

Traditional Adherence and Cultural Integration: A Survey of Chinese Restaurants in Paris

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Abstract:

In recent years, the internationalization of Chinese culture has become a topic of great concern. Chinese restaurants are one of the most direct ways for people to understand Chinese culture. This study explores the operating characteristics of Chinese restaurants in Paris and their acceptance by locals through interviews with practitioners and consumers of Chinese restaurants in Paris. Over the years, Chinese restaurants in Paris have developed their own tradition, integrating a variety of Asian food cultures. In recent years, many Chinese restaurants pursuing authentic local cuisine have also appeared in Paris. The two restaurants have different positionings, and both have been recognized by Parisian consumers. It is generally felt that Chinese restaurants in Paris are doing a booming business.

Keywords:

Chinese food, overseas Chinese restaurant, traditional adherence, cultural integration

I. Introduction

“The Belt and Road” initiative proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping has created many opportunities for Chinese culture to go international and Chinese people to start overseas businesses. Food is the universal language of mankind and the fusion agent that resolves disputes. It allows people of different nationalities, races, and beliefs to share a knowing smile while enjoying the pleasure of delicious food. Chinese cuisine is the wealth of the Chinese nation and the essence of world culture. (Ou, 2017) However, Chinese restaurants overseas was often criticized for their poor performance in the past. For example, in response to negative reports in French media, Chinese restaurant operators had to defend their rights in accordance with the law. (2010) After three years of impact from the epidemic, the overseas Chinese restaurant industry has continued to recover and began to seek new development opportunities. The establishment of Chinese restaurants overseas is completely different from their local development. When talking about the European Chinese food industry, Yang said: “Compared with the Chinese cuisine that combines food culture, tea culture, wine culture, and perfectly integrates various regional characteristic catering cultures in China, the development of overseas Chinese restaurants has only stayed at the level of providing an ordinary dining place, and the overall development situation of the overseas Chinese food industry is not very optimistic.” (Yang, 2022) He meant that Chinese restaurants scattered all over the world have not played a good role in spreading Chinese culture, and the internationalization of Chinese cuisine is not very satisfactory. When Chinese tourists go to Chinese restaurants overseas, they often cannot find the taste of home in the dishes, which has led to their lower recognition of overseas Chinese restaurants. In order to understand the current development status of the Chinese food industry in the Paris region and the current attitudes of consumers, I conducted a one month survey of Chinese restaurants in various regions of Paris from January to February 2024, interviewing 8 Chinese restaurants, including owners, employees, and long-term customers.

2. The Development History of Chinese Restaurants in Paris (1975-2024)

The development history of Chinese restaurants in Paris is closely related to the history of Chinese immigration.

The first batch of Chinese restaurant entrepreneurs in the Paris area came from refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia around 1975. Most of them were Chaoshan people in Guangdong. Therefore, the style of Chinese restaurants at that time was mainly Cantonese cuisine. For they had many years of living experience in Southeast Asia, the dishes they cook were not purely Cantonese cuisine, but include many Southeast Asian dishes, such as spring rolls, salads, etc. Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were once French colonies, so the French people are more familiar with the dishes there, which also affected their understanding of Chinese food.

The second batch of Chinese food entrepreneurs came from the New Immigrants of

the 1980s, who came from Zhejiang, Fujian, and Northeast China, most of whom were from Wenzhou. From then on, Wenzhou people became the main force of Chinese food entrepreneurs in Paris. The Chinese cuisine in Paris has become more diverse, with the emergence of different cuisines such as Zhejiang cuisine and Northeastern cuisine. They were not separated from each other, but continuing to merge with the gathering of Chinese immigrants.

After years of development, the Chinese District in the 13th arrondissement is still the main location for Chinese restaurants, and it has also branched out in other areas. When you walk around the streets of Paris today, you can always find at least one Chinese restaurant in every street block. You can sometimes see Chinese food chain stores in large shopping malls, which are all French local brands. Some of these restaurants may have only local employees.

3. The Management of Chinese Restaurants in Paris

Although many Chinese restaurants run by Chinese immigrants have gained recognition from local consumers, as their economic success demonstrating, their business is very different from that of local Chinese restaurants in China. Most Chinese restaurants operate as individual businesses. The restaurant owners prepare their most frequently cooked dishes in a large pot in advance, then put them on a tray and place them in a glass cabinet, waiting for customers to select. Then they put the dishes into plates or disposable meal boxes, weigh and charge, and use microwaves to heat the dishes for the guests. This model is very common in Paris. However, due to the fact that these restaurants sell pre-made food that require secondary heating, with which Chinese consumers are not at ease, it is difficult to gain recognition from Chinese local customers. They believe that using a microwave for secondary heating can damage the flavor and nutrition of food.

In order to reduce labor costs, Chinese restaurants generally do not hire skilled professional chefs. Even if someone is willing to hire experts, the cumbersome job visa applications and language requirements will greatly increase the difficulty of Chinese chefs working in France. On the other hand, due to the impact of hiring chefs from China on the employment of local residents, the policies of European countries will keep some reservations while encouraging the development of the Chinese food industry.

Meanwhile, some restaurant owners seize the new opportunities brought by the Internet and use the We-Media platform to promote themselves to the French and Chinese, thereby forming a good reputation and promoting the French's understanding of Chinese food culture.

4. Localization: Paris or Hometown

The first problem faced by Chinese immigrants who run Chinese restaurants in Paris

is how to make Chinese food that represents Chinese culture accepted by the French. Although most Chinese restaurant operators come from areas such as Wenzhou, what they cook is not true Zhejiang cuisine. In fact, most Chinese restaurants that have been operating in Paris for many years have difficulty guaranteeing that they are serving cuisine from a specific region. On the contrary, their dishes have become seriously homogenized. The reason for this phenomenon is related to the Chinese lifestyle of looking to one another for comfort. Many Chinese who have language barrier and find it difficult to integrate into the French social group gathered in the catering industry in the Chinese district. With the increase in the number of Chinese immigrants, the French have gradually learned about some Chinese lifestyles, such as eating Jiaozi during festivals. Restaurant E, located in the 13th arrondissement, is a Chinese restaurant opened by Northeasterners, but it also sells Vietnamese spring rolls and other dishes that can be found in most Chinese restaurants in France. Mr. Peng, a frequent customer of restaurant E, told me: “This restaurant originally sold northeast food, but the French had a stereotype of Chinese food, and they would be curious: ‘Hey, why don’t you have Spring rolls?’ So we started to sell Spring rolls. There are many Islamists in France who don’t eat pork. They also have high requirements for other meat processing materials, because they are afraid of pork mixing. For these requirements, we can make changes. Slowly, even Muslims are willing to come to our restaurants. Because we are very open, not inflexible.”

As Mr. Peng said, Chinese cuisine has strong inclusiveness. In order to adapt to the local dietary and religious customs, Chinese restaurant operators can respond promptly by modifying their recipes and business methods. However, excessive inclusiveness also brings drawbacks, such as the convergence of dishes and changes in processing methods. These Chinese restaurants located in Paris have achieved the integration of diverse cultures, or in other words, created their own traditions. Chinese people traveling, studying, and living in Paris find it almost difficult to find the flavor of their hometown in these restaurants.

When it talks about the Chinese dishes that the French are most familiar with, Ms. Song from L Restaurant, a Cantonese Restaurant, said, “There are sweet and sour pork, Jiaozi, hot and sour soup, which are the Chinese dishes that the French recognize much.” Restaurant G is a noodle shop that does not follow the general model in Paris and retains Chinese characteristics. Mr. Guo, the owner, said without thinking, “Onion beef, pineapple chicken, sweet and sour shrimp, fried rice, fried noodles... yes, and Jiaozi! Sushi, of course, sushi is Japanese.” Chinese restaurants in Paris sometimes sell Japanese sushi, partly due to the market, and partly because some Chinese people had worked in Japanese restaurants, which brought sushi into the Chinese culinary circle, resulting in cultural integration between Asian cuisines in the Paris region. After a long period of evolution, the old Chinese restaurants in Paris have not only formed a fusion of various Chinese cuisines, but also to a certain extent integrated the culinary elements of Southeast Asia, Japan and other regions. Most of them are actually Chinese restaurants that have already been localized in Paris.

However, while a large number of Chinese restaurants are moving towards localization and even homogenization in France, there is an opposing force driving Chinese restaurants to return to regional characteristics and similar business practices as in China. This phenomenon is particularly evident in newly opened Chinese restaurants in recent years.

Some people still decorate the restaurant in the style of a cafeteria according to French customs, while others choose a decoration style similar to that of domestic Chinese restaurants. They set up round tables for many people to sit around. In terms of dish selection, they will also place emphasis on regional characteristics. For example, Cantonese restaurants that have restored their original flavor, Shanxi style noodle shops, and Sichuan, Yunnan, even Xinjiang cuisine have emerged. Operators are also inclined to restore familiar flavors to Chinese people, yet dynamic adjustment is also needed. For example, Ms. Wang from XM Noodle Shop said, “Less oil, less salt...” French people do not have the habit of eating spicy food, but feel comfortable while eating. Therefore, the business of Sichuan and Chongqing restaurants, especially hotpot, is the hottest. But these types of restaurants usually adjust the spiciness of their food, otherwise it will be detrimental to their operations.

5. The Attitudes of Parisian Consumers

If Chinese restaurants in Paris, after years of development, have gradually moved away from traditional Chinese characteristics, have their operations been successfully accepted by Parisian consumers? The Chen couple has opened a Chinese restaurant near the place where I studied and has been operating it for many years. The following is a scene I saw when I went to this restaurant for lunch:

The storefront of this restaurant was small, decorated with five sets of tables and chairs. A large picture of Chang’e flying to the moon was painted on the wall. There was a red shrine on the wine rack behind the counter, without a deity placed inside. Instead, a bright red incense burner was placed. There was only one small glass refrigerated cabinet in the store, which was divided into three levels. The top layer was neatly arranged with different types of Spring rolls, as well as other Dim sum; The middle was chow mein and Fried Rice; The lower layer was filled with beef, chicken, and shrimp with different cooking methods in trays, and there was only one complete vegetarian dish. When I arrived at 12:30, there were no other customers in the restaurant. After 10 minutes, several workers arrived and packed some dishes to take away. Next came a swarm of white-collar workers working nearby. A long queue had already formed inside the store, even reaching the outside. The couple was working together and they were both a bit busy. The vast majority of customers chose to take away. They hardly ever dined in the restaurant.

From this clip, it can be seen that an ordinary Chinese restaurant not located in the central urban area is thriving in business on weekdays. French people have lunch slightly later than Chinese people. During non-dining hours, the restaurant is very quiet and leisurely, but as soon as it is time for meal, the house immediately becomes bustling. For customers who are tight on time and don’t care much about the dining environment, Chinese restaurants are a good choice. Mr. Chen told me: “Chinese restaurants are blooming everywhere in Paris now. The business is very good. But if served together with French cuisine, French cuisine sells better, because Chinese cuisine is imported after all.” On the street where Restaurant X is located, there are several French restaurants, an Italian restaurant and a Korean restaurant.

Except for one fast-food restaurant, no restaurant can match the price and efficiency of the Chinese restaurant run by the Chens. But this also proves that Restaurant X is positioned as an efficient, low-priced fast food. Although it can meet the dining needs of the French, it is difficult to say that it can be recognized by the more discerning Chinese consumers.

In addition to facing pressure from competition with French cuisine, Chinese restaurants also face more intense internal competition. Most high-end restaurants are clustered near the Louvre Museum, Arc de Triomphe, etc. They seize advantageous geographical locations, close to famous attractions or metro hubs, and know how to use Chinese and foreign media to promote themselves. They imitate domestic restaurants. Their food can be ordered by the small size (1 person) or the grand size (4 person). There are also larger hard dishes such as sweet and sour mandarin fish. It is difficult to find Chinese restaurants near La Défense. Even if there are, most of them are traditional models in France. And these restaurants are often poorly promoted and rely solely on foot traffic in the area.

We all know that French cuisine has a very long history and tradition. In the impression of many Chinese people, the French feel arrogant and confident about this. For them, food represents a status symbol and lifestyle rather than a simple need for survival. Authentic French food is very sophisticated from the selection of ingredients, the ways of cooking, to the dining environment. The most common ones they show off are foie gras and French snails. (Zhang, 2003) Chinese food, as an imported culture, will it be marginalized? For this point, all respondents hold a very optimistic attitude to the future of Chinese restaurants. The French never say that their own cuisine is the best. On the contrary, they love to try. Except for some places in the 13th arrondissement, everyone says that there are more French people coming to consume than Chinese people. Even in areas close to Chinese communities, the ratio of Chinese to French people is 6:4. The French are very knowledgeable about enjoying delicious food, love to try it out, and fond of diversity. In this situation, Chinese restaurant practitioners do not feel marginalized, but instead feel the great enthusiasm of French consumers. If the consumer is curious about the dishes, they will also talk more, including how to make them, how to add soy sauce, and try to explain as much as possible.

6. Conclusion

We all know that food, as a name card that can represent a country's culture, can serve as a bridge for identification between different groups. In the eyes of Chinese people, building a good image of overseas Chinese restaurants is not only a responsibility to local consumers, but also the responsibility to the motherland. Overseas Chinese restaurants have gained their own traditions through the development of the history of Chinese immigrants, gradually forming a difference from local Chinese restaurants. They have to face language and survival issues, as well as solve some problems caused by different social customs and religious beliefs. Despite various difficulties, the Chinese immigrants in France stubbornly embarked on their own path, blending the culinary characteristics of different regions and cultures. In recent years, Chinese restaurants have also gradually developed towards a stronger regional

color. We can see that the dissemination of Chinese culinary culture in France is gradually improving.

For Chinese restaurants in Paris, gaining recognition from French consumers is the most important. Although Chinese traditional culture is often emphasized, it seems to be secondary. This can be largely attributed to the nature of Chinese restaurants in Paris, which means they are smaller and more susceptible to market influence. The food traditions that the Chinese acquired in Paris are often different to those in their hometown. To this end, Chinese restaurant practitioners must continue to explore the balance between the two. At the same time, Chinese people's impression of French consumers is also constantly changing. They have learned about the French love of multiculturalism. They choose to retain the original flavor of local cuisine and still succeed in Paris.

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Profile of the interviewees

<i>Restaurant Code</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Hometown</i>	<i>Date (all in 2024)</i>
<i>G</i>	<i>Guo</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Datong, Shanxi</i>	<i>2.5</i>
<i>X</i>	<i>Chen</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Wenzhou, Zhejiang</i>	<i>2.6-7</i>
<i>XZ</i>	<i>Chen</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Shanghai</i>	<i>2.8</i>
<i>E</i>	<i>Peng</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Northeast</i>	<i>2.11</i>
<i>L</i>	<i>Song</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Chaozhou, Guangdong</i>	<i>2.12</i>
<i>J</i>	<i>Ye</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Wenzhou, Zhejiang</i>	<i>2.13</i>
<i>XM</i>	<i>Wang</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Chaozhou, Guangdong</i>	<i>2.13</i>
<i>H</i>	<i>Zhang</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Guangzhou, Guangdong</i>	<i>2.16</i>