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Introduction: Special Issue - Chinese Food in New Settings

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Introduction

Where does European anthropological research on Chinese dietary culture currently stand? Our field research in China and our review of relevant academic output shows that there is a wide variety of current young scholars – only some of whom are sinologically and/or anthropologically informed or are competent in Chinese languages. Their research areas include migration and Chinese diaspora foodways, food skills, migrant nutrition strategies, and the transformation of Chinese consumption. With the liberalisation of the Chinese economy and ensuing economic reforms since the 1980s, an ever-increasing number of European restaurant chains and gastronomic institutions have attempted to open new branches in China, encouraging young Chinese scholars to work for them, allowing some of them to continue simultaneously pursuing their research. Whatever the focus of these young researchers, they are all concerned with the topic of skills: for instance, Chinese food skills, Chinese cooking skills, Chinese food consumption skills, Chinese food packaging and presentation skills, the developing of, and emphasis on, cook's skills for ever-changing local, national and international Chinese food production.

By sifting through current young European scholars' research and publications on Chinese dietary culture issues, it becomes clear that this work has developed around the existing research centres and networks based at SOAS, at the IEHCA and in Germany, which will be briefly described in the following section.

Some Centres and Networks on Chinese Dietary Culture Research in Europe

The European Food History and Culture Institute (Institut Européen d'Histoire et des Cultures de l'Alimentation, IEHCA) is a foundation under the aegis of the Institut de France located in the French city of Tours in the Loire valley. It was initially created in 2001 as a result of a French Ministry of Higher Education and Research initiative and later included collaboration from the François-Rabelais University in Tours with the political support from the Regional Council. Today, more than 400 researchers from all over the world are affiliated to its network and participate in the Institute's numerous activities. Only a few of its researchers are working on Chinese food history, sociology or anthropology. The Institute's scientific programme is defined by a European Scientific Committee composed of well-known scholars, who are social science or humanities specialists in food research. Its president is Bruno Laurioux, Professor in Medieval History at the University of Versailles – Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines. The Institute houses a specialist library on food studies containing about 5,000 volumes. The IEHCA is compiling an up-to-date bibliography on the subject of European food cultures with the support of the French National Library, the Mellon Foundation, and the Villa I Tatti (Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies). This research tool is a unique and comprehensive information source for researchers and the general public, which can be freely accessed on the IEHCA's website. The Institute's publication

programme includes the academic journal *Food & History*, the “Tables des Hommes” collection – a series of books published in collaboration with the François Rabelais University Press (Tours) and, more recently, a quarterly journal – *Les Cahiers de la Gastronomie* – published by Menu Fretin.¹

The SOAS Food Studies Centre at the University of London was founded in May 2013. It is an interdisciplinary centre dedicated to studying the political, economic and cultural dimensions of food – both historically and in the contemporary moment – from production, to exchange, to preparation and consumption. The Centre’s primary purposes are to promote research and teaching in the field of food studies at SOAS and to facilitate links between SOAS and other individuals and institutions who have an academic interest in food studies. The Centre has about 60 members and affiliated or associated scholars and is chaired by Prof. Harry West, Professor in Anthropology. Its Deputy Chair is Dr. Jakob Klein, a Lecturer in Social Anthropology and a sinologist and anthropologist whose main areas of study are Guangdong and Yunnan.²

The Kulinaristik-Forum: Netzwerk der Kultur- und Lebenswissenschaften e.v. (Forum of Culinary Studies: Non-profit Network of Culture and Life Sciences) was founded in 2008 to establish a network of German scholars and other interested people (such as cooks, gastronomists, food producers

¹ See also IEHCA, “Presentation Brochure,” www.iehca.eu (accessed on 2015/4/28).

² See SOAS, University of London, “SOAS Food Studies Centre,” <https://www.soas.ac.uk/foodstudies/> (accessed on 2015/4/28).

and retailers). It included Prof. Dr. Alois Wierlacher,³ formerly Professor of Intercultural Germanistics at the University of Bayreuth and co-founder of the German Academy for Culinary Studies (in 2000).⁴ Since 2009, the Kulinaristik-Forum has published the annual journal *Kulinaristik: Wissenschaft – Kultur – Praxis* (Culinary Studies: Science – Culture – Practice)⁵ which frequently addresses issues related to China.⁶ Prof. Wierlacher has had a long association with Qingdao University and founded the Arbeitskreis für interkulturelle Germanistik China (Intercultural German-Chinese Study Group), which undertakes research on culinary issues about China and with Chinese scholars. As a result of the group's conferences, publications and networking, a circle of scholars working on China has emerged against this broader institutional background. Since 2012, Prof. Stefan Kramer (sinologist at the University of Cologne), Prof. Peter Kupfer, (former Professor of Sinology in Gernersheim, specializing on wine in China) and Prof. Thomas Höllmann (sinologist at the University of Munich) have been planning an international conference on Chinese dietary culture. In preparation for this,

³ See “Prof. Dr. A. Wierlacher: Zur Person,” (2012), <http://wierlacher.de/person.htm> (accessed on 2015/4/28).

⁴ See German Academy for Culinary Studies, “Geschichte,” (2012), <http://www.kulinaristik.de/uber-die-akademie/geschichte/> (accessed on 2015/4/28).

⁵ The journal *Kulinaristik* evolved from the former *Zeitschrift für Kulinaristik. Palatum. Wissenschaft – Kultur – Gastlichkeit* (Journal of Culinary Studies. Palatum. Science – Culture – Hospitality).

⁶ See Kulinaristik-Forum, “Zeitschrift,” <http://www.kulinaristik.net/zeitschrift.html> (accessed on 2015/4/28); e.g.: Liu Wei, “Der runde Esstisch in China: Zur Pragmatik chinesischer Gastlichkeit,” *Palatum* 2 (2010): 41-3; Merle Schatz, “Zuckermalerei in China,” *Kulinaristik* 5 (2013): 24-8.

Thomas Höllmann founded the Arbeitskreis Essen und Trinken in China (Study Group on Eating and Drinking in China), which first met in Munich in November 2012 and met again in May 2013 to discuss the topic of commodity change in Chinese consumer culture.⁷

Three Young Scholars' Contributions to Studies of Chinese Dietary Culture

The three contributions in this volume reflect three different strands of Chinese culinary anthropology which are evolving in the young generation of European China scholars.

Leo Pang gained his first degree in International Studies from the University of Technology in Sydney in 2003, and then continued his research in Gastronomy at the University of Adelaide and in anthropology at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. He is currently studying for his PhD on Ecological Food Entrepreneurs in China under the supervision of Jacob Klein at SOAS in London.

Leo Pang's contribution concerns his ongoing interest in Chinese diaspora cuisine, which has developed along various paths and kinds of Chinese migration all across the world. The many roles that food play have been investigated: as an expression of culinary upbringing or culinary

⁷ See Kulinaristik-Forum, "Einladung, China-Workshop zur Kulinaristik: Produktwandel in der chinesischen Konsumkultur, 24.-25.5.2013," http://www.kulinaristik.net/fileadmin/user_upload/PDFs/Externe_Veranstaltungen/2013-05-24bis25_Einladung_Workshop_Produktwandel.pdf (accessed on 2015/5/4); Thomas Höllman 2010.

attachment to home areas;⁸ as compromise foodscapes in multiethnic culinary contexts;⁹ as memory food for first and second generation migrants;¹⁰ as food for some non-Chinese migrant groups – like Jewish people in New York;¹¹ or the meaning of certain Chinese dishes which have evolved under specific local conditions – like noodles cooked by Chinese people at Ramadan in Zanzibar, as Elisabeth Hsu has described.¹² Wherever Chinese food has appeared and does appear in diaspora contexts outside China, it reflects and reveals something about the socio-technical or politico-economic situations in the homelands – be it technical changes like the innovation of the rice cooker;¹³ a growth in self-consciousness like the foodscape developments in the People’s Republic of China during the last decade;¹⁴ or developments in China itself – like the “meatification

⁸ E.g. Yu-jen Chen, “Bodily Memory and Sensibility: Culinary Preferences and National Consciousness in the Case of ‘Taiwanese Cuisine,’” *Taiwan Journal of Anthropology* 8 (2010): 163-96.

⁹ E.g. David Y. H. Wu, “All You Can Eat Buffet: The Evolution of Chinese Cuisine in Hawaii,” *Journal of Chinese Dietary Culture* 4 (2008): 1-24.

¹⁰ E.g. Sally Chan, “Sweet and Sour: The Chinese Experience of Food,” in *Food in the Migrant Experience*, edited by Anne Kershen (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 172-95.

¹¹ E.g. Adam Chandler, “Why American Jews Eat Chinese Food on Christmas,” *The Atlantic* Dec. 23, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/12/why-american-jews-eat-chinese-food-on-christmas/384011/>.

¹² Film, Elisabeth Hsu, dir., and John Newman, ed. 2008. “Making noodles in Zanzibar,” 4.46 mins.

¹³ Yoshiko Nakano, *Where There Are Asians, There Are Rice Cookers: How ‘National’ Went Global via Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009).

¹⁴ E.g. Yunxiang Yan, “Of Hamburger and Social Space: Consuming McDonald’s in Beijing,” in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, edited by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (London: Routledge, 2013), 449-71.

of China.”¹⁵

Leo Pang’s contribution to this burgeoning research field on Chinese diaspora food addresses the culinary migration aspect which reflects China’s new role as a global player. A few years ago, Chinese food in diaspora contexts represented reluctant integration,¹⁶ cheap streetside wok-food, and culinary compromise.¹⁷ In contrast, today there is a new trend – the self-confident rise of Chinese food becoming a high-end product in chic restaurants in cities like Sydney, Australia. Such “repackaging of Chinese Food” and the concomitant re-professionalisation of Chinese diaspora food may become a leading topic in studies on diaspora Chinese food in the coming years.

While Chinese diaspora food for receiving nations has always received scholarly attention, since the earliest Chinese migration, western attention has rarely considered endogenous Chinese migrant food issues. Judith Farquhar’s wonderful contribution “Food, Eating and the Good Life”¹⁸ is one exception, giving an idea of the agency to be witnessed in such circumstances. Ever since China’s social, economic and technical

¹⁵ Mindi Schneider, “Modern Meat, Industrial Swine: China and the Remaking of Agri-Food Politics in the 21st Century” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2013).

¹⁶ J. A. G. Roberts, *China to Chinatown: Chinese Food in the West* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002); David Y. H. Wu and Chee-beng Tan, eds., *Changing Chinese Foodways in Asia* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2001); David Y. H. Wu and Sidney C. H. Cheung, eds., *The Globalisation of Chinese Cuisine* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2002).

¹⁷ E.g. Françoise Sabban, “Forms and Evolution of Chinese Cuisine in France,” in *Regionalism and Globalism Chinese Culinary Culture*, edited by David Holm (Taiwan: Foundation of Chinese Dietary Culture, 2009), 369-80.

¹⁸ Judith Farquhar, “Food, Eating and the Good Life,” in *Handbook of Material Culture*, edited by Christopher Tilley et al. (London: Sage, 2006), 154-61.

transformation began in the 1980s, an ever-increasing number of people – especially the young – have been leaving rural areas to find work in the cities. This huge population displacement has resulted in all sorts of culinary issues, including the evolution of canteens and cheap food industries in areas of dense migration, the emergence of bricolage technologies for temporal cooking in labour market contexts,¹⁹ and the expected influence on – or even re-making of – local culinary cityscapes by the mass migration of people from certain areas, bringing their cooking skills and their taste preferences.

Lena Kaufmann has studied anthropology and sinology at Berlin Free University, the Università La Sapienza in Rome and Shanghai Jiaotong University. She is currently writing her anthropology PhD on “Skills in Migration: Everyday Life Strategies of Chinese Rice Farmers” at Zurich University. Lena’s paper addresses the migration of people and skills in relation to food, studying migrants from Anhui who run a *mala tang* noodle-shop in Shanghai. The migrants pool their resources, skills, abilities and knowledge through specific – almost secretive – channels of transmission. By sharing their recipes and knowledge of ingredients, the migrants are able to help their kinfolk establish stalls to trade successfully. This article provides a first impression about various dimensions of the everyday shifts in food landscapes brought about by mass inner migration

¹⁹ Ngai Pun, “Gendering the Dormitory Labor System: Production, Reproduction, and Migrant Labor in South China,” *Feminist Economics* 13 (2007): 239-58; Lena Kaufmann, *Mala tang – Alltagsstrategien ländlicher Migranten in Shanghai* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011).

in China.

Finally, Aël Théry has taken a different approach. Aël Théry began to study Chinese in Taiwan, then at the INALCO (Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales) while she got a professional training in cooking, technologies, catering and hotel management in France. She gained her Master's degree in anthropology at the EHESS (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales), and is currently completing her doctoral studies, lecturing and researching at the Institut Paul Bocuse of Shanghai. Her paper is more of a first research note. The focus of Aël Théry's research interest is the kitchen, understood as a socio-technical system and a highly professional universe, a space where work and production strategies unfold, scheduled by manual or automatized cooking processes and the sensual transformation of matter and texture over time. The crucial role in this is played by a chef who uses technical and material skills as well as learnt operation techniques to orchestrate the production of food and flavours. She also provides the vision and representation of the culinary ideal food within alimentary landscapes which may reach far beyond the particular kitchen.

If we read Aël Théry's research note against the complexity of Chinese diaspora or migration food, it becomes clear that viewing it from the perspective of gastronomes, chefs, connoisseurs and consumers will help us to gain a deeper understanding of the rich contexts which lie beyond the local, regional, national or glocal/global serving, production and packaging of today's Chinese foods.

Comparing these three papers sheds an interesting light on each

author's topic. When they were asked to write a piece for the *Journal of Chinese Dietary Culture*, without knowing each other, our three contributors chose to address the issue of professional Chinese cuisine practiced in restaurants: Leo Pang in the Australian city of Sydney, Lena Kaufmann in Shanghai and Aël Thery in Taiwan. They could have been focused on any other food practices, such as family cooking or recent dietary evolutions in China, but restaurant cuisine attracted the attention of them all. This suggests that Chinese professional cuisine is considered by them, and maybe by everyone, as the *true* Chinese cooking tradition, because it is the result of the accumulation of fundamental and technical professional knowledge over the passing of time. This is also true for the lower-class *mala tang* fast food restaurant studied by Lena Kaufmann, as shown in greater detail in her paper.

Knowledge comprises both the corpus of visible techniques and skills required for a cooking procedure, and the implicit and internalized thinking that does not need to be openly expressed. This knowledge provides a way to express an unsurpassable manual virtuosity, which has developed into a spectacular show in some touristic noodle restaurants in Beijing or noodle stalls in Xi'an. It is also intended to meet consumer demands that are not always openly expressed, but are nevertheless expected.

Our young scholars based their work on a serious anthropological survey conducted in restaurants. Lena Kaufmann studies a kind of cheap fast-food restaurant that produces only one type of dish – a very hot spiced noodle soup with skewers presented on the bowl. Leo Pang is interested in

the novel style of Chinese cooking which is produced in new, upmarket Chinese restaurants owned by a younger generation of recent migrants from the People's Republic of China, who were trained in professional catering schools before their arrival in Australia. Aël Théry followed the technical work implemented in a Cantonese restaurant in Taipei in order to analyse the different linkages of the whole cooking process.

As well as their common choice of subject area, there are other interesting similarities in these three papers, even though their authors' observations are guided by different experiences and purpose. They all have addressed some important issues that underpin their main topic. The first is, of course, the importance of mastering the technical *intelligence* needed to work as a professional chef in a Chinese restaurant. The second issue is the various problems caused by migration and the ability to find a job or establish a restaurant abroad or after a migration into a Chinese city from another province. Third is the question of the authenticity of a cooking tradition, and its resulting identity concern for a group or population.

Kaufmann and Pang focus on the link between migration and skills, showing that it is essential for migrants to have cooking qualifications and knowledge in order to achieve their goals in this kind of business activity. Nowadays in Australia, it is crucial for chefs to have professional training in order to meet the expectations of increasingly more demanding customers. The days when newly-arrived immigrants could open Chinese restaurants and make a living without any cooking qualifications or experience, by providing low-quality food to their emigrated compatriots

or poor Australian clients have long gone. In theory, there should be less need for these skills with internal migration from Anhui to Shanghai to set up a kind of cheap, fast food restaurant. But, in fact, it is as important as in the migration from one country to another, because the Shanghainese eaters are expecting to eat a specific kind of regional food that has to be made in a particular way. Théry suggests that the migration issue does not raise any particular problem, however the chef she studied is a native of Hong Kong who has to prove to his clients that *his* culinary art is respectful of a supposed Cantonese tradition. In fact, when Théry focuses on the importance of mastering cooking skills, this qualification works as evidence of the genuine Cantonese tradition that founded the reputation of this restaurant, which has a positive impact on its commercial success and which is expected by its customers.

Reputation, as represented by the clients' expectations, is crucial for ensuring these restaurants' success in their various cultural and social settings. This is reflected in Pangs paper too which shows that the new trend in Chinese restaurants in Australia required an improved change of image to meet the 21st century. These new migrants, who are more educated than their predecessors, realise that, as well as providing a new style of cuisine, they also have to produce new decor and invent new forms of presentation that would create an imaginary version of old China that would appeal to their Australian customers. Symbols and images are of primary importance in catering activities, creating a kind of constructed authenticity expressed in a specific way in different contexts, so this also matters for the low-class restaurant described by Lena Kaufmann.

Reading these papers one cannot fail to be impressed by the deep meaning of this constructed authenticity, which directly influences the cuisine's definition of each restaurant. This concern for authenticity, which is not always expressed by a specific discourse, can be assumed through the various attitudes of staff at every level in these restaurants.

The authenticity in the *mala tang* fast food noodle shop studied by Kaufmann is suggested by the owner who pretends to possess a secret spice mixture that gives the noodle-boiling broth a unique and genuine taste. Authenticity is also implicitly implied through the very precise and detailed work processes of the cooking and serving staff, to ensure that every individual customer is satisfied by a perfect noodle bowl of individually selected ingredients which corresponds to their taste, health, economic situation, and food preferences. It is important in China in highly-competitive environment to prove to generally low-income customers that they are being served a real Sichuanese noodle bowl, either when they eat on the spot, or when it is delivered. Strategies for delivering a bowl of noodles that is still hot are crucial.

Leo Pang's study of restaurants in Australia shows that the evolution of Chinese cuisine towards a rather more elaborate and genuine form of cuisine is connected with economic reforms in China since the 1980s that have permitted increased migration from China and which opened the country to Australian tourists who have now become the wealthy customers for Chinese cuisine in their home country.

Théry writes that the Hong Kong chef working in a Cantonese restaurant in Taiwan considers himself an ambassador of Cantonese

cuisine. In contrast to the examples given by Kaufmann and Pang, even though the chef fulfilled his job perfectly on a technical level and so could demonstrate his art without speaking, he still wanted to express his own conceptions and insist on what Cantonese cuisine should be.

In conclusion, these three papers document the emerging trend of a kind of national pride that is based on the concrete and spiritual mastering of culinary techniques, as if cooking skills, kitchen images and cuisine authenticity were natural evidence of Chineseness. They also depict Chinese modernity as well as individual and bodily orientation²⁰ in a rapidly, ever-changing everyday life.

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Mareile Flitsch (Völkerkundemuseum Universität Zürich)

²⁰ On migration and the issue of a culinarily-bodily re-orientation of migrants, see Mareile Flitsch, “Hesitant Hands on Changing Tables: Negotiating Dining Patterns in Diaspora Food Culture Transfer,” *Asiatische Studien Études Asiatiques* 65 (2011): 969-84.

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