A Glimpse into the Beginning of Sino-French Exchanges in Modern Times—Taking the Food Practices of European Traders and Missionaries in China as an Example

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***Abstract*—Both China and France are renowned for their extraordinary culinary arts and food culture. Food is not only a necessity or daily chore, but also an important carrier of national culture. When food is bathed in ideology, respective cultures will naturally be reflected on the dining table. That said, a broad, long-term, self-consistent historical evolution picture will be reflected. In the context of academic exchanges and dialogue between China and the West in recent decades, the issue of narrative in modern Chinese history is particularly important. Combining comparative cultural methods with historical facts, this article first look into the milestone events in the historical exchanges between China and France, and then focuses on the dietary practices of modern Western missionaries in China and the dietary practices of Chinese people invited to Western tables during the same period, in order to apprenhend the importance moment of the beginning of Sino-French dialogue.**

***Keywords*—dietary practice, modern times, comparative culture, China, France**

I. Introduction

In historical research, historical teaching, and public education, the question of historical narrative occupies a very important place. Historical narrative refers to the view of history used, the value position relied upon, and the angles from which narrators describe and depict history. On this basis, a broad, long-term, and coherent picture of historical evolution is formed. Among them, in the context of academic exchanges and dialogue between China and the West in recent decades, the narrative question of history from the end of the Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China is particularly worth our consideration [1].

Regarding methodology, paradigmization is a distinctive feature of the study of modern Chinese history. The paradigm of revolutionary history, the paradigm of modernization, the "impact-response" paradigm, the one of "China-centric" orientation, the "society-state" paradigm, and the civil society theory paradigm, etc. On the one hand, paradigmization provides analytical tools for the study of the modern history of China, it enriches and deepens the study of modern Chinese history and brings about changes in the narrative of interdisciplinary research methods and in-depth study of the interaction between factors, such as individuals, groups, environment. The society-state paradigm, in particular, will help to better reveal the complex narrative of modern-day Chinese history. Many researchers have contributed to these studies, among which, Xia Mingfang analyzed the three paradigms: revolutionary history, modernization, and postmodern [1, pp. 14–21]. Liu [2] advocated returning to grand narratives adapted and centered on contemporary China, and Yu [3] reflected on the relationship between micro-historical research and grand historical narratives.

On the other hand, the emergence of these paradigms has its own time and academic origin, and each has its own limitations [4]. That is why, a change is taking place in Western historical circles, and the development of new research on cultural history, micro-history, and the history of popular culture is one of the signs important to this change [5]. The "third zone" formed between the interaction between the state and the society (neither entirely the orthodox state system, nor entirely the informal social system) captures the attention of researchers in history. Indeed, in the "third zone", we can make closer connections between macro-history and micro-history by examining the multiple activities of man. For instance, Lynn Hunt, who studied the French Revolution, observed cultural "symbols" such as clothing, cap badges, and flags of the French Revolution, analyzing the relationship between politics and culture through signs [6].

In this article, we attempt to link comparative culture with historical research from the turn of the 18th century to the end of the Qing dynasty (1912), focusing on a topic little discussed in historical studies – the food practices of European traders and missionaries in China. During this period, European and French missionaries had already been established in China for almost a century for their mission of evangelization, and they brought enormous documentation on China to Europe. The chosen period is therefore an interesting moment in the cultural exchanges of the two cultures.

Regarding the theme, above all, the taste experience is a perception shared by every human, it is both a vital necessity and an element of culture, and food practices, being part of the banality of everyday life, reflects essential cultural aspects of human societies and the conscient or inconscient intentions of involved agents. When it comes to the choice of the comparatif subjects, the Chinese and the French share the same passion for food, and we can see this in the society of these two countries, at the time in question, at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, a period which experienced food prosperity wealthy classes in society [7], at the same time a strong representation of meal scenes in literature and arts. Through the Western missionaries and traders and some Chinese officers, by adopting an interdisciplinary method, between history and comparative culture, we will link the daily life of the agents who operate in the two cultures of which the philosophical grounds are

totally different from each other, so we will be able to see the beginning of the embryonic period of real cultural exchanges between the West and China – even if they are not always effective and pleasant – in order to achieve "complementarity and not a perpetuation of difference", as Pageaux says, speaking of the cultures of the East and the West.

Comparative culture is essential to deepen cultural exchanges, because, in the examples of conflicts at the table between Westerners and Chinese, in the embryonic state of exchange between the West and China, we see that the idea of beauty and of the good for one people are not necessarily pleasant for another, because when we find beauty in an element – a dish, a novel, for example – we are imbued with profound ideas which direct us towards the judgment of good and evil, beauty and ugliness – this is what we call "ideology". Now it is by understanding the deep reasons behind the thinking of a people, when we meet the gazes of one and the other, that we can see the beauty and the good, or at least understand why this is "beautiful" and why that is "good", which would establish a solid foundation from the start, favorable to a friendly, at least egalitarian relationship, instead of generating absolute hostility which does not allow any deep knowledge. In other words, it is the view towards the other that determines our attitude towards the world, and our relationship with other people.

II. The Encounter of China and France

The curiosity of France about China has never ceased. This already began around the middle of the 13th century, when France had direct knowledge of China, with the first exchanges with the Mongol Empire: The European emissaries did not reach China but had confirmation that this country existed. It was not until the Spanish Mendoza, in the 16th century, and his *History of the Great Kingdom of China* that the image of this country became concrete and influential in Europe. Influential indeed: This book was published and republished for seven years (1585–1592), immediately translated into seven European languages, for forty-six editions, which demonstrates Europe's ardent interest in China.

It was around the same period that Chinese intellectuals became acquainted with Western thought, mainly concerning Catholicism and science, brought by European emissaries, such as Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), Italian missionary, author of *The History of Chinese Culture*, in which he tries to interpret Chinese culture, whose system is totally strange to Westerners, through notions of European culture. It emphasizes Confucian rituals for ancestors which are entirely derived from morality, but not from idolatry; it replaces the image of the cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified with the image of the Virgin Mary with the child Jesus, in order to conform to the Confucian concept of "mercy", in the general and familial sense. He describes China in his work as a powerful and stable country, but he also tells of the corruption of morals in society, and the despair of poor and oppressed people.

It was not until the 19th century that trade between the two countries gradually resumed. In France, in 1814, a chair of Chinese and Tartar-Manchurian language and literature was ready for Abel-Rémusat (1788–1832), at the Collège de France. This is the first time in Europe that China is included in university institutions, thanks to Louis XVIII's interest in China. As a result, a scholarly sinology developed in France, with the reception of sinologist students, including Rémusa's student, Antoine Bazin, who offered a simple course in spoken Chinese at the School of Oriental Languages in 1841. From the side of China, in 1835, Liang Tingnan (1796–1861) wrote *Notices of Coastal Defense and Annals of Canton Customs*, systematically presenting, and for the first time, Western trade and culture. The same author also wrote *The Monograph of the United States*, in three volumes, and *The Difficulty of the Reception of Christianity in China*, *The Essays on London*, etc., in which he makes known the culture and history of West, which makes him one of the founders of opening up to the world in the modern history of China. Just as Wei Yuan (1794–1857), author *An Illustrated Treatise on Maritime Kingdoms*, advocated that Western skills must be mastered in order to resist their intrusion into China. It should also be mentioned that commercial efforts on the French side never ceased between the two countries, from 1660 [8] until the 19th century, whether during a peaceful or turbulent period, motivated by the great need of the French market for Chinese objects such as porcelain, lacquerware, Chinoiserie, white cotton canvases. Although, for France in the 19th century, the trade balance deficit with China was quite significant: Chinese exports and imports are less than 2%; and up to 12% respectively, that is to say that for China, French objects also entered China, despite the fact that they are quite rare and are probably only intended for the court and to the elites.

III. Fork and Chopsticks

Lord Anson (1697–1762), a British aristocrat, both a naval officer and an explorer, in his travel relationships displayed intense hostility towards China. According to the study of Walter [8], during his sea voyage around the globe between 1740 and 1744, Anson maintained an unfriendly relationship with the Chinese. He stopped his ship twice near Macau for repairs, most of the time he remained in the ship, except for the time to fetch the crew's supplies from the coast. The first time everything went well, he had been provided with "plenty of vegetables [9]" and a rich variety of subsistence products; but the second time, he had some disagreements with the Chinese authorities because of a tax problem, the latter then stopped providing him with food. Anson was upset and protested that his crew could not accept being starved while they found themselves in the midst of an abundance of food. He added, "perhaps with a less serious tone [9, pp. 397–398]," that his crew would become cannibals and that they "preferred, with regard to luxury, the well-fed and overweight Chinese, than their fellow sailors who were all thin and weak [9, pp. 397–398]."

Most notable is Anson's harsh criticism of Chinese food suppliers. He found them dishonest, because the poultry purchased died as soon as they arrived at the ship, which caused suspicion among the sailors, who were convinced that they were poisoned. They found, however, after dissecting the poultry, that the real cause was that they were forced to feed on gravel, in order to increase their weight. The same goes for pork meat, filled with injected water, and

live pigs with a contracted urinary tract, which were fed a lot of salt so that they would drink as much water as possible without being able to urinate. When his ship left Macao at the end of the first visit, the suppliers tried by all means to ensure that the animals were dead as quickly as possible, because, once dead, the sailors threw them into the water, and the Chinese came with them, piched them up and ate them without embarrassment. "These incidents," said the captain ironically, "might serve as examples of the true manners of that nation, which was so well celebrated and commended to the rest of the world, as a model with all their praiseworthy qualities." [9, pp. 397–398]

On the other hand, on the Chinese side, the view towards Western food is no less embarrassed. Before the First Opium War (1840–1842), food exchanges between the West and China were not necessarily regular or balanced, because the Chinese authorities imposed a policy of banning maritime activities, rather to Westerners who came to China than the reverse [10]. The Guangzhou region was the only one whose seaport was still open to foreigners during the implementation of the maritime ban at different severity levels, therefore the exchange of food culture between the two peoples was very limited, in time and space, for the Chinese side which remained rather the watching culture, or using Pageaux's term, the "host culture", or the "national" culture [11]. However, we still find clues regarding the reception of Western food among the Chinese.

Toogood Downing (1838), a British surgeon, recounts in his book *The Fan-qui in China in 1836-7* that the distrust on the part of the Chinese towards the Western table is just as evident. Once, a newly appointed official, who dealt with foreign trade affairs, was invited by the foreign community to a "first-rated breakfast in the British fashion [12]". The meal was served on a snow-white tablecloth and included "Blancmanges, jellies, and fruits…in addition to the more substantial meat" [12, pp. 147–162]. However, all these delicacies, after having been examined by the very doubtful eyes of the officer, were rejected – he did not even eat a single piece! However, the author observes that this officer's inferiors feasted on this meal provided by the "foreign devils" [12, p. 162]. Downing concluded that an impartial observer "would see in the manners of these natives, an exact resemblance to those of the European who dine at the tables of Chinese. Prejudice prevents them from eating freely, but they yet cannot resist tasting the curious dishes set before them." [12, p. 238]

It seems to us that the beginnings of exchanges between the West and China, from the most everyday activity – eating – were not very pleasant. Zhang Deyi (1847–1918), a member of the diplomatic corps, visited Europe five times in his life. As a diplomat, interpreter, and travel journal writer, he recorded, in *Anecdotes of Maritime Navigation*, the moments he had experienced or what he had heard at the table, feeling uncomfortable among the guests of the two peoples. When the British embassy team Macartney [13] (1737–1806) visited China in 1792, their clumsy way of holding chopsticks and their Western physical appearance "greatly surprised the Chinese who were eating at the same table. They (the last) show their curiosity by making particular gestures, often bursting out laughing [13]". While the same embarrassment occurs for a Chinese officer who is invited to lunch by Macartney on the British ship: "At the table, the officer was very embarrassed when he used the cutlery, especially the knife and the fork that he hardly knew." [14]

Among Westerners and Chinese who are equally bothered by differences in eating habits, it seems that there are those, despite the rarity, who adopt another attitude when faced with another culture. The study by Roberts [15] shows that, between 1844 and 1846, Abbot Évariste Huc, accompanied by his superior Father Gabet, went to Tibet then, after being expelled from this region, crossed China to Canton. Some descriptions of Chinese dishes, he claimed, had been plagiarized from earlier accounts or had been elaborated with fanciful suggestions: that the Chinese prepared dishes with castor oil; or that their favorite treats were shark fins, fish gizzards, crow's feet, peacock crests, suppositions that Huc knew to be absurd. A real Chinese dinner was a very strange thing in the eyes of a foreigner, but the Chinese were also amazed by the Western way of dining. Huc claimed that all Chinese were gifted with a remarkable aptitude for cooking and could produce culinary wonders with extremely simple means. The cooks serving the mandarins had a vast store of recipes in their possession, and when called upon to demonstrate their skill, they could accomplish surprising feats [15].

There is no doubt that Huc and Father Gabet had as many difficulties in life as other Western missionaries and traders at the same period, but their perspectives on Chinese culture helped them overcome obstacles. Once, after a long and extremely miserable mission trip, they were starving but finally arrived in Nanchang, the capital of Jiangxi Province, which welcomed them with a decent dinner. So Huc and Gabet tried hard to eat and drink in the strictly orthodox Chinese manner. They pricked melon seeds exactly "as if they had been born on the banks of the Yellow River, instead of the Garonne [16, pp. 368–369]", and they used their chopsticks "with ease and skill and a perfect seriousness, as if we had done nothing else in our entire lives" [16]. Through his words, we feel a look towards the other carrying the spirit of cultural relativism that Yue, among others, advocates, an intelligence that deals with the complicated situation immediately, effectively, instantaneously, on the spot, without insisting on the frozen, fixed, or even stubborn position. In Huc's case, the Western manner and eating habits that he is accustomed to do not prevent him from adapting to the foreign environment, nor from even being humorous about the situation that would have been embarrassing. Unconsciously, Huc was able to step out of his position as a Westerner to resolve the problem of conflict at the table in China, and in doing so, he managed to appreciate the "beauty" in the other culture – whether it was Chinese cuisine or other possible fields– that other Westerners, or other Chinese who were so shocked by the other, could not. Isn't that already a benefit situation?

Certainly, as Xie [10, p. 17] indicates, "reciprocal cultural exchanges and penetration between the two peoples can only take place in the long term, and the influence of one on the other is often imperceptible. Food conflicts between the West and China only began to ease in the 20th century, thanks to Chinese restaurants appearing in Europe, *vice versa*."

IV. Conclusion

The beautiful words of Pageaux, "a complementarity and not a perpetuation of difference", and an "intussusception" of Louis Massigmon, indicate the attitude that we should adopt towards the cultures of the East and the West. We propose another possibility that carries the same spirit of cultural relativism as the aforementioned thoughts. This is the thought of the Taoist school, which considers that nothing in the universe is pre-organized or planned, especially not by a certain God. The meanings of all beings are not fixed or determined, but are made in multiple metamorphoses, in continual changes. This is what Lao Tzu (517 BC–?) indicates in *Tao Te King*, "The Dao is formless, indistinguishable, between there-is and there-is-not," "In this vagueness, there seem to be traces and beings," and "A being is formed in chaos." Here, the "traces" and "beings" are of certain possibilities, not yet determined, but which would eventually become reality. In other words, in front of us are innumerable and infinite changes, it is better not to take a determined position from the beginning, faced with situations that are also constantly changing.

This principle dates back 2800 years, however, it seems suitable to us as a solution when we talk about the way two cultures look towards each other. The two types of "beauty", Western and Chinese, by extension, the principle, the logic of the two peoples, indeed have incompatible and heterogeneous sides, but it is not necessary to choose sides from the start. Faced with changes and unknown situations, the most important thing is not to maintain a clear and firm position, nor to keep fair and correct points of view, nor to follow a fixed plan, but to find an effective, immediate and timely solution, which is called, in Taoist philosophy, *wu-wei*, non-action.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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