



Images of Products With Chinese Characteristics: Based on a Qualitative Study

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Abstract

China's products fall into two general categories: The products made in China and the products with Chinese culture as its core illustrating the essence of Chinese culture. "Made in China" is far from covering the concept of the "products of China". From the perspective of cognitive science, the survey aims at how the general French public takes Chinese products, and, in particular, the image of products with Chinese characteristics.

Key words: Products of Chinese culture; Items with Chinese characteristics; Image of food

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, problems have been emerging as a growing group of Chinese products are exported abroad, which sparks concerns. Meanwhile, researches have sprung up concerning the image of China and the products of China. The vast majority of scholars have set "Made in China" or "Chinese brand" as a study focus, attempting to understand the problems of China's image raised by "Made in China" overseas, while the accurate concepts of

the products of China have rarely been pondered over. In consequence, "Made in China" has gradually become the synonym with the products of China. For instance, in the paper co-authored by Wang and Han titled *Made in China and Study on National Image* (Wang & Han, 2010, pp.49-55), there is an analysis of the characteristics and news framework by following a 30-year reportage in regard to "Made in China" from the four mainstream media of America. Li explores corresponding image of 'made in China' from American and Chinese media respectively from the perspective of risk in her article named *The Mirror of Made in China: An Investigation Based on the Perspective of Society at Risk* (Li, 2012, p.10). She regards "Made in China" as a risk which is produced and constructed in different times and spaces and attempts to put forward a coping strategy by looking at the image of made in China in Chinese and American media from the angle of risk.

In real life, however, the concepts such as "Made in China" or "China brand" fail to completely cover the connotation of Chinese products. After some close examinations, we found that the French don't think "Made in China" can fully replace the products of China when they first get into the products of China. All of these understandings initiate our pondering that we are expected to define the products of China when we attempt to know how the products of China impress foreigners, because "Made in China" is merely a part of the products of China.

1. RESEARCH METHODS

The qualitative study is applied as the main method. The study tends to explore the behavior of objects on the micro-level, which can be compared and interpreted through their narrative. This approach emphasizes that "the opinions of objects can be better comprehended from the angle of parties and their psychological states and meaning construction can be dynamically noticed" (Chen, 2000, p.10).

The semi-directive interview is applied as the concrete method in the study. The motivation and sense of actions can be fully seen through by generalizing the first-hand information from interviews. Each interview lasts about one to two hours. Before the interviews, it is a must to set the outlines which is merely a broad summary of the conversation and can be adjusted on the basis of respondents' sentiments and actual conversation. The survey data are expected to be transcribed, classified, depicted and analyzed after the completion of the survey. Different subjects are studied specially based on the corresponding theories.

54 French respondents of the survey are divided into two groups: group I and group II. The former is the 29 native French who have never been to China before, and the latter is the 25 French who have been living in China for at least one year. The survey lasts for about four years from 2008 to 2012.

2. CLASSIFICATION OF CHINESE PRODUCTS

It is found in the study that in the French eyes, Chinese products usually fall under two categories.

The first category is the products that we usually call "Made in China" containing the products with foreign brands and Chinese brands. The foreign products are processed in China, numerous in number and rich in variety, often sell in the names of international brands while China is merely a main supplier. The other is products with Chinese brands which tend to be confused with the first category in that both are industrial products which are mass-produced and rarely known to all. There are a small number of the products of Chinese brands as a result of rare self-owned Chinese brands with a high reputation in the international market.

The second category mostly includes the products with strong Chinese or eastern cultural characteristics which differ from western culture completely. They are mistaken for Chinese products at the first sight, or at least eastern products, which westerners like to call exoticism. All items connecting to China and Chinese culture are supposed to appear in this category.

The paper focuses on the image of the second category due to space limitation. Speaking of Chinese characteristics and traditional products, respondents mostly talk about Chinese cultural products represented by calligraphy and painting and products relating to Chinese cuisine.

3. IMAGES OF CHINESE CULTURAL PRODUCTS

Unlike products made in China, products with Chinese characteristics brim with unique Chinese elements received differently by the consumers. Products with

Chinese characteristics refer to those with any given Chinese characteristics, regardless of whether they are made in China, as long as they show a certain aspect of Chinese culture. The main purpose of these products is not simply their functions and the ability to meet everyday needs, but rather the culture they create, which is in sharp contrast to that of the French society and highlights its uniqueness, shown mainly as individuality.

3.1 Chinese Sentiments Out of Items With Chinese Characteristics

Speaking of items with Chinese characteristics, respondents are more likely to think of decoration. Exoticism and the owner's unique taste and style are emphasized by Chinese products used for decoration. Meanwhile, the feature of Chinese products is reflected which is decoration value rather than its practical value or other utility. Typical Chinese products have preference for red which is the color of its national flag and is the Chinese's favorite color for special occasions indicating the days after is booming.

Some French's first thoughts are Chinese clothes which refer to the Chinese traditional costume or Chinese ancient clothing, such as cheongsam or Tang suit, etc. Chinese characteristics are embedded in people who wear Chinese costume.

A number of respondents decorate their houses with products with Chinese characteristics. For instance, in the example below, Chinese calligraphy and paintings are used in the decoration of a room. What's more, the room of the respondent is tastefully furnished in the Asian style.

My room is quite Chinese style. There is Chinese calligraphy on the tapestry of the room, which is not written by me. I find it quite interesting that hanging it there adds a lot of Asian atmosphere to the room. I put my bed on the floor and I'm not really sure if it's useful or not. (Group I, No.17, male, student, 20Y)

Chinese calligraphy is used in the decoration of a room. In addition, in terms of bed arrangement, laying bed on the ground that is not quite common in China is more like Japanese tatami. The respondent himself explains that not familiar as it is with Chinese culture, he finds it quite interesting to decorate his room in Asian style. The chief concern lies in its uniqueness that is different from the European atmosphere.

The ancient implications of China are embodied in Chinese paintings. Silk has long been one of the typical representatives of Chinese products, which dates back to the ancient Silk Road. Some respondents consider that Chinese paintings and silk bear typical Chinese characteristics. Some French taking the paintings on silk as gifts present for someone else's wedding. Consequently, taking Chinese paintings as gifts means unique.

Chopsticks, Chinese's daily necessities, are commonly found in people's lives. But for Frenchmen, they are not

only the items for cutlery, but also have Chinese culture implications. It is obvious that cultural indications of chopsticks stand out in French eyes.

[Have you ever bought chopsticks?]
No, I haven't. You know, I thought chopsticks are thrown away anyway after the meal, so I keep them. And that's the only Chinese products that I have had. (Group I, No.17, male, student, 20Y)

The respondent keeps the chopsticks after the meal and regards them as the only Chinese products he has had. He considers them as a representative of Chinese culture, so for him, chopsticks are necessarily Chinese. The unique tableware is shaped from the Chinese food culture, and chopsticks are a representative of Chinese elements.

Chopsticks, a symbol or an emblem, bear typical Chinese sentiments to Frenchmen who adore them and focus on learning to use them. Some Frenchwomen put Chinese chopsticks in their hair as hairpins for the sake of beauty.

That is probably weird to Chinese because if a Chinese woman put chopsticks in her hair, it would be like to put the knife and fork in her hair. If French find someone puts knives and forks in her hair, it would be as weird as it is to Chinese when finding a pair of chopsticks used as hairpins. However, chopsticks bear its own exotic nature of Chinese culture to Frenchmen and serve as cultural carriers. Consequently, using them in women's hair is quite exotic rather than being abrupt.

To sum up, items with Chinese characteristics mainly represent a kind of exotic feeling towards Chinese culture, which is quite unlike images of products that made in China. The focus of products made in China is on its functions, while that of items with Chinese characteristics is on its decorative and symbolic functions. From the perspective of Frenchmen, China is represented by Chinese traditional products or items with Chinese characteristics. Frenchmen, however, prefer to use these products on the basis of their own understanding and hobbies in the case of completely inapprehension, even if the real purposes of those items are still there.

3.2 Commercialization of Items With Chinese Characteristics

With the progress of globalization, business ties have more or less helped people understand each other's products. Frenchmen get to know Chinese New Year by Chinese daily goods. The commodities and food of Chinese New Year can be bought in the French market, such as red envelopes filled with money as a gift, cakes, a wide range of cuisines and dressings, etc..

Red envelopes filled with money as a gift is a ritual of celebrating Chinese New Year. Chinese living abroad will promote personal relations in the manner of Chinese characteristics when dealing with foreigners. Therefore, the ritual of giving red envelopes filled with money as a gift spreads abroad.

Interactions among people can be promoted by giving gifts to express wishes in Chinese New Year. Chinese sending presents to foreigner is part of intercultural interaction. Presents with profound Chinese culture are given and their implied meanings are simultaneously explained in detail in case of being misunderstood. Besides, the timing of gift giving is exquisitely chosen. It is merely in the Chinese New Year that giving red envelopes filled with money as a gift. If it is not on that moment, it might be proper to choose other ones.

Chinese New Year, the most iconic moment for Chinese, is also popular among foreigners, which is just like Chinese celebrate Christmas. Chinese might not be familiar with western festivals except Christmas and they joyfully celebrate it. Christmas ornaments and theme activities are visible all over in China in addition to merchants hyping up Christmas activities out of marketing purposes. Children in the kindergarten and primary school celebrate Christmas with the guidance of instructors and parents and wait for the Santa Claus with white beard to bring them presents.

Although Chinese New Year in western countries is not as popular as Christmas in China, celebrating Chinese New Year gradually becomes a trend with China's increasing international impacts, vibrant overseas Chinese and merchant's propaganda out of marketing purposes. Ordinary French have heard of Chinese New Year, but they have no idea how to celebrate it and what is the purpose of it.

4. IMAGES OF CHINESE FOOD

Chinese foods are popular all over the world and become one of the well-known dishes contrasted with western food. Chinese cuisine is the meals with authentically Chinese-style flavors. The results of this study indicate that Chinese cuisine with Chinese culture appears in a general form abroad, while the displays and decorations of Chinese restaurants are supposed to agree with Chinese traditional culture.

Some Frenchmen get to Chinese cuisine in their daily lives and even try to make them on their own. Their behavior fully reflects their understanding of Chinese cuisine.

4.1 Rice Is a Chinese Identity

To begin with, let's look at some French's opinions of rice which is a staple for Chinese. Frenchmen also eat rice, but they take it occasionally.

I eat rice, but I'm not really sure if it is from China or not. I have it once a week. I'm not a big fan of processed rice in bags. I usually buy and cook rice on my own, and I put nothing in it and really enjoy its original flavor. (Group I, No.17, male, student, 20Y)

We can learn from what he said that he prefers to eat rice cooking on his own without any seasoning and

usually eats rice once a week. Therefore, Frenchmen merely eat rice occasionally and they are a big fan of bread. It is exactly as that people in the northwestern districts of China usually prefer food made from wheat or rice flour. And we know that there are processed rice in bags on sale. It is himself that doesn't prefer it.

Besides, some Frenchmen prefer fried rice.

[Are you able to cook Chinese dishes?]

I make Yeung Chow fried rice sometimes, not authentic Chinese fried rice. I can't cook Chinese dishes. (Group I, No.22, female, student, 21Y)

Not cook Chinese dishes as she can, she like make Yeung Chow fried rice on her own at home, which means she has had or seen it. As a matter of fact, there are frozen Yeung Chow fried rice on sale in many supermarkets in France. In addition, customers can order it at numerous Chinese restaurants, which means it is not a rare dish for Frenchmen and most of them have heard of or seen it before.

Rice is a representative of Chinese cuisine for Frenchmen and it represents China. Speaking of rice, they will think of Chinese.

4.2 Exquisite Chinese Dishes

Frenchmen consider that Chinese dishes are quite exquisite and characteristic. Western people not familiar with Chinese dishes regard it has its own peculiar attractiveness.

Chinese dishes are quite exquisite. (Group I, No.4, female, teacher, 40Y)

The combination of color, aroma and taste is a must for a good Chinese dish. Color, first mentioned, is not only colors of the dishes, but also the settings, matches and exactly the way they seem. Therefore, looking delightfully is an essential part of a good Chinese dish. It is "she is a dish." that is used to praise some pretty lady. The exquisiteness of Chinese dishes, in the eyes of Frenchmen, may have different meanings as a result of the diverse definitions and measures of beauty and ugliness in different culture. Discrepancy, however, makes heart grow fonder and Chinese dishes are popular among Frenchmen.

4.3 Light and Sweet

For French people, Chinese dishes are light and deliciously sweet.

I think Chinese dishes are light. It reminds me of a dish called fried banana, quite light and appetizing. (Group I, No.4, female, teacher, 40Y)

The light diet in the eyes of French respondents and Chinese makes a great difference. Chinese prefer to vegetables and they put lighter oil and dressings during cooking. The above-mentioned French lady's favorite fried bananas are far from blandness in the eyes of Chinese.

Chinese dishes taste slightly sweet. Chinese like putting some sugar in them. Yeah, the dishes taste sweet and sour. (Group I, No.4, female, teacher, 40Y)

The respondents taste sweet in Chinese dishes. It is probably a feature of Chinese dishes that main courses taste sweet, which can be easily found by Frenchmen when compared with western-style food.

4.4 Chinese Dishes Are the Combination of Meat and Vegetables Chopped Into Small Pieces

Chinese dishes are usually chopped into small pieces, which make people feel comfortable.

Yeah, they are really appetizing and chopped into small pieces. No big ones, which gives you a real treat. (Group I, No.4, female, teacher, 40Y)

The raw materials are processed exquisitely in Chinese dishes. Chopping is a key part before cooking. A great many preparations are made before cooking, especially chopping the food into small pieces aiming at picking food up easily when eating with chopsticks. That purpose in the eyes of Frenchmen is hard to notice by Chinese themselves because the latter becomes accustomed to the way of chopping into small pieces before cooking. It goes without saying for Chinese people.

[What are Chinese dishes in your eyes?]

Chinese like to mix meat chopping into small pieces and vegetables into sweet and sour sauces. It is delicious. All I'm asking is food without too much chili. I am not a fan of extra-spicy food. In French cuisine, I don't like spicy food, either. (Group I, No.4, female, teacher, 40Y)

Chinese dishes are seen as a mixture of meat and vegetables chopped into small pieces. They taste sweet and sour and mildly spicy. As Chinese, we fail to regard those as the characteristics of Chinese dishes as we get used to this convention. The respondent, from her own perspective, found the differences between Chinese and French dishes from another culture. Thus, those can be seen as the characteristics of Chinese dishes.

4.5 Extremely Exotic in Chinese Restaurants

Another reason why French respondents are big fans of Chinese dishes lies in its dining environment, for whom it produces an exotic ambience.

For us, there (the Chinese restaurant) is considered as a most exotic place. I like the Chinese restaurant very much where I feel calm, quiet and respected. I really enjoy that. (Group I, No.4, female, teacher, 40Y)

In the exotically Chinese atmosphere, people get a sense of calmness, tranquility and mutual respect. Indeed, Chinese restaurants do produce a setting of serenity and peace, or entertain a state of meditative mind. However, that might just be the assumption preset by the French to Chinese restaurants. In reality, it is possible that both these scenarios are true, and together they make the Chinese restaurant in the eyes of the French. For one, Chinese restaurants go to great lengths to create a tranquil

atmosphere, and for the other, French people enter the restaurant with great reverence and adoration to a certain extent that it borders on the serenity given to us by religion, so that Chinese restaurants bring guests a treat to the meditative mind as in Zen.

4.6 Chinese Cuisine: A Synonym for Asian Cuisine

The dishes offered by Chinese restaurants in France are not entirely Chinese style. By the same token, you don't just have Cantonese food in a Cantonese restaurant. The Chinese restaurants in France normally offer Frenchmen's desirable Chinese dishes. Features of Chinese dishes can be reflected only when the restaurants offer the dishes on target for their expectations. Consequently, Frenchmen's impressions of Chinese products are able to be seen through clearly by the understanding of the types of dishes Frenchmen order in Chinese restaurants in France.

[In general, do you like the products of China?]
I mean, Chinese food. There is a Chinese restaurant near where I live. It offers buffet, a wide variety of dishes, roast duck, Yeung chow fried rice and spring rolls. I think there are probably so many dishes in China. What we are offered is merely some typical dishes, like roast duck. I love them all. (Group I, No.8, female, student, 21Y)

The typical dishes the respondent mentioned is, in other words, the stereotypes Frenchmen have shown to Chinese dishes. The good comprehension of Frenchmen's cognition of Chinese dishes is conducive to understand their cognitive patterns and features of some Chinese dishes.

The dishes the respondent mentioned include roast duck, Yeung chow fried rice and spring rolls, etc. which are part of Chinese cuisine with typical Chinese features. It is generally known that Beijing Roast Duck has become a famous brand and Yeung chow fried rice, popular all over China, is a specialty of fried rice. Ordinary Chinese families usually make fried rice in their own way by adding favorite food respectively. Spring rolls, also known as pancakes, are one of Chinese traditional food which are popular around China with long history and evolve from ancient spring pancakes.

Spring rolls are believed to be Chinese typical food by Frenchmen. Every Chinese restaurant in France offers them. It is, however, not all restaurants that offer spring rolls in China. It is a rare thing for China to eat spring rolls every day.

I like Vietnamese spring rolls, they are tasty. But I am not a fan of all dishes. (Group I, No.11, female, cleaner, 54Y)

In addition to spring rolls, Frenchmen are generally unable to pinpoint the differences between Chinese dishes and the dishes of other Asian countries. Therefore, Chinese dishes become a synonym for Asian dishes. In the following examples, the respondents classify spring rolls, sushi, tea and Japanese sake as Chinese food.

Many friends of mine are big fans of Chinese food. But I never eat more. They like Asian food, such as spring rolls and sushi. They usually eat out. (Group I, No.25, male, student, 21Y)

Spring rolls, tea and Japanese sake. (Group I, No.4, female, teacher, 40Y)

It is not merely in food that Frenchmen confuse China with Asia. As we can see, Frenchmen normally mix up Chinese products with Asian ones in their cognitions. The same phenomenon can be found in other aspects.

CONCLUSION

Chinese products can be divided into two main types for Frenchmen interviewees. One is the products made in China, including foreign brands made in China and Chinese independent brands. Those are commonly called products made in China. The other type products, with Chinese culture as its core, are a representative of features of Chinese culture in one aspect. The category matters extraordinarily. Chinese products have been replaced by those made in China for scores of years, which leads to a cover for different features of Chinese products. The research from the perspective of cognition gives a clearer picture of ordinary Frenchmen's views about Chinese products, the typical Chinese products in particular.

Products with Chinese cultural characteristics, for Frenchmen, are mainly used as a decoration and creation for Chinese emotional appeal different from western society which is one of the functions of Chinese typical products. In addition to its value in use, Frenchmen focus on its Chinese or oriental emotional appeal the products create. These products, unlike western culture, highlight its distinctiveness and individual taste and create a special memory. As a consequence, these products are able to be used in some significant moments as a result of not being mediocre. If society memory requires a fulcrum, the Chinese emotional appeal that Chinese products give will exactly be it for their features agree with some crucial moments of life transition.

It is worth noting that in real life, it can be confused with products of other Asian countries. Chinese products, in the eyes of Frenchmen, are probably made in other Asian countries or the ones with cultural characteristics of other Asian countries. In social psychology, cognitive bias tends to emerge in the process of social cognition because "insufficiency and lost of information usually dots the process of social cognition, in which people are biased in their cognition for the main reason that the established schema in one's mind carries a negative impact on social cognition" (Le & Wang, 2011, p.378). The unfamiliarity of the French with Asian countries and their want of information predetermine that, when seeing products from Asian countries and of Asian cultures, they incline to choose information that aligns with their established schema, namely using "China" to generalize

“Asia”, and substituting “Chinese products” for “Asian products”.

Products with “Chinese characteristics” include both “cultural products” and “Chinese cuisine”. The former is mainly for decorative purpose, while the latter, also used with a decorative aim, sees its function as food sidelined, which explains the fact that people eat in a Chinese restaurant for the sought-after “mood” or “ambience”.

The national image is not vague imagination, but concrete to the use of physical objects. The image of China is manifested in Chinese products and is meaningful in the use of ordinary items. Boulding writes: “In the social sciences we have an agency whereby men reach self-consciousness about their own cultures and institutions and therefore no longer regard these as simply gave to them by ‘nature’” (Boulding, 1959, p.130). During the use of Chinese products by French, we can catch not only the image of China, but also the French cultural system, because the use of products with Chinese

cultural characteristics in Frenchmen’s daily life represent the logic of French culture.

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