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**The Onset of Social Class Tastes Among Children of Migrants in France:  
Competing Food Patterns in the Context of Migration**

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Institute for the  
Study of  
Societal Issues

## The onset of social class tastes among children of migrants in France: Competing food patterns in the context of migration

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores social variations in food acculturation in the context of migration. While the literature on this issue has documented changes in eating practices among adults, this study focuses on the children of migrants. The research is based on data collected among elementary and middle school students, and relies on an approach combining focus group discussions with a survey questionnaire. Results reveal that food preferences among children of migrants are more strongly influenced by their family social background than by their ethnic characteristics. Main findings confirm Pierre Bourdieu's theory about social distinction as more involved in social reproduction than in ethno-cultural reproduction. However this social reproduction doesn't follow a singular common pattern. The coexistence of competing food patterns among migrants highlights the plurality of minority cultures resisting the dominant norm, as Claude Grignon has already shown about the French working class.*

**Consistent summary** of the paper published in the sociological Review *Politix*, 2012/3 n° 99, p. 51-77. DOI : 10.3917/pox.099.0051.

<http://www.cairn.info/revue-politix-2012-3-page-51.htm>

Original title : L'émergence de goûts de classe chez les enfants de migrants.  
Modèles concurrents de goûts et pratiques alimentaires.

### **Background**

Foodways, as a practical and concrete material object, is conducive to the study of social differentiation of cultural practices. From Pierre Bourdieu to Claude Grignon, numerous French sociologists have researched food practices to uncover competing systems of social differentiation, such as Bourdieu's theory of distinction<sup>1</sup>. Building on these ideas, this contribution focuses on the largely migrant basis of the working-class culture that is emerging in the sociological debates on the subject<sup>2</sup>. The aim is also to compensate for the limitations of the French culturalist approach of food acculturation that breaks up social space<sup>3</sup>, obscuring social interactions between subsystems, in spite of hierarchical relations between minority cultures and the dominant culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu (P), *La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement*, Paris, Ed de Minuit, 1979 ; Grignon (C.) et Grignon (C.), « Styles d'alimentation et goûts populaires », *Revue française de sociologie*, 21 (4), 1980 ; and also Grignon (C.), « Un savant et le populaire », *Politix*, n° 13, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Pasquier (D.), « La culture populaire à l'épreuve des débats sociologiques », *Hermès* 42, 2005

<sup>3</sup> Crenn (C.), Hassoun (J.-P.), Medina (F.-X.), « Introduction : Repenser et ré-imaginer l'acte alimentaire en situations de migration », *Anthropology of food*, 7, 2010

The purpose of this paper is to explore the social aspects of food acculturation in the context of migration, emphasizing the point of view of the children rather than the now well-documented point of view of the adults<sup>4</sup>. The study focuses on the food practices and preferences within the family rather than at school or in other outside settings. Children are seen as witnesses of family practices through their factual answers to survey questions about the family meal. Their perceptions are also investigated through their interactive discussions on this issue.

## Method

Qualitative data have been collected within one elementary school and one middle-school, among children aged 11 and 12 years, using focus groups, observation sessions, and a short food questionnaire. Children were involved with three workshops in five 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade classes. The first workshop consisted of the study of iconographic examples of meal patterns across the world, to create an initial distance from the dominant norm in France. The goal was to prepare children to relate familial practices that may be different from the French pattern or from the “correct” answer expected in school. The second workshop involved administering a questionnaire that provided opportunities for individual responses and the collection of factual data on the last family dinner and the children’s favorite dish at home. During the third workshop, the anonymized results of the questionnaires were analyzed in class by the same students and the resulting discussions are parts of the observed materials.

## Data

The sample consists of 119 children in an elementary and a middle school of a Parisian neighborhood in the process of becoming gentrified, where the working class is mainly composed of different waves of migration, at the moment mostly from China and sub-Saharan Africa<sup>5</sup>. School choices of the wealthiest families as well as changes in the school zoning system have progressively modified the demographic and socio-cultural characteristics of the student population<sup>6</sup>. Over two thirds (80) of the children interviewed have at least one parent not born in France. A strong relationship was found between the geographic origin of the parents and their social and occupational characteristics<sup>7</sup>. Professionals are mostly French or married to a French person. Manual workers are about one-third Chinese, one-third Sub-Saharan African. The remaining third is divided between parents born in other foreign countries (mostly located in North Africa and Eastern Europe) and parents born in France but whose own parents were born elsewhere. Most small business owners are of Chinese origin while most employees are primarily from Sub-Saharan Africa; the other middle-class occupations<sup>8</sup> represent a population of mixed background,

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<sup>4</sup> Crenn and al. Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Clerval (A.), *La gentrification à Paris intra-muros : dynamiques spatiales, rapports sociaux et politiques publiques*, Thèse de Doctorat, Université Paris1, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> About the process of school segregation : Felouzis (G.), Liot (F.), Perrotton (J.), *L'apartheid scolaire. Enquête sur la ségrégation ethnique dans les collèges*, Points, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Social characteristics of the families (household composition, parents’ occupation and country of birth) were collected through individual questionnaires filled out by the students in the classroom. The categorization of parental occupations is based on the classification of PCS INSEE. This French nomenclature of occupations and occupational categories (PCS) used by INSEE is quite different from the international Nomenclature of Occupations (ISCO). About comparison between ISCO and French PCS classification, see Brousse (C), *ESeC: the European Union’s Socio-economic Classification project*, *Courrier des statistiques*, English series no. 15, 2009, [http://www.insee.fr/fr/ffc/docs\\_ffc/cse15e.pdf](http://www.insee.fr/fr/ffc/docs_ffc/cse15e.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Intermediate occupations like teachers, nurses, technicians

with some French and some migrants. Single parenthood affects all occupational categories with nearly as many migrant parents as French ones, while family size is more discriminating. Migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa make up the most homogeneous group, characterized as mostly employee and manual workers, and with the largest families. By contrast, parents born in China and in France are socially more heterogeneous. Chinese immigrant parents are either business owners or manual workers, and their children attend the same school, Native-born parents are typically either professionals or, when their own parents are from North Africa, lower-wage workers<sup>9</sup>. Wide variations in the social characteristics and the ethnic origins of children in the sample provide the perfect setting to investigate social differentiations in children's perception regarding food practices and preferences.

Table 1 – Social Structure of the survey's sample compared to the neighborhood

	Neighborhood	Survey
<b>Parents occupation (PCS)<sup>b</sup></b>		
Business & restaurant owners, craft workers	5%	11%
Intellectual, managers & high level professionals	19%	7%
Intermediate occupations (other professionals, teachers, nurses etc)	18%	14%
Employees	16%	24%
Manual workers	12%	29%
Unemployed & other inactives	31%	5%
No answer + Unknown	-	10%
Total	100%	100%
<b>Parent's origin<sup>c</sup> :</b>		
France		21%
Asia (mostly China)		25%
Sub-Saharan Africa		24%
North Africa (Maghreb)		13%
Other (mostly Eastern Europe)		10%
No answer		8%
Total		100%
<b>Proportion of foreign families</b>	32%	67%
<b>Proportion of single parent households</b>	30%	17%
<b>Proportion of families with 4 children or more<sup>e</sup></b>	7%	25%
Total children		119

<sup>a</sup> Source : INSEE Iris data (local data) for PCS of the household reference person and for all other neighborhood indicators.

<sup>b</sup> In the survey's sample, categorization of parental occupations reflects the occupation of both parents in the case of two earners, retaining the higher of the two except in the case of employees. Employees are both more numerous and whose combinations of marital PCS are most diversified. If one parent is an employee and the other a manual worker, the family is categorized in the group of manual workers with reference to the

<sup>9</sup> Like most of the so-called "second generation" they are combining social discrimination and difficulties of socio-economic integration of the crisis times. Silberman (R.) et Fournier (I.), « Les secondes générations sur le marché du travail en France : une pénalité ethnique ancrée dans le temps. Contribution à la théorie de l'assimilation segmentée. » Revue française de sociologie, vol. 47, n°2, 2006, p. 243-292.

definition of the "employees" as "service workers" proposed by Chauvel<sup>10</sup>. Thus the group of "employees" includes only couples of employees and families whose only asset is also.

<sup>c</sup> Parent's origin (country of birth) combines both parents main origin or takes the foreign one for mixed couple.

<sup>d</sup> Proportion is the INSEE Iris foreign families for the neighborhood. For the sample, proportion includes families with both foreign parents according to actual criteria of nationality at birth and to compare with INSEE data. Thus mixed unions are categorized as French families.

<sup>e</sup> Definition of a large family: at least 4 children less than 25 years, for the sample and for INSEE Iris data

### **Categorization of materials on food preferences**

We first analyzed the favorite dish at home from the questionnaire data. In order to "standardize" responses from children of different backgrounds we compared each dish to a relevant item that carried potential markers of acculturation. For example, some answers demonstrate a preference for a dish reflecting the cultural origin of the parents among children of migrants, which remains the notion defined by Emmanuel Calvo as a "totem" dish<sup>11</sup>. Other children may refer to French or more Western dishes as a mark of possible acculturation for children of migrant parents. Three types of answers appear in this other register: First, pasta, which is assumed to be a child's preferred dish<sup>12</sup>; second, the "typical"<sup>12</sup> French dish like "steak-frites" which we classify as a "national dish"<sup>13</sup>; third "other" French dishes reminiscent of some regional products or familial recipes<sup>14</sup>. We also classified in this latter category ingredients listed by themselves (e.g. maize, vegetables, meat as a single answer) when they did not evoke the origin of migrant parents. By contrast "rice", as a single answer, often and exclusively mentioned by children of Chinese origin, received the fourth classification as a "totem dish". Our analysis offers theoretical markers of acculturation that can break the dichotomy of the "totem dish" versus the "French dish". Thereby it finds various models of acculturation and competing systems of distinction including "totem dish", "child preferences", the pattern of "national dish" and "family or regional recipes".

### **Main Results on the social differentiation of tastes**

Among children's stated preferences, the "national dish" is most often cited (32% of responses), followed by pasta and by the "totem dish" (27% and 25%, respectively). Last come other French dishes which are mentioned half as often as the "national dish" (16%, of which 7% include miscellaneous ingredients).

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<sup>10</sup> Chauvel (L.), *Le destin des générations. Structure sociale et cohortes en France au XXe siècle*, Paris, PUF, 1998

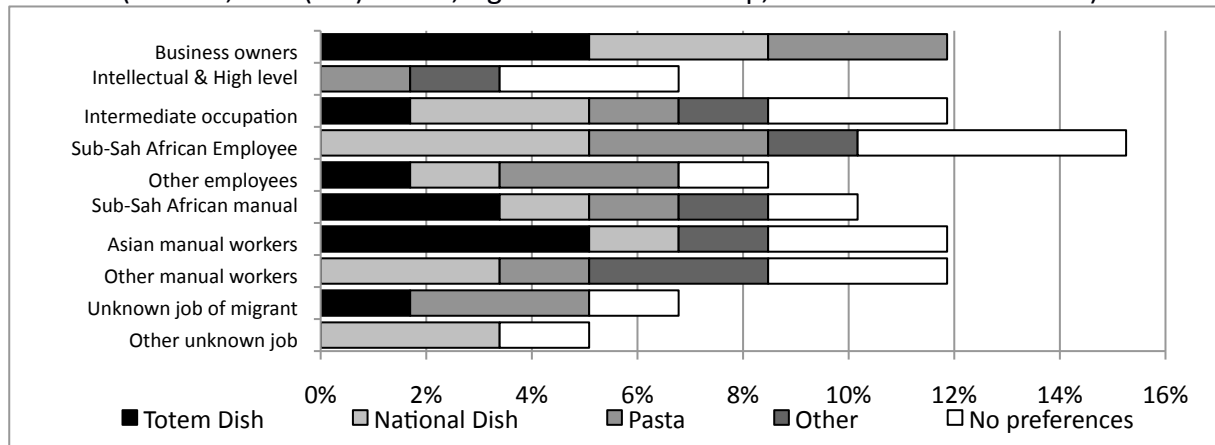
<sup>11</sup> The notion of totem dish is defined by Calvo as a dish that acquire a new status because of his new symbolic value in context of migration. « (plat) qui, à la suite de l'émigration, va subir une revalorisation culturelle. » Calvo (E.) «Migration et alimentation», *Social Science information*, vol. 21/3, 1982, p 421

<sup>12</sup> Typical from the point of view of non-French people. Hubert (A), *le plat National existe-t-il ?*, Autrement, 2000

<sup>13</sup> With reference to the work of Barthes, Fischler and Hubert (art. it) we classified the "steak-frites" in the category of national dish. Barthes (R.), *Mythologies*, Paris, Seuil, éditions Points, 1957; Barthes (R.), *Mythologies*, Paris, Seuil, éditions Points, 1957; Fischler (C.), *L'omnivore. Le goût, la cuisine et le corps*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2001.

<sup>14</sup>Example : "pommes de terre sautées", « côte de porc aux petits-pois et carottes »

Figure 1. Children's favorite dish at home according to cultural background  
(Combination of PCS and country of birth of parents for employees and manual workers)  
(n = 119, chi2 (6df) = 16.5, significant relationship, confidence interval 98%)



The results show no gender differences ( $\chi^2(3df) = 1.1$  insignificant relationship), by contrast with what has been found among adults with a marked preference for meat and starches among men compared to women<sup>15</sup>. If preference for meat is not differentiated by gender for children, "pasta" is slightly more often mentioned by boys than by girls although the difference is not significant. Children's preferences for pasta are still relatively gender neutral at this age, by contrast with other types of cultural preferences which are often already differentiated by sex. Typically, children's preferences for "pasta" are also socially less discriminating for both sexes. But it carries another symbolic dimension in the preferences of children of migrants, as a substitute for other basic grains favored by the culinary traditions of the country of origin. Among children of migrants, only children of Chinese workers do not mention pasta in a culturally neutral or Western denomination ("pasta" as single answer or "pasta bolognese" for example), preferring "rice" or referring to pasta in a typical Chinese language as "small shrimp noodles" referring to the group of "totem dish".

Preference for a national dish, such as "steak-frites", is socially differentiated, and particularly strong among children of some migrant groups. On the one hand there are students who do not mention this kind of dish or mention it rarely, for example the children of manual workers from China and Africa. At the other end of the social scale, children of intellectual and professionals are also among the few to never mention this type of dish. National dishes are favored by children of French natives in the lower social class who mostly belong to the third generation of North African labor migrants of the 1970s in the sample. Some children of migrants also favor a national dish, in particular children of Sub-Saharan African employees and children of North African and Eastern European migrants.

What does the distinction between children of migrants reveal about "steak-frites"? During the focused discussion workshop, children revealed that for them this dish first evokes France, confirming that the symbolism of "steak-frites" as "national dish" is built into an outside view, from foreign people<sup>16</sup>. Then the discussion moved on to the nutritional

<sup>15</sup>Saint Pol (T de), « La consommation alimentaire des hommes et femmes vivant seuls », Insee Première, n°1194 - mai 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Hubert, Op. Cit.

disadvantages of "steak-frites", supported by Asian children whose parents work in food service industries, and those from upper classes (of any origin). One expert child, the son of a "Maitre d'hôtel", takes the ascendancy over all others to affirm or contradict the arguments of each. A child of a North African worker resisted throughout the discussion, constantly preaching respect for "steak-frites" which he defined both as a privilege of the rich and as a typical family dish. This apparent contradiction confirms the place of "steak-frites" as a favorite dish of the children of workers. "Steak-frites" is still the most valued and consumed dish among the French working class<sup>17</sup>. Consumption frequency highlights the contrast between a casual consumer in the wealthiest families and a weekly consumer in the working class, despite the ambiguity of nutritional claims. Is the taste for this type of dish specific to living in France? It doesn't appear to be in French-speaking Sub-Saharan Africa where "steak-frites" remains the prerogative of trendy restaurants and wealthy urban elites as a symbol of modernity and social success. When children of migrants value this type of dish, they internalize their family model as well as the aspiration in popular culture.

Results of the questionnaire survey support the different positions argued in the focus group discussion. Children from the wealthiest families (whether native or migrant) rarely chose "steak-frites" as their favorite dish, referring to the nutritional arguments against this dish in the discussion, and raising other markers of distinction like gastronomy or moral restraint of a responsible and healthy consumption, perceived as values of the elite. In contrast, the children of migrant workers from North and Sub-Saharan Africa prefer "steak-frites" like other children of the French lower social class. Whatever the geographical origin, children from the migrants' families seem open to the French signs of distinction valorized in their parent's social class.

However, the investigation also revealed competing systems of distinction among children of migrants in the lowest social class. Thus, preference for a "totem dish" evoking the parents' country of origin, contrasts with the "national dish". This concerns almost exclusively children of manual workers from China and Sub-Saharan Africa. African dishes mentioned by children are primarily international dishes, showing that food acculturation begins in the home country. The "totem dish," referring to the idea of an original cuisine, is, in fact, already acculturated and appears as a mythology<sup>18</sup>. "Rice" is mentioned by children from Chinese families, but never by any child of African origin. This grain is nevertheless very present in Sahel food as it is practiced in France, but also in home countries where it symbolizes the opulence of the urban diet, compared to other varieties of traditional grains used in the village<sup>19</sup>. The fact that rice is never mentioned by children of Sahel families shows an aspiration to other food more rewarding in the French context, especially pasta and fries for children of employees, but "totem dish" for children from the lowest class. For their part, the Chinese children prefer Asian food. But while children of Chinese manual workers remain always faithful to Asian food, some of the children of the Chinese middle-class (small business owners) chose typical French dishes (steak-frites or other). This

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<sup>17</sup> Fischler (C.), *Le repas familial vu par les 10-11 ans*, Les Cahiers de l'Ocha (6), Paris, 1996. Grignon op.cit.

<sup>18</sup> "Mafé" originally from Mali is mentioned by a Nigerien student, "Aloko" originally from Ivory Coast is mentioned by children from this area but also from Sahel and Central Africa. On the mixing of food cultures before migration see Tuomainen (H.M.), "Ethnic Identity, (Post)Colonialism and Foodways. Ghanaians in London", in *Food, Culture and Society*, vol. 12 : n° 4, 2009

<sup>19</sup> Ouedraogo (F.C.), Janin (P.) et Boyer (F.), « L'insécurité alimentaire à Ouagadougou », Colloque « Mobilité Ouest Africaine », ANR Mobua, juin 2011



difference among Chinese children crosses the social differentiation of tastes observed among students from African families.

### **Main conclusion**

Building on the work of Grignon, this study of food preferences suggests competing systems of distinction among children. Concerning children of migrants, several models coexist from the myth of the original "totem dish" or the myth of the French "national dish", through the pattern of some more healthy dish. The influence of the dominant culture of the elite through internalized speech on nutrition mainly appears in the preferences of children from the wealthiest families. The acculturation process as well as the time of substitution of these different patterns could depend on the duration of time in France as well as on the role of elder children. Academic and social capital of migrants, which allows access to skilled jobs and to higher social class, could also help migrants understand and follow the social codes of the dominant culture. Data cannot answer these questions, but reveal that children from migrant families who have more socio-economic capital are more receptive to French markers of distinction, whether belonging to the French working class culture or to those of the elite.