

## Transcultural Movement: Shang Palace, Chinese Haute Cuisine in Paris

Lung-Lung Hu

**ABSTRACT:** Food, as an art form, is a carrier of its own culture. Culture, which is a crucial element to personal and national identity, is not a fixed and unchangeable entity but an ever-lasting process.

As an Asian cuisine, unlike Japanese cuisine which both techniques and tastes have been widely accepted by French people in Paris, Chinese cuisine, although it is well-known and popular, has not been considered as a haute cuisine as French and Japanese cuisine.

This paper aims to explore how Chinese cuisine, which culinary culture is not dominant in Paris, reacts to some infamous incidents—such as the health report about Chinese restaurants in 2004 and Covid-19 outbreak from Wuhan wet market—and reclaims/creates its reputation and identity based on the interview with Samuel Lee, who is from Hong Kong and now is a Michelin-star chef in Shang Palace at Shangri-La hotel in Paris. From this interview, we can see his philosophy about Chinese food, the transculturation of Chinese and French culinary culture, and an overall picture of Chinese haute cuisine in Paris.

Modern transportation and borderless internet have together brought about greater opportunities to experience different cultures. Such interaction between cultures has featured strongly within the field of culture studies<sup>1</sup> in terms of how one culture can dominate another despite the difference and distance between the two.<sup>2</sup> Much has been said about cultural differences, such as how the West regards the East, and how the East then sees itself in light of the gaze from the West: this very notion Edward Said discusses in *Orientalism*. Meanwhile, Franz Fanon and Homi Bhabha address the ways that a people restore their original culture at the end of a process of colonisation during which time their culture has undergone change and after which a new cultural hybridity becomes apparent.

When two cultures encounter, the culture that moves to the other accepts the local one, while also affecting it. A perfect example of this is Chinese cuisine<sup>3</sup> as a representation of cultural and national identity: it exemplifies transculturation and transculturality due to the very fact it has travelled the world over. In this paper, the focus will be on the interaction between Chinese and French culinary cultures in Paris from a transcultural point of view. In the author's discussion of this transcultural phenomenon, the author will refer to use my June 21, 2021 interview<sup>4</sup> with Samuel Lee (Samuel in this paper) from Hong Kong, who is chef at the Michelin star restaurant Shang Palace, located at Shangri-la Hotel in Paris.

### Culture

The concept of culture is traditionally generalised as being a fixed and unchanged entity formed by human activity. As Wolfgang Ivers states:

“Culture” first developed into a *general concept*, spanning not only single, but all the reifications of human life, in the late 17th century. As a general concept of this type, “culture” appeared for the first time in 1684 with the natural rights scholar Samuel von Pufendorf. He denoted “culture” as the sum of those activities through which humans shape their life as being specifically human—in contrast to merely animal one.<sup>5</sup>

Different groups form and confirm their own cultures by way of their activities. In etymology, culture comes from the Latin word *colere*—meant, in verb form, to tend and to cultivate in late Middle English—that is to say, to cultivate farmland. Culture, as a noun, derives from Latin *cultura*, which means growing and cultivation. With this in mind, culture can mean a crop that grows and then stops growing at a certain point. Therefore, two cultural groups can be regarded as two plants that grow separately that will never have contact with each other. As Wolfgang Ivers explains in relation to Johann Gottfried Herder's concept of culture:

In terms of its basic structure, Herder's concept is characterized by three determinants: by social homogenization, ethnic consolidation and intercultural delimitation. Firstly, every culture is supposed to mould the whole life of the people concerned and of its individuals, making every act and every object an unmistakable instance of precisely *this* culture. The concept is unificatory. Secondly, culture is always to be the “*culture of a folk*,” representing, as Herder said, “the flower” of a folk's existence. So the concept is folk-bound. Thirdly, a decided *delimitation* towards the outside ensues: Every culture is, as the culture of one folk, to be distinguished and to remain separated from other folks' cultures. The concept is separatory.<sup>6</sup>

Every “folk” has its own culture, which develops fully on its own in isolation, thus making it alien to any other culture. Such a notion as this makes people assume that differences and confrontations are inevitable, and that transculturation is impossible.

### Transculturation

According to Wolfgang Welsch, there are three molds of cultural interaction when one culture moves to another place and encounters its culture: multicultural, intercultural, and transcultural. Both multicultural and intercultural perspectives presume the validity of the traditional concept of culture, according to which cultures are separate entities and remain the same. They may even conflict with each other even though they can acknowledge the existence of the other and try to understand and accept the other as well.

My criticism of the traditional conception of single cultures, as well as of the more recent concepts of multiculturalism and interculturalism can be summarized as follows: If cultures were in fact still—as these concepts suggest—constituted in the form of islands or spheres, then one could neither rid oneself of, nor solve the problem of their coexistence and cooperation. However, the description of today's cultures as islands or spheres is factually incorrect and normatively deceptive. Our cultures *de facto* no longer have the insinuated form of homogeneity and separateness, but are characterized through to the core by mixing and permeations. I call this new form of cultures transcultural [...].<sup>7</sup>

These words by Welsch show that the relationship between cultures is like the connection between islands when the water retreats and dry land appears. Islands can be easily connected and may form one or more new islands as a result of constant land changes. This is transculturality—that is to say, when a culture is no longer homogeneous or no longer has a single origin, which defines today's cultures and their interaction. Transculturality presumes that the formation of culture is a dynamic process. Even the most isolated, homogeneous, and purest of cultures are formed as a result of many transcultural activities. That is to say, culture is never finished and final; rather, it is everlasting. However, such a claim as this has an epistemological problem. It lacks a solid platform on which two cultures can be placed together and examined since they are constantly changing. To resolve this problem, we need to grasp a viable and visible cultural representation—which is why food is an ideal research subject when it comes to an examination of the transculturality of cultures.

### Cuisine of Chinese

In order to explain what is meant by Chinese culinary culture, the author needs to clarify terms such as food, cook, and cuisine. Parkhurst Ferguson states:

Food refers to the material substances we humans consume to meet the physiological requirements for sustenance [...]. Cooking begins the primary transformative process that puts food in a state ready to be consumed [...]. From eating simply to live, gastronomy moves us into the realm of living

to eat. [...] [c]uisine refers to the properly cultural construct that systematizes culinary practices and transmutes the spontaneous culinary gesture into a stable cultural code.<sup>8</sup>

Human beings need food to stay alive. Cooking goes beyond that—to the realm of art, which then evolves into gastronomy. When cooking becomes a discourse, it turns into cuisine and cultural code. With its cultural code, it defines the identity of the group that consumes and appreciates it. Chinese cuisine is a set of cultural codes that Chinese people are immersed in and identify with. But what is it that defines a group?

Individuals constitute associations, they come together as already formed persons and set them up, establishing rules, positions, and offices [...]. Groups, on the other hand, constitute individuals. A person's particular sense of history, sense of history, affinity, and separateness, even the person's mode of reasoning, evaluating and expressing feeling, are constituted partly by her or his group affinities.<sup>9</sup>

An association is constituted by individuals who have a common attribute, preference, and interest. In contrast, a group exists before individuals even enter it, and the group defines identity by way of abstract and pre-existing ideas—such as culture. Therefore, for a person to be Chinese, they must share “a way of life” with others in a group that has collective identity that can be defined as Chinese and that other people, both insiders and outsiders, identify him or her with. While culture is abstract, food culture is more concrete and specific. For example, if someone shares (how) a turkey (what) with their family (whom) to celebrate Thanksgiving (why) on the fourth Thursday of November (when), then we know that person is a member of a group sharing American food culture.

### Chinese Restaurants in Paris

The reason the author chose a Chinese haute cuisine restaurant rather than a less exclusive Chinese restaurant in Paris is because their food cannot be defined in terms of culture encounter and is not a creative activity meant to solve or respond to the cultural conflict. Most Chinese restaurants exist so that people can make a living; often, the owners and cooks have little time for creativity or for the chef to express their personality and demonstrate their talent. As Willian Chan, a researcher of Chinese food in France, said in an interview:

The first Chinese restaurants opened in the Latin quarter in Paris. They existed mainly to satisfy a clientele of Chinese students who had come to study in France in the 1930s or the 1940s, and the odd few clients who had once travelled to Asia. It was rather an economical and everyday cuisine. The goal at the time was simply to get fed.<sup>10</sup>

Before this, Chinese cuisine, even though it is popular and enjoyed by many, had never been viewed as luxurious or elegant as, say, the cuisine of France or Japan. Despite of that, in the early 1900s, there were several high-quality Chinese restaurants in Paris, such as Chung Fat Lung (1920–1939) and Wan Hua (1921–1940).<sup>11</sup> However, with an increase in the number of Chinese restaurants, they reduced their prices (and with a low budget comes low quality)—so that they could compete in the market and still make profit.

In 2004, a public health report on the hygiene of Chinese restaurants, which investigation was conducted by G.I.R. (le group d'intervention regional founded in 2002) on Oct 19th and 20th and released in the media, ruined their reputation. The report described unclean restaurants infested with cockroaches; illegal workers; sub-standard work environments; food that had expired and that was kept in non-chilled chained storage facilities; and rotten, mouldy food waste being handled in non-hygienic ways.<sup>12</sup>

This report had a devastating impact on the Chinese food industry in France that has endured, and as a result many Chinese restaurants struggle to stay in business. Exceptions to this are LiLi in The Peninsula and Shang Palace in Shangri-La, both in Paris. Only Shang Palace has a Michelin star, which is why Samuel Lee and his restaurant are unique. The history of Chinese food and restaurants in Paris, and the overall criticism of Chinese food and restaurants, have played a large part in Samuel Lee's philosophy about Chinese cuisine and the way he deals with the matter of transculturation that is apparent from his interview. In this interview, Samuel depicts the difficulties caused by cultural differences and confrontations that he has experienced as a Chinese chef in Paris. And how he presents Chinese cuisine and transcend the barrier between Chinese culture and French culture.

### Post Colonialism

Since China has never been colonised, it is strange to talk about how China can reclaim its own culture in a postcolonial era. However, there are several postcolonial ideas that help us understand Chinese cuisine as being an example of transculturation in Paris, a place where French culinary culture is prevails and, indeed, dominant. Modernisation is a process of colonisation from the perspective of post colonialism. As Wang Ning states about Chinese culture:

[O]n the one hand, such a “colonization,” if it continues to exist, will help promote the revolution and modernization of Chinese culture and language so as to make Chinese literature gradually approach world literature. On the other hand, the national character and cultural identity of Chinese culture and language cannot but be obscured or even more or less lost. In this respect, the post

colonial strategy of opposition to mainstream Western culture is easily identical with the Chinese attempt to struggle against the imperial hegemony, both politically and economically as well as culturally.<sup>13</sup>

Wang's description indicates that two paradoxical attitudes have existed in terms of Western culture in the post-colonial era. On the one hand, modernisation has been justified as a way for China to equip itself so that it can compete with the West. On the other hand, Westernisation is a betrayal and denial of Chinese culture and its national and cultural identity. Since the loss of Chinese culture is the cost of modernization, postcolonial theory can then be used as a countermeasure to reclaim its culture.

### The Resurrection of Chinese Cuisine

Long before the 2004 public health report and the more recent Covid-19 outbreak at the Huanan wet market in Wuhan, Chinese food has long been the focus of criticism with direct comments on its lack of hygiene and strangeness, and as a way of belittling and insulting in times of war. This is expressed in the following song, “The Heathen Chinese is Peculiar—A Chanson for Canton.”

JOHN CHINAMAN a rogue is born,  
The laws of truth he holds in scorn [...].  
With their little pig-eyed and their large pig-tails,  
And their diet of rats, dogs, slugs, and snails,  
All seems to be game in the frying-pan  
Of that nasty feeder, JOHN CHINAMAN [...].<sup>14</sup>

John Meares is said to have been the first person to use the term “Chinaman”: it appeared which was on page 609 of the appendix of his book *Voyages Made in the Years 1788 and 1789 from China to the North West Coast of America*.<sup>15</sup> John, a common male name in English, was combined with Chinaman and became John Chinaman, which came to be “a generic name given to any Chinese person, especially male, in the early to mid-nineteenth century”, as first mentioned in the legal document *State of California vs. John Chinaman* from 1855.<sup>16</sup> Chinese people in this chanson are depicted in an abhorrently stereotypical way: eats and cooks all kinds of disgusting things.

The negative image of Chinese food has had a great impact on Chinese chefs. Samuel uses Chinese cuisine as a means to counteract public hostility and to reclaim the cultural identity of Chinese cuisine. Samuel mentioned this attitude, which he heard about from other Chinese chefs in his kitchen. This led to his philosophy on Chinese cuisine and his view that Chinese food is at a disadvantage in Paris. He commented on the 2004 public health report and the attitudes towards Chinese food in the media, and used a case happened in Hong Kong as an example:

I feel the media has been very critical about Chinese restaurants, be it for unknown reasons. Let's talk the criticism of Chinese restaurants in Hong Kong

in the 1990s as an example. The media criticised some Chinese chefs for being dishonest and only wanting to take shortcuts because they used baking powder or another similar tenderiser when preparing beef. However, what the media failed to mention was that: because customers loved tender meat, chefs that, did not have suppliers of imported US beef could only use food additives to prepare local beef.<sup>17</sup>

The function of baking powder in bread and tenderiser used on beef is to improve the quality of bread and the beef. However, the reasons for using baking powder in bread and tenderiser are not the same: bread requires baking powder to rise, but beef does not need tenderiser to become beef—besides, the law<sup>18</sup> states that not all food additives or enzymes, natural or chemical, are allowed in food products. Some food additives and enzymes that are permitted for use in bread production are not permitted in beef. The regulations on food additives and enzymes in Honk Kong and in Europe are alike.<sup>19</sup> Some food additives and enzymes are not permitted to use in meat, such as sulphur dioxide, which stops the oxidative process and retains the colour. Hence, some Cantonese chefs might have broken the law and deserved criticism. Samuel did not try to find excuses for these Cantonese chefs who broke the law, but wanted to point out:

I am not saying that using food additives is indisputable. I just want to point out that: it is strange that no one is curious about why the media directs its criticism so fiercely at Chinese restaurants because of the chef's use of meat tenderiser but do not criticise French bakeries when they use baking power in their baking.<sup>20</sup>

The main point Samuel is making about the attitudes toward Chinese restaurants are that they are unfair and biased, with undertones of prejudice, and fortified and magnified by the media. In both the 2004 hygiene report and the case in Hong Kong Samuel mentioned, even though not all Chinese cooks and restaurants broke the law, the report in the media led to the conclusion that all Chinese chefs were lawbreaker and had no morals. Such impression, which is enhanced by the stereotypical image of Chinese food in history, makes Chinese food and Chinese restaurants vulnerable and inferior in Paris. This kind of mind set is also represented in cultural interaction between culinary cultures.

During the interview, Samuel said that he had observed how some Chinese chefs tried to overcome what they felt to be prejudice towards Chinese cuisine:

To be attractive and competitive in the market, I have seen some chefs of Chinese restaurants make “French” Chinese food and imitate French dishes, the result of which is that causes Chinese food is no longer Chinese.<sup>21</sup>

Such French Chinese food and presentations, which are meant to make Chinese food more attractive and less inferior, are sometimes superficial. As Samuel continues:

Some European chefs may garnish a dish with three drops of balsamic vinegar, fifteen-year-old, twenty-five-year-old, and fifty-year-old, which together provide a flavour of multiple layers. A Chinese chef who had seen tried to imitate this by creating a food presentation with three drops of oyster sauce, which is not supposed to be used in this way and which will definitely not make the food more delicious.<sup>22</sup>

Trying to emulate European culinary traditions suggests an acceptance of the European culinary culture as superior, which then results in the Chinese culinary culture being viewed as inferior. Samuel illustrated the difficult situation in which Chinese chefs find themselves in Paris. When they choose to do as their predecessors did, then Chinese cuisine will continue to be held in low esteem and be undervalued. Yet when they imitate French cuisine, Chinese cuisine is considered subordinate and uncreative. This demonstrates an unbalanced power relationship between French and Chinese culinary cultures, and it is this that forms the basis of Samuel's philosophy about Chinese cuisine.

“Balance” is a word that Samuel uses to conclude his philosophy. Being a chef at the one Michelin star Chinese restaurant in a five-star hotel, he does not need to worry about finances and has more freedom to explore and experiment with Chinese cuisine in a French cultural context. On the other hand, he does not want to comply fully to French culinary culture and make French Chinese food that is both unauthentic and unbalanced. To restore the reputation of Chinese cuisine and to show what authentic Chinese cuisine is, Samuel reaffirms the fundamentals of Chinese cuisine.

My philosophy is to show the customers what I want to present and what real Chinese food is [...]. I want to amaze them with the simplest and the most common and fundamental dishes, such as a traditional Cantonese dish—sweet and sour pork. The simplest is often the most difficult [...]. There is no need for it to be peculiar and eye-catching. Innovations can be found in the fundamentals. First, you make everything fundamental the best, let people realise what authentic Chinese cuisine is. Then, you create something new to your cuisine. That is “balance”.<sup>23</sup>

Samuel's philosophy is a reaction to the negative image of Chinese cuisine from a Western perspective. The negative image is a mixture of misunderstanding, prejudice, and fear. Fortunately, according to Samuel, most French people do not have a negative attitude when it comes to Chinese cuisine; they simply do not understand the history of Chinese cuisine or the hostility towards the Chinese in general. The way to make French people learn about, or even love Chinese

cuisine is to show them what Chinese cuisine really is, and that is what Samuel's philosophy is all about.

### Conclusion

Rather than appropriating French cuisine, Samuel, as a representative of the Chinese culinary culture group, chose to re-establish the foundation and tradition of Chinese cuisine in the face of the challenges he met in Paris. However, he is not so stubborn as to be un-willing to change because he must, nonetheless, adapt to the culture of French cuisine, as he mentions in our interview:

It is common to show customers live fish in Hong Kong so they can see they are fresh and healthy before they are cooked; however, because of laws and transportation, this is impossible, although the restaurant in Paris has tried to include a fresh fish dish on its menu at Shang Palace. Therefore, I have to use frozen fish to make a fish dish that is as good as it was when I used fresh fish when I was in Hong Kong. All French chefs in Paris who are awarded Michelin stars use frozen fish, so you cannot make an exception.<sup>24</sup>

However, his strategy is not to mimic French cuisine; rather, he blends French cuisine with Chinese cuisine to create his own authentic Chinese dishes. The author had a chance to taste several of Samuel's dishes in which he used French ingredients. One example was "Caviar and Deep-Fried Oyster—No 2 Gillardeau" (French chefs do not deep-fry Gillardeau oyster), and "Three Peppers and Langoustine" which was stir-fried with huge fire (French chefs do not stir-fry it because langoustine is too delicate). In addition, "Chaozhou Master Stock, Foie Gras and Scallion Pancake", an appetiser, is a perfect combination of Cantonese and French cuisine. French foie gras is creamy and heavy, while the crunchy scallion pancake compliments its taste. The umami or savouriness of Chaozhou master stock sets the tone and makes this dish Cantonese, not French. Samuel also plans to make the traditional Cantonese dish Sweet-Sour Pork made with a traditional French ingredient, ris de veau. Samuel not only preserved the essence of Chinese cuisine but also successfully incorporates French cuisine into his culinary creation, which is a perfect example of his philosophical balance. It is what transculturality is supposed to be. Wolfgang states:

As transculturality pushes forward, diversity does not simply vanish, but its mode is altered. Diversity, as traditionally provided in the form of single cultures, does indeed disappear increasingly. Instead, however, a new type of diversity takes shape: the diversity of different cultures and forms of life, each arising from transcultural permeations and exhibiting a transcultural cut.<sup>25</sup>

Samuel has brought a new life to Chinese cuisine in Paris that has been undervalued and misunderstood for a long

time. In a successful transcultural movement, such as exemplified by Samuel's Chinese cuisine, Chinese culinary culture reclaims its identity and independent status, and cultures involved do not disappear; rather, they reappear with a new diversity and do not lose their identities or come to dominate over or be dominated by another culture.

### Notes

1. Fernando Ortiz was the first to use the term transculturation, he describes it as (") the process of mutual—even if asymmetrical—cultural influences and fusions between so-called "peripheral" and colonising cultures ("). See Arianna Dagnino, "Transcultural Writers and Transcultural Literature in the Age of Global Modernity." *Transnational Literature* 4, no. 2 (2012): 5.
2. Mary Louise Pratt discusses how the cultural identity of Europe is established through the contrast with the idea of (") the rest of the world (") (Pratt 4). Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes—Traveling Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 4.
3. In this paper, Chinese cuisine, of which there are eight major types, refers to Cantonese: this is because my interviewee, Samuel Lee, is from Hong Kong.
4. This interview will be referred to "Samuel's Interview" in this paper.
5. Wolfgang Welsch, "Transculturality: The Changing Form of Cultures Today," *Filozofski vestnik* 22, no. 2 (2001): 60, <https://ojs.zrc-sazu.si/filozofski-vestnik/article/view/3602>.
6. Welsch, "Transculturality," 61.
7. Welsch, "Transculturality," 67.
8. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, *Accounting for Taste: The Triumph of French Cuisine* (The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 3.
9. Iris Marion Young, "Five Faces of Oppression," in *Justice and The Politics of Difference*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011), 44–45.
10. Translated by the author. Alexis Ferenczi, "Une Histoire Accélérée de La Gastronomie Chinoise en France," *Vice*, May 19, 2017, <https://www.vice.com/fr/article/43g5aq/une-histoire-acceleree-de-la-gastronomie-chinoise-en-france>.
11. Alexis Ferenczi, "La Gastronomie Chinoise en France."
12. Ludovic Blecher, "Mardi et Mercredi, C'est Razzia dans Les Appart-raviolis Chinois," *Libération*, October 22, 2004, [https://www.liberation.fr/societe/2004/10/22/mardi-et-mercredi-c-est-razzia-dans-les-appart-raviolis-chinois\\_496922/](https://www.liberation.fr/societe/2004/10/22/mardi-et-mercredi-c-est-razzia-dans-les-appart-raviolis-chinois_496922/) and "23 Tonnes de Produits Avariés Saisies à Chinatown," *L'OBS*, October 26, 2004, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/societe/20041021.OBS9679/23-tonnes-de-produits-avaries-saisies-a-chinatown.html>. See also videos, "La Vérité sur Les Restaurants Chinois!" *Imimeo*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJsF7-8qKDY> and "La Sécurité Alimentaire: dans Les Arrières-cuisines de France—

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- Documentaire,” *Investigations et Enquêtes*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o5Zu0Lc9QFA>
13. Ning Wang, “Postcolonial Theory and the ‘Decolonisation’ of Chinese Culture,” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 28, no. 4 (October 1997): 42.
  14. It was written during the Second Opium War (1856–60). “The Heathen Chinese is Peculiar—A Chanson for Canton,” *Punch Magazine* (London: April 10, 1858): 151.
  15. John Meares, “Voyages Made in the Years 1788 and 1789 from China to The North West Coast of America,” Internet Archive, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://archive.org/details/voyagesmadeinthe011308mbp/page/n607/mode/2up?q=Chinaman>.
  16. “State of California vs. John Chinaman,” Online Archive of California, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c89k4htn/>.
  17. Samuel’s Interview.
  18. EUR-Lex, accessed March 20, 2022, [https://ec.europa.eu/food/safety/food-improvement-agents/additives/eu-rules\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/food/safety/food-improvement-agents/additives/eu-rules_en).
  19. “Food Legislation / Guidelines,” Centre for Food Safety, accessed March 20, 2022, [https://www.cfs.gov.hk/english/food\\_leg/food\\_leg\\_cl.html](https://www.cfs.gov.hk/english/food_leg/food_leg_cl.html) and “Preservatives in Food Regulation,” Hong Kong E-legislation, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.elegislation.gov.hk/hk/cap132BD>.
  20. Samuel’s Interview.
  21. Samuel’s Interview.
  22. Samuel’s Interview.
  23. Samuel’s Interview.
  24. Samuel’s Interview.
  25. Welsch, “Transculturality,” 80–81.
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