

Evaluation of bachelor's thesis written by **Jiayi Huang**

„Ethnography of a Chinese Family Restaurant in the Czech Republic“

This thesis has charted the territory of a sense of belonging/nonbelonging of Chinese migrants in Czech Republic through cuisine as a vehicle and instrument of culture and identity. The student conducted her research in a family-owned Chinese restaurant in Prague and used participant observation combined with semi-structured and unstructured interviews. She attempted to explore the interplay of Chinese and Czech features in the cuisine offered by the restaurant, the role the Chinese cuisine plays in the sphere of emotions for Chinese expats, facilitating reminiscences of home country and the importance such a cuisine-related place can have in the cultural exchange between the Czechs and the Chinese.

This paper is written in good English, shows very solid language skills, although some of the statements should be expressed with more accuracy. That is more of a formulation problem than a language problem.

The student made herself familiar with ample amount of scholarship both older and of a more recent date on the cultural and social aspects of food which she sums up in chapter 2.3 Research on Catering and Culture. Her inventory of the existing research in this area creates a bit of confusion due to the lack of precision of her formulations (p. 5). I would also expect it not to be a mere list of existing literature but more specifically an outline stating which particular ideas were of use and relevance to this thesis. How did some of the sources relate the case study presented here is sometimes hard to fathom (for instance Sanday, P. R. 1986, "Cannibalism cross-culturally," in *Divine Hunger: Cannibalism as a Cultural System*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), and even if used for expounding a current theoretical framework, such sources require better legitimisation of their utility for the purposes of this study.

Not sooner than on p. 8 (the last paragraph) do we learn that the Chinese cuisine is not a monolith but a notion that it varies greatly in more general terms and, if I simplify matters for now, at least province to province. I believe that this very important notion should have been written large somewhere near the very beginning of the thesis and reiterated more often or as a more resounding message to the reader of the thesis. One reason for that is that it turned out that the latest adjustments of meal offer in the analysed restaurant involved inclusion of dishes from more regions than the home region of the restaurant owner to cater to customers from various parts of China. The second reason being the necessity to debunk the idea of a monolithic umbrella term „Chinese cuisine“ held by many in the West and counter the general oversimplification of what Chinese food is. Especially in this country, where still a lot of people tend to equal it with one singular dish, the Gong Bao Chicken. I firmly believe that the topic of the regionality of the cuisine in relation to identity (Chinese) and sub-identity (Chinese-regional specific) could have been highlighted more. In the final analysis, the student could not only speak of culinary or aesthetic-decorative fusion aimed at satisfying Czech-unexperienced, Czech-connoisseur and Chinese customers, but also show us Chinese customers in a more granular distinction and with their adherencies, more specific identities and food preferences

which vary considerably. After all, the display of distinct Chinese regional elements became apparent even in the choice of a few pieces of interior decoration.

With regard to decoration and aesthetic evaluation and related expectations from the restaurant, it seems from the interviews that the Chinese customers and the Czech ones differ. How to explain this difference in perception of the same decorative layout?

On p. 1 the student mentions a certain „unpopularity“ of Czech Republic as a destination for Chinese migrants, and speaks of, again rather vaguely „a relatively small number of immigrants, who arrived relatively recently.“ The student should make her statement more precise and ideally have it include some numbers and perhaps even briefly outline a chronology of Chinese immigration flows into Czech Republic in particular decades of 20th century, otherwise an uninitiated reader may fall under the impression, that the only influx of people migrating from China was year 1992, 1993 upon the environment became more favourable and accommodating for the newcomers. I further observe one omission in the student’s recounting of the factors adding to this country’s migratory unpopularity as a destination, and that is a dauntingly difficult official language with excess of grammar and discouraging amount of inflection. For any entrepreneur from a foreign country who simply cannot avoid communicating in Czech while establishing their business, this might have been a strong deterring factor, besides those other factors that the student duly mentioned.

The notion of mass-consumption in affluent societies as an element conducive to the success of Chinese food and catering services in new environments (p. 7) is a helpful finding to mention in this thesis and there was a potential for further elaboration on this very phenomenon, in the case of the increasingly affluent countries of Central Europe, including the Czech Republic.

Would the student explain more clearly the language situation in regard to her communication with the restaurant owner and staff? How different was their dialect from her own or from *putonghua*? Or was it simply *putonghua* that was used as the language of the interviews?

Finally, I find it necessary to mention as a big asset of this thesis the courage and perseverance of the student while embarking on volunteering in the restaurant and learning a profession she has never done before, in a foreign country, with a language barrier. Though initially a stranger and unrelated by any family bonds to the restaurant owners and staff, with her obviously frank nature combined with professional research approach she gained their trust which enabled this whole research to happen and yield data. That being said, the student did not shrink from real work responsibilities in the venue and worked in full scope just like other members of staff. I find her endeavour impressive in this respect.

I propose to evaluate this thesis as *very good* if the oral defence is well prepared and addresses the mentioned points.

Mgr. Veronika Teryngerová
Prague, 14th September 2021