

# The Migration of Experts and Savoir-faire

The Case of French Cuisine Professionals in Shanghai

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**ABSTRACT:** This article focuses on the practice of French cuisine in Shanghai and questions the permanence of this professional niche. It combines an anthropological approach to culinary techniques with a sociological approach to workforce migration, tracing the ways in which the discourse and practices of chefs and maîtres d'hôtel working in French cuisine's restaurants employ forms of ethnocultural and technical legitimacy. The case of Shanghai, a city undergoing rapid transformation in its modes of consumption, provides a clear illustration of the shifts that have occurred over the last ten years in the hierarchy of Western migrants and Chinese locals: the symbolic and material privileges offered to the former are beginning to disappear, and professional recognition is increasingly becoming based on savoir-faire and a strong work ethic.

**KEYWORDS:** China, French cuisine, migration, knowledge transfer, training.

## Introduction

This article looks at the passing-on of a culinary model, at the individuals enacting this transfer of knowledge (or *savoir-faire*), and more specifically at the practice of French cuisine in Shanghai, examining the discourses and working methods of both French/Western and Chinese/non-Western individuals within this professional niche. A large number of professionals in this sector are foreigners, for whom migration is a part of their career strategy. Whether they are business owners, or have been recruited by luxury hotel chains, or are working as tutors in culinary schools, they all find themselves at the top of their establishment's hierarchy and are therefore responsible for passing on a culinary model and the *savoir-faire* that goes with it.

However, developments within the French cuisine sector, coupled with local developments in the social, economic, and political spheres, are beginning to undermine this hierarchical structure in the workplace and in the sector as a whole. As one of our Taiwanese interviewees told us, being French or white is no longer enough to grant you privileged status in the eyes of Chinese colleagues and customers: "Now, people know the truth." The clientele is more knowledgeable, and exoticism is gradually disappearing, giving way to a demand for greater expertise, where quality and innovation matter more than appearance.

We will look more specifically at gastronomic (also gourmet) and café cuisines, two fields in which French identity is a valuable asset. We intend to analyse the ways in which "nationalised" French *savoir-faire* is championed, by questioning the notion of expertise. How has this *savoir-faire*, so respected by professionals and consumers alike, created opportunities for North-South migration and a privileged professional niche? In what ways do the learning and adoption of the techniques and work ethic specific to a given sector serve to internationalise knowledge and skills, thereby undermining the presumed legitimacy of French experts? The

hypothesis is that, due to the passing-on of expertise, highly qualified professional positions hitherto reserved for expatriates are disappearing, to the benefit of local experts.

In this article, we also intend to combine the field of migration studies, more precisely migration studies of Western professionals, with an anthropological approach to culinary techniques. The article will examine documentation from two main sources: firstly, observation notes taken during anthropological field research at the Institut Paul Bocuse (IPB) <sup>(2)</sup> in Shanghai from July 2013 to December 2014, where Aël Théry worked as coordinator of the training and recruitment programme for Chinese students—her dual role of coordinator and researcher as "participating ethnographer" allowed her to share the life of a Shanghai-based French cookery school. Secondly, we will examine a sample group of interviews that reflect the diversity of the sector. At establishments serving French cuisine, <sup>(3)</sup> we carried out interviews with chefs (kitchen chefs), sous-chefs (second kitchen chefs), maîtres d'hôtel, head waiters, managers, business owners, and more generally qualified staff, of which 20 were male and four female—testament to the fact that the catering industry is still very much a masculine milieu. This article focuses on the discourses of professionals who are either French or come from a French culinary background (one Swiss, one Belgian) (20 interviews). In addition, there are interviews with two French speakers from Taiwan and Colombia who studied at the Institut Paul Bocuse in Lyon, as well as two

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2. Names have been altered throughout to preserve anonymity.
3. In 2013, the French General Consulate's website listed 38 establishments providing French cuisine, ranging from the modest to the more upscale. However, as the interviewees confirm, the size of the French cuisine sector in Shanghai is hard to determine due to its high turnover rate. We carried out our research in districts where these restaurants were most common, such as the French Concession district and the Bund, across some 23 restaurants, bakeries, patisseries, and schools.

managers, one from China and one from Taiwan.<sup>(4)</sup> These latter interviews offer a contrasting perspective and enable us to plan out the direction of the second stage of our research, which will look more specifically at Chinese professionals within the French cuisine sector.<sup>(5)</sup>

## Theoretical framework

Gastronomy—encompassing the production and preparation process as well as the consumption of the end product—is a topic that has been covered from a variety of anthropological standpoints. On Chinese soil in particular, historians and anthropologists have (albeit not exhaustively) taken an interest in the construction of a food system by carrying out large-scale chronological studies (Anderson 1988; Zhao 2015) in the systematisation of culinary habits and techniques<sup>(6)</sup> and in the construction of an identity narrative through cuisine (Sabban 1996). Given that cooking is by its very nature an activity that involves combining ingredients, “it constitutes a perfect cultural melting pot” (Sabban 2011). The role played by cooking and its related discursive practices—for there is no gastronomy without discourse (Ory 1998)—in weaving the fabric of a nation is approached via the concepts of cross-pollination (Amselle 1990), creolisation (Tibère and Poulain 2000), and *bricolage* (Bastide 1970) in order to understand the process of assimilation, appropriation, acculturation, the influence of products, and the sharing (or otherwise) of *savoir-faire*. Finally, sociological works on professional cooking—which differs from domestic cooking in its organisation, gender distribution, and symbolism—analysing the respect granted to particular jobs (Fine 1996; Mériot 2002), and the discourse championing cultural heritage (Leschnizer 2010), will be used to support our analysis.

Special attention will be paid to the technical and discursive practices involved in the apprenticeship process, to the transmission and practice of the craft and, consequently, to interactions between the professionals who (in principle) possess the skills, and the students who must learn to master them. When a culinary style is transposed into a new setting—that is, French cuisine into China—it is instructive to analyse the resulting discourse and the ways in which traditions and culinary identity are constructed, taught, and translated. In the context of China, a country that has only recently opened up to foreigners and foreign culture (dating from Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms at the end of the 1970s), and a city such as Shanghai, where entrepreneurship and consumption have developed very rapidly, Westerners have been able to find a professional niche in (re)introducing and passing on the techniques and culture of French cuisine. This is why a study on the passing-on and practice of the craft, and especially on the discourse that stems from this, necessarily intersects with sociological studies of migration.

Castels and Miller (1998) have described how, since the 1980s, international migrant workers have tended to cluster at opposite ends of the labour market: that is, occupying the most qualified and the least qualified jobs (p. 167). Studies have for the most part examined cases of migrant workers in the lowest qualified roles, and it is only in recent years that highly qualified migrant workers have attained greater visibility. Aside from analyses that explore the “brain drain” and international competition in favour of qualified immigration, studies that examine the career paths and views of these qualified migrants have been few and far between.<sup>(7)</sup> As a result, the migration of Westerners for work-related reasons has retained a relatively low profile, especially since their movements were understood within the framework of expatriation or “lifestyle” (Lundström 2014, p. 3). The growing

body of work on the migration of Westerners has made it possible to take a more nuanced position on the phenomenon. Firstly, migratory dynamics have been observed where journeys from South to North and from North to South intersect with increasing frequency. Secondly, some publications are calling into question the correlation between the North-South migration of Westerners and the migration of qualified individuals, thereby also calling into question the process that causes migrants to cluster at the two opposing ends of the jobs market. Several researchers have taken an interest in English-speaking Westerners who convert their linguistic capital into symbolic prestige and economic capital in Asian countries (Lan 2011; Farrer 2014). Their linguistic asset increases in value once they have moved, but is not equivalent to a high level of qualification. In addition, jobs in the sector of the hospitality trade studied here do not precisely match the image and definition of highly qualified work.<sup>(8)</sup> However, some individuals within the sector are able to master complex techniques and have acquired skills in management and team-building that bring them the same social recognition as would a master’s degree. For other less qualified individuals, following the example of numerous English teachers, migration offers an opportunity to translate their ethnocultural capital into social, economic, and symbolic capital.

Finally and most importantly, studies on the migration of supposedly qualified Westerners allow us to explore power dynamics through the lens of whiteness studies and postcolonialism. Introducing the notion of “whiteness” to migration studies provides a means of analysing the ways in which skin colour can constitute a form of institutionalised cultural capital that can be converted into other forms of capital in the course of the migration process (Lundström 2014, p. 13), helping to uphold an unequal power dynamic (Fechter and Walsh 2010) and a system of privilege inherited from the colonial era that influences the formation of subjectivities (Leonard 2010). According to Farrer, who studied the preference in Shanghai for non-Chinese migrant workers in three sectors (teaching and research, management, and the restaurant industry): “The knowledge and assets that count are not limited to technical expertise, but also include the ethnic, cultural and gender attributes of the individuals concerned” (Farrer 2014, p. 404). In the case of French cuisine, it seems that the chefs, *maîtres d’hôtel*, and other professionals in the sector do indeed take advantage of their ethnic capital (being French) and convert it into a cultural capital (an intimate knowledge of French cuisine) that imbues them with legitimacy, or even a certain aura within the sector where they work. The studies have shown

4. We carried out semi-structured interviews, beginning with the subject’s life story and supplemented by some more precise questions on working conditions, relationships within the team, the construction of a professional network, customer relations, the reputation of French cuisine, and plans for the future.
5. It should be noted that while the vast majority of financial support involves Chinese or Taiwanese investors, Chinese chefs are outnumbered by chefs from countries with a French culinary tradition. This article focuses on professionals in the field, and not on investors.
6. An article by Françoise Sabban (2012) exhaustively presents the works written both in and outside of China.
7. Anne-Catherine Wagner’s study on France (1998) is a notable exception.
8. Each country’s immigration policy has its own definition of what constitutes a highly qualified worker. The most common criterion is that they must hold at least one university (bachelor’s) degree, but some shorter qualified training courses are also recognised. Furthermore, in some countries the level of salary and number of years’ experience are used as additional criteria (OECD 2009). In 2012 the Exit and entry administration law was introduced, revising the law of 1985 that was contradicted by a number of regulations and political measures (Liu 2011). Since 2013, this new law has been aimed at reducing undocumented immigration and work (Zou 2017), and as a result may target certain employees in the hospitality sector. On the other hand, other hospitality professionals will be able to benefit from a new system certifying foreigners’ expertise (a points system that ranks applicants A, B, or C) that was implemented by the State Administration of Foreign Experts Affairs and was in its trial phase until March 2017.

how “Western” is often understood as synonymous with “white”<sup>(9)</sup> and how, within each historical and local—one might even add professional—context, a different image of Westerners can be found. In the case of French cuisine, for instance, which is widely considered to set the benchmark for all types of Western cuisine, anyone from a Western culinary background can be justifiably labelled a professional in French cuisine, especially Latin Americans, who in this sector are seen as Western, but in many other contexts are not. The ability to profit from one’s “French capital” is not the preserve of French nationals alone; it can be used by any Westerner who has trained at a French culinary school (preferably in France or Switzerland).

The data collected in Shanghai make it possible to confirm the existence of power dynamics linked to the exploitation of “French capital.” We will therefore analyse the material and symbolic privileges that this ethnocultural capital creates. However, we will also demonstrate that the French cuisine sector has, within a relatively short period of around ten years, witnessed a decrease in these privileges and therefore a decrease in the power dynamic between migrants and locals. The anthropology of professional interactions and of knowledge transfer in Shanghai’s French restaurants shows how both discourse and practice are paying ever-greater attention to technical mastery and a strong work ethic as opposed to ethnocultural factors when defining borders in the world of cuisine.

### **French cuisine in Shanghai: Historical and geographical context**

Of all the many variants of Western gastronomy, French cuisine is considered the benchmark in terms of how a kitchen team and the basic techniques should be organised. French cuisine’s prestigious status is also widely accepted in China, and Chinese textbooks on Western culinary theory bear witness to this (Lai 2014).

In China, French cuisine is not a new phenomenon. Since the late nineteenth century, restaurants serving classic French cuisine have operated in Shanghai, in the district now known as the International Settlement. From the 1920s onward, restaurants inside international hotels gained the upper hand under the supervision of foreign chefs. In the 1930s, cafés began to open up—including the Red House, run by an Italian. During China’s revolution, gourmet cuisine was criticised as a “bourgeois” practice and went through a fallow period. The economic reform policies that were implemented in the 1980s brought about a steady increase in consumer spending, but also in leisure activities. Among these leisure activities, fine food became more widely available and diverse, making conditions more favourable for a new wave of immigrant chefs, for the sharing of ideas, and for increased provision of qualified culinary training. It was in the first decade of the new millennium that the market for foreign food began to boom in Shanghai, growing in a geographical pattern according to the use and status of each neighbourhood.

For the most part, the Bund and the International Settlement are the places to find gourmet restaurants with kitchens run by foreign chefs from the best schools, and which appear in international guides such as *The World’s 50 Best Restaurants* and the Michelin Guide, or are mentioned by websites such as *Dianping* (点评) or *Dining City* (鼎食聚), or *That’s Shanghai* and *Smart Shanghai* (for foreigners). The old French Concession district is a haven for semi-gourmet restaurants, but also a large number of brasseries, cafés, and bakeries and patisseries. Some of these appear in the culinary guides, and are mostly run by entrepreneurs who operate with a relative

degree of independence. Fashionable new areas such as Pudong are home to restaurants in respected hotels, and to a handful of brasserie-bistros for a white-collar clientele from the business district. Finally, brasseries and shops selling imported goods are beginning to open up in the residential areas where foreigners tend to live, often a short distance from international schools.

The sample group of interviews also reflects the diversity of the individual migrant experience and the changing trends within the sector in Shanghai. While some may see Shanghai as a city of temporary opportunity, for others it is a permanent destination. Some people are betting on establishing a loyal, high-quality clientele in the long term, while others are opting for short-term financial benefit.

### **A narrowing ethnic divide in the workforce: The material and symbolic privileges of French professionals**

At first glance, the allocation of roles among kitchen and waiting staff in restaurants appears to show a hierarchy where Chinese workers are confined to the lower ranks, or occasionally to a role as go-between, helping the chef<sup>(10)</sup> to communicate with the rest of the team. Beyond this hierarchical division of labour—which is gradually disappearing—the real distinction between Western professionals and locals is visible in the privileges they receive: material privileges such as salaries and other benefits stipulated in their employment contracts, and symbolic privileges such as overrating their experience or certain forms of extraterritoriality, thereby according special status to migrant experts.

#### **Material privileges**

Without a doubt, the most widely recognised material privilege is the famous “expat package,” a list of benefits that come with an expatriate contract: these include extra money for children and partners, accommodation, social security, subsidised transport costs, and so on. This type of contract has only ever applied to individuals working in respected hotels, and in some cases at high-end restaurants when the establishments are first opening and a team is being formed. Several interviews indicated that expatriate contracts are becoming increasingly rare, making room for more local contracts—and that in general they are only given to the chefs.

They don’t want to hire foreign chefs any more. They bring on the chef when they open, and after that they try to thank him, and then if another Chinese person can do the job, all the better. In terms of salary, but also in terms of internal development (...). Now, at the foreign hotels they are offering single-person packages, so these days, if you have a family it’s not ideal.<sup>(11)</sup>

9. Henceforth we prefer to use the term “Western” rather than “white” because a discussion of the use of racial categories is beyond the remit of this article.

10. We use the term “chef” to designate the person who is effectively in charge of a kitchen. Responsibilities can vary depending on the size of team and type of restaurant, but the chef’s work consists of devising menus, overseeing purchases, and organising and running the team. In large kitchens, they are assisted by a head of operations—but only in hotels—and a sous-chef, followed by a number of chefs de partie at each station in the kitchen, which again varies depending on the type of restaurant.

11. Head chef at a traditional bistro, French, Shanghai Former French Concession district, 15 November 2016.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the number of Westerners working on highly advantageous contracts remains relatively high within culinary schools, indicating that demand for tutors remains significant, as we shall see in the third section of this article. On a more immediate level, material privileges are still clearly visible in the form of wage disparity. In the case of some chefs at major hotels and tutors at culinary schools, salaries can be up to ten times higher than that of the Chinese employee directly below them in the hierarchy (sous-chef or assistant tutor). However, these two instances aside, it is widely agreed that the wage gap seems to be gradually shrinking, or even disappearing altogether. Today, the position and related responsibilities are the most important criteria when setting a salary. Westerners who are still occasionally hired to bring a "French touch" to a restaurant are finding that the salaries they are offered are becoming less and less attractive. This levelling of wages is explained by a French head pastry chef, working for a Chinese company that has opened several restaurants and boutiques in Shanghai:

Compared to other places, we try to keep it balanced (...). A Chinese manager cannot earn a lower salary than a French waiter (...). The basic salary is 8,000 or 9,000 *yuan*, which, if you include various bonuses, can go up to 10,000 or even 12,000 *yuan*. That's equivalent to 1,400 euros, not counting accommodation. The days of Eldorado are long gone, especially for people who don't speak Chinese. Now, demand in China is so high that there are jobs at 10,000 or 12,000 *yuan*. The more the expats accept it, the lower the salaries get.<sup>(12)</sup>

Nevertheless, the salaries and working environment remain highly attractive to some young French professionals working in hospitality, such as G., aged 24, who came to Shanghai in 2015 and holds a technical degree in hospitality as well as a degree from a business and management school. He had considered three "young markets": Brazil, Dubai, and China.

To me, China seemed like a land of opportunity, where there were no established regulations and where you had to start from scratch.<sup>(13)</sup>

Three days after arriving, thanks to a local network of foreign professionals, he found a management position at a bistro. He knows that his employment is somewhat precarious, but he stresses that he earns three times more than his Chinese colleagues (16,000 *yuan*) and intends to double his salary within the next five years. But above all, aside from the material benefits, G. insists that his position also provides some valuable social recognition:

[One advantage] is also my career. I would not have been able to get a job like this at the age of 25. In France they don't trust you; they don't take risks.<sup>(14)</sup>

### Symbolic privileges

It would appear that the material advantages over local employees are shrinking, but they are also shrinking in comparison to the migrant's country of origin, as Shanghai's cost of living begins to catch up with other global cities around the world. But Shanghai still remains extremely attractive in terms of the career opportunities on offer. A number of young interviewees also describe the tendency in China for young people to assume roles of greater responsibility, despite some admitting that they don't really have

the requisite experience. Career progression has been, and still is, faster than in France. It's certainly true for this young head pastry chef who, at 27, has a professional qualification and a few years' experience in Michelin-starred restaurants:

We get positions higher up, and we develop more quickly. You're ten years ahead of where you would be with a job in France. I was head pastry chef as soon as I arrived. I manage four shops and I'm involved in setting up a central kitchen (...). You are given recognition that, in the same profession, you would never get in France. You're not seen as a mere baker, but as a chef.<sup>(15)</sup>

This statement is interesting because it highlights that respect stems not only from the responsibilities granted to relatively young professionals, but also from the prestigious image that others grant them. They are not merely "bakers"; in Shanghai, more than in France, they can bask in the glory of French cuisine and be seen as "chefs." But this symbolic privilege that grants them access to highly-prized jobs despite a lack of experience is not the sole preserve of French nationals or Westerners. This young Taiwanese man who trained in France makes the same observation:

It's great for me, because I'm still young. In Taiwan or Japan, I would never have had this opportunity. Here, they trust me. I'm an executive chef.<sup>(16)</sup>

Similarly, Chinese workers who trained at French culinary schools are soon able to access management roles. This would appear, above all, to indicate a lack of staff in China's Western restaurant sector, rather than a habit of offering special treatment to Western experts.

Furthermore, some elements of these symbolic advantages could be seen to resemble the extraterritorial agreements of the colonial period, which decreed that expatriates were exempt from local regulations. In terms of migration, symbolic privilege also has an effect on freedom of movement—distinguishing those who cross borders easily from those for whom it poses a problem—and in terms of inhabiting a place—distinguishing those who can feel comfortable anywhere, who can make anywhere their home, and those who cannot. For a long time, Western migrants only rarely had their presence in the world called into question, and this amounts to a real symbolic privilege (Lundström 2014). Shanghai is one of these places. The word "Eldorado," which occurs in a number of interviews, is telling, because it conjures images of a place where new arrivals are subject to little scrutiny and have easy access to the area's wealth.

There have been cases of foreigners abusing their status in China over the last ten years. You could do whatever you wanted because nobody would ever say anything. People were doing things that they wouldn't dare do in France.<sup>(17)</sup>

12. Head pastry chef, French, Shanghai Former French Concession district, 26 November 2016.
13. Young graduate with a technical degree in hospitality, Shanghai Former French Concession district, 15 November 2016.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Young French head pastry chef, professionally qualified, Shanghai Former French Concession district, 17 November 2016.
16. Young Taiwanese man, trained in France, Shanghai Former French Concession district, 20 November 2016.
17. Bar manager, French, Pudong, Shanghai, 24 November 2016.

Other interviews mention, among other things, how frequently fake qualifications are used to obtain a visa. Let us not forget as well that the arbitrary rules for setting up a business were not limited to the restaurant industry.

Even today, new arrivals without the necessary qualifications or experience to obtain a work permit believe that it is easy for a Westerner to get around the regulations. That said, the situation has changed, and the majority of interviewees claimed that the regulations on residential permits or on hygiene and security standards have become much stricter for all foreigners, including Westerners.<sup>(18)</sup>

What's more, with only a few rare exceptions, it is apparent that the interviewees support, or at least accept, the developments in Chinese policy, and very few of them claimed, even implicitly, to feel entitled to the privileges that come with special status. As a result of these changes to policy and practice within Chinese institutions (such as in Hong Kong, studied by Leonard 2014), the narrative has evolved, ethnocultural subjectivities and self-image have been reconfigured, and the relationship between Westerners and locals has therefore also shifted.

### **Defining the "professional" in French cuisine: From ethnocultural criteria to technical criteria**

Having shown how a French or Western background affords dwindling privileges in the French cuisine sector, we would also like to trace the criteria that can bring a more durable form of recognition. How are these criteria formed and expressed by professionals in the trade (Bidet 2007)? Some of them fall under the definition of ethnocultural capital, but in general it is *savoir-faire* and a work ethic acquired through training and experience that are central to a sense of professional identity.

There is no cuisine without discourse, and it is important to highlight the way that the interviewees describe their backgrounds. In fact, the ethnocultural aspect of cooking is frequently put forward as a form of validation:

There is this idea that we [French people] are all expert cooks, that we all have a knowledge base, that our grandmothers and parents were cooks, and therefore we have that knowledge too.<sup>(19)</sup>

Numerous references are made to cultural and familial heritage:

I've never felt more French than I do here. By having a French restaurant, I'm highlighting my nationality and staking my claim to it (...). My knowledge, the wine, the service, the hospitality (...), these are French family values.<sup>(20)</sup>

The experience of being an expatriate intensifies a sense of national pride, caricaturing the symbolism of the French meal as somehow connected to the *savoir-faire* and *terroir* that are supposedly the common property of all French people. Other chefs champion France's unequalled mastery of flavours and techniques, as the following two quotes demonstrate:

[The Chinese] don't have the culture; they can't do it as well as we can.<sup>(21)</sup>

Understanding and appreciating a cuisine is a matter of culture.<sup>(22)</sup>

According to them, excellence is still determined by cultural borders.

But these references are often stereotypical, and are soon followed by a more comprehensive and specific discussion of techniques and how the work is to be approached. The opinions of professionals, in interviews or within the context of their teaching work, soon move from cultural to technical matters:

[Being French] is extremely helpful (...). It's about being prepared, planning ahead, discipline at work, and also respect for the ingredients, which is another form of discipline in that you don't do things by halves, and you love to do your job well.<sup>(23)</sup>

While this culture background is an important part of presenting and promoting oneself, it does not adequately describe the values specific to this working environment.

### **The work ethic: Discipline and passion**

The Institut Paul Bocuse (IPB) is an instructive example in the way it represents and constructs the profession's norms. During the welcome speech for French students at IPB Shanghai, the director (a Colombian who trained at the IPB in Lyon) and the (French) head chef said:

- Director: It will be necessary to get [the Chinese students] used to that discipline without discouraging them; a balance needs to be struck. We have to keep them going, and pass on our dedication and passion for the job (...).

- Head chef: It all starts with appearance, with an ethical code, a hierarchy that must be respected, [and learning] the basics of the classic techniques.

- Director: It's true, technique is important, and they must remain faithful to the basic techniques, but that should not prevent them from being creative, from bringing their own youthful touch (...). When you see young people smiling, who are really keen to work in the kitchen, it gives a good impression of France, of haute cuisine, and of the school.<sup>(24)</sup>

Firstly, the word "discipline" repeatedly appears in this conversation as the single basic attribute required of every practitioner. Both the director and the head chef give the impression that this is a highly codified trade. On one hand, professionals are expected to respect the hierarchy and behavioural norms—especially appearance. On the other

18. The case of the Farine bakery company is indicative of this stricter approach: on 23 March 2017, around ten of the factory's employees were arrested and held accountable for the presence of a sack of flour with an expired use-by date. One of them was, and still is, incarcerated. See Simon Lepître, "À Shanghai, un pâtissier français détenu depuis cinq mois pour une affaire de farine périmée" (In Shanghai, a French pastry chef held for five months for an expired flour case). *Le Monde*, 20 August 2017, [http://www.lemonde.fr/asi-pacifique/article/2017/08/20/a-shanghai-un-patissier-francais-detenu-depuis-cinq-mois-pour-une-affaire-de-farine-perimee\\_5174343\\_3216.html#FuracRoxfrj2cOMs.99](http://www.lemonde.fr/asi-pacifique/article/2017/08/20/a-shanghai-un-patissier-francais-detenu-depuis-cinq-mois-pour-une-affaire-de-farine-perimee_5174343_3216.html#FuracRoxfrj2cOMs.99) (accessed on 20 August 2017).

19. French head chef at a café in Shanghai's French Concession district, 15 November 2016.

20. French maître d'hôtel at a semi-gourmet restaurant in Shanghai's French Concession district, 24 November 2016.

21. Head pastry chef, French, Shanghai Former French Concession district, 17 November 2016.

22. Sous-chef, French, at a gourmet restaurant in the Bund, Shanghai, 16 November 2016.

23. Culinary advisor and ex-assistant director of the Institut Paul Bocuse, French, 16 November 2016.

24. Institut Paul Bocuse, the Bund, Shanghai, 7 September 2013

hand, they are expected to be “faithful” to the technical heritage of the craft. The job can only be mastered through increased precision. “Showing attention to detail,” “being meticulous,” and “having an iron will” are all phrases that have been uttered in numerous training sessions at the IPB.

Secondly, the two IPB supervisors mention the twin criteria of dedication and passion. Even though this account should be understood in its proper context—after all, the IPB is an elite school—such emphasis on dedication is not uncommon. It appears in a large number of interviews.

In a brasserie, you learn (...) to work well, quickly, in an organised way, with flawless discipline in every area of your life. That goes for every chef in the world, who doesn't see what they do as a job, but as a passion.<sup>(25)</sup>

This chef's assertions focus on the connection between flawlessness and discipline, between passion and success. His work is his means of expressing himself, his way to develop as an individual. He earns his freedom by gradually increasing his mastery of his trade. From this we might conclude that discipline and passion are the criteria that set chefs of French cuisine apart from all the others.

If gastronomy's international niche is still intact, it is due to its refusal to compromise.<sup>(26)</sup> As a result, foreigners who enter this niche are able to prove their legitimacy with a combination of high standards and meticulousness, criteria that embody the work ethic.

### Constructing authenticity

Participants in the sector manage the institutional conditions for the authorship and distinction of their type of cuisine through discursive practices relating to their trade's cultural means of production (Leschziner 2010). Rectitude, propriety, an ability to withstand long working hours, and a devotion to the profession are used to define the work of the French, and imply their superiority over other models. This notion that France is unique is reinforced by the championing of a sense of *terroir*.

In France you have the produce, the wine, the idea that you make something more for personal pleasure than for business, perhaps an artisanal bakery with freshly ground flour, with different varieties of cereal, cooked in a wood oven... In a way it's about young, passionate people staying faithful to the produce.<sup>(27)</sup>

In this somewhat nostalgic account, France is presented as favouring a “faithful” approach to traditional crafts, to fresh produce, to simple, personal pleasure. Elsewhere in the interview, the chef implies that France is a country where passion is expressed, whereas China is merely a country for doing business. Nevertheless, he continues, referring to his arrival in China in the year 2000:

Western life was still a new thing here, so you had to bring the culture, the experience, and also immediately be doing something authentic, not just doing something that's “almost the same.” Really, you had to act as if you were opening in Paris. The idea was to play the authenticity card, and not to remake the concept for Shanghai or for China. (...) That means adapting was not an option.

Here, he is championing authenticity over adaptation. This notion that adapting one's cuisine constitutes a betrayal of one's culture was also mentioned by other chefs who were interviewed. Nevertheless, for the director of the IPB, the mission of any French chef is to act as an ambassador for France's *savoir-faire* and to educate the Chinese in a culinary culture that is foreign to them. French heritage, elevated as an immutable model of authenticity, is idealised and charged with a civilising mission.

According to Rao et al. (2005), authentic produce and activity must be (1) an original and (2) a credible representation of cultural forms. The chef's goal is to create a sense of credibility and authenticity, both in the presentation (form) and in the product (content). The notion of authenticity is formed through an accumulation of heritage from generations of chefs that is gradually incorporated into the practice and discourse of the discipline. The professionals interviewed expressed the view that to be authentic is to be faithful to the profession.

### Apprenticeship and passing on techniques: Hierarchy and the role of the chef

It is crucial to examine the system by which the trade is taught, since this is where the trade's ethos is learned and the students' relationship to the profession is determined. In a system where training is carried out “on the job,” hierarchy and knowledge transfer are closely linked. A number of interviewees held the view that working in the trade is the real “school.” Professionals start at the bottom of the ladder in roles that involve a number of thankless tasks. According to one *maître d'hôtel* at a semi-gourmet restaurant, “You have to start at the bottom” and climb the rungs until you reach the top of the hierarchy.

In this model, directly receiving knowledge from one's superiors is the main vector of learning—with the exception of recipes. Devotion to the work and deference to the chef both stem from this master-disciple dynamic. “Doing the rounds at the big establishments” and “being trained by the big names” are expressions that were frequently used by our interviewees. In France, the invention of the “signature cuisine” category in guide books, now in common usage throughout the restaurant world, confirms the central role a chef plays in defining a restaurant's identity.

Nevertheless, this glorification of the chef is not associated with membership of any particular ethnocultural group, but with a type of cuisine where the hierarchy is clearly defined. In the classic brigade system, each role in the kitchen (meat, vegetables, fish, etc.) receives information from the rank above, from the *chef de partie* (responsible for managing a given station in the kitchen) to the *sous-chef de partie* (second chef de partie), down to the *commis* (junior cook). This localised transmission of information encourages a well-organised production process, according to Escoffier's writings on the culinary system. In China, though, the only channel of communication is from the chef (whether they be French- or English-speaking) to the (English-speaking) *sous-chef*, and from the *sous-chef* to the chefs de partie and *commis*. The chef's orders are therefore passed on through an intermediary whose legitimacy may or may not be acknowledged.

By way of illustration, let us revisit the example of the IPB: the respect accorded to hard work and a hierarchical training process is a source of some disagreement among teaching staff in an environment where the bound-

25. Chef, French, semi-gourmet restaurant, the Bund, Shanghai, 22 November 2016.

26. Culinary advisor and ex-director of the IPB, Colombian, Shanghai, 16 November 2016.

27. Head pastry chef, French, Shanghai Former French Concession district, 22 November 2016.

aries between teacher and student are not fixed. Although French students are subordinate to the school's chefs when carrying out tasks, under the school's training structure they are also superiors to the Chinese students, and as such act as their intermediaries within the hierarchy. After two months of training, Julie, a student at the IPB in Lyon who has taken a teaching placement in Shanghai, reports:

[The Chinese students] are beginning to gain confidence, to answer back, to take their time, to not feel pressure when you tell them something. They need to take it easy. They still have a whole lot of things to learn, it's not over yet! <sup>(28)</sup>

Julie is criticising a lack of respect for the traditional learning process that she herself went through, and that she considers to be the only way to properly learn the trade. In effect, the Chinese students are staging a mini-revolt, criticising the authoritarian and infantilising methods used by the trainee tutors from the IPB in France, who are no different from them in age and status. As Ken, a Chinese student, puts it: "The days of colonisation are over." However, in practice they have no trouble respecting orders from the chef, which indicates that they are not questioning hierarchy as such, but merely the legitimacy of this hierarchy in particular. The French students do not have the same status or stature as the chef, and their superior mastery of the basic techniques is not enough to secure them a status equivalent to an experienced chef or to win the respect of the Chinese students. The Chinese students' respect is exclusively reserved for the school's official teaching chefs.

The notion of respect for the chef is therefore just as important to French cooks as it is to Chinese cooks, and the legitimacy of the chef's position is debated on the same terms. For that matter, the hierarchy of a kitchen is crucial in every type of cuisine where tasks are strictly allocated to certain roles and ranks. This is also the case with Chinese cuisine, and this example undermines the idea that the French system is unique, proving that the Chinese students have their own critical faculties and notions of what constitutes legitimacy.

In this section, we have shown that the prescriptive ethical and technical framework around French cuisine leads to a championing of authenticity and the negotiation of a hierarchical structure, and serves as justification for the system to continue unchanged. French chefs are in favour of disseminating a system based on the values of hard work, discipline, and dedication, but also on the passion and authenticity that they believe is theirs alone to pass on.

However, our hypothesis is that the French cuisine sector is undergoing a transitional phase. We will consider the ways in which roles are being redistributed among Chinese and foreign staff in the culinary industry as a result not only of China's increasingly strict immigration policies, but also of technical specialisation in culinary skills. We will examine these questions from the perspective of local training, brought in by foreign professionals and encouraged by government campaigns, in order to better understand the connections and interplay of needs and desires among French cuisine professionals in China.

### **Training, knowledge transfer, recognition: The end of a professional niche**

#### **The struggle to pass on a demanding skillset**

In all the interviews that were carried out, accounts of employees tended to agree on two points: the struggle to recruit trained staff, and the struggle to pass on a demanding skillset to Chinese employees.

For every French worker, you need two Chinese workers. In France, the training is high quality (...). Ten years ago, it was because they didn't understand or because they completed the tasks robotically. Now, it's "I will do what I have been told to do and nothing more." <sup>(29)</sup>

The problem is that we don't work in the same way. We can do several things at once, while they only do one thing at a time. <sup>(30)</sup>

It has been reported, then, that Chinese kitchen staff are less organised and less efficient than their French counterparts. <sup>(31)</sup> However, it should be noted that the language barrier constitutes a major obstacle, and can make communication difficult within a kitchen team. In addition, Chinese staff who trained in China have no frame of reference: they struggle to understand the flavour combinations, the nature of certain cooking techniques, and so on, and this impedes the learning process. This account by a Chinese student at the IPB gives some insight into the challenge they face:

How do we know if it will taste good? Or if it's properly cooked? I don't know how you like your chicken! (...) With you [the French], all the sauces are thick but the taste is subtle and hard to define. What are the distinctive characteristics of your cuisine? <sup>(32)</sup>

Observing and reproducing what you can see is considered the simplest way to achieve an illusion of the correct results, according to one Chinese student who, with the help of a little potato starch, was able to successfully replicate a mayonnaise, which he then finished off with some sugar. In other words, for want of reference points, the Chinese students are trying to achieve results in their dishes' visual appearance rather than their taste.

I think they're a lot better than the French at reproducing things, even if they don't always see the full picture. They're talented enough in that area. But the logic behind things is harder to explain. <sup>(33)</sup>

Moving beyond mimicry and gaining an understanding of culinary heritage is the real challenge. According to the analysis of Dasen et al. (2005), learning to become a chef requires "acculturation through immersion," involving a process of observation, imitation, and "intentional socialisation by the teacher." The alleged cultural barrier, along with the linguistic and taste-related obstacles—as expressed in the preceding quotes—are therefore significant but not insurmountable.

### **The anointed Chinese professionals: Overcoming the French ethnocultural prerogative**

Aside from the aforementioned cultural obstacles and culinary norms that are hard to overcome, or even to express in words, the discipline's savoir-

28. Institut Paul Bocuse, Shanghai, 25 November 2013.

29. Maître d'hôtel, French, semi-gourmet restaurant, Shanghai, 24 November 2016.

30. Head chef, French, gourmet café, Shanghai, 15 November 2016.

31. The phrasing here shows the precision that is required in distinguishing between representations and reality. By all accounts, Chinese cuisine is highly organised, albeit in a way that is different from the French style. There is a tension between two different sets of customs in how to run a restaurant kitchen.

32. Institut Paul Bocuse, Shanghai, April 2014.

33. Culinary consultant, French, Shanghai, 16 November 2016.

faire and work ethic (as described in the preceding section) are indeed being passed on, and this is helping to deconstruct the ethnocultural discourse on the authenticity of French cuisine.

As we have shown in the previous section, the codes of French cuisine set clear boundaries that must be crossed in order to gain professional recognition. When Chinese chefs acquire a reputation as legitimate practitioners of French cuisine, mastering both the basic techniques and the work ethic, they are then perceived and recognised as "authentic." The chef at a café in the old French Concession describes his Chinese kitchen team:

My pastry chef is extraordinary. She went to a school, she's clean, meticulous, and reliable.<sup>(34)</sup>

She has adhered to the norms that are a prerequisite for learning the chef's trade. The sous-chef at another brasserie in the same district lists the qualities of another employee who has the same "French" passion:

He's 22 but he's truly passionate (...). When he goes home, he opens his books. He's like an artist, with a strong personality, sensitive, and really in love with the work.<sup>(35)</sup>

Two Taiwanese interviewees, a chef at a semi-gourmet restaurant and a maître d'hôtel at Robuchon who trained, respectively, at the Institut Paul Bocuse in France and with Gordon Ramsay in London, have absorbed the work ethic that their training demands, and, in the case of the maître d'hôtel, the same enterprising spirit:

It's the first Robuchon in China, and we want to bring the way we work, the way we think to it. We want to pass on our knowledge to our staff, and especially to the locals, who have no idea what a Western-style restaurant in Europe would be like.<sup>(36)</sup>

This account shows how comprehensively the work ethic has been embraced.

Ironically, the best chefs are the ones who have not only absorbed the traditions, but have also given themselves the freedom to be creative. Consequently, French chefs will acknowledge their colleagues' qualities and skills as chefs when they overstep the usual conventions:

Tony, he's an ex-student of the IPB. He opened a Chinese-Italian kitchen: bruschetta, Chinese fried rice, and so on. It was a big success. There are others too, who are gradually climbing the hierarchy, but very few of them have created such a personal form of cuisine.<sup>(37)</sup>

When they discover Chinese employees who appear to have potential, or even a passion, the French chefs are keen to give them the opportunity to pick up culinary reference points and sources of inspiration, but also to bring them into a network with other professionals. Several of them say that they bring their best employees to France:

For the last three years, I've been bringing a Chinese bakery chef with us to Paris for ten days, so he can take a course at a training centre. I also showed him the Parisian bakeries that have had an influence on me, so he can understand where the inspiration comes from and who my mentors are.<sup>(38)</sup>

The relationship between the head bakery chef and the young Chinese chef has transcended the ethnic divide; they are now quite simply members of the same professional community. After Mériot (2002), we can confirm that: "[interactions] occur in the material use of objects, tools, and symbols, the processes of production, distribution, and consumption, patterns of recognition, cooperation, and conflict." In this case, having begun as a dichotomous relationship between a French "master" and a Chinese "disciple," we now see a form of cooperation and a sense of mutual respect developing thanks to a shared use of the knowledge and symbols that make up the system.

Taken as a whole, these interview extracts highlighting the recognition given to Chinese chefs demonstrate how ethnocultural barriers disappear when faced with a strong professional identity based on savoir-faire and a work ethic gained through training and experience.

### **Training in Western cuisine: Toward greater funding and acknowledgement**

One final criticism that the chefs levelled at their employees was a lack of commitment to the job, and the rapid turnover of staff. For many of the professionals interviewed, this behaviour stems from the negative image that the hospitality trade has acquired in China. Greater emphasis on the value of training, and of the trade itself, is therefore critical in determining attitudes to the profession. Let us now further explore this key issue of local training.

From the late 1970s onwards, a large number of universities dedicated to teaching the hospitality and tourism trades began to open up, such as the Shaanxi Tourism and Cook Vocational College (*Xi'an taoli lüyou pengren xueyuan*, 1975), the Yangzhou University College of Tourism and Cuisine (*Yangzhou daxue lüyou pengren xueyuan*, 1984), and the Sichuan Tourism College (*Sichuan lüyou xueyuan*, 1985), to name but a few.<sup>(39)</sup> The prestige that these universities currently enjoy is testament to the increasing recognition accorded to the hospitality sector. Aël Théry's exploratory work in a variety of Chinese provinces shows, firstly, that Chinese tourism and hospitality universities now routinely offer courses in Western cuisine as standard, and secondly, that they are in need of tutors and consultants to improve their programme. Moreover, the Chinese tutors at these universities confirmed that the government is making increasingly large investments in equipping their kitchens.

In terms of academic training in Western cuisine, there are only a few foreign schools operating in Shanghai: Le Cordon Bleu (France), Les Roches (Switzerland), and the Institut Paul Bocuse (France, closed since the end of 2015). French schools wishing to offer training to Chinese students on Chinese soil must be certified by the Ministry of Education for undergraduate courses, and by the local authorities for professional training. In most cases, the foreign educational establishment enters into association with a local company; Les Roches, for instance, has affiliated its campus with the Jinjiang chain of hotels. The director of Les Roches states:

34. Shanghai Former French Concession district, 20 November 2016.

35. Shanghai Former French Concession district, 15 November 2016.

36. The Bund, Shanghai, 20 November 2016.

37. Culinary consultant, French, Shanghai, 17 November 2016.

38. Head pastry chef, French, Shanghai Former French Concession district, 22 November 2016.

39. The opening of these establishments shows how the cuisine industry was revitalised after the Cultural Revolution, from the early 1980s onward (Sabban 2006), especially through the booming private sector and the development of national and international hotels. "Chinese cuisine" also became a tool of soft power, with China presenting itself to the outside world as an empire that excelled in art, culture, and taste (Sabban, 1996).



Our Chinese partners hope that the school will endure in the long term, because it's very important for China. They also hope that we can create and run other schools, because there is a need for them (...). Good schools already exist but... there are always problems with the quality of training at Chinese universities.<sup>(40)</sup>

Foreigners are still tasked with training chefs, but also with training Chinese tutors. While local universities use exclusively local tutors, international schools such as Le Cordon Bleu recruit foreigners who still benefit from expatriate packages. This attests to the difficulty in finding teaching staff that meet the standards of the aforementioned schools, despite the Chinese government's investments.

In tandem with the government's increasing investment in technical education, promotional campaigns have been launched, such as the "spirit of craftsmanship" programme, revived by Premier Li Keqiang. Striking a nationalist tone appropriate to the Xinhua News Agency,<sup>(41)</sup> the leadership speaks encouragingly of these types of professions:

In the course of China's transition from great nation to powerful nation, the spirit of craftsmanship must be given a new definition: honorary distinctions from a great master of the craft are no longer enough; we must also take into account the industrious and persistent hard work of each and every manual worker.

According to the official discourse, craftsmanship is becoming increasingly respected and valued in China. If this has a tangible effect on the reputation of certain trades, we could hope to see improved standards of training in the hospitality sector and, in turn, a higher standard of qualification among professionals in the job market, leading to greater commitment among Chinese professionals.

## Conclusion

Starting from the hypothesis that anthropological approaches to culinary techniques and sociological approaches to migration could be mutually beneficial, we have seen how the views and practices of chefs and *maîtres d'hôtel* working in China's French cuisine sector combine forms of ethnocultural and technical legitimacy. More specifically, the example of

Shanghai, whose consumer society is undergoing rapid transformation, made it possible to highlight the shifts in the hierarchy between Western migrants and Chinese locals over the last ten years: a hierarchy that is apparent in the material and symbolic privileges granted to the former—which are starting to wane—and in professional recognition that is no longer predicated on a person's cultural background, but above all is based on a command of the requisite knowledge and skills, and a work ethic acquired during the training process.

While increasingly strict visa criteria are a clear sign of an immigration policy that prioritises specialism and expertise, another clear sign is the balancing-out of salaries and responsibilities between foreigners and Chinese workers. Even though the jobs at the top of the hierarchy are still mostly taken by foreigners, a number of Chinese chefs and business owners are beginning to emerge in Shanghai's French cuisine sector, leading to the gradual disappearance of a professional niche hitherto reserved for Westerners. True, making the adjustment from Chinese culinary practices to French culinary practices can be difficult, due to problems with language and communication and the fact that China and France understand flavours differently. Because of this, there is a real need for training staff and advisors to supervise the transition, but the conditions are now determined in a more equal fashion. French, Western, or Chinese chefs are not required to adapt their techniques to create an international form of cuisine, because that would mean betraying the cultural and culinary heritage that they all share. French cuisine may be travelling the world via its practitioners, but it is preserving an identity that is founded on expertise far more than on ethnocultural criteria.

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40. Jingan District, Shanghai, 23 November 2016.

41. "Zhongguo zhizao xuyao gongjiang jingsheng" (China's industry needs the spirit of craftsmanship), *Xinhuanet.com*, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-04/29/c\\_128938258.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-04/29/c_128938258.htm) (accessed on 11 October 2017).

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