable story, from the expat businessmen in the 1990s who simply could not stand another cup of instant Nescafé to the local entrepreneurs of the 2000s who discovered proper espresso in Milan and came home determined to recreate it, even if recreating it ultimately meant transforming it into something distinctly Hong Kongese.

This thesis examines how Italian coffee culture has adapted to, and been adapted by, Hong Kong's market over the past several decades. I am interested in the transplantation, transformation, and localisation of espresso traditions within a context shaped by over 150 years of British colonial heritage, the profound economic transformations of the post-war decades, the identity crises and resolutions that followed the 1997 handover to China, strong Japanese aesthetic influences, Taiwanese beverage innovations, and the particular rhythms of a city where people genuinely seem to work at a pace and intensity that has always impressed and slightly alarmed outside observers. The cast of characters in this story includes Italian brands making belated but significant entrances into the market, Italian expats starting passion projects that sometimes grew into genuine businesses, local entrepreneurs who fell in love with coffee abroad and brought that love home, baristas who have trained under Italian masters and then gone their own creative way, and consumers whose preferences have evolved rapidly and keep everyone in the industry guessing.

1.1 Research Background

The transformation in global coffee consumption over the past thirty years or so represents a genuinely remarkable convergence of cultural globalization, economic development, and lifestyle change. Anyone paying attention has noticed it: the historic fault lines that supposedly separated European coffee cultures from one another and from the rest of the world have largely collapsed. The French no longer just drink café au lait; the British have very substantially abandoned their tea-exclusive reputation, at least in urban centres; and everywhere—absolutely everywhere—you can now get a reasonably decent cappuccino. These changes have not stayed within the comfortable confines of Europe, either. East Asia has become one of the most dynamic and rapidly evolving regions for coffee culture in the world,



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with China, South Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong all experiencing explosive growth in both consumption volumes and cultural complexity of the coffee scene.

Hong Kong occupies an interesting position within this regional picture. The Chinese market for coffee was valued at something like USD 4.24 billion in 2025, growing rapidly toward an estimated USD 5.94 billion by 2031, numbers that reflect the sheer scale of change underway on the mainland (Mordor Intelligence, 2026). Hong Kong, by contrast, is a mature market with substantial per-capita consumption, around 250 cups annually, making it one of the most coffee-drinking places in Greater China. Yet it is often overlooked in broader discussions that focus, understandably but perhaps myopically, on mainland China's sheer scale and growth velocity. What gets missed in those mainland-focused narratives is that Hong Kong has been doing something more sophisticated and arguably more interesting than simply growing: it has been integrating coffee into a complex cultural identity that is unlike anywhere else in the world.

Understanding how Italian coffee in particular has found its place within that identity is the core project of this thesis.

1.2 Research Objectives

I am trying to accomplish several interrelated things in this study. The first objective is to trace the historical development of Italian coffee culture and the mechanisms through which it spread globally, you really cannot understand what arrived in Hong Kong without first understanding what left Italy, and how it changed in transit. The second objective is to examine the specific mechanisms of adaptation and localisation that have operated within the Hong Kong market in particular, which has its own history, its own consumer culture, and its own way of absorbing and transforming external influences. The third is to analyse what different categories of players, Italian brands, local entrepreneurs, cultural intermediaries of various kinds have actually done in practice to shape the current landscape. The fourth is to investigate how global trends interact with local traditions to produce what we might call Hong Kong's distinctive coffee identity, hybrid and contested as that identity necessarily is. And finally, I want to draw out implications for understanding culinary globalization more broadly, using coffee as a test case for theories that have sometimes been applied to less tangible cultural



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products.

1.3 Research Significance

There are theoretical stakes here that go well beyond coffee specifically. The academic literature on cultural globalization has debated for decades whether what we are witnessing globally is a process of homogenization, the flattening of cultural difference into a bland global monoculture or resistance, in which local cultures push back against and contain global influences, or something more complex and interesting than either of those relatively simple stories. Coffee offers a genuinely useful test case for these debates precisely because it is so clearly both global and local simultaneously: the same espresso machine might produce radically different drinks, consumed in radically different contexts and with radically different meanings, in Milan and in Mong Kok. Glocalization theory suggests we should expect local adaptation of global forms, and I want to see whether that framework actually illuminates what is happening on the ground rather than just describing it at an unhelpfully abstract level.

There is also the Hong Kong dimension specifically, which I think has been undervalued in the existing literature. Hong Kong's history as a British colonial territory, its post-war economic transformation from entrepôt to industrial powerhouse to financial services hub, its complicated post-1997 identity, and its position at the intersection of Chinese, British, Japanese, and broader global influences all make it a particularly rich site for studying how cultural products travel and transform. Coffee is, in this sense, a vehicle for understanding something larger about how Hong Kong has always absorbed, adapted, and generated culture.

Practically speaking, this research should genuinely interest international coffee brands wondering how to approach Asian markets without simply replicating what worked in their home market or in North America. It should interest local entrepreneurs who are navigating an increasingly crowded café landscape and wondering how to differentiate themselves.

And it may interest policymakers thinking about the economic dimensions of food and beverage sectors in a city that has historically punched well above its weight in hospitality and F&B innovation.

1.4 Thesis Structure

The thesis unfolds across seven chapters. Following this introduction,



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Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature, covering theoretical frameworks for understanding coffee globalization, the scholarship on Italian coffee traditions specifically, and what has been written about East Asian coffee markets. Chapter 3 outlines my methodology, including its acknowledged limitations. Chapter 4 traces Italian coffee culture's formation and global spread. Chapter 5 digs into Hong Kong specifically, starting from its colonial and economic history and working through to the contemporary specialty scene. Chapter 6 examines how Italian brands and entrepreneurs have operated in Hong Kong, what they have tried, what has worked, and what has not. Chapter 7 concludes with discussion, theoretical contributions, practical implications, and suggestions for future research that could fill the gaps I have been unable to address here.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Coffee Culture Globalization

Scholars have approached coffee culture from several different disciplinary angles, each of which captures something real but no single one of which is sufficient on its own. For this study, I want to draw on three frameworks in particular: cultural globalization theory, the production of culture perspective, and glocalization. Each offers a distinct lens, and their combination, I hope, produces something more nuanced and complete than any one of them alone.

Cultural globalization theory examines how cultural products, practices, and meanings move across national and regional borders, and what happens to them in that movement. Coffee is almost too perfect an example for this framework: originating in Ethiopia, spreading through the Arab world, arriving in Europe via Venice, then circulating globally through colonial trade networks and corporate expansion over several centuries. The economic history of coffee is deeply entangled with colonization, trade wars, and the successive phases of globalization. But what is crucial for my purposes—and what cultural globalization theory at its best insists upon—is that this kind of circulation is not simply a matter of Western products flooding the world and flattening everything in their path. Things change as they travel;



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they get adapted, reinterpreted, hybridised, and sometimes transformed into something their originators would barely recognise. The challenge is to trace those transformations with sufficient precision and care.

The production of culture perspective, which emerged from sociology's study of cultural industries in the latter half of the twentieth century, adds something important to the cultural globalization framework by emphasising that cultural consumption does not simply happen spontaneously, it is produced, in the sociological sense of being actively constructed by people with particular interests, resources, and agendas. Applied to coffee, this means paying close attention to what roasters, café owners, baristas, equipment suppliers, food writers, competition judges, and marketers actually do to construct the experiences and meanings associated with coffee consumption. Consumer preferences are not autonomous, fully-formed expressions of individual taste that emerge from nowhere. They are shaped—not determined, but meaningfully shaped, by the deliberate activities of cultural producers who create the conditions within which consumers make choices. When scholars ask why espresso rather than some other preparation method achieved the prominence it has in European and now global popular culture, they are essentially asking a question about the role of producers in actively creating that prominence, which is a question the production of culture perspective is well-equipped to answer. Glocalization is probably the most useful single framework for understanding what this thesis is about. The term, which entered academic circulation through Roland Robertson's work in the 1990s but has roots in Japanese business vocabulary, captures how global cultural forms get adapted at the local level in ways that produce genuinely new cultural configurations. It is not homogenization, the global simply overwriting the local, and it is not straightforward resistance the local simply rejecting the global. It is transformation through engagement, a process in which both the global form and the local context are changed by their encounter with each other. Applied to this study, glocalization suggests that what we should expect to find in Hong Kong is not Italian espresso culture intact and unchanged, nor a simple rejection of Italian coffee in favour of local alternatives, but rather something new that contains elements of both and is fully reducible to neither.



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2.2 Italian Coffee Culture: Origins, Traditions, and Global Influence

Italian coffee culture is distinctive, historically deep, and globally influential though the influence often works through American mediation, which significantly complicates the picture, as I will discuss in the next section. Coffee arrived in Italy through Venetian traders in the sixteenth century, reportedly introduced to European botanical knowledge by the physician and naturalist Prospero Alpini following his expeditions to Egypt. Venice, as one of the most cosmopolitan trading cities in the world at that time, was a natural point of entry for a product that had already been circulating through Ottoman commercial networks for over a century by the time it reached the Adriatic.

But the specifically Italian approach to coffee, the espresso tradition that would eventually become the template for "good coffee" globally emerged much later, with the development of the espresso machine in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Angelo Moriondo patented an early version of a steam-driven espresso apparatus in Turin in 1884; Luigi Bezzera refined the technology significantly in the early 1900s, and Desiderio Pavoni purchased Bezzera's patent and began commercial production. The machines that emerged from this period of innovation allowed coffee to be prepared through the forced passage of near-boiling water under

pressure through finely ground coffee, producing a concentrated, intensely flavoured extraction in a fraction of the time required by other methods. What emerged from this technological development was a preparation method ideally suited to the rhythms of modern urban life: extraction in twenty to thirty seconds meant coffee prepared to order and consumed immediately, eliminating long waits and the staleness associated with coffee kept warm on a stove. This efficiency aligned perfectly with the social rhythms of the Italian bar, where customers stopped briefly during their workday for a quick coffee at the counter before continuing on their way. The Italian espresso tradition has several features that differentiate it sharply from coffee cultures elsewhere and that have both helped and complicated its global spread. Speed is foundational you do not linger at an Italian bar the way you might at a Viennese Kaffeehaus or a Parisian café, both of which developed their own distinct cultures of extended sociability around



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coffee. There are also strict cultural norms around what to drink and when: cappuccino in the morning, espresso after meals, and absolutely never the other way around. Tourists who order cappuccino after dinner in Italy mark themselves immediately as people who do not understand the culture, and the reaction of Italian bar staff to such an order ranges from mild amusement to barely-contained exasperation. The neighbourhood bar serves as social infrastructure, a place for brief but regular encounters with familiar faces, a point of continuity in daily life that is almost impossible to replicate in other cultural contexts where such dense social geography does not exist. This combination of speed, quality, and embedded sociability has made Italian coffee culture both highly distinctive and, as it turned out, surprisingly exportable, though what gets exported is never quite the same thing as what exists at home.

The major Italian coffee companies have been instrumental in amplifying and disseminating Italian coffee's global influence. Lavazza, founded in Turin in 1895 by Luigi Lavazza as a small grocery shop, grew from a local business into Italy's leading roaster through sustained innovations in blending and packaging, and now operates in over 90 countries. The company's trajectory is in some ways a microcosm of Italian coffee's global ambitions, it took almost a century for Lavazza to become a truly international brand, and even today its approach to new markets tends to be cautious and partnership-dependent rather than aggressively expansionist. illycaffè, founded in Trieste in 1933 by Francesco Illy, pursued a quite different path focused on premium positioning and the insistence on a single consistent blend rather than the portfolio approach favoured by competitors, a bold commercial choice that has helped establish illy as the premium Italian coffee brand internationally. Caffè Pascucci, founded even earlier in 1883 in Sant'Angelo in Vado, began as a coffee roasting operation with sidelines in colonial goods and evolved through the franchise model that would prove remarkably successful in Asia, with over 400 branches in Korea alone at the time of writing.

2.3 The Americanization of Italian Coffee

Here is the complication that any honest account of Italian coffee's global spread has to confront: a substantial portion of that global spread happened



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not through direct Italian agency but through American mediation, and specifically through Starbucks. Howard Schultz, who joined Starbucks in 1982 and took full control of the company in 1987, drew explicitly on his experience of Milanese espresso bars during a trip to Italy. He was captivated by what he saw the theatricality of the espresso preparation, the social function of the bar as a neighbourhood gathering point, the idea of coffee as a craft product rather than a mere commodity, and he wanted to create an American version of that experience. The Starbucks model that emerged from Schultz's vision bears obvious Italian DNA: the vocabulary (espresso, latte, cappuccino, barista), the equipment, the central importance of milk-based drinks, the positioning of the coffee bar as a social space distinct from both home and workplace. But the transformations Starbucks made to what it had borrowed were equally profound.

Italian cafés emphasise speed and standing consumption; Starbucks created spacious, comfortable environments explicitly designed for extended stays. Italian portions are small and intensely concentrated; American-influenced drinks grew progressively larger, sweeter, and more elaborately milk-heavy, with creations like the Frappuccino bearing only the most distant relationship to anything an Italian barista would recognise as coffee. Italian cafés are sites of brief, repeated, intensely familiar social interaction between known faces; Starbucks developed and trademarked the "third place" concept of a space bridging home and work, complete with WiFi, loyalty programmes, and furniture explicitly chosen to encourage customers to stay for as long as they liked. This hybrid format, Italian in vocabulary and technical foundation, American in scale, comfort, and customer experience, proved enormously exportable in a way that pure Italian café culture, embedded as it is in specifically Italian social geography, probably could never have been on its own.

When espresso-based coffee spread to Hong Kong, it arrived through multiple channels simultaneously direct Italian influence, American chain expansion, and local entrepreneurs who had encountered coffee in both contexts and in various other places besides. Untangling these influences, and understanding how they have interacted and been further adapted by Hong Kong's own cultural dynamics, is one of the central analytical challenges of this thesis.



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2.4 The Three Waves of Coffee

Understanding contemporary coffee culture, including the specific forms it has taken in Hong Kong, requires the "three waves" periodisation framework, which has become something of an industry standard way of describing the major phases of modern coffee consumption even if it somewhat oversimplifies a messy reality. The first wave, roughly from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s, was primarily about commodification and mass distribution. Coffee became a mass-market product valued almost exclusively for its caffeine content and its availability, with instant coffee and pre-ground commercial blends dominating. Flavour barely mattered; consistency and convenience were the primary virtues. In Hong Kong, this first-wave logic manifested most clearly in the cha chaan teng tradition, where coffee was a standardised, heavily sweetened, often canned or instant product consumed mainly after meals.

The second wave, emerging in the 1960s and gaining its full momentum through the 1980s and 1990s, introduced sustained attention to quality and experience for the first time. Specialty coffee chains, Starbucks most prominently, but also Peet's Coffee, Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, and others, popularised Italian-style espresso beverages in North America and then globally. Coffee consumption became a lifestyle activity rather than mere habit; cafés became "third places" for relaxation, socialising, and eventually for working; and the consumer's relationship with coffee became more complex and more personally meaningful. In Hong Kong, this wave arrived somewhat later than in North America, primarily through the mid-1980s entry of Japanese coffee house chains and then Starbucks and McCafé in the early 2000s.

Third wave coffee emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s, primarily in North American specialty coffee circles, with a radical shift of focus to the bean itself rather than to the experience of the café. Third wave shops source high-quality, often single-origin beans from specific farms or cooperatives, roast them relatively lightly to highlight rather than mask their intrinsic flavour characteristics, and prepare them with meticulous attention to brewing variables. Coffee gets treated as an artisanal product genuinely comparable to wine in its complexity and its relationship to terroir, processing methods, and seasonal variation. Baristas become skilled



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craftspeople whose expertise is valued and performed; roasters develop direct relationships with farmers; and consumers are educated to appreciate qualities they previously had no vocabulary to describe. Hong Kong's third wave began emerging in the early 2010s, and the city has since become genuinely significant in global specialty coffee circles.

2.5 Coffee Culture in East Asia: Regional Patterns

East Asia has become one of the most dynamic regions for coffee culture globally, though the patterns vary significantly across individual markets in ways that have important implications for how Italian coffee culture specifically might be expected to behave in each context. Japan has the longest and deepest specialty coffee tradition in the region, dating back over a century to the Tokyo kissaten culture of the early twentieth century.

Japanese kissaten, traditional coffee houses, developed a culture of precision brewing, deep quality consciousness, and minimalist aesthetic sensibility that influenced global specialty coffee long before the third wave was given that name. The kissaten represents "a haven of tranquility, designed for introspection," and its design sensibility stripped down, carefully composed, placing the coffee itself at the absolute centre of the experience has spread throughout the specialty coffee shops of East and Southeast Asia, including Hong Kong.

South Korea has experienced explosive growth in coffee consumption in the twenty-first century, with a café culture that blends Korean aesthetic sensibilities with global trends in ways that have made Seoul one of the most café-dense cities in the world. Competition among both international chains and local brands is extraordinarily intense, and café design and ambiance play roles in attracting customers that are arguably as important as the quality of the coffee itself, particularly among younger consumers who treat café visits as social performances as much as refreshment stops.

China represents the fastest-growing coffee market globally, with consumption growing at roughly 30 percent annually compared to a global average of approximately 2 percent. The combination of Starbucks' sustained expansion, the rise of domestic chains like Luckin Coffee (which, remarkably, grew to over 26,000 locations within just a few years of its founding), and the rapid urbanisation and Westernisation of consumption



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patterns among young Chinese consumers has produced a market of extraordinary scale and dynamism. China has reportedly surpassed the United States as the world's most café-dense nation, which is a genuinely astonishing development when you consider how recently the country had essentially no café culture at all (The Guardian, 2023).

2.6 Previous Research on Hong Kong Coffee Culture

Hong Kong's coffee culture has received increasing academic and journalistic attention as the specialty scene has developed and the city's international reputation in the coffee world has grown, but the literature remains somewhat scattered and often addressed to practitioner rather than academic audiences. Existing research traces Hong Kong's evolution through the three-wave framework, noting the city's exceptional position at the intersection of Chinese, British, and broader Asian influences. Studies have examined how Hong Kong consumers adopted Western coffee consumption trends, how rising incomes and international travel exposure accelerated this adoption, and how entrepreneurial activity by locals who encountered specialty coffee abroad has driven innovation in the local market. Several distinctive features emerge from the existing literature on Hong Kong coffee. The colonial history created unusually strong foundations for Western-style café culture to take root. The cha chaan teng tradition represents a genuinely unique Hong Kong hybrid that has shaped how the city's consumers relate to coffee even as the specialty scene has developed. The rise of specialty coffee links clearly to rising incomes, increased international travel and media exposure, and the crucial entrepreneurial activity of people who discovered specialty coffee abroad and came home wanting to share it. However—and this is the gap I am trying to address, and I think it is a real and meaningful gap—existing research pays surprisingly limited attention to the specific role of Italian coffee culture within Hong Kong's story. Studies examine American chains and Japanese aesthetic influences, but the contributions of Italian brands, Italian entrepreneurs, and distinctly Italian traditions to Hong Kong's contemporary landscape remain genuinely underexplored in the literature.



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Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

This study employs qualitative methods combining historical analysis, market research, and case study approaches. Qualitative methods suit the focus on cultural meanings, adaptation processes, and the experiences of various market participants because these phenomena simply do not reduce well to the kind of numerical data that quantitative methods are designed to handle. You cannot meaningfully quantify what it means for Jennifer Liu to have been inspired by Italian café culture during her architecture studies in Italy and then to have translated that inspiration into something that became, over time, one of Hong Kong's most significant specialty coffee companies. That kind of meaning-making process requires a different analytical approach, one that is attentive to context, to narrative, and to the ways that individual decisions aggregate into cultural patterns. The aim is to illuminate the transformation of coffee culture and the spaces in which it is enacted, emphasising what makes Hong Kong's Italian coffee scene distinctive and what that distinctiveness can tell us about broader processes of cultural globalization.

3.2 Data Sources

The study draws on multiple sources in a triangulation approach intended to compensate for the weaknesses of any single source type. Primary sources include company documents, press releases, and marketing materials from Italian coffee brands that have operated in Hong Kong; government reports and official statistics on the food and beverage industry; and trade publications covering the Hong Kong market. Secondary sources include academic literature on coffee culture and globalization, journalistic coverage of Hong Kong's coffee scene (which is extensive and often of high quality), and market research reports from industry analysts.

The thesis also draws on a range of company-sourced materials including origin histories from Lavazza, illycaffè, Caffè Pascucci, and Hong Kong specialty operators like The Coffee Academics and Cupping Room, as well as heritage sources including the Hong Kong Intangible Cultural Heritage Database for information on the yuenyeung tradition.



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3.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis uses the production of culture perspective as its primary organising framework, examining the adaptation of Italian coffee culture in Hong Kong through the activities of three broad categories of market participants, whose boundaries blur in interesting ways in practice. Producers include Italian coffee companies and their Hong Kong operations or distributors, local entrepreneurs introducing Italian-inspired concepts, and the suppliers of Italian equipment and products who enable quality reproduction in a non-Italian context. Intermediaries include baristas who translate Italian traditions for local consumers and who develop their own innovations through that translation process, media outlets and food writers who shape public discourse about what counts as good coffee, and competition organisers whose standards establish quality benchmarks. Consumers range from Hong Kong residents with varying degrees of interest in and knowledge about Italian coffee, to tourists and expatriates who bring expectations formed in other contexts, to the business professionals who have increasingly made cafés into de facto offices.

3.4 Limitations

Several limitations deserve candid acknowledgement. The most significant is the reliance on secondary sources, which limits insight into the subjective experiences and individual motivations of the people who have actually built and shaped Hong Kong's Italian coffee scene. I have not spoken directly with café owners, baristas, or consumers, which means I am necessarily working from mediated accounts—press interviews, company communications, trade coverage—rather than from direct testimony. The single-market focus of the study also limits how far I can generalise conclusions to other East Asian contexts, even though the regional comparisons I draw on throughout are suggestive of common patterns. And the coffee industry evolves rapidly enough that some of the specific market data cited here will inevitably have dated by the time anyone reads this. Future research could address all of these limitations through primary data collection and comparative multi-market analysis.



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Chapter 4: The Formation and Global Spread of Italian Coffee Culture

4.1 The Birth of Italian Espresso Culture

Italian coffee culture is, in a very real sense, inseparable from espresso, and understanding why requires spending some time thinking about what espresso actually is and where it came from. It is easy to take espresso for granted as simply the Italian way of making coffee, a fixed and established tradition that has always been there, but the reality is more interesting than that. Espresso is the product of a specific historical moment, a particular convergence of industrial ambition, commercial need, and Italian urban culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the machine that makes it is not merely a piece of kitchen equipment. It is, in a quite meaningful sense, the material embodiment of a set of cultural values: about speed, about intensity, about the integration of genuine quality and pleasure into the texture of ordinary working life rather than reserving them for special occasions or leisured classes. Understanding that history helps to explain why espresso became so central to Italian identity and why it has proven so exportable to certain kinds of urban environments around the world.

Coffee itself arrived in Italy through Venetian traders during the sixteenth century, part of the broader movement of the drink from its origins in the Arab world and East Africa into European commercial and social life. For several centuries, Italian coffee consumption followed patterns that were not radically different from those of other European countries, centred on the café or coffee house as a social institution where people gathered to talk, read, conduct business, and engage in the kind of prolonged public sociability that coffee houses across Europe fostered during the Enlightenment period. The specifically Italian approach to coffee, the one that distinguishes Italy from France or Austria or Britain in the way that matters for our purposes, began to take its distinctive form only in the late nineteenth century, when Italian industrial ingenuity started to be applied to the problem of how to make coffee faster, more consistently, and to a higher standard of quality than the existing methods allowed.

Angelo Moriondo, a Turin-based inventor, is generally credited with patenting what we might recognise as a proto-espresso machine in 1884. Moriondo's device was a large and rather unwieldy industrial apparatus, designed not for the intimate neighbourhood bar but for the high-volume



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demands of large cafés and exhibition spaces, where the need to serve many customers quickly and without sacrificing too much quality made the existing methods of batch brewing increasingly inadequate. The machine used steam pressure to force hot water through the coffee grounds more rapidly than gravity or manual methods could achieve, and while it was crude by later standards, it established the fundamental principle on which all subsequent espresso technology would be built. The fact that Moriondo patented his invention but did not manage to commercialise it widely is one of those small ironies of technological history. The credit for taking that fundamental principle and turning it into something practically useful and commercially viable belongs largely to Luigi Bezzera, who refined Moriondo's basic design considerably in the early 1900s, reducing the scale of the machine, improving the consistency of the extraction, and making the technology more practical for the kind of individual bar or café that formed the backbone of Italian urban social life. Desiderio Pavoni then purchased Bezzera's patent in 1903 and began commercial production in earnest, exhibiting the machine at the Milan Fair in 1906 in a moment that is often cited as the beginning of espresso's public commercial life. From that point onwards, the technology began to spread through Italian bars, gradually and then with increasing momentum, until the espresso machine became the defining piece of equipment of Italian café culture.

What made espresso culturally significant, though, went well beyond its technical specifications. The really important thing about the roughly twenty-to-thirty-second extraction time was not just that it was fast but what that speed made possible in terms of the relationship between the café, the barista, and the customer. Because espresso could be made to order, prepared fresh for each individual customer in the time it took them to pay and move along the bar, the compromises that other brewing methods required simply ceased to apply. There was no need to brew a large batch in advance and keep it sitting under heat, slowly deteriorating in quality with every passing minute, in order to meet the demands of a busy bar. Each cup was made fresh, at the moment of order, from properly calibrated grounds and properly managed pressure, and the result was a method that was simultaneously faster than any serious alternative and, when executed correctly, qualitatively superior to them. This combination of speed and



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quality is not something that appears often in the history of food and drink, and it goes a long way towards explaining why espresso became such a natural fit for the rhythms of Italian urban working life.

The bar culture that developed around this technology has a character that is worth describing in some detail, because it is different enough from the café cultures of other countries that the differences are easy to underestimate if you have not actually spent time inside it. The Italian espresso bar is typically a place of quick passage rather than extended stay, at least for the morning coffee ritual that is its most essential function. You come in, you stand at the counter, you exchange a few words with the barista who almost certainly knows your usual order, you drink your coffee in a matter of minutes, and you leave. The whole interaction might last no more than five or ten minutes, and often considerably less. But within that brief encounter there is warmth, familiarity, and a sense of being a known and valued regular in a specific place, embedded in a specific neighbourhood. The repetition of this ritual, day after day, across years and decades, creates a kind of social texture that is genuinely different from anything produced by the more elaborate café cultures of Vienna or Paris, with their emphasis on extended stays, newspapers, and philosophical discourse, or indeed from the American model of the café as a comfortable space for working or socialising over long periods. None of these is inherently better or worse than the others. They reflect different relationships to time, to public space, and to the role of the café in urban life, and those differences matter.

What is particularly interesting for the purposes of this thesis is that the Italian model, for all its apparent simplicity and its deep roots in a very specific local culture, turned out to be remarkably exportable, at least to certain kinds of urban environments. The combination of quality, speed, ritual, and social warmth that espresso bar culture offers proved to have appeal well beyond Italy's borders, and cities characterised by high density, fast pace, and a sophisticated consumer culture have tended to be especially receptive to it. Hong Kong, as subsequent chapters will argue, fits that description very well, and the history of how espresso technology was developed and what cultural values it embodies helps to explain both why Italian coffee culture found a receptive audience in Hong Kong and how it



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was adapted and transformed in the process of being transplanted there.

4.2 Regional Variations Within Italy

While espresso provides the unifying thread that runs through Italian coffee culture and gives it its international identity, it would be a serious oversimplification to treat Italian coffee as a single, uniform thing. The reality is that coffee culture varies quite substantially across the Italian peninsula, and these regional differences complicate any straightforward account of what "Italian coffee" actually is and, by extension, what is really being exported when Italian coffee culture travels abroad. This is not a minor footnote to the main story. It goes to the heart of what we mean when we talk about authenticity in relation to Italian coffee, and it has real implications for how we should understand the kinds of adaptations and reinterpretations that happen when Italian coffee culture takes root in a place like Hong Kong. The northern Italian cities, Turin, Milan, and Genoa in particular, developed sophisticated and self-consciously cultivated café cultures during the nineteenth century that were part of a broader European phenomenon. The great coffee houses of these cities were not simply places to get a drink. They were social institutions, functioning as gathering points for writers, artists, journalists, political agitators, and businesspeople, and the association between coffee and a certain kind of engaged, intellectually serious urban life was central to their identity and appeal. This was not entirely unlike what was happening at the same period in Vienna or Paris, where café culture had become inseparable from literary and philosophical life, though the Italian version developed its own particular character. Turin's Caffè al Bicerin, which has been operating since 1763, or Milan's Caffè Cova, founded in 1817, are examples of establishments where the physical environment, the service rituals, and the social atmosphere were all as important as the coffee itself. The elegance and the sense of occasion were part of what made these places significant. This association between coffee and a certain kind of cultivated, cosmopolitan urban sociability is something that has carried forward into how Italian coffee culture tends to present itself on the world stage, and it is worth keeping in mind when thinking about how the more upmarket Italian café brands have positioned themselves in international markets like Hong Kong's.

Southern Italy tells a different story, or rather several different stories, and



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they are equally important for understanding the full picture. Neapolitan coffee culture occupies a special place even within Italy, renowned across the peninsula for its particular intensity and its own set of deeply held convictions about how coffee should be made and consumed. The coffee in Naples tends to be darker roasted and more strongly extracted than in other parts of Italy, and it is typically drunk very sweet, with a quantity of sugar that drinkers from other regions sometimes find startling. This is not simply a matter of taste preference. It reflects a whole different relationship to coffee, one in which the bitterness and intensity of the brew are deliberately and confidently foregrounded rather than softened. The Neapolitan coffee bar also carries a social and even political dimension that sets it apart from its northern counterparts. The communal glasses of water served alongside the coffee, the particular choreography of standing at the bar, the speed and efficiency of the service, all of these are part of a social ritual with its own logic and its own meaning. And then there is the *caffè sospeso*, a practice in which a customer pays for two coffees but only takes one, leaving the second "suspended" to be claimed later by whoever comes in and cannot afford to pay. This custom, whose origins are somewhat uncertain but which is deeply associated with Neapolitan identity, turns the simple act of buying a coffee into something with an explicitly communal and solidaristic dimension. It is a small gesture, but it encodes a particular set of values about community and mutual obligation that goes well beyond anything that could be captured by a brand standard or a recipe specification.

Sicilian coffee traditions introduce yet another set of variations. The Sicilian approach to coffee has historically been more open to incorporating local ingredients and flavours, with almond milk being the most distinctive example. *Caffè d'orzo*, *granita di caffè* served with brioche, and coffee prepared with almond-based drinks rather than dairy milk are all part of a Sicilian coffee repertoire that reflects the island's particular history and its openness to influence from Arab, Spanish, and North African culinary traditions. The willingness to blend coffee with local ingredients and to adapt preparations to local tastes and conditions is, as this thesis will go on to argue, precisely the kind of creative adaptation that characterises Hong Kong's engagement with Italian coffee culture. The fact that this spirit of adaptation is itself present within Italian coffee culture, in its southern and



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island traditions, rather than being something that only happens when Italian coffee leaves Italy, is a point worth dwelling on. It suggests that the boundaries between authentic tradition and creative adaptation are more porous, even within Italy, than the more authoritative and prescriptive accounts of Italian coffee culture tend to acknowledge.

What all of this regional variation ultimately reminds us is that Italian coffee, for all its global reputation as something authoritative, consistent, and essentially non-negotiable in its standards and its character, has always contained within itself a significant degree of internal diversity. It has always been a living, dynamic culture rather than a fixed and finished one, shaped by local conditions, local histories, and local ways of relating to food, drink, and public social life. Recognising this does not diminish what is genuinely distinctive and valuable about Italian coffee culture. If anything, it makes that culture more interesting and more complex, and it provides a more honest foundation for thinking about what happens when Italian coffee travels. If Italian coffee is already plural and already dynamic within Italy itself, then the transformations it undergoes as it moves to Hong Kong or Tokyo or São Paulo are less a departure from some original purity and more a continuation of processes of adaptation and evolution that were always part of its nature.

4.3 Italian Coffee Companies and Global Expansion

Italian coffee's global spread was facilitated by a number of Italian companies that developed international distribution networks from the mid-twentieth century onward, with acceleration occurring in the 1990s and 2000s as globalization created new market opportunities and the specialty coffee movement created new consumer demand for quality espresso.

Lavazza exemplifies this trajectory particularly clearly. Founded in Turin in 1895 by Luigi Lavazza, who began blending coffees in the back of his grocery shop in ways that were better suited to Italian palates than the single-origin coffees typically available at the time, the company grew steadily through the twentieth century through innovations in roasting, blending, and crucially packaging.

Lavazza's invention of vacuum-packed ground coffee in the 1930s dramatically extended the shelf life and distributable quality of its products,



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enabling national and then international distribution. The company's international expansion began in earnest in the 1980s and has accelerated substantially since, with operations now in over 90 countries and a sustained effort to move up-market from commodity grocery products to premium café experiences.

illycaffè represents a quite different model of internationalisation, one driven by an almost philosophical commitment to a single consistent product rather than by portfolio diversification or franchise expansion. Founded in Trieste in 1933 by Francesco Illy, who had emigrated from Hungary and combined Central European café culture sensibilities with Italian espresso expertise, the company developed a single blend of nine Arabica origins and maintained it with remarkable consistency over decades. This commitment to a single, premium, unchanging product made illy something unusual in the coffee industry: a brand with genuine cult status among coffee connoisseurs, the coffee that serious espresso enthusiasts tended to use at home and that serious cafés used as a signal of quality commitment.

illycaffè has reported strong growth from Asian markets including Thailand, and the brand has been available in Hong Kong's premium hospitality sector for some time. Caffè Pascucci represents yet another model: the franchise approach that has proven particularly successful in Asia, where the combination of brand recognition, product quality, and local operational knowledge through franchisee relationships has enabled remarkable scale. The company's 400-plus locations in Korea alone represent a level of market penetration that most Italian food and beverage brands could only dream of in Asian markets.

4.4 The Americanization of Italian Coffee

Any serious attempt to understand how Italian coffee culture has spread across the world has to grapple with what happened when it crossed the Atlantic and underwent its American transformation, because that transformation is simultaneously the most powerful accelerant of Italian coffee's global influence and the source of some of its most significant distortions. The two things cannot really be separated, and that is part of what makes the American chapter of this story so complicated and so interesting. Without America, and without Starbucks in particular, Italian coffee vocabulary and espresso technology would almost certainly have



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reached markets like Hong Kong far more slowly, if they reached them at all through commercial channels rather than through the more gradual and piecemeal route of individual travellers and expatriates. But the version of Italian coffee that America exported to the world was already something quite different from what it claimed to be inspired by, and understanding that gap matters for understanding what Hong Kong consumers have actually been engaging with when they engage with "Italian coffee."

Starbucks was founded in Seattle in 1971, initially not as a café chain in any sense that an Italian would recognise but as a retailer of high-quality roasted coffee beans. The company's early identity was more closely connected to the American specialty coffee movement and its interest in sourcing and roasting quality beans than to any particular vision of café culture or social experience. The transformation came when Howard Schultz, who had joined the company in 1982, travelled to Milan in 1983 and had what he would later describe in fairly dramatic terms as a kind of revelation. What he encountered in Milan's espresso bars clearly struck him with considerable force. He was struck by the sociability of it, by the sense of ritual and craft, by the way the coffee bar functioned as a genuine community institution where the barista knew the regulars and where the act of having a coffee was embedded in the fabric of daily neighbourhood life. He was also, crucially, struck by its commercial potential, by the sense that here was a model of the café as a meaningful social space that Americans might respond to if it were offered to them in the right form. Schultz has talked about this experience extensively over the years, and while it is worth treating any founding mythology with a degree of scepticism, there is no particular reason to doubt that the Milan trip was genuinely formative in shaping his vision for what Starbucks could become.

What he built on returning to Seattle was, in some respects, genuinely informed by what he had seen in Italy. The emphasis on the coffee bar as a place to linger, to feel comfortable, to be a regular, to have a relationship with the people serving you, all of these ideas have recognisable Italian roots. The adoption of Italian terminology across the menu, espresso, cappuccino, latte, macchiato, gave the brand a sense of connection to a specific and respected tradition, and the investment in espresso machines and trained baristas represented a real commitment to a certain level of craft



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that distinguished early Starbucks from the diner coffee it was positioning itself against. But in almost every other respect, what Schultz built was fundamentally and unapologetically American. The stores were large and comfortable, designed for sitting in for extended periods in a way that the Italian espresso bar, with its stand-up counters and rapid turnover, was not. The menu was built around drinks that were milk-heavy, sweet, and highly customisable, calibrated to American taste preferences that ran in a quite different direction from Italian ones. The sizes were enormous by Italian standards. The whole experience was engineered for accessibility and scale, supported by sophisticated loyalty marketing, a carefully managed real estate strategy, and an operational infrastructure that Italian café culture, running as it does through tens of thousands of small independent neighbourhood bars, had never needed to develop and would have found alien to its entire logic.

The consequences of this American transformation for the trajectory of Italian coffee around the world have been genuinely profound, and they play out in ways that are somewhat paradoxical if you think about them carefully. On the one hand, Starbucks's global expansion carried Italian vocabulary, espresso technology, and at least a mediated version of Italian café culture's social aspirations into markets that might otherwise have taken considerably longer to encounter them. Hong Kong is a good example of this. Starbucks arrived in the city in 2000, and its presence helped to normalise espresso-based drinks, to educate a consumer base in the basic grammar of cappuccinos and lattes, and to establish the idea of the café as a place to spend time rather than simply to grab a drink and leave. In this sense, Starbucks did something real and significant in preparing the ground for the more directly Italian offerings that followed. Without that preparatory work, it is at least possible that ventures like Caffè Habitu or Caffè Pascucci would have faced a steeper educational challenge in explaining to Hong Kong consumers what they were offering and why it was worth paying for. On the other hand, the version of Italian coffee that Starbucks delivered to those markets was filtered through so many layers of American commercial adaptation, so many adjustments to American size preferences, sweetness preferences, and expectations of comfort and customisation, that its relationship to what you would actually experience standing at a bar in



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Naples or Milan had become quite distant. The Italian names on the Starbucks menu function more as cultural signifiers, as a way of borrowing the prestige and the associations of Italian coffee culture, than as accurate descriptions of what is in the cup. A Starbucks latte and a latte as an Italian would understand the term are not really the same drink, and the differences between them reflect not just differences of recipe but differences of the entire social and cultural context in which the drink is made and consumed. This creates a genuine complexity when we try to talk about how consumers in a city like Hong Kong relate to Italian coffee culture, because the question immediately arises of which version of Italian coffee we are talking about. There is the direct tradition, as carried by brands like Caffè Pascucci, Lavazza, and illy, which maintains a more or less serious relationship with Italian norms and standards. And then there is the heavily mediated American version, which uses Italian vocabulary and espresso technology but has reworked everything else in accordance with a very different set of commercial and cultural priorities.

The reality in Hong Kong, as this thesis will go on to argue, is that consumers and café operators have not had to choose between these two versions. They have encountered both, often simultaneously, and they have also brought Japanese, Taiwanese, Australian, and local influences into the mix, drawing on whichever elements suited their purposes and combining them in ways that reflect Hong Kong's own particular cultural logic. The result is something that cannot be straightforwardly described as Italian, or American, or any other single national tradition. It is something that Hong Kong has made distinctly its own, and understanding how that happened requires keeping track of all these different threads and how they have interacted over time.

4.5 Authenticity Questions

The global spread of Italian coffee culture raises some genuinely difficult questions about authenticity, and these questions deserve to be taken seriously rather than brushed aside as the concerns of purists or snobs. There is something real at stake in the debate, even if the terms in which it is usually conducted are not always particularly helpful. Italian coffee culture is, at some level, genuinely the product of a specific place, a specific history, and a specific set of social practices that developed over time in a particular



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cultural context. The argument that espresso prepared and consumed according to Italian norms is different in kind, and not merely in degree, from a Frappuccino or a pumpkin spice latte is not obviously wrong or simply a matter of cultural prejudice. These are, in some meaningful sense, different things, shaped by different values and serving different social functions, and acknowledging that does not require you to believe that one is inherently superior to the other.

Italy's bid to have the art of the Neapolitan espresso maker, the *maestro dell'espresso napoletano*, recognised by UNESCO as intangible cultural heritage is perhaps the clearest institutional expression of this anxiety. The bid reflects a genuine and understandable concern that something specific and valuable, a particular set of skills, knowledge, and social practices built up over generations, might be gradually eroded or diluted as coffee becomes an increasingly globalised commodity and as the signifiers of Italian coffee culture are detached from their original context and repurposed for mass-market branding. The UNESCO framework for intangible cultural heritage was designed precisely to address this kind of concern, and Italy's decision to use it in relation to coffee signals how seriously at least some people within Italian culture take the question of what is being lost as espresso travels further and further from Naples. Whether or not the UNESCO designation actually protects anything in practice is a separate question, but the impulse behind it is worth understanding on its own terms. The specialty coffee world adds another layer of complexity to the authenticity debate, and in some ways a rather ironic one. The third-wave coffee movement, with its emphasis on single-origin beans, light roasting, carefully calibrated extraction, and a general ethos of treating coffee with the same kind of attention that fine wine receives, has positioned itself as more genuinely engaged with coffee's real qualities than the dark-roasted, milk-heavy mainstream. The implicit claim is that third-wave coffee is more honest, more transparent, more truly connected to what coffee actually is at its best. The irony is that Italian coffee, with its dark roasts and its insistence on a specific and highly controlled preparation method, sometimes ends up on the wrong side of this argument, cast not as the authentic original but as another form of mass standardisation standing in the way of a more direct relationship between the drinker and the raw material. Italian producers and



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traditionalists who might have expected to be the defenders of authenticity against global homogenisation occasionally find themselves in the uncomfortable position of being accused of a different kind of inauthenticity by the very people who take coffee most seriously. This is a genuinely strange situation, and it illustrates how unstable and contested the concept of authenticity becomes once you start pulling at its threads.

The more historically grounded response to all of this, however, is to point out that food and beverage cultures have never been static, self-contained things. They have always developed through exchange, borrowing, hybridisation, and creative transformation, and Italian coffee is actually one of the cleaner illustrations of this point available. Espresso did not spring fully formed from Italian soil. It emerged from a confluence of ingredients and influences that came from very different parts of the world: the coffee itself originated in Ethiopia, the practice of brewing and drinking it as a daily ritual was developed and elaborated across the Arab world, European café culture provided a social context and a commercial model, and specifically Italian industrial ingenuity, particularly the development of high-pressure brewing machinery in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, provided the technical innovation that made espresso as we know it possible. The combination of all these elements into something that felt distinctively and recognisably Italian was itself a historical process, not a given. And that process did not stop once espresso had been invented. Italian coffee culture has changed continuously since the 1880s, adapting to new technologies, new economic circumstances, and new social habits. The cultural norms and rituals that feel most authentically Italian today, the quick shot at the bar, the foam on the cappuccino, the strict rules about what you drink at what time of day, are not ancient traditions reaching back centuries but relatively recent constructions, solidified into convention over the course of the twentieth century.

This matters because it undermines the idea that there is some fixed, original version of Italian coffee culture from which all subsequent global developments represent a falling away or a corruption. If Italian espresso is itself the product of cultural exchange and historical contingency, then treating it as a stable authentic original against which the Hong Kong flat white or the Taiwanese bubble tea latte should be measured and found



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wanting does not really hold up. Every point in the development of coffee culture that we might want to designate as authentic was itself the outcome of earlier processes of change and mixture. What is more productive, particularly for the purposes of understanding what has happened in a city like Hong Kong, is to shift the question away from whether a given practice is authentic or not and towards asking how meanings and practices transform as they move from one context to another, and what that transformation tells us about both the culture of origin and the culture of reception. Hong Kong, as the rest of this thesis will argue, is not simply a passive recipient of Italian coffee culture, absorbing and consuming something that arrives from outside fully formed. It is an active participant in the ongoing global evolution of what coffee culture is and can be, contributing its own social logic, its own aesthetic sensibilities, and its own ways of inhabiting urban space to a story that is still very much being written.

Chapter 5: The Evolution of Coffee Culture in Hong Kong

5.1 Colonial Foundations: The Making of a Hybrid City

To understand Hong Kong's coffee culture, you must first understand how Hong Kong came to be the place it is, and that means beginning with the colonial encounter that created it. It is barely an exaggeration to say that modern Hong Kong exists, in a fundamental structural sense, because of the British obsession with tea. Britain's insatiable demand for Chinese tea in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, combined with the Qing dynasty's restrictions on trade and the resulting silver drain from Britain's balance of payments, created the commercial and political pressures that led ultimately to the Opium Wars and the cession of Hong Kong Island to the British Crown under the Treaty of Nanking in 1842. The colony was extended by the cession of Kowloon in 1860 and the lease of the New Territories in 1898, gradually assembling the territory we know today. At the time of cession, Hong Kong Island had a Chinese population of around 7,500 people and only a handful of Western traders and officials; by 1859, the Chinese community had grown to over 85,000, supplemented by a growing expatriate population. The territory was, from the very beginning, a place of commercial encounter, cultural mixture, and practical



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cosmopolitanism rather than anything like cultural purity.

The British colonial administration shaped Hong Kong in ways that would have lasting consequences for its cultural development, including its eventual relationship with coffee culture. The foundational economic philosophy of the colonial government was one of free trade and minimal intervention, what later economists would call "positive non-interventionism" which allowed Hong Kong to function as a genuinely open trading entrepôt. The combination of a natural deep-water harbour, a strategic location at the mouth of the Pearl River Delta, and an administration that kept taxes low, maintained the rule of law, and imposed minimal restrictions on commerce or capital movement created conditions for extraordinary economic vitality. This openness was not merely economic; it created a cultural disposition toward the new, the foreign, and the hybrid that would repeatedly show up in how Hong Kong absorbed external cultural influences, including coffee culture.

The British presence also brought specific cultural practices that would prove directly relevant to the coffee story. Afternoon tea, originally an aristocratic British institution that became progressively democratised through the nineteenth century, was transplanted to Hong Kong and took root in the colonial hospitality culture. Hotels, restaurants, and eventually the humbler establishments of the cha chaan teng tradition incorporated tea and eventually coffee into their offerings in ways that reflected the complex cultural negotiations of colonial life. Western food and drink became associated with aspiration, modernity, and social mobility in Hong Kong in ways that were specific to the colonial context: consuming Western beverages was, at some level, a way of participating in the modernity that Western commercial culture claimed to represent, even if that participation was always partial and always inflected by the local.

5.2 Hong Kong's Economic History and Its Cultural Consequences

Hong Kong's economic development is, in the blunt assessment of economic historians, one of the most remarkable stories in modern economic history, and it matters for understanding coffee culture because economic development shapes the conditions under which consumer cultures evolve. From the cession of 1842 to the establishment of the



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People's Republic of China in 1949, Hong Kong's economy was primarily built around its entrepôt function, the transshipment, banking, and commercial services that its geographic position and open trade environment made it uniquely suited to provide. The population grew through successive waves of immigration from the mainland, particularly during times of political disruption, and the economy diversified gradually from its shipping and commercial core into retail, services, and some light industry.

The really transformative economic change came in the 1950s, when a combination of factors produced the conditions for rapid industrialisation. The Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War and the establishment of the PRC in 1949 drove a massive inflow of capital, entrepreneurial talent, and skilled labour from Shanghai and other mainland cities to Hong Kong, providing the human and financial capital for an industrial takeoff. Simultaneously, Cold War embargoes on trade with mainland China cut off Hong Kong's traditional entrepôt role and forced a fundamental economic reorientation. What emerged was a manufacturing economy initially built around textiles and garments, the cotton spinning industry was largely created by Shanghai immigrants, and diversifying through the 1960s into electronics, plastics, and other labour-intensive export industries. This industrialisation was accomplished primarily through small and medium enterprises rather than through the large conglomerates or state-directed investment that characterised development in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan; in 1955, fully 91 percent of manufacturing establishments employed fewer than one hundred workers (Schenk, 2008). This SME character of Hong Kong's economy would prove enormously resilient and adaptable, and something of that adaptability and entrepreneurial energy can be traced through into the coffee sector later.

From the late 1970s onward, Hong Kong underwent another fundamental economic transformation, this time from manufacturing to financial and professional services. China's Open Door Policy, announced by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, allowed Hong Kong to resume and dramatically expand its traditional role as the primary commercial and financial gateway between China and the rest of the world. Manufacturing moved progressively to the mainland, where labour costs were a fraction of Hong Kong's increasingly



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expensive workforce, while Hong Kong specialised in the higher-value financial, legal, accounting, and managerial services that mainland Chinese companies and their international partners needed. By 2000, services accounted for approximately 80 percent of Hong Kong's GDP and employment, compared to 52 percent in 1981, while manufacturing had shrunk correspondingly. This transformation produced an economy that was wealthier, more internationally connected, and more service-oriented than at any point in its history, and created a consumer base that was better-travelled, more sophisticated, and more willing to pay for quality experiences than ever before. The conditions for a serious specialty coffee scene were, in other words, being laid by Hong Kong's economic development long before the first specialty roaster opened its doors.

5.3 The 1997 Handover and Its Lasting Impact on Hong Kong's Identity

No account of Hong Kong's cultural landscape in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries can avoid grappling with the 1997 handover of sovereignty from Britain to China, and its complex consequences for Hong Kong's identity, economy, and consumer culture. The handover, the culmination of the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984 and years of negotiations, transferred sovereignty over Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China on 1 July 1997 under the "one country, two systems" framework, which guaranteed Hong Kong's distinct legal system, civil liberties, and economic arrangements for fifty years. The immediate period surrounding the handover was marked by substantial uncertainty and by a significant wave of emigration, predominantly to Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom by Hong Kongers who feared what the transfer of sovereignty might mean for the freedoms and way of life they had built under British rule.

The economic context of the handover was severely complicated by the Asian Financial Crisis, which struck the region in mid-1997 just as the political transition was occurring. The currency and financial contagion that swept Southeast and East Asian markets in 1997 and 1998 hit Hong Kong hard, triggering a collapse in share prices and property values that exposed the vulnerabilities of an economy whose post-industrial wealth was heavily concentrated in real estate and financial services. Unlike many of its regional neighbours, Hong Kong and mainland China maintained the dollar



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peg and the renminbi's exchange rates rather than devaluing, which protected monetary stability but at the cost of a prolonged period of deflation and economic contraction. GDP contracted, unemployment rose to around 6 percent between 1998 and 2003 (compared to an average of 2.5 percent in the preceding decade), and the property market, which for many Hong Kong households represented the bulk of their net worth entered a severe and prolonged downturn.

The SARS outbreak of 2003 compounded these difficulties in ways that still resonate in Hong Kong's collective memory. From March to June 2003, Hong Kong experienced 1,750 confirmed SARS cases and 286 deaths, with the epidemic prompting extreme public health measures that essentially shut down much of the city's public social life for several months. The economic damage was severe: tourism collapsed, retail and food and beverage businesses saw catastrophic drops in revenue, and the psychological impact of a genuinely frightening epidemic in a densely populated urban environment was profound. Siu and Wong (2004) estimated the direct economic losses caused by SARS at up to USD 6.7 billion. Hong Kong's GDP growth in 2003 came in at roughly 1 percent, compared to expectations of close to 3 percent before the epidemic struck. What happened after SARS, though, is as significant for our purposes as the damage itself. Hong Kong recovered with remarkable speed—GDP growth rebounded sharply in 2004, and the recovery was accompanied by a kind of collective assertion of the city's vitality and determination to continue developing. It was in this specific context of post-crisis resilience and reaffirmation that Jennifer Liu launched Caffe Habitu in 2003 right in the middle of the SARS crisis, in a bet on Hong Kong's appetite for quality social spaces that turned out to be spectacularly well-timed. The post-SARS recovery also marked the beginning of a sustained period of increasing mainland Chinese tourism and investment in Hong Kong that would significantly expand the city's retail and hospitality sector, creating new demand for quality food and beverage experiences of precisely the kind that the emerging specialty coffee scene was positioned to provide.

The period from 2003 to the present has seen Hong Kong grapple continuously with questions about its identity, its relationship to mainland China, its colonial legacy, its claim to distinctiveness within Greater China,



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and the meaning of its unique hybrid culture. These identity questions have not been resolved, and in some respects they have become more acute and contested over time. But they are directly relevant to coffee culture because one of the ways that Hong Kong residents have asserted and celebrated their particular identity is through the city's food and beverage culture, of which coffee has become an increasingly important part. The pride that Hong Kong takes in its specialty coffee scene, in its world-champion baristas, and in local innovations like the yuenyeung is not incidental to its broader cultural politics, it is part of how the city defines what makes it distinctively itself.

5.4 The Cha Chaan Teng Tradition

The collision of Chinese and British culture in post-war Hong Kong produced one of the most distinctive and enduring institutions in the city's culinary landscape: the cha chaan teng, literally the "tea restaurant," which has shaped Hong Kong's relationship with food and drink, including coffee in ways that continue to resonate even in the era of third wave specialty shops and Instagram-driven café tourism. Cha chaan tengs emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as rising working-class incomes made it possible for ordinary Hong Kongers to access Western-inspired food for the first time, and the cha chaan teng was the institution that democratized that access by offering adapted Western dishes at prices that ordinary workers could afford. They were emphatically not upscale establishments; they were functional, efficient, often cramped and noisy, with menus that mixed Chinese and Western dishes in combinations that would make purists of either tradition wince, and staff who were famously direct in their customer relations. Coffee's role within this cha chaan teng context was modest but significant. It was typically served after meals rather than as a standalone daytime beverage, prepared as a dark-roasted drip coffee heavily adulterated with sweetened condensed milk or evaporated milk, and valued primarily for its comforting sweetness and its after-dinner functionality rather than for any quality of flavour in the coffee itself. This was coffee as utility rather than craft, coffee as a reliable, affordable, deeply familiar end-of-meal pleasure that was entirely integrated into the rhythms of Hong Kong working-class life. Understanding this baseline understanding of what coffee was in Hong Kong is important for appreciating just how dramatic the transformation that



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the second and third waves represented, and just how much cultural work Italian coffee culture had to do to reposition coffee as something worth caring about on its own merits.

The cha chaan teng tradition's most significant and creative contribution to Hong Kong coffee culture, though, is the yuenyeung, the combination of brewed coffee and Hong Kong-style milk tea (itself a Chinese adaptation of British-style tea with evaporated or condensed milk) that remains one of Hong Kong's most distinctive and beloved culinary inventions. The name yuenyeung comes from the Cantonese for "mandarin ducks," birds that are traditionally seen in pairs and used as a symbol of harmonious combination. The drink is now listed in Hong Kong's Intangible Cultural Heritage Inventory, which is a remarkable recognition for something that originated as an improvised fusion in a casual lunch counter. The yuenyeung is genuinely delicious the bitterness and complexity of the coffee combining with the malty depth of the Hong Kong milk tea to produce something that is entirely different from and arguably better than either ingredient alone, and it has become one of the primary symbols of Hong Kong's distinctive hybrid culinary identity. The fact that a coffee-based drink was among the first things Hong Kong contributed to global culinary culture tells you something important about the city's relationship with the beverage.

5.5 The Second Wave: International Chains and the Rise of Café Culture

The transformation of Hong Kong's coffee culture from cha chaan teng afterthought to serious consumer category began not with Italian coffee, and not with American chains, but, perhaps surprisingly, with Japan. The Japanese coffee house tradition, specifically the kissaten culture of meditative quality and precise preparation that developed in Japan from the early twentieth century onward, made its Hong Kong appearance in the 1980s and early 1990s through chains like UCC and Pokka Café. These Japanese coffee shops introduced the concept of the dedicated coffee house, a place you went specifically for coffee, rather than a restaurant where coffee happened to be available, and they did so with the aesthetic sensibility of precision, cleanliness, and quality that characterises Japanese hospitality at its best. This Japanese arrival planted seeds that would bear fruit in the specialty coffee boom of the 2010s; it established the idea that



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coffee could be a primary experience rather than an incidental one.

The 1992 founding of Pacific Coffee, genuinely a Hong Kong company despite its American-influenced format, marked another crucial turning point in the development of café culture in the city. Pacific Coffee adapted the American specialty coffee shop model, comfortable seating, espresso-based drinks, a space designed for lingering rather than for in-and-out efficiency for Hong Kong's urban environment, and it proved enormously successful at introducing a generation of Hong Kong consumers to the idea of the café as a social and professional space. The chain expanded steadily through the 1990s and became one of the most recognisable café brands in the city, competing directly with international chains when they arrived and helping to establish the market they would subsequently fight over. The arrival of Starbucks and McCafé in the early 2000s accelerated and confirmed a shift in consumer behaviour that Pacific Coffee had already begun to catalyse. North American café culture, with its emphasis on comfortable seating, wireless internet, loyalty programmes, and milk-heavy espresso drinks, became mainstream in Hong Kong with remarkable speed.

McCafé's local development manager Janet Yuen told the South China Morning Post in 2008 that "the coffee market is very active and the development is expected to be fast in the coming few years," and she was right in a way that might have surprised even her (as cited in Perfect Daily Grind, 2018). Within ten years of the major chain expansions, net imports of coffee into Hong Kong had increased by 40 percent. The chains succeeded because they offered something that had not previously existed in quite that form in Hong Kong: convenient access to espresso-based drinks throughout the day, in comfortable spaces equipped for both social and professional use, at prices that were accessible to middle-income consumers even if not to everyone. They broke coffee out of its cha chaan teng confinement to the post-dinner slot and made it a morning commute, afternoon break, and evening study session drink simultaneously a transformation that fundamentally changed the cultural role of coffee in the city.

5.6 The Third Wave: Specialty Coffee and Local Innovation

By the early 2010s, the groundwork laid by Pacific Coffee, Starbucks, and McCafé had created a large and established coffee-drinking population in Hong Kong, and within that population a growing segment was beginning to



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ask for something more. The third wave arrived in Hong Kong through the combined influence of international specialty coffee culture, the inspiration of Hong Kong entrepreneurs who had encountered high-quality coffee abroad, and a media and competition infrastructure that educated consumers and professionalised baristas with striking efficiency. Jennifer Liu's Caffe Habitu, founded in 2003, and The Coffee Academics, launched in 2012, were crucial early entrants in the specialty segment. Liu herself studied architecture and design in Italy, and her explicit ambition from the beginning was to bring something of the Italian café experience, the combination of design quality, coffee quality, and unhurried sociability to Hong Kong. "From the start, I imagined Habitu as Hong Kong's own version of the Italian coffee experience," Liu has explained, and the framing is telling: not Italian coffee transplanted wholesale, but Hong Kong's own version of it, adapted and claimed (BBC News, 2012).

The role of media and competition in professionalising Hong Kong's coffee industry deserves emphasis because it operated as a genuinely important accelerant of quality standards and public awareness. A 2009 reality television programme, *Coffee Confidential*, introduced coffee appreciation to a mainstream Hong Kong audience in ways that no amount of industry marketing had quite managed to achieve. The programme made coffee interesting and aspirational for people who had previously thought of it primarily as a functional beverage, and it helped create the consumer base that specialty coffee shops needed in order to be economically viable. The first Hong Kong Grand Barista Championship, held the same year, began the process of professionalising the barista role and creating public recognition for coffee as a skilled craft. Ed Lam, Head Roaster at The Coffee Academics and a multiple roasting champion himself, has described these twin developments as decisive: "It made people more curious about coffee... More young people were interested to become a barista. These made the coffee industry start to bloom" (as cited in *Perfect Daily Grind*, 2018). The international competitive achievements of Hong Kong baristas in the 2010s brought the city's specialty coffee scene to global attention and generated enormous domestic pride. Kapo Chiu of Cupping Room Coffee Roasters placed second in the World Barista Championship in 2014 and third in 2017 exceptional results that put Hong Kong alongside the Nordic



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countries and Australia as one of the leading forces in global specialty coffee competition. Lok Chan of Craft Coffee Taster won the World Cup Tasters Championship in 2017, a title that recognises the exceptional sensory discrimination and palate training that the most skilled coffee professionals develop. These achievements were not accidental; they reflected sustained investment in training, in quality sourcing, and in the kind of competitive culture that pushes practitioners to excellence. They also helped attract international attention to Hong Kong's coffee scene and draw visiting coffee professionals who further raised standards and created connections with the global specialty community.

5.7 Market Characteristics and Consumer Trends

Hong Kong's contemporary coffee market has a distinctive profile that reflects the city's economic development, its cosmopolitan population, and the specific trajectory of its coffee culture evolution. The approximately 250 cups consumed per person annually, one of the highest per-capita figures in Greater China represents a level of habitual coffee consumption that is meaningful rather than merely occasional. The size and sophistication of the market is also reflected in the diversity of its supply: approximately 250 independent specialty coffee shops operate alongside Starbucks's 170-plus Hong Kong locations and various other chain and mid-market operators, creating a genuinely competitive landscape in which quality and differentiation matter for survival.

Consumer trends in the Hong Kong coffee market reflect several intersecting dynamics. The rise of specialty coffee has created a growing segment of highly knowledgeable, discerning consumers who understand the relationship between origin, processing, and cup quality, who are willing to pay premium prices for exceptional coffee, and who treat coffee appreciation as a genuine hobby rather than mere refreshment consumption. These consumers attend cupping events and brewing workshops, follow baristas and roasters on social media, seek out limited-edition single-origin releases, and discuss coffee with a vocabulary and analytical framework borrowed from wine culture. This segment is relatively small but commercially disproportionately significant because of its willingness to pay premiums and its influence on broader trends through social networks and media. Alongside this specialist segment, a much larger



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mainstream consumer base has developed for quality café culture broadly defined, people who want a reliably good espresso drink in a pleasant environment, who appreciate the aesthetic quality of well-designed café spaces, and who have integrated regular café visits into the rhythms of their working and social lives.

Hong Kong's fast pace of urban life has also created a substantial and growing market for quality coffee consumed on the move. The city's extreme population density and highly developed public transport infrastructure mean that most Hong Kong residents spend a significant portion of their waking hours commuting, walking between appointments, and navigating the city's complex urban geography. Convenient, high-quality takeaway coffee cold brew in a bottle, single-origin filter coffee in a paper cup, iced lattes for the humid subtropical climate caters to this fast-moving urban lifestyle in ways that neither the standing Italian bar nor the lingering American café quite achieves. This distinctive channel for coffee consumption, which is both economically important and culturally revealing, reflects Hong Kong's particular version of the speed-quality tension that Italian coffee culture itself embodies at its origin.

5.8 Regional Influences

Hong Kong's coffee culture did not develop in isolation, and understanding it properly requires situating it within the broader regional context of Asian coffee development. Japan's influence on Hong Kong's specialty coffee aesthetic has been profound and is perhaps most clearly visible in the visual and physical design of many of the city's top specialty shops. The Japanese kissaten sensibility minimal, precise, placing the craft of coffee preparation at the visual and experiential centre of the space has shaped how Hong Kong specialty operators design their environments and present their products. Brands like % Arabica, the Kyoto-founded chain that has established a significant presence in Hong Kong, exemplify this Japanese aesthetic translated into a contemporary global specialty coffee format. The emphasis on clean lines, quality materials, and a kind of disciplined visual restraint that lets the coffee speak for itself resonates strongly with a Hong Kong consumer base that appreciates sophistication without ostentation. Taiwan's influence on Hong Kong's beverage culture has been significant and somewhat under-acknowledged. The bubble tea craze that originated in



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Taiwan in the 1980s and swept Hong Kong in subsequent decades demonstrates the speed with which beverage innovations from regional neighbours can achieve mass adoption in Hong Kong, and it establishes a precedent for the kind of creative, fruit-and-dairy hybrid drinks that have become a significant component of Hong Kong's café menus. The openness to Taiwanese innovation in beverages a 2021 survey found that 94 percent of respondents aged 20-29 had recently purchased bubble tea reflects a broader regional cultural openness to creative beverage mixing that has influenced how Italian coffee concepts have been received and adapted. The willingness to combine Italian espresso with Taiwanese oolong tea in Habitu's signature drink, or to treat coffee and milk tea as complementary rather than competing in the yuenyeung, is not entirely unrelated to the same consumer openness that embraced bubble tea so enthusiastically. Mainland China's rapidly expanding coffee market creates competitive pressures and spillover effects that Hong Kong increasingly cannot ignore, even as the city maintains its distinct identity and standards. The scale of chains like Luckin Coffee—over 26,000 locations as of the most recent counts—represents a level of market development that has no Hong Kong equivalent, and the flow of mainland Chinese tourists and residents into Hong Kong brings coffee consumption patterns and expectations that are sometimes different from local ones. The mainland market's explosive growth at the lower and mid-market ends of the price spectrum creates competitive pressure even on Hong Kong operators, while its growing sophistication at the premium end creates potential new audiences for the quality coffee experiences that Hong Kong's specialty scene produces.

Chapter 6: Italian Coffee Brands and Entrepreneurs in Hong Kong

6.1 Early Pioneers: Habitu and Italian Inspiration

The deliberate introduction of Italian coffee culture as a primary commercial and aesthetic proposition in Hong Kong began in the mid-2000s, largely through the efforts of entrepreneurs who had personally encountered Italian café culture and been genuinely transformed by what they experienced. Before this period, Hong Kong's coffee scene was dominated either by fast-moving cha chaan tengs, where a cup of milk tea or instant coffee was gulped down between errands, or by the emerging wave of American chains



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like Starbucks, which offered a very different kind of experience rooted more in product customisation and branded comfort than in any deep cultural tradition. Italian coffee culture, with all its rituals and social meanings, had not yet found a real home in the city. That began to change when Jennifer Liu founded Caffè Habitu in 2003, a moment that now stands out as a genuine turning point in Hong Kong's café history, and one that deserves to be looked at carefully, not just for what it managed to achieve commercially, but for what it tells us about how a deeply rooted cultural practice can be transplanted from one urban environment to a very different one.

Liu's background is important for understanding why Caffè Habitu turned out the way it did. She had studied architecture and design in Italy, and this was not simply a matter of picking up a professional qualification abroad. Living and studying in Italy meant being immersed in the rhythms of Italian daily life over an extended period, long enough to understand coffee not as a trendy product or a lifestyle accessory, but as something genuinely woven into how people organise their days and relate to one another. In Italy, the neighbourhood bar is often the first stop of the morning, a place where the barista knows your name and your order, where you stand at the counter for a few minutes, exchange a few words, and then get on with your day. It is quick, it is social, and it is cheap, but it carries a real sense of ritual and belonging that is difficult to reduce to a simple formula. Liu had lived inside that culture rather than merely observed it from the outside, and that made all the difference in how she thought about what she wanted to build back in Hong Kong.

What Liu brought back with her was therefore something more ambitious than a menu of espresso drinks and an Italian-sounding name above the door. She had a genuine conviction that coffee's role in Italian life was fundamentally about the quality of everyday social experience in public space, about the way a good café could give people a moment of genuine pleasure and human connection in the middle of a busy urban day. Hong Kong, she clearly felt, was a city with every reason to want that kind of space. It was dense, fast-paced, and full of people who worked hard and moved quickly, but who were not necessarily well served by the existing options for slowing down, even briefly, in a pleasant and thoughtfully designed environment. Her goal was not to copy Italy wholesale, which



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would have been both impossible and probably unappealing to a Hong Kong audience, but to create something that captured the underlying spirit of what made Italian café culture valuable and translate it into a form that made sense in a Hong Kong context. That combination of genuine cultural knowledge, design training, and commercial instinct is what gave Caffè Habitu its particular character and what made it so influential on everything that came after it.

The timing of Habitu's 2003 launch was, by any measure, audacious. Hong Kong in 2003 was at a genuine economic and psychological low point, with the Asian Financial Crisis recovery still incomplete, SARS devastating the retail and hospitality sectors, and a general atmosphere of uncertainty about the city's economic trajectory and its future relationship with the mainland. Liu has described the decision to open in this climate as a considered bet on Hong Kong's appetite for quality social spaces a bet that the crisis itself had created pent-up demand for exactly the kind of comfortable, aesthetically serious, quality-focused café experience that Habitu was proposing to offer. The bet proved correct; Habitu found its audience quickly and established itself as a significant presence in Hong Kong's emerging premium café market. The company's success demonstrated that there was a substantial consumer segment willing to pay for and actively seek out an experience that was explicitly positioned as Hong Kong's interpretation of Italian café culture rather than merely a generic coffee chain outlet.

Habitu's signature drink, the oolong latte a combination of Taiwanese oolong tea with espresso is one of the clearest examples in Hong Kong's coffee history of precisely the kind of creative hybridisation that this thesis argues is characteristic of successful cultural adaptation. The drink draws on Italian espresso as its foundation, on Taiwanese tea traditions for its distinctive flavouring, and on the specifically Hong Kong consumer sensibility that embraces creative cross-cultural combinations as a matter of course. It is neither Italian nor Taiwanese nor simply "local"; it is something genuinely new that could only have been invented in a place like Hong Kong, where multiple cultural influences are simultaneously present and where hybridisation is a deeply ingrained cultural reflex. Also in 2003, Hong Kong & Pacific Group was formed to bring Italian coffee products machines and beans primarily to the home consumption market, creating a parallel channel



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for Italian coffee culture that complemented Habitu's café-focused approach and began educating Hong Kong consumers about Italian quality standards outside the café context.

6.2 Caffè Pascucci: Authentic Italian Presence

Caffè Pascucci's arrival in Hong Kong in 2008 represented something meaningfully different from what Jennifer Liu had done with Caffè Habitu five years earlier. Where Habitu was built on a Hong Kong entrepreneur's personal interpretation of Italian café culture, shaped by her years of study and living abroad, Pascucci's presence in the city meant something else entirely: an actual Italian brand, with its own history, its own supply chains, its own personnel, and its own deeply held convictions about how coffee should be made and served, had physically set up in Hong Kong. This was not a translation of Italian culture through a local lens, but the culture itself arriving more or less intact. The distinction might seem subtle, but it matters, because it raises a different set of questions about what happens when something that is genuinely rooted in a specific place and tradition is transplanted into an environment as different from Tuscany as Hong Kong's Western District.

The man behind Pascucci's Hong Kong venture was Mario Assuero Barbagli, an Italian businessman who had made his life in Hong Kong and who came across the Pascucci brand through his connections back in Italy. His account of how he first encountered the brand has a quality of genuine personal enthusiasm that is worth taking seriously. "When I first met the owner of Caffè Pascucci in 2008, I immediately fell in love with the brand. I was very impressed with the concept and their persistence in maintaining high quality coffee," he recalled in an interview with Invest Hong Kong in 2016. There is a pattern here that keeps reappearing in the story of how Italian coffee culture has spread to Hong Kong, and it is worth pausing on it. It tends not to be large corporations with market research and expansion strategies driving these ventures, but individuals, often Italians living abroad, who feel a specific and personal attachment to a particular brand or approach, and who see in it something that represents what they value most about the coffee culture they grew up with or came to love. The human dimension of cultural transmission, in other words, seems to matter at least as much as any purely commercial calculation.



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What Pascucci actually offered in Hong Kong was, by the standards of what the city's café market looked like in 2008, genuinely ambitious in its scope and uncompromising in its commitment to authenticity. The menu ran to 75 specialty coffees, all of them developed by Eddy Righi, Pascucci's champion barista trainer, working in Italy. Righi did not simply hand over a set of recipes and leave local staff to get on with it. He travelled personally to every new Pascucci location around the world to explain the thinking behind the menu, train the baristas, and make sure the recipes were being executed with the level of precision that the company required. This is not an insignificant detail. It speaks to a philosophy of quality control that treats the coffee-making process as something that cannot simply be written down in a manual and delegated, but that needs to be transmitted through direct human contact and demonstration. The Western District branch added another layer to this by integrating the coffee offer with authentic Tuscan food, creating something that was closer to a full Italian dining experience than a standalone café. This was a deliberate decision, and an intelligent one, because coffee in Italy does not exist in isolation from the broader context of Italian food culture. It is part of a set of relationships, between meals and between people, and placing it within that fuller context gave it a meaning and a coherence that a coffee-only approach would have struggled to achieve.

Barbagli himself brought in over twenty members of staff and hired chefs directly from Italy to maintain the standard of the food offering. That level of investment goes well beyond what you would expect from someone who was simply looking to attach a recognisable Italian name to a café and trade on its associations. It suggests a genuine commitment to doing the thing properly, even when doing it properly is expensive and logistically complicated. Barbagli was also reflective about why Hong Kong, specifically, was the right kind of place for this kind of venture. "Hong Kong people are very open-minded to food and beverage culture from around the world, hence giving us the opportunity to share our passion of Italian coffee culture with this city," he observed in the same 2016 interview. This is an accurate observation, and it points to something real about Hong Kong's character as a city. Its history as a British colony, its role as one of Asia's major financial and trading hubs, and its long experience of sitting at the intersection of



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Chinese and Western cultures have all contributed to producing a consumer population that tends to be genuinely curious about food and drink from other parts of the world, and willing to engage with it on something like its own terms. This is not universally true of every market that Italian coffee culture has attempted to enter. In some places, there is resistance, or indifference, or a demand that foreign food cultures be heavily adapted before they can find an audience. Hong Kong has generally been different in this respect, and that openness is part of what made it possible for a venture as uncompromising in its Italian-ness as Pascucci to find a foothold there.

6.3 The Italian Coffee Club and Expatriate Initiatives

The Italian Coffee Club HK, founded in 2021 by Stefano and Daria Moriondo, represents a third distinct model for how Italian coffee culture has found expression in Hong Kong: not a café brand, not a restaurant, but a community and educational platform designed to connect Italian coffee products with Hong Kong consumers who want genuine access to authentic Italian espresso quality. The Moriondos' motivation was explicitly personal, they were Italian expats who found themselves unable to source the quality of espresso they were used to at home, and who decided that building a community around the problem was more productive than simply complaining about it. This is, as I noted earlier, a recurring pattern in how Italian coffee culture spreads globally: Italians abroad who miss authentic espresso and build something to address that gap, in the process creating infrastructure that benefits local consumers as well.

The Italian Coffee Club model is interesting because it represents a form of cultural transmission that operates through community and education rather than through the commercial hospitality format that most of the other actors in this story have used. By connecting Italian products with Hong Kong consumers, by creating learning opportunities around Italian coffee culture, and by building a genuine community of espresso enthusiasts, the club contributes to the overall Italian coffee ecosystem in Hong Kong in ways that do not fit neatly into the usual categories of "brand" or "café." It is more like a cultural institution than a business, even if it has commercial dimensions.

This kind of grassroots cultural diffusion, operating through personal passion and community building rather than through corporate strategy is an



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important part of how Italian coffee culture has embedded itself in Hong Kong's coffee landscape, and it deserves more attention than it typically receives in accounts that focus primarily on brand expansion and entrepreneurial stories.

6.4 Lavazza's Hong Kong Entry

The November 2025 opening of Lavazza's first standalone Hong Kong store in Central was, in the context of this thesis, a highly significant moment, and also a slightly puzzling one. Lavazza is Italy's largest coffee company, with operations in over 90 countries and a sustained global expansion strategy; the fact that it took until 2025 to open a standalone retail presence in one of Asia's most sophisticated and developed coffee markets says something interesting about how even major Italian brands have historically underestimated or underweighted the Hong Kong opportunity. The company itself acknowledged this in its framing of the opening, describing Hong Kong as "one of the world's most mature coffee markets" that "offers an ideal environment with its open, diverse consumer environment and refined lifestyle" language that suggests the recognition was genuine, if somewhat belated (Inside Retail Asia, 2025).

The choice of Central for the flagship location was strategically sensible in ways that go beyond simple footfall calculation. Central is Hong Kong's primary international financial and commercial district, the neighbourhood most densely populated by the kind of globally mobile, quality-conscious professional consumers who represent Lavazza's ideal target customer worldwide. It is where the international banks, law firms, and consulting companies have their offices; it is where visiting executives from Europe, North America, and mainland China are most likely to be moving through; and it is where the density of high-end retail and hospitality makes a premium coffee experience feel contextually appropriate rather than incongruous. The store's design continues the Lavazza brand's blue, white, and gold colour scheme while creating what the company describes as a balance between "professional quality and comfortable ambiance" an attempt to capture the Italian espresso bar's combination of expertise and warmth in a format suited to the Hong Kong market's expectation of comfortable seating and lingering-friendly spaces.

Lavazza's product offering in Hong Kong reflects the company's



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commitment to premium positioning and its recognition that the Hong Kong market is sophisticated enough to engage with the nuances of origin and blend storytelling. The offering includes beans inspired by the flavour profiles of Rome, 100% Arabica KAFA beans from Ethiopian forests, and seasonal exclusive blends a range designed to communicate breadth of expertise and commitment to quality sourcing rather than simple brand familiarity. The Hong Kong opening also needs to be read in the context of Lavazza's broader Asia strategy: the company has announced targets of 1,000 coffee shops and USD 60 million in retail sales in China by 2029, and the Hong Kong flagship serves both as a market in its own right and as a gateway and credibility-builder for the larger mainland ambition (World Coffee Portal, 2025). The partnership with Yum China, which operates the franchise, provides the local operational expertise and network that Lavazza would struggle to build from scratch on its own, another example of the pattern, visible throughout Hong Kong's Italian coffee story, of Italian brands succeeding through thoughtful partnership with people who understand the local market.

6.5 Challenges and Adaptation Strategies

Italian brands and entrepreneurs operating in Hong Kong face a set of challenges that are worth examining systematically, both because they illuminate the specific difficulties of cultural adaptation in this market and because the strategies that have successfully addressed them offer lessons for future entrants. The fundamental challenge is competition: Hong Kong is not an underserved market waiting for Italian coffee to arrive and fill a void. It is a market with approximately 250 independent specialty coffee shops, a Starbucks presence of over 170 locations, a well-established Pacific Coffee network, and a sophisticated consumer base that has high standards and many alternatives. Standing out in this environment requires genuine differentiation rather than merely competent execution of a formula that works elsewhere.

Consumer expectations around the physical experience of the café present another specific adaptation challenge. Italian coffee culture's emphasis on standing consumption and brief, efficient visits makes sense in the context of the Italian bar's social geography, everyone knows everyone, the bar is a regular stop in a dense and familiar neighbourhood, and the five-minute



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espresso serves a social function because it is repeated daily rather than occasional. This model does not translate directly to Hong Kong, where consumers have absorbed the American café format's expectation of comfortable seating, extended stays (often for work purposes, with laptops open), and a general atmosphere of relaxed occupation of the space. Brands that insist on Italian standing-bar formats risk alienating consumers whose expectations have been shaped by Starbucks and Pacific Coffee; those that adapt to comfortable seating while maintaining Italian quality and aesthetics tend to be better received. Climate is another practical consideration: Italian coffee culture developed in a temperate Mediterranean environment where hot espresso makes complete sense year-round, while Hong Kong's humid subtropical climate with its long hot summers creates substantial demand for cold and iced coffee options that Italian traditions do not traditionally accommodate.

Successful Italian coffee operators in Hong Kong have developed several consistent adaptation strategies in response to these challenges. Menu localisation, adapting the product offering to include beverages suited to local preferences while maintaining Italian core products and quality standards, is almost universal among the more successful operators. Habitu's oolong latte and similar hybrid creations at various specialty shops represent this strategy at its most creative: genuinely novel products that draw on Italian espresso technique as their foundation while incorporating flavours and ingredients that resonate with Hong Kong consumer preferences. Environmental adaptation, creating spaces that balance Italian aesthetic sensibilities with Hong Kong's expectations for comfortable, well-designed, photographable environments, is equally important and often requires significant investment in space design and fit-out. Quality emphasis and cultural storytelling, communicating the heritage, craft traditions, and quality standards of Italian coffee culture in ways that resonate with Hong Kong consumers who are increasingly sophisticated and quality-conscious, provide the differentiating narrative that justifies premium pricing in a competitive market.

6.6 Local Entrepreneurs and Italian Influences

Beyond the direct Italian presence in Hong Kong's coffee market through brands like Lavazza and Caffè Pascucci, Italian coffee culture has exercised



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a diffuse but substantial influence through the many local entrepreneurs who encountered Italian coffee during travel or study and came back inspired to recreate something of that experience in Hong Kong. This pattern of travel-inspired entrepreneurship is one of the most important and least theorised mechanisms through which culinary cultures spread globally it operates through individual human beings rather than through corporate strategy, and it tends to produce adaptations that are more sensitively calibrated to local conditions precisely because the entrepreneurs involved have intimate knowledge of both the source culture and the destination market.

Entrepreneurs like Sam Si-long visited Milan, fell in love with authentic espresso culture, and returned with a determination to create shops using Italian blends and reflecting Italian quality standards as closely as possible within a Hong Kong context. This pattern is not unique to coffee, it mirrors the stories told about Hong Kongers who encountered French patisserie, Japanese ramen, or Australian brunch culture during travels and came home to introduce local versions but it has been particularly significant in the coffee sector because the technical standards required to produce genuinely good espresso are high enough that the exposure and training represented by travel experience is commercially relevant, not merely personally inspiring. The Coffee Academics, founded by Jennifer Liu in 2012 following her success with Habitu, exemplifies the sophisticated integration of Italian influences within a locally rooted specialty operation: it has become one of Hong Kong's biggest café chains while maintaining an emphasis on coffee education, quality sourcing, and the kind of craft-focused professional culture that reflects Italian coffee's serious side rather than merely its aesthetic appeal. Local operators drawing on Italian influences have created a competitive dynamic that is ultimately beneficial for consumers and for the market as a whole, even as it presents genuine challenges for Italian brands seeking to establish a distinctive premium position.

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion

7.1 Summary of Findings

This thesis set out to examine how Italian coffee culture has adapted to and been adapted by Hong Kong's market, and I think the findings are interesting enough to justify the effort even acknowledging the limitations of



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a study that relies entirely on secondary sources. Several key findings emerge from the research. The first is that Hong Kong's coffee culture did not develop through a single dominant influence or a straightforward developmental sequence; it evolved through successive waves of external influence British colonial tea culture, Japanese café aesthetics, American chain formats, and Italian espresso traditions each of which was actively adapted and hybridised by Hong Kong's producers and consumers rather than simply adopted. The yuenyeung, which manages to be simultaneously local, colonial, and globally unprecedented, is the purest expression of this pattern, but it repeats throughout the story: from the cha chaan teng's dark-roast coffee with condensed milk, to Habitu's oolong latte, to the Japanese-influenced minimalism of Hong Kong's most admired specialty shops. The second key finding is that Italian coffee culture entered Hong Kong through multiple channels simultaneously, and the diversity of those channels has produced a richer and more complex Italian influence than any single dominant vector would have created. Direct brand expansion through Lavazza and Caffè Pascucci brought authentic Italian products and expertise; Italian expatriate entrepreneurship through operators like the Moriondos brought personal passion and community-building; local entrepreneurs inspired by Italian experiences brought cultural translation skills and local market knowledge; and the global diffusion of Italian-style espresso through American mediation provided the technical vocabulary and infrastructure on which all of these more specific contributions built. Understanding Italian coffee in Hong Kong requires tracking all of these channels and their interactions rather than focusing on any single one. The third finding is that successful adaptation in Hong Kong's Italian coffee market requires the kind of balance between authenticity and localisation that sounds simple in principle but turns out to be genuinely difficult to execute. The operators who have thrived Habitu, Caffè Pascucci, The Coffee Academics have all maintained genuine commitment to Italian quality standards and craft traditions while adapting their formats, menus, and physical environments substantially to Hong Kong's conditions and expectations. Pure replication of an Italian café model, unchanged for the local context, has consistently proved less successful than thoughtful adaptation that honours Italian traditions without being imprisoned by them.



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Lavazza's 2025 Central opening, which combines the brand's Italian identity and quality standards with a comfortable-seating format and a menu designed for Hong Kong conditions, represents a recognisably similar strategic logic applied by the most prominent Italian brand to enter the market.

7.2 Theoretical Contributions

This study offers several contributions to the theoretical frameworks it draws on, modest as those contributions necessarily are given the limitations of the research approach. The most significant is the demonstration that glocalization theory does genuine analytical work when applied to culinary culture in a specific market context. The Hong Kong case confirms the core glocalization prediction: global cultural forms (Italian espresso traditions) are transformed through local engagement (Hong Kong entrepreneurs, baristas, and consumers adapting them to local conditions and preferences), and the local adaptations that result may subsequently feed back into global practices. The oolong latte, the yuenyeung, the highly skilled Hong Kong barista who trains in Italian technique and then develops innovations beyond it, these are not merely local curiosities but potential contributors to the ongoing evolution of global coffee culture. Hong Kong is not simply a receiver of Italian coffee culture; it is an active participant in what Italian coffee is becoming globally.

The production of culture perspective proves equally valuable for understanding the mechanisms through which this cultural transformation occurs. What Italian coffee means in Hong Kong is not a fixed cultural content that arrived from Italy and was passively received; it is something that has been actively constructed by café owners deciding how to design and position their spaces, baristas deciding how to interpret Italian techniques within a local context, competition judges establishing quality standards, food writers and social media influencers creating narratives about what good coffee is, and consumers exercising their preferences in ways that signal to producers what kinds of adaptation are welcome and which are not. This production-side perspective adds necessary depth to accounts that focus only on the consumer side of the cultural globalization story.

7.3 Practical Implications



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The practical implications of this research are, I think, genuinely useful even if they are somewhat obvious when stated directly. For Italian brands considering Hong Kong entry, the evidence strongly suggests that thorough market understanding before entry is essential—the market is mature, competitive, and already has sophisticated consumers who can distinguish between genuine quality and marketing veneer. Brands should balance authenticity with adaptation, maintaining the quality standards and heritage storytelling that constitute Italian coffee's genuine competitive advantage while adapting to local preferences around portion size, beverage temperature, seating expectations, and menu diversity. Partnership with local operators—as Lavazza has done through its Yum China collaboration—can provide the market knowledge and operational expertise that makes the difference between successful adaptation and expensive failure. For local entrepreneurs and operators, Italian coffee culture offers genuine resources for differentiation and quality improvement that remain underutilised: studying Italian espresso techniques, sourcing Italian equipment, engaging with Italian craft traditions can enhance offerings substantially, but the most successful operators adapt these influences creatively rather than simply imitating them, drawing on Hong Kong's own rich heritage and consumer preferences as the other side of the equation. For policymakers and industry organisations, the research highlights the economic importance of coffee education and professional development infrastructure, the barista competition system, the training programmes, the consumer education events that have been instrumental in making Hong Kong a globally recognised specialty coffee hub, and the value of protecting and supporting that infrastructure as a component of the city's broader economic and cultural positioning.

7.4 Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of this study are real and I do not want to minimise them. The exclusive reliance on secondary sources means that the most interesting questions what do café owners actually think about their relationship to Italian coffee culture? how do Hong Kong consumers understand and experience the authenticity claims that Italian brands make? what do Italian baristas who have trained in Italy and then worked in Hong Kong make of the differences they observe? cannot be answered with the depth and



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precision they deserve. These questions require primary research through interviews, possibly through ethnographic observation of the kind that would involve spending significant time in the cafés themselves. The single-market focus limits how far the conclusions can be generalised; a comparative study across Hong Kong, Seoul, Tokyo, Taipei, and Shanghai would be much better positioned to identify which aspects of Hong Kong's Italian coffee experience are specific to Hong Kong and which reflect broader regional patterns of adaptation. And the rapid pace of change in the coffee industry means that some of the specific market conditions described here will have evolved by the time anyone reads this closely, Lavazza's 2025 opening is less than a year old as I write, and the story of how it performs in the Hong Kong market is only just beginning.

Future research should address these gaps through primary data collection interviews with café owners, baristas, brand representatives, and consumers, and through the kind of comparative multi-market analysis that would genuinely advance the theoretical contribution. Longitudinal research tracking how Hong Kong's Italian coffee landscape evolves over the next decade would be particularly valuable, especially as Lavazza consolidates its presence and as the specialty coffee market continues to mature.

7.5 Conclusion

Italian coffee culture's market adaptation in Hong Kong is, when you follow it in detail, a genuinely compelling story about how cultural forms travel, change, and generate new possibilities through encounter with different contexts and different people. Italian traditions found genuinely fertile ground in Hong Kong's cosmopolitan, quality-conscious, perpetually curious consumer culture, but what grew in that ground is something that would be recognisable to an Italian coffee expert while also being unmistakably something else, something that belongs to Hong Kong as much as it belongs to Italy, and that reflects the city's extraordinary capacity for absorbing the world's best offerings and making them its own.

Hong Kong's coffee culture emerged from a rich history of cultural exchange dating back to the British colonial encounter that created the city, evolved through the successive influences of Japanese precision, American accessibility, and Italian craft quality, and continues developing through the creative activities of local entrepreneurs, highly skilled baristas, and



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increasingly sophisticated consumers. The result is a coffee culture that honours Italian espresso traditions without being defined by them—a culture that insists on quality, embraces innovation, and has demonstrated to the world that you do not have to be from Italy to understand and extend what is genuinely great about the way Italians relate to coffee. The yuenyeung may yet conquer the world, as I suggested in the abstract, or at least inspire someone in Milan to wonder whether coffee and tea might not, after all, be natural companions. That kind of feedback loop, from the supposed periphery to the supposed centre, is what glocalization theory predicts, and it is what Hong Kong's coffee story, at its most ambitious, suggests might actually be happening.

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