

Cuisine and Symbolic Capital

Cuisine and Symbolic Capital:
Food in Film and Literature

Edited by

Cheleen Ann-Catherine Mahar

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P U B L I S H I N G

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PREFACE

This collection of interdisciplinary essays examines food as it mediates social relationships and self-presentation through the mediums of film and literature. As well as providing a cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary look at food and the uses of food as a way to apprehend cultural meaning, the essays presented here, also provide theoretical templates for the study of food in film and literature.

Each essay focuses upon a variety of cultures and literary traditions in order to investigate culinary practice and how it intersects with such cultural constructs as class, gender and sociability. The essays here also explore how food and social practice are connected to concepts of hearth and nurturance, as well as to patterns of hierarchy and social reproduction. Culinary practice is central to human civilization and forms a quotidian terrain upon which struggles for symbolic capital routinely take place. The elements of this struggle, and the hierarchies, which are fought over, are very complicated and subtly nuanced.

Culinary struggles and the use of food metaphors evoke larger struggles for symbolic capital that are closely connected to a sense of community and humanity. For instance, often in a world as globalized as ours is now, there is a fundamental struggle over sustaining a historically bound vision of authentic food and family identity, (at least of home), as opposed to the food marketed as 'authentic' in restaurants and shops.

The essays gathered together here focus on the literary, film and quotidian terrain upon which food and culinary practices reveal the deeper logics of social practice and cultural meaning. Chapters explore a range of ideas from identity through food in China to Romani cultural identity in Germany to a consideration of Julia Child. Each chapter focuses specifically on a culture area as well as particular literature and films. The threads of identity and culture run through each chapter, while revealing how food and culinary practices as symbolic capitals mediate relationships.

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**CULINARY TRANSLATIONS OF IDENTITY:
FROM BRITAIN TO CHINA**

CHAPTER ONE

TRANSLATING CREPES:
POLITICS, ECONOMICS AND CULTURE
IN PHILIPPE MASSONNET’S
“LA CRÊPERIE DE PÉKIN”¹

MICHELLE BLOOM

In Phillipe Massonnet’s humorous 2003 story “La crêperie de Pékin” (The Creperie of Beijing), “beurre sucre” (butter sugar), the dying utterance of the unnamed character based on Deng Xiaoping, is supposedly translated into Chinese characters to report the death of the “Grand Dirigeant” (Great Leader) in newspapers throughout China. This linguistic translation of the crepe is but one of several kinds of translation operating in the importation of the French pancake to China in this story, the last in the eponymous collection authored by Massonnet, a French journalist and former director of the Agence France Presse in Beijing and Shanghai.² On a visit to France, Massonnet’s protagonist Chen discovers the crepe because it provides relatively inexpensive sustenance relative to other types of French cuisine. When he imports crepes to China and becomes the personal, clandestine chef of the Great Leader, they undergo “economic translation,” becoming the food of the elite. The culinary

¹ My appreciation goes to Flannery Wilson for her diligent and insightful research assistance on this project and for her patience with the nuances of preparing the article for publication. I would also like to extend my thanks to Jeanne Boyer for her invaluable editorial assistance. My gratitude goes to the University of California, Riverside for the COR grant facilitating this assistance. Thanks also to Heidi Brevik-Zender, Perry Link, Véronique Olivier, Theda Shapiro and Kelle Truby for sharing their expertise as bilingual French-English wordsmiths, to which I owe the success of the translations of Massonnet’s story. Any errors are my own responsibility.

² Massonnet stepped down from his position as Director of the Agence France Presse in September 2008.

translation involved in importing French crepes to China entails modification of ingredients, utensils and eating habits. Through the examination of political, economic, culinary and cultural translation in Massonnet's story, I will argue that food goes beyond nutrition and even surpasses the social, as it embodies cultures and cultural differences.

To Translate or Not to Translate

Massonnet's story not only represents "literal translation," but also foregrounds it. Massonnet creates the character of Chen, whose supposedly Chinese dialogue the author, bi-lingual in French and Chinese, represents in French, thereby translating it, in a sense. Given that Massonnet places Chen, a retired professor of Chinese literature, on vacation in France, this linguistic translation almost makes sense. I say "almost," because being in France does not mean Chen speaks the language, even if Massonnet takes the fictional leap of representing his speech in French. Like the words of many a literary or film character placed "abroad,"³ Chen's dialogue is represented in the foreign language, even though he does not speak the language in question. Further, Massonnet of course continues to represent Chen's spoken words in French once he returns to China with his scheme to make crepes there.

The Grand Dirigeant's dying words "beurre sucre" reflect Chen's post-voyage success translating French crepes for the Beijing consumer, be it the Great Leader himself, or the customers who frequent Chen's creperie. The Great Leader's last words are recounted near the opening of the story, which is told not only retrospectively, but also posthumously, and not only after the Leader's death, but also, at least partly if not fully, and certainly fantastically, after the narrator-character Chen's decease: "Huit années plus tard [after the Great Leader's death], je mourus en héros national" [Eight years later, I died a national hero].⁴ Massonnet represents the Grand Dirigeant's last words in French, describing the Chinese characters representing *beurre sucre*, even quantifying them, but not representing

³ For instance, although Lasse Hallström's 2000 film *Chocolat* takes place in France, and Juliette Binoche plays a French woman named Vianne, she speaks English throughout the film alongside Johnny Depp. Bernardo Bertolucci is another good example of a director who employs this technique, most notably in his films *1900* (1976), which takes place in Italy, starring Robert De Niro and Gérard Depardieu, and *The Last Emperor* (1989), which takes place in China, starring John Lone and Peter O'Toole.

⁴ Massonnet, *La crêperie de Pékin, et autres nouvelles de Chine*, 168. Hereafter cited in text.

them pictographically. He thus keeps the text in French rather than includes a translation into Chinese:

“Tous les quotidiens sans exception, du Tibet à la Mandchourie, de la Mongolie à la frontière vietnamienne, imprimèrent les trois caractères en typographie géante” [All of the daily newspapers, without exception, from Tibet to Manchuria, from Mongolia to the Vietnamese border, printed the tree characters in giant topography.] (131)

A footnote further breaks down the three characters, explaining that there are two characters for “butter” and one for “sugar,”⁵ but we never see those characters, even in the intermediary form of pinyin, the romanization system used to indicate the name “Chen” and designed to allow westerners easier access to Chinese. Massonnet refrains from representing Chinese characters, instead remaining faithful to the French language and readership.

The explanation for the French text and thus dialogue of “La crêperie de Pékin” lies in the bilingual journalist Massonnet’s project of “translating” Chinese experiences and characters (of both sorts) into French for a francophone audience, and probably a specifically French one at that. The story is accessible to date only to francophone readers, as it remains thus far untranslated. Indeed, as Massonnet himself claims, the entire collection is written in accessible French, presumably for a readership of his compatriots: “‘C’est une écriture simple, humoristique, sans misérabilisme, accessible à tous, qui permet de faire avancer la compréhension du pays.’” [It is simple, humorous writing, without sordid realism, accessible to all, which allows for the advancement of the understanding of the country].⁶ It is accessible to readers who are literate in French, while the qualification “sans misérabilisme” [without sordid realism] suggests that it is not simply the language that is easy, but the upbeat and humorous tone that makes the text accessible. The unnamed country in question is of course the People’s Republic of China, rendered understandable ironically through the Chinese protagonist’s efforts to understand France.⁷

While Massonnet serves as a linguistic and cultural translator for his French readership, when in France, his character Chen requires the translation services of his friend Ling, a compatriot and “vieille connaissance exilée en France” [old acquaintance exiled in France] (140).

⁵ Note 1, 131.

⁶ Carre Chen, “Un patchwork tendre,” [an unpaginated electronic interview].

⁷ Ibid.

Ling serves as Chen's "interprète," [translator] for instance, in order to ask Madame Lagadec, the proprietress of a Norman creperie, for her permission to film the establishment for a few minutes (147). Dependent on translation in order to function in France and to read French literature, Chen relies on his friend for oral translation.

Consuming Literature and Food

Chen is ambivalent about both his consumption of French literature and his consumption of French food, since both are simultaneously appealing and unfamiliar to him. He first encountered French literature during the "Cultural Revolution," the intellectually and politically repressive period from 1966 to 1976 under Mao during which youth were "sent down" to the countryside to be "re-educated." Chen consumed the works of Balzac, Flaubert and Hugo, three of the *grands écrivains* [great writers] of the nineteenth-century who were authorized prior to the Cultural Revolution but banned during it. He read these authors, "Dans ma langue, puisque je ne maîtrisais pas celle de mes écrivains préférés" [In my language, because I hadn't mastered that of my favorite writers] (137). Although Chen embraced *Madame Bovary*, his ignorance of Flaubert's language accounted for his distance from it and her. Nevertheless, being caught in the illicit act of reading Flaubert—even in translation—accounted for his being "sent down" for "re-education." Flaubert's chef-d'oeuvre was no less scandalous in Cultural Revolution China than in its birthplace and time, mid nineteenth-century France.⁸

Chen is no more able to consume Flaubert's work in the original years later when he purchases it on the same visit to France where he discovers crepes. He possesses the original French text, but it does not follow that he can read it:

"quinze ans plus tard, je harponnais solidement le chef-d'oeuvre de Flaubert dans mes mains. En français cette fois. À Paris. Tant pis si je ne savais toujours pas lire la langue du cher Gustave à qui je ne tenais pas rigueur de m'avoir fait découvrir la Chine profonde!" [Fifteen years later, I solidly harpooned Flaubert's chef-d'oeuvre in my hands. In French this time. In Paris. Too bad if I still didn't know how to read the language of

⁸ Flaubert's novel was attacked by public prosecutors after it appeared in the *Revue de Paris* in 1856. The scandal resulted in a trial in 1857, but was published in book form soon after, and became a best seller. See Dominick LaCapra's book *Madame Bovary on Trial*.

dear Gustave, whom I didn't hold it against that he made me discover rural China! (138)

It would be inaccurate to say that the French version of *Madame Bovary* meant nothing to Chen, given the work's role in shaping his personal history; indeed, its responsibility for his "re-education." As an object, albeit one whose writing is illegible to him, the French book means a lot to him. However, Chen's ignorance of French keeps him at a distance from French literature in the original.

Like French literature, French food is difficult for Chen to consume. While the act of reading *Madame Bovary* during the Cultural Revolution resulted in a three year punishment, Chen finds the act of eating baguettes to be torture, albeit humorously so.⁹ Baguettes in the French sense of bread in addition to chopsticks, as the French plural *les baguettes* denotes, provide the object of Chen's critique of the French. Rather than offer the typically western praise of the long, thin French bread, he focuses on the equally compelling and rarely articulated downside of the baguette:

"Je vais vous dire, la première fois que je mordis dans une baguette fraîche, mes gencives exproprièrent des litres et des litres de sang! J'exagère un peu, d'accord. Mais sur le coup, je m'étais vraiment interrogé: 'Comment les Français endurent-ils ce supplice?'" [I am going to tell you, the first time that I bit into a fresh baguette, my gums expropriated liters and liters of blood! I exaggerate a little, okay. But at the time, I truly asked myself: how do the French endure this torture?] (140)

Chen's self-consciousness as narrator allows him to acknowledge the hyperbole of his bloody account of the French bread. Chen-the-narrator contrasts Chen-the-experiencer,¹⁰ who views the French, hyperbolically and amusingly, as victims of torture executed by the weapon called the

⁹ Of course, it is not out of the question to portray the torture of re-education humorously. Dai Sijie, for instance, does so in his novel *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* (2000) and in his film adaptation of the same name (2002). Likewise, in terms of the comparison between the Cultural Revolution and the Holocaust which Gao Xingjian evokes through the German Jewish character Margarethe in *One Man's Bible* (2002), other collective historical traumas such as World War II have been represented humorously, for instance in films such as Roberto Benigni's hit *Life is Beautiful* (1998). Such comedies do of course provoke mixed reactions amongst viewers, and particularly negative responses by survivors.

¹⁰ Käte Hamburger makes a distinction between the "I-narrator" and the "I-experiencer" in her book *The Logic of Literature*, 140.

baguette. Chen's commentary is contingent upon the concepts of cultural difference and cultural relativity.

Food is not only about what we eat but also about how we eat, in terms of presentation and with regard to the physical act of eating, which in turn includes manners and utensils. In Gérard Kracwyk's 2001 French action film *Wasabi*, Jean Réno as the Frenchman Hubert in Japan eating a bowl of wasabi with his hands creates humor out of cultural difference. This French character is no more in tune with Japanese food and manners than he is with the language. Wasabi is a spicy condiment, not a main dish, to be eaten in small quantities as an accompaniment.

Kracwyk, like Massonnet, derives humor from cultural difference. Indeed, a Frenchman speaking through his Chinese character, Massonnet engages in occidentalism, which I define simply as the reversal of the hierarchy of the "west" over the "east."¹¹ The Chinese, the supposedly weaker party in the hegemonic relationship, have more license to critique the stronger party without violating the rules of political correctness, as Chen does, quite humorously. Further, since Massonnet is French, occidentalism is a cover for western self-critique, which seems more acceptable than the critique of the other. Accordingly, whereas it would be unacceptable to call the Chinese "primitive," Massonnet, through the voice of Chen, can deem the French "barbares," as he does on more than one occasion (145, 149). Calling the French barbaric for using knives and forks rather than chopsticks reverses orientalism, humorously:

"Je plantai vigoureusement fourchette et couteau dans la galette de sarrasin. Je maniais de mieux en mieux les ustensiles des barbares mais collais toujours un peu trop le nez dans mon assiette..." [I planted my fork and knife vigorously in the buckwheat crepe. I manipulated the barbare's utensils better and better, but still stuck my nose a little too much into my plate.] (145)

Chen's humor lies in his description of his physical movements, specifically of his aggressive manipulation of the western utensils, and in the constant threat of contact between nose and plate. In addition to subverting the orientalist assumption of the superiority of knife and fork over chopsticks,¹² Chen calls into question French manners: "J'essayais de

¹¹ Xiaomei Chen, in her book *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China*, defines the term "Occidentalism" as "a discursive practice that, by constructing its Western Other, has allowed the Orient to participate actively and with indigenous creativity in the process of self-appropriation, even after being appropriated and constructed by Western Others," 4-5.

¹² See Barthes on chopsticks in *Empire of Signs*, 15-18.

mâcher moins bruyamment qu'en Chine, pour respecter le code de la politesse française" [I tried to chew less loudly than in China, to respect the French code of politeness] (146). Chen points out that cultural difference accounts for manners, which are cultural constructs. He thus avoids buying into the orientalist view of western "civilization" versus eastern "primitiveness," indeed critiquing this dichotomy.

Cultural and Culinary Translations

Mastery of language without understanding of culture does not suffice to facilitate meaningful translation. "Things in China can't be explained by language alone," as per the protagonist of Nobel prize winning Chinese born, French expatriate writer Gao Xingjian's *One Man's Bible*.¹³ As a result, in Gao's novel, even if the protagonist's German lover Margarethe "does know the language," (Chinese, but more specifically Cantonese, since the present day segments of the text take place in pre-Handover Hong Kong) she does not understand – or indeed, cannot understand- why "Gao," or the author's fictional incarnation, cannot be both a writer and an artist in China.¹⁴ Such barriers to understanding even in the face of mastery of "language" apply universally, although the Gao example provides a precise case in that it nicely inverts the Europe/China relation of Massonnet's story: a European character's knowledge of "Chinese" does not allow her to comprehend Chinese culture, any more than Ling's French language translation alone suffices to facilitate Chen's understanding of French culinary norms.

As Lydia Liu says in *Tokens of Exchange: The Problem of Translation in Global Circulations* (2000), "we can no longer talk about translation as if it were a purely linguistic or literary matter."¹⁵ Literal translation, which stands in opposition to "cultural translation" as per Wang Ning in *Globalization in Cultural Translation*,¹⁶ constitutes translation of a text from one language to another. In "La crêperie de Pékin," culture as well as language keeps Chen at bay from France even while he is physically

¹³ Gao, 29. See note 10 above.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Liu, 1.

¹⁶ Ning, 23. In his famous essay "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin notes that "literal translations," when too heavy-handed, are often damaging to meaning. He adds: "...the significance of fidelity as ensured by literalness is that the work reflects the great longing for linguistic complementation" *Illuminations*, 79. In other words, good translations must never overshadow the original; fidelity and freedom must be balanced.

present there. Understanding the Other (language and culture) requires cultural translation, and more specifically what I will call “econoculinary” translation in this case. Given that Ling resides in Paris and knows the language, he is able to offer his friend some insights into the finances of French food. However, the information that Ling offers is insufficient, due to cultural relativity. It allows for cultural misunderstanding. When Chen looks for a budget restaurant, a “formule économique” (140) other than the unsatisfying French version of Chinese cuisines to satisfy his appetite, Ling suggests crepes.

Chen tastes “French pancakes” not because they are the quintessential French food but, more pragmatically, and amusingly, because they cost relatively little in the context of late twentieth-century France. Indeed, crepes, originally from Brittany, were “peasant food,” which farmers would give to their landowners as a sign of respect. Displaced from Brittany to Paris, they become street food wrapped in paper and sold by vendors for modest prices to eat on the go. They rise a notch in creperies, sit-down restaurants where they constitute either main dishes made with *farine de sarrasin* (buckwheat flour), oil, butter and eggs, or dessert. What are currently considered main dish crepes (crepes did not originally constitute a meal) may be filled with cheese, ham, vegetables or a combination of these and other ingredients. Dessert crepes are made similarly, but they typically contain regular flour, powdered sugar, and all sorts of fillings, from chocolate to fruit preserves to Nutella (hazelnut spread).¹⁷

In France, even relatively inexpensive French restaurants charge more for less food than do run-of-the-mill Chinese restaurants. Although Ling’s suggestion that his friend eat at a creperie is not misguided, under the circumstances, Chen’s response to the bill at a Montparnasse creperie, like his gustatory reactions to the food, is one of indigestion:

“À la fin du repas, mon estomac entama une marche de protestation qui allait compliquer une digestion déjà perturbée par les cent soixante-trois francs de l’addition. Cidre et service compris” [At the end of the meal, my stomach began a protest march which was going to complicate a digestion already disturbed by the bill for 163 francs. Cider and tip included.] (141)

Massonnet expresses Chen’s economic indigestion when the protagonist asks his friend, “‘Tu m’avais pas dit que c’était pas cher, les crêpes?’”

¹⁷ This paragraph’s brief history and discussion of crêpes is informed by sources including Epicurious.com’s adaptation of Pappas’ ‘Crêpes’. See also “Bnet Business Network” and “Worldwide Gourmet.”

[‘Didn’t you tell me they weren’t expensive, crepes?’] In his role as first-person narrator, Chen reveals, “Je détestais ne pas en avoir pour mon argent” [I hated not getting my money’s worth] (141). As Ling explains in response, inexpensive is relative: “‘Pas cher comparé à d’autre repas, on est à Paris’” [‘Not expensive compared to other meals, we’re in Paris’] (141). If French restaurants are expensive, the capital’s establishments are even pricier than those in province. Chen claims with reference to Paris’s 20th arrondissement “mini-Chinatown,” that “‘A Belleville, je me gave pour quarante francs,’” [‘In Belleville, I stuff myself for 40 francs’] meaning that he indulges in its vague – albeit inexpensive – approximation of “Chinese food”:

“Je dénigrais pourtant les restaurants chinois de Paris, indignes pour certains de revendiquer cette appellation incontrôlée. Je ne retrouvais jamais le goût de la cuisine pékinoise ou shanghaienne” [I nevertheless disparage Chinese restaurants in Paris, some of them unworthy of claiming this certificate of authenticity. I never found the taste of Beijing or Shanghai style cuisine.] (140)

However, Chen also claims that he can eat “chez McDo pour vingt francs” [at McDonald’s for 20 francs] (141). Interestingly, quality does not enter into Chen’s equation, even though he has already criticized the authenticity of Belleville’s “Chinese” restaurants and “McDo” is well known to be fast food.

Quality aside, he admits, to the reader albeit not to his personal translator, that this claim entails “mauvaise foi” [bad faith] due to portion size:

“Je savais pertinemment qu’un hamburger, même double, ne colmatait qu’un recoin de mon estomac d’ogre” [I absolutely knew that a hamburger, even a double, would fill only a nook of my ogre’s stomach.] (141)

He admits that he had not yet mastered “the subtleties of the market economy” (141), with portion size coming into play in the *rappor qualité/prix* (relationship between the price and quality) of restaurant food. At the Norman creperie, by contrast to the Parisian one that Chen and Ling frequent, the crepes measure up, according to Chen-as-narrator: “La part était copieuse, même s’il en aurait fallu deux pour apaiser ma faim” [the portion was copious, even if two would have been necessary to appease my hunger] (146). Chen’s qualification of his approval of the Norman crepes’ size reflects that portions are generally bigger in China than in France. As Massonnet puts it accurately, “En Chine, la quantité compte

autant que la qualité, sinon plus” [In China, quantity counts as much as quality, if not more] (161). Indeed, to French moderation, China counters excess. More than the size of each dish, in China, the number of dishes constituting a meal accounts for the large amount of food served, if not necessarily consumed.

In France, crepes constitute what Priscilla Ferguson defines as “regional cuisine” rather than national cuisine,¹⁸ although they circulate throughout France to feed the French from different regions as well as non-French tourists imagining they are consuming quintessential French food, rather than Breton cuisine par excellence. Indeed, crepes might qualify as what Maryann Tebben calls iconic French cuisine, even if they are a far cry from the pot-au-feu she writes about as such.¹⁹ As Massonnet depicts accurately in his fiction, the creperies in the Montparnasse neighborhood near Paris’s southernmost train station await tourists and charge accordingly: “Je rémemorai la crêperie du boulevard Edgar-Quinet et ses prix pour voyageurs à peine descendus du trains et bons pour l’arnaque” [I recalled the creperie on the Boulevard Edgar-Quinet and its prices for travelers scarcely off of trains and ripe to be swindled] (144). The creperie that Chen and Ling frequent in Etretat, one of Monet’s favorite Normandie locales, also involves displacement from Brittany, the birthplace of crepes. Designed with rustic decor to appeal to Parisians, the establishment is decorated with old photos of Bigoudens, ambiguously evoking either the region in Brittany or the hairstyle, on the walls.²⁰ Even though the restaurant is a Breton transplant, the manager/owner Gilberte Lagadec is as well, thus connecting it to the origins of crepes and in that sense rendering it more “authentic.”

Importing Crepes: Sanlitun, Beijing, China

Massonnet transplants crepes internationally as well as domestically, the former importation occurring when Chen imports the idea and ingredients to Beijing. Massonnet feeds his French readership the idea that crepes were unknown in Beijing prior to Chen’s importation of the idea, equipment and ingredients to make them. Indeed “the famous Chen” is characterized as “the one who brought the crepe to China” (133), with the French word crepe clearly restricted to the French concept as well,

¹⁸ Ferguson, *Accounting For Taste*, 5.

¹⁹ Tebben, “French Food Texts And National Identity: Consommé, Cheese Soufflé, Francité?”

²⁰ Thanks to Véronique Olivier for her consultation regarding “Bigoudens.”

since China has its own such thin pancakes, sold on the streets of Beijing or served in dishes such as Peking Duck and Mushu Pork in restaurants. The sign, “Chez Chen, la meilleure crêperie de Chine et la seule” [Chez Chen, the best creperie in China and the only one] (134), denotes the uniqueness of Chen’s establishment in front of which it hangs. With this sign, Massonnet no doubt satirizes Chen’s crepe fantasy as well as the idea of monopoly versus competition, since the assertion of uniqueness undermines the superlative statement: if Chen’s creperie is the only one, it is definitionally the best, but not necessarily even good; and it is also the worst. In terms of delusions of the importance of his endeavor and its political overtones, Chen even has a dream that “la Cité interdite était transformée en une gigantesque crêperie dont j’étais l’empereur...” [The Forbidden City was transformed into a giant creperie of which I was the emperor] (154). This dream becomes reality in spirit if not to the letter when Chen becomes the personal chef of the Great Leader, thus realizing the political connections embodied in the satirical transformation of the Forbidden City into an enormous creperie. However, as “Chinese” restaurants in Paris are localized in Belleville and in one other (13th arrondissement) Chinatown, French crepes in Beijing are found primarily in the French and more generally “foreign” neighborhood of Sanlitun. This is to say that, as reflected by Massonnet’s reference to crepes as “that speciality little known (méconnue) in China,” they are little known but not unknown.

Indeed, Sanlitun, the Beijing location where Chen opens his creperie, appropriately next to the French school, is host to several French establishments which, while not devoted exclusively to crepes and thus not constituting creperies, offer crepes on the menu. The internet would have it that the straightforwardly named “La Crêperie,” the first creperie in Shanghai, a “more French” city than Beijing due to its French concession, opened as recently as 2007.²¹ Shifting to Beijing, the Sanlitun neighborhood might be considered the equivalent of Shanghai’s French Concession, if only in the sense that it is an expatriate heavy neighborhood. In the Chaoyang District, Sanlitun houses several embassies, including the French one. In Sanlitun, “Crazy Crepes” was “solely devoted to making crepes,” which you can thus “expect... to be great,” according to one internet user: “This place serves up everything from deep fried crepes to sweet crepes filled with Nutella and other fillings.” However, “Now Closed,” as per the same website where we find

²¹ City Weekend. “Crazy Crepes.” *Beijing Dining European Listing*.
<http://www.cityweekend.com.cn/beijing/listings/dining/european/has/crazy-crepes/>

the review, it seems to have come and gone. A March 2009 web search on the site <http://bbs.english.sina.com/> yielded the Far Away Café, what sounds like a bona fide creperie, serving “traditional French crêpe.”

During my November 2006 research trip to Beijing and crepe-tasting tour localized in Sanlitun, I found French and other restaurants serving crepes but not focused on them or qualifying as creperies. “Le Petit Gourmand,” one of the establishments where I tasted my standard butter/sugar crepe, the last request of Massonnet’s Great Leader, remains at the heart of the Sanlitun neighborhood. Like the nearby Beijing Bookworm,²² Le Petit Gourmand is not a creperie or even a restaurant, but a bookstore which houses a non-lending library and a restaurant. The bookstore is situated in compatriot company, next door to a more upscale French restaurant called Le Petit Bistrot (sic), and across the street from “Mèche,” not surprisingly a hair salon. In fall 2006, the menu at the Petit Gourmand was a hodge podge of crepes, salads, pizzas and couscous along with sandwiches – western lunch fare – and accompanied by hot and cold beverages and desserts. Since the crepe constituted my focus, that is what I sampled. Like those at several other French restaurants, my *beurre sucre* was standard French fare, but not particularly tasty or notable, and I certainly would have fared better on a Chinese meal for the same price. Indeed, the same money would have bought a meal rather than one dessert crepe.

Le Petit Gourmand’s then-new manager, Frenchman Axel Moreaux, articulated the admirable goal of “democratizing French cuisine” in China, to lower its cost so that it is more accessible. He explained in my November 2006 interview with him²³ that the restaurant’s location was good and that 70% of its clientele consisted of foreigners. However, he also indicated extra-culinary motivations for the Chinese interest in his offerings, when he said, “the Chinese are more and more interested in occidental cultures” and that they have the “cultural desire to make foreign friends.” Meanwhile, in Beijing, he notes that French restaurants represent *la mode* and *le luxe* and that there is a certain *snobisme* about all that is French. The high prices of French restaurants result not only from this reputation, but also, he explains, from the difficulty of finding the ingredients for French cuisine in China, and the cost of obtaining them. Whereas a French salad in a French restaurant in China would cost less than the same thing in a French restaurant in France, it would still cost more than a Chinese salad, thus the difficulty drawing in Chinese

²² The Bookworm Beijing. “Welcome to the Bookworm Beijing.” *Home page*. <http://www.beijingbookworm.com/>

²³ Michelle Bloom, personal interview with Axel Moreaux, November, 2006.

customers. For renowned chef Daniel Boulud of the eponymous New York City restaurant (“Daniel”), acquiring “high-quality” ingredients for his new French restaurant in China also poses “one of the big challenges of setting up in Beijing”: “Boulud is known for his fresh, seasonal fare, and this discriminating chef likes to source as locally as possible. He’s been happy with the fresh seafood but less enthralled with the herbs and meats.”²⁴

Manager Moreaux raises some of the same issues regarding the availability of ingredients which Chen faces in terms of making crepes in China, and which the Great Leader underscores as well, with the solution of Massonnet’s character lying in importation. However, I would also suggest that Massonnet’s inventive Chen improves what he can offer to his Chinese clientele by translating it for them, rather than resign himself to the uninspiring original version I tasted in China, like the mediocre “Chinese” food typically found in restaurants in France, some exceptions aside. Chen’s creative solution to this problem lies in part in sinifying French crepes, which diminishes the problem of attaining requisite foreign ingredients and adapts foreign food to the Chinese palate. Chen recounts his experimentation concocting diverse main dish crepes: “Je bourrai trois galettes. Une avec des oreilles de cochon et des haricots secs, l’autre avec des palmes de canard à la moutarde, la troisième avec des tripes” [I filled three crepes. One with pig’s ears and dried beans, the other with duck feet with mustard, the third with tripes] (161).

Deng Xiaoping and/in France: “Il faut prendre ce qu’il y a de bon à l’Ouest”

Despite his attempts to translate crepes to make them accessible to his compatriots, Chen’s importation of non-Chinese ingredients upholds the Great Leader’s motto, “We must take what is good from the West” (“Il faut prendre ce qu’il y a de bon à l’Ouest”) (159, 166). Massonnet never names the Great Leader, even referring to him in an interview as “un grand dirigeant” with the vaguer indefinite article (“un”/a) rather than the definite article “le” (the).²⁵ It is in part the character’s openness to “the west” that reveals his identity to the reader—even if he must keep his private chef and culinary arrangement confidential. We know that the “Grand Dirigeant” is not Mao, whom Massonnet refers to by name, even comparing Nixon’s famous 1973 encounter with Mao to Chen’s own

²⁴ Lin-Liu. “Boulud-y Marvellous.” [Unpaginated electronic article].

²⁵ Carre Chen, “Un patchwork tendre.”

meeting with the anonymous Grand Dirigeant (165). Massonnet's Great Leader is clearly not Mao because of this openness to the west; the character's selection of Chen as his private crêpier because he is not a communist (166); as well as the chronology: Mao died in 1976 and this story takes place two decades later.

We do know that Massonnet's "Grand Dirigeant" is inspired by Deng Xiaoping, who died in 1997, six years before the publication of the story and who, like the story's Leader, spent time in France. In "La crêperie de Pékin," one of the photos accompanying the obituary presentation printed systematically in newspapers throughout the Mainland, extending as far as Tibet, testifies to the Great Leader's longstanding ties to France and to crepes. The photo's caption reads: "'Le Grand Dirigeant devant une crêperie en Bretagne, en compagnie de son propriétaire, un dénommé Martin.' Suivait la date: '6 janvier 1924'" ['The Great Leader in front of a creperie in Brittany, in the company of its proprietor, named Martin.' The date followed: '6 January, 1924'] (132). Deng Xiaoping not only visited France, but did so at precisely this time, or rather was there during a five year period including this moment. Deng participated in francophile Li Yuying's "Movement for Diligent Work and Frugal Study," under whose auspices he went to the Chungking preparatory school where he studied French and Chinese in preparation for his work-study in France.²⁶ According to Richard Evans, the Franco-Chinese program created by Li was an attempt to circumvent the poor state of affairs in China:

"Because the political condition of the country was so bad, and also because jobs were hard to come by for the first generation of modern middle-school graduates, a large number of young Chinese were attracted by Li's Programme. Between March 1919 and December 1920, almost 1600 worker-students, about thirty of them women, sailed for France."²⁷

In France, Deng studied, worked in factories and engaged in (communist) political activities.

According to Evans, Deng's time in France may well have opened him up to "foreign influences" rather than to France per se:

"France as such may have influenced him less strongly than the experience of living abroad. . . . there is no evidence that he took an interest in French art or literature, or even as a practical man, in French engineering and

²⁶ In chapters 1 and 2 of his biography of Deng, Richard Evans describes Li Yuying's program in depth.

²⁷ Evans, *Deng Xiaoping and the Making of Modern China*, 11. Hereafter cited in text.

architecture. Nor is there anything in the record – the archives of French government departments, factories and schools, and the memoirs of other worker-students – to indicate that he had French friends...” (23-24).

Evans continues by specifying that other “worker-students” did engage in activities or arrange living situations which facilitated more contact with the French, thus suggesting that Deng could have done so had he wanted to but opted not to (24). Evans calling into question the specificity of France’s influence on Deng’s political perspectives meshes with Massonnet’s fictionalization of Chen’s singular role in introducing the crepe to China and the author’s exaggeration of the French crepe’s significance in China once it arrives at this destination.

Although Evans makes the compelling point that France represents the foreign and the west, he goes a bit far in diminishing the specificity of France in Deng’s life and its resulting influence on his politics. At the root of the Chungking program was founder Li Yuying’s longstanding goal of forging closer ties between China and France and to “bring to Chinese workers and students the benefits of education and vocational training in France” (10). Li himself had gone to a French secondary school and had studied at Paris’s prestigious Pasteur Institute (10). Thus, Li’s choice of France as the destination for his program was hardly arbitrary. Further, if Deng did not take full advantage of the interpersonal possibilities with the French, even Evans presumes that, “By the time he left Paris for Moscow he must have read French without difficulty and spoken French at least passably well” (23). As the “must have” indicates, Evans is speculating here. Earlier, he recounts that the class in Bayeux where Deng first studied in France dissolved only months after his arrival, due to lack of funds, leaving students who could not pay their ways at the school to fend for themselves (15). Nevertheless, one can safely speculate with Evans that Deng’s French advanced in five years, even without much official instruction.

Paul Bailey points out both the genuine and the not-so-genuine Franco-Chinese connections at the root of the work-study program, as well as its ultimate failure, which supports Evans’ view that France did not ultimately play a unique role in influencing Deng. On the one hand, Bailey points out that the affinities between French and Chinese culture, which were “benign and humanistic” rather than dominant like the Anglo-Saxons, made such collaborations such as Li’s work study program promising.²⁸ However, France’s competitive motivation for these programs, which constituted her effort to combat the dominance of the Anglo-Saxon

²⁸ Bailey. “The Chinese Work-Study Movement in France.” 453.