

Western Cuisine Culture in Contemporary China : A Case Study on Haute French Cuisine in High-class Hotels and Restaurants in Urban Tianjin

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Western Cuisine Culture in Contemporary China: A Case Study on Haute French Cuisine in High-class Hotels and Restaurants in Urban Tianjin

现代中国的西餐文化：基于天津高级饭店与餐厅法国菜肴
的考察

Zhengyu LIU

刘征宇

SOKENDAI (The Graduate University for Advanced Studies)

(日本) 综合研究大学院大学

ABSTRACT

This chapter takes the localization process of French cuisine in Tianjin as a case study to discuss the influence of western cuisine culture in contemporary China. It outlines the development of western-style restaurants in Tianjin in modern times, then focuses on development of French cuisine culture in Tianjin. Specifically, it summarizes the situation and characteristics of French cuisine from three types of restaurants, including the *Lao Zi Hao* (time-honoured brand), the modern franchise, and the native-operated restaurant. Based on field research, it considers that, along with localization of French cuisine culture, the urban area of Tianjin has formed a multi-layered foodscape related to its history of western cuisine as a foreign culture and local knowledge on western cuisine.

摘要

本文以法国菜在天津本土化的过程为研究事例，讨论西餐文化在当代中国的影响。首先，笔者简单地勾勒出西式餐馆在近现代天津的发展历程。在此之后，笔者将考察的焦点至于法国饮食文化在天津的发展现状之上。具体而言，笔者分别对三类西餐厅，即‘老字号’西餐厅、现代品牌加盟店、以及本土民众经营的西餐厅等三类餐厅所提供的法式菜肴的现状与特征进行了总结。通过这样的考察，笔者认为伴随着法国饮食文化的本土化发展，天津城市地区形成了重层的饮食景观，而这种现象的形成与该地所固有的西餐文化历史、以及本土居民对西餐的不同认知密不可分。

INTRODUCTION

This chapter investigates the characteristics of haute French cuisine served in high-class hotels and restaurants of urban Tianjin, with discussion of the influence of western food culture in contemporary China.

Anthropological studies of transfiguration of urban China's food culture in a global system involving food have been conducted since the 1990s. These investigate how western culinary culture and eating and drinking service industries have been accepted and how they have changed in local China. The studies also discuss the process of 'culture conjunction' between western and local Chinese food culture (Watson ed. 1997).

Based on the perspective of this 'glocalization' of food, some researchers have specifically examined the influence of western food and its transfiguration in urban China. Farrer adopts the following five elements in the case of western food development in the global city of Shanghai: supplier quality; financier attitudes; chef training; consumers' cultural knowledge; and city government role. Farrer also discusses the process of food culture change in urban Shanghai, subject to the interaction of universal movement of commodities and people and urban policies (Farrer 2010). Furthermore, Farrer regards western restaurants in urban Shanghai as a 'culinary contact zone' in which the food cultures of China and the West are conjunct, and he investigates processes by which cultural capital with respect to western food is reproduced and mastered by local residents, and by which a stratified culinary field develops in this zone. He also elucidates the influence of western food on the food culture of urban China (Farrer 2015). This chapter examines urban Tianjin as a survey area based on the Farrer's case study of Shanghai (Figure 1).

Tianjin was one of the first cities in which western food cultures were introduced into China. Since the late Qing Dynasty, western food and some western restaurants have been popular in this city. During the times of the People's Republic of China, much progress was made in Tianjin, which flourished after the reform and opening-up. In recent years, French cuisine became a popular typical western cuisine in Tianjin. Based on a case study in Tianjin, this chapter attempts to determine the features of western restaurants and French cuisine in the area, and to explain the present situation of western cuisine culture in contemporary China.

To more clearly explain the socio-historical development of these western restaurants in Tianjin, the second section of the paper briefly reviews three periods: 1) the concessions period (1863–1945), 2) the socialist transformation period (1949–1978), and 3) the period after the reform and opening-up (1980s-). The third section describes the present state of French cuisine, focusing on three kinds of western restaurants: 1) *Lao Zi Hao*¹⁾ restaurants in Tianjin urban areas, which have been operated for a lengthy period; 2) chain restaurants from overseas; and 3) western restaurants opened by native residents. In the fourth section, based on the aforementioned context, the localization of French cuisine in the urban area of Tianjin is examined, taking account of ingredients and the cultural experiences of restaurant operators and local consumers. Finally, the fifth section presents examples of other areas in China, summarizing the characteristics and influences of western food culture in China.



Figure 1 Location of Tianjin (Created by the author)

WESTERN CUISINE CULTURE IN MODERN TIANJIN

The city of Tianjin (Figure 1), whose name means ‘the port for the emperor’, was established in 1400 during the early Ming Dynasty. Its important roles as a doorway to the capital of Beijing and a canal transit point for canal, resulted in huge development for Tianjin during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. As a treaty port prior to the end of World War II, it gradually grew to become the second largest industrial and commercial city in China and the largest financial and trade centre in the north (Li 2007; Luo 2005). Following the civil war, the historical periods of post-war reconstruction, socialist transformation, and establishment of special economic zones saw a new round of development in Tianjin, which regained its status as an important international port. With respect to this modern history, the growth of western restaurants and western cuisine culture can be described through three historical phases, described below.

1. Concessions Period

After Tianjin became a treaty port in 1860, many western countries, such as Britain, the United States, and France, rushed in to build their own concessions. Up to the early 20th century, Tianjin not only had the most foreign concessions,

but also became an important gateway city for Sino-foreign cultural exchange (Tenshin Chiikisi Kenkyukai 1999: 136–137).

Western or western-style restaurants were opened successively in the concessions area and gradually became important places for social activities frequently held by the aristocracy, which included former royalty who had settled in the area to avoid revolutions and a number of politicians who had moved to the area because of frequent changes in regime. Consequently, the local popularity of western food culture grew ever greater. In the 1930s and 1940s, the customer base grew to include not only the rich and elite upper classes but also many white-collar workers and journalists, especially in those mid-range social classes (Zhao 2013: 69). Although some distinctions did exist within western cuisine, such as French, Russian, and German cuisine, at that time these cuisines looked fairly similar to the vast majority of Chinese people, and were thus still referred to generally as ‘western cuisine’ in light of their huge differences from traditional oriental forms.

2. Socialist Transformation Period

After victory in World War II, concessions in Tianjin were returned to the Chinese authorities. Some of the western restaurants in the area were taken over by the local government as defeat properties; others were near bankruptcy. Furthermore, as Tianjin became a main battlefield in the civil war, many restaurants suffered from the war’s effects and were forced to close. The previously flowering western food culture thus entered a long hibernation, almost perishing after establishment of the People’s Republic of China. Those restaurants that survived the war were either closed or forced to change their business model (to serve Chinese cuisine); a few were merged or restructured into state-owned enterprises serving both western and Chinese cuisines for foreign affairs receptions.

During the socialist transformation period, the well-developed western food culture of the concessions period declined into a nostalgic memory in local residents’ minds. However, with the ‘Sino-Soviet Friendship Era’ in the 1950s, Russian cuisine became a new preference for Chinese people, particularly the young generation who were deeply influenced by the ‘revolutionary enthusiasm’.

3. Period after Reform and Opening-up

After the reform and opening-up in the 1980s, Tianjin once again became an important channel for foreign culture as a municipality and port city, with several western restaurants opening to provide delicious western foods to the locals. With continual experience of these foreign cuisines, domestic consumers learnt more about the distinctions between the styles and cooking methods of different countries and areas. Because it is similar to traditional Chinese food culture in terms of foodstuffs, culinary skills, and etiquette, French cuisine has grown greatly in local awareness in recent years.

Consequently, restaurants operated by French people or serving French

cuisine become the ‘field’ in which consumers could learn about western culture, practice the table etiquette, and enjoy their delicacies.

WESTERN RESTAURANTS AND FRENCH CUISINE IN CONTEMPORARY TIANJIN

Among the western restaurants in Tianjin, three types serve French cuisine. First are western hotels or restaurants recognized as *Lao Zi Hao* (time-honoured brands, as described above). These were originally opened by foreigners who came to Tianjin in the concessions era. However, they became state-owned enterprises through social reorganization, and were ultimately nationally authorized as established hotels or restaurants, receiving the title of *Lao Zi Hao*. Second are chain restaurants from overseas, especially French restaurant chains in the Tianjin urban area, developed starting in the 2010s. Third are other western restaurants opened by Tianjin natives. The present circumstances of the French cuisine offered by these restaurants will be described with concrete examples.

1. *Lao Zi Hao* Western Restaurants

Two businesses in Tianjin are authorized as *Lao Zi Hao*: Astor Hotel Tianjin and Kiessling.

Built in the British concession in 1863, Astor Hotel was the first luxury hotel in Tianjin and soon became an iconic place for social gatherings. Following several resales during World War II and the Chinese Civil War, it was finally taken over by the local government as the state-owned enterprise to host foreign affairs receptions and renamed Tianjin Hotel. Through a joint restructuring venture in the 1980s, the original name Astor Hotel was restored, and the hotel was accepted into the list of *Lao Zi Hao* (Bian 2007(zhong): 112–122). Within the hotel, a restaurant called 1863 Bistro & Terrace (Photo 1) serves several styles of western cuisine, with special ‘historical menus’ related to well-known people and events from the hotel’s long history. Among these menus are several French courses, such as *escargots gratinee* (referred to as ‘French-style’ in the Chinese description) and *foie gras poêlé* in the standard Astor ‘collection’ menu, *crêpe normande* (pancakes with apple and brandy) in the ‘well-known set meal’ of VK Wellington Koo²⁾ (Figure 2), and so on.³⁾

Kiessling, in contrast, opened in the French concession in 1901 and mainly served German cuisine along with French baking. Like Astor Hotel in the 1940s, Kiessling was taken over by the local government and merged with several other restaurants serving western-style cuisine. After renaming as Gongnongbing Canting (‘Canteen for Worker-peasant-soldier’) and Tianjin Restaurant, the original brand of Kiessling was restored in the 1970s, and the restaurant was accepted into the list of *Lao Zi Hao* in 2006 (Photo 2; Bian ed. 2007(shang): 192–200; Pan and Guo 2010: 50). In addition to German, Kiessling also serves cuisines from Russia, England, and Italy, in addition to baked goods, candies, and coffee. A French



Photo 1 1863 Bistro & Terrace in Astor Hotel
(Source: Photograph by the author, June 6, 2015)



Figure 2 Historical menu of VK Wellington Koo
(Source: Provided by Miss Xiao, manager of 1863 Bistro & Terrace in Astor Hotel)



Photo 2 Kiessling restaurant
(Source: Photograph by the author, March 8, 2015)



Photo 3 French dining hall in Kiessling
(Source: Photograph by the author, March 8, 2015)

dining hall (Photo 3) is located on the fourth floor, where people can enjoy a set meal of French dishes such as *bouillabaisse*; French goose liver with grape chutney, vanilla sugar, and red wine pear sauce; Burgundy baked snails; and so on.

Although both Astor Hotel Tianjin and Kiessling were opened by foreigners and famous in the concessions for serving ‘exotic cuisine’, they have been integrated into the native culture over a century, particularly through restructuring by the local government. Both became typical local food enterprises in Tianjin and were thus very attractive to customers from all over the country and even overseas. To the native residents, enjoying a meal there meant not only satisfying



Photo 4 Maxim's de Paris
(Source: Photograph by the author,
October 17, 2014)



Photo 5 Brasserie Flo
(Source: Photograph by the author, March
8, 2015)

the stomach with delicacies, but also experiencing a strong feeling of nostalgia and connection to the past one hundred years.

2. Chain Restaurants from Overseas

After the reform and opening-up, French restaurants like Maxim's de Paris and Brasserie Flo, already well-known overseas, were introduced into mainland China and opened chains in Tianjin at the start of this century. Maxim's de Paris began its business in Beijing in 1983, then opened a location in Tianjin in 2013 using the historical residence of Zhang Fuyun in the former British concession (Photo 4). After the first location of Brasserie Flo was opened in Beijing in 1999, the second was opened in Tianjin in 2011 using the building of Zeng Guofan's family in the former Italian concession (Photo 5).

Unlike the *Lao Zi Hao* restaurants, these 'newcomers' are considered to be 'authentic' French restaurants due to their specialty in French cuisine, denoted by frequent use of the words 'classic' and 'traditional' in their menu descriptions. Such descriptors occur in three forms: 1) 'classic' dishes incorporating the restaurant's name, such as Maxim's de Paris *foie gras terrine*, Maxim's de Paris classic snail, *foie gras mi-cuit façon FLO*, and so on; 2) dishes with the words 'classic' or 'traditional' directly in the name, such as *soupe traditionnelle de poisson* (**classic** fish soup with garlic croutons, rouille sauce, and emmental), *salade Cesar de homard de Boston* (**classic** Boston lobster Caesar salad with garlic croutons, mixed lettuce, Parmesan shavings, and creamy Caesar dressing), **classic** heavy cheesecake, and so on; and 3) dishes labelled with the Mandarin *jing dian* (meaning 'classic'), such as *escargots de Bourgogne*, *crème de champignons et truffes noires*, and so on. It is additionally emphasized that the ingredients, such as oysters, are flown in fresh from France daily, and that the dishes are cooked or recommended by French executive chefs.

The factors synonymous with the 'authentic', such as classic dishes, French



Photo 6 Chenggui Restaurant (Source: Photograph by the author, June 16, 2015)

ingredients, and French chefs, are selling points for the public, thus establishing an important field for the practice and cognitive construction of French cuisine.

3. Western Restaurants Managed by Tianjin Natives

In addition to the two types of western restaurants introduced above, several restaurants offer French or French-style cuisine in Tianjin, mostly opened and managed by native citizens since the 1980s.

Chenggui Restaurant, located in the former English concession, is typical of this type (Photo 6). The business began in 1984, mainly serving western-style dishes cooked by a sophisticated local chef who worked in a French restaurant in Tianjin before the liberation (Yin 1995: 280–282). Today, it has not only trained a large number of young local chefs but also opened another two branches in Tianjin. Many ‘traditional French cuisine’ dishes can be found on the menu, in particular some recipes preserved as the restaurant’s specialities, such as French onion soup (30 years), braised ox tongue and vegetables with red wine sauce (29 years), hot French potato salad with bacon (labelled ‘classic recommendation’ in Chinese), braised chicken with French sauce (labelled ‘traditional’ in Chinese), and so on.

In addition to Chenggui Restaurant, other local restaurants serve many kinds of western-style food, such as Xinjinhuan Restaurant and Suyishi Restaurant. Both are famous in the local area, with the same long history and support from a sufficient and stable customer base.

These native-owned restaurants achieved remarkable success even before introduction of foreign restaurants into Tianjin, such as Maxim’s de Paris and

Brasserie Flo, and survived in an increasingly competitive environment.⁴⁾ Although the so-called ‘classic’ or ‘authentic’ restaurants are highly attractive to younger diners chasing the fashion in globalization and eager to experience exotic culinary culture, the high prices might give common people pause. In contrast, the ‘affordable’ native restaurants could offer an economical alternative for the majority of society, and give some an appetite for the ‘classic’ options.

LOCALIZATION OF FRENCH CULINARY CULTURE IN TIANJIN

In analysing the formation of gastronomy in 19th-century France, Ferguson examines foodstuffs, restaurants (chefs and diners), and culinary tradition as the foundations of the field: ‘Like any new social practice, gastronomy drew on a nexus of social, economic, and cultural conditions. It shaped to its own ends the standard exemplar of cultural communication linking supplies, producers, and consumers in a set of common understandings. For gastronomy, this model translates in: first, abundant, various, and readily available foodstuffs; second, a cadre of experienced producers (chefs) in a culturally specific site (the restaurant), both of which are supported by knowledgeable, affluent consumers (diners); and third, a secular cultural (culinary) tradition’ (Ferguson 1998: 602–603). These factors played a similarly important role in the localization of French cuisine in urban Tianjin.

All three types of western restaurants described offer French dishes cooked using traditional French ingredients, including *foie gras* and snails. Furthermore, due to the acceleration of food ingredient transport around the world, things like French oysters, Russian caviar, Australian steak, and Boston lobster have recently become readily available and common in the menus of both French and local restaurants in Tianjin (Photo 7). Using these fresh, traditional ingredients, French and skilful native chefs gathered in Tianjin offer more traditional and classic French cuisine to the city’s citizens. Furthermore, many native diners have a deep affection for French cuisine, especially those well-educated in ‘traditional’ western culture during the concessions period. Consequently, four elements—varied fresh ingredients, skilful chefs, native diners with western food experience, and traditional western food culture—have established the unique food culture of Tianjin French cuisine.

However, examination of the French food culture in modern urban Tianjin reveals that specific meanings and understandings of western restaurants and the French cuisine they offer among Tianjin citizens. Taking an example from the foodscape formation process and present dietary practices of locals in Xiguan, Guangzhou, China, Kawai stated that certain foods and restaurants in the same space have distinct meanings for local people (Kawai 2018). He also noted that these meanings are strongly related with the locals’ experience, food customs and memories, and social relationships (place). Similarly, Tianjin locals, who have various experiences with and awareness of western food, have also developed



Photo 7 French oysters and Boston lobster displayed in the show window of the restaurant Brasserie Flo (Source: Photograph by the author, June 13, 2015)

distinct meanings and understandings—for example, ‘nostalgic’, ‘classic’, or ‘local’—of the three kinds of restaurants in the former concession area (space) and the dishes they offer. Concretely, the first of the three, *Lao Zi Hao* western restaurants, have become Tianjin specialties over their more than one hundred years of operation. Tianjin people feel nostalgia for the concessions or socialism eras of the past when they dine there. The second of the three, chains and restaurants from abroad, were opened in former concession areas, which provide an atmosphere of western culture. These chains and restaurants emphasize their use of fresh ingredients and classic French dishes cooked by skilful chefs. For some rich Tianjin residents, dining in such expensive French restaurants is a reflection of their social status and financial capability. Finally, the third type, western restaurants opened by natives, especially those operated since the 1980s, have gradually been established as one a local Tianjin food culture. Thus, the multi-layered foodscape of Tianjin was created through localization of French food culture, with its history involving western restaurants and the various sentiments and understandings of the locals.

CONCLUSION

The above discussion illustrates that elements including circulation of ingredients, management and advancement of restaurants, local diners’ experiences, and preservation of a local culture of western food have localized French cuisine and

created a multi-layered French cuisine foodscape in urban Tianjin.

What about the situations in other Chinese cities? Some similar cases can be found in the capital of Beijing and other early treaty ports, such as Shanghai and Guangzhou. Having a nearly hundred-year history of western cuisine culture, such cities typically have a large number of local customers who are fond of the foreign dishes, and foreign or local restaurants mainly serve various western dishes. Examples of French cuisine or French-style food, such as pan-fried goose liver with Italian dressing or baked crabmeat cream cheese sauce in the shell, French-style fresh seafood (prawn, scallop, mussel, squid) soup, and French onion soup, are found in Shanghai's DeDa Western Restaurant.

In contrast to the coastal areas, western food was rarely introduced into inland cities until the end of the 20th century. Western restaurants of that time mostly sold fast food, such as KFC and McDonald's, but they did rapidly and successfully develop and popularize western food culture in the inland cities. For those who enjoyed it, there are certainly some 'French-style' food offerings, such as *escargots* from Pizza Hut or flaky pastry from KFC's breakfast menu, both of which were labelled 'French-style' in the Chinese menu to attract consumers' attention and patronage. In addition, some delicious French-style foodstuffs were available in the buffets of starred hotels, Vietnamese restaurants, and cafes.

A phenomenon of 'culture conjunction' resulted in those cities that were influenced by western cuisine culture since the 1990s, similar but different in all cities based on the reactions of their modern history. Those restaurants mentioned in this chapter are typical western restaurants serving localized dishes served. Throughout the country, these western restaurants have become an important culinary field (a so-called 'culinary contact zone') in which native people can understand, experience, and enjoy western cuisine. Nevertheless, as seen in the case study of Tianjin, western cuisine culture presented in the same space can have different meaning to individual people with different experiences and local knowledge (place). How the food culture 'looks' in their eyes thus makes the foodscapes multi-layered, with both similarities and differences. Cases in other cities require more attention and comparative study.

NOTES

- 1) *Lao Zi Hao* translates to 'China time-honoured brand' in English. It is an honoured title granted by the Ministry of Commerce of PRC to enterprises in mainland China whose brand has a long history; products, techniques, or services passed down through generations; strong Chinese cultural background and characteristics; and wide recognition by society.
- 2) VK Wellington Koo (1888–1985), Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China, was the first and only Chinese head of state known to publicly use a western name. Koo attended the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 and participated in founding the League of Nations and United Nations. His cosmopolitan tastes were reflected in his menu selection when he stayed at the Astor Hotel: *crème de topinambours* (cream of Jerusalem artichokes), *blanc de loup de mer persille au jus de veau* (pan-fried sea bass coated in parsley

- breadcrumbs with veal juice), and *crêpe normande* (pancakes with apple and brandy).
- 3) During my survey of the Astor Hotel, I received great support from Miss Xiao, manager of 1863 Bistro & Terrace. I wish to show my gratitude to her here for introducing important information about the restaurant and collecting many 'well-known set meals'.
 - 4) Certainly, lower prices are also a competitive advantage for the local-owned restaurants. At Chenggui Restaurant, the price per person is about 180 yuan. Although this is a high price among the local restaurants, it is still the half price of foreign ones such as Maxim's de Paris and Brasserie Flo (Dianping 2015 [online]).

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