

Intercultural tid-bits from Paris

From an ethnographic point of view, a Chinese restaurant in Paris should be far tastier than the same sort of establishment in London or New York, for the simple reason (as a famous French ethnologist once explained to me) that French cuisine being superior to British and American cooking, any transposed delicacy will naturally be more delicious in France than in either of the other two contexts.

May the same be said for Chinese *Kosher* restaurants in Paris? And what would a sociologist of language have to say about it?

Joshua and Gella Fishman came to give talks in Paris in September 1997 and I was in charge of getting them on time to their several engagements and setting up eateries. Eating Kosher is no problem in Paris, because aside from the traditional Jewish quarter in the Marais (but expensive and touristy), there are many other Kosher restaurants sprinkled around the city: in the 11th arrondissement, for instance (near a square and Métro stop ironically¹ shared by Voltaire and Léon Blum), as well as around the Grands Boulevards, where I myself had a wedding lunch over forty years ago, to mention just two areas. I couldn't resist though taking them to a Chinese restaurant with authentic Beth-Din accreditation. I don't know what Joshua and Gella thought of the food but to me it felt somewhat like reading the instructions for an electronic appliance made in Japan and translated into English by the Taiwanese wholesaler.

One of my Algerian friends, an urban planner, is married to a French woman, a gynaecologist, who happens to be Protestant. He himself is resolutely indifferent to religion and expects his friends and relations to be the same. Great was his surprise therefore when one day he came home to find a green-leafed wreath dotted with little red berries hanging on their front door (it was nearing Christmas time). He unhooked it and took it into the kitchen where she was preparing the Friday night couscous. "What is this *tyre* ("*pneu*") doing on our door?" He asked, rhetorically. His wife is a reserved and not very talkative person, she only looked significantly first at him, then at the meal she was making. He put the tyre back on the door.

Interculturality is not easy or always very successful – but it can be amusing, especially for an external observer!

Gabrielle Varro, Paris, January 2006

¹ Was it irony or ignorance that led Paris City Council members to thus mix the names of Blum and one of France's most notorious Anti-Semites (though Voltaire did specify "nevertheless, they should not be burnt")?