

“Steak, Blé d’Inde, Patates”

Eating national identity in late twentieth-century Québec

This paper explores the connections between pâté chinois and Québec national identity during the second half of the twentieth century. The respective French, British, and Native roots of the ingredients are highlighted and discussed, with a particular emphasis on socioeconomic and cultural terms that also extends to the analysis of the historical preparation of the layered meal, more akin to “daily survival” than to gastronomy. Special attention is also given to the significance of the dish’s origin myths, as well as to cultural references on a popular television series. Those origin myths are separated along the French/English divide, thus evoking the often-tempestuous relationship between these two languages and their speakers in Québec. The progression of the discourse surrounding pâté chinois, from a leftover dish prior to the rise of nationalism in the ’70s, to a media darling in the decade following the 1995 referendum, corresponds with efforts to define and then to redefine Québécois identity. The history of the dish tells the tumultuous history of the people of Québec, their quest for a unique identity, and the ambiguous relationship they have with language. Pâté chinois became a symbol, reminding French Canadians of Québec daily of their Québécois identity.

Keywords: *pâté chinois*, food, Québec, national identity, *La Petite Vie* (TV series), French language

INTRODUCTION

As a little girl, *pâté chinois* was my favourite meal—but only my grandmother’s version. The classic recipe is simple: cooked ground beef at the bottom, canned corn—*blé d’Inde*—in the middle, mashed potatoes on top, warmed in the oven for a few minutes.¹ Grandma did it differently: she mixed all the ingredients together without putting them in the oven. For her, it meant less work. For me, it meant a better *pâté chinois*. For other Québécois, however, the disregard for the structure

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meant that what my grandmother made was not the real thing. Indeed, altering the dish—its ingredients or its layering—is arguably considered sacrilegious. Only renowned chefs are given a license to innovate and still legitimately label their concoction *pâté chinois*.

The true nature of *pâté chinois* came under scrutiny in 2007 when the Montréal newspaper *Le Devoir* asked what should be considered Québec's national dish. *Pâté chinois* was controversially declared the winner. Some said *tourtière*, a meat pie, was more justifiably Québécois. Others saw *pâté chinois* as too proletarian, yet others praised the choice precisely because it was a food of the common people (Deglise, 2007a, 2007b). This passionate debate about a national meal came at a time of enduring political and social debates about Québécois national identity, following two failed independence referendums in 1980 and 1995 (Mathieu, 2001, p. 9). The concurrence of these debates suggests a link and raises many questions: What does the life of this dish tell us about the Québécois people and this national identity crisis? Why is it that a minor change to the recipe tends to be perceived as sacrilegious and dramatically altering the nature of the dish? What can we learn from what is said about this meal?

This paper will argue that in the late twentieth century, *pâté chinois* became a symbol representing, for the French Canadians of Québec, their Québécois identity, a reminder of their tumultuous history, and their ambiguous relationship with language.² To demonstrate the changing status of *pâté chinois*—from a simple leftover dish before the rise of nationalism in the '70s to a media darling after the independence referendum in 1995—as well as to understand the significance of the change, we will first look into the material characteristics of the dish. We will then dive into its origin myths and the important signification of these discourses, before trying to appreciate how the meal is understood in Québécois popular culture.

WHAT IS PÂTÉ CHINOIS?

First, let us look at what the preparation and ingredients can tell us. Beef, corn, and potatoes are common staples to many cultures, but the ways and the circumstances in which they are used give them different meanings that can illuminate some aspects of the identities of the cultural groups using them (Coulombe, 2002, p. 104).

Québec's traditional cuisine—typically economical and simple, using few ingredients and cooking them slowly (Armstrong, 2011, p. ix)—was shaped by shortage and the harsh conditions of winter. Since French Canadians lived off the land, ingredients had to be found or grown locally, in the family garden or farm. Thus, as in British and Anglo-Canadian cuisine, a typical meal in Québec is composed of a piece of meat with a vegetable and potatoes (Coulombe, 2002, p. 118). Additionally, the growing season is short and the winter long, therefore staple food had to be stretched to last until the next crop, especially as families were large. Dishes called *plats de desserte*, food made from leftovers of previous meals, such as

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pâté chinois, were common in Québec. They helped to stretch the family's limited supplies.

While there is some evidence of earlier consumption, it was only after the British conquest of Nouvelle-France in 1760 that potatoes became frequently used. In 1749, Pehr Kalm (1771) found that French colonists did not have a high regard for them (p. 120). When British ingredients supplemented French-Canadian cuisine, however, potatoes made a regular appearance in local cooking (Coulombe, 2002, p. 73). Corn is the indigenous plant that settlers were quick to adopt because it was important to their subsistence in the New World (Warman, 2003, p. 151). In *pâté chinois*, canned corn is used, a product that appeared during the second half of the nineteenth century (Warman, 2003, p. 25). By 1882, Ontarian facilities were indeed canning corn and sending it to Montréal by railway (Lemasson, 2009, pp. 62-63). Already greatly appreciated by the French Canadians, corn was thus made available all year round thanks to technological innovations and industrialization. As for ground beef, it was widely available because of the rise of supermarkets—in Montréal, Dominion opened its first store in 1920 and Steinberg in 1927 (Lemasson, 2009, p. 61). It was the most economical meat since the least tender parts of the animal were used, but it also had a gourmet status from its association with French cuisine and its *Bifteck-Frites*, *Bœuf Bourguignon*, and *Steak tartare* (Coulombe, 2002, p. 57). The use of ground beef represented a compromise between feeding a family economically and enjoying the luxury of red meat (Lemasson, 2009, p. 61). For these reasons, *pâté chinois* might be said to be a working-class meal.

Both *pâté chinois'* name and its structure have taken on mythological proportions. Authors and chefs are adamant: the structure of *pâté chinois* is unvarying. This unchangeable order, according to Chef Laurent Godbout, is "ce qui permet aux gens de s'y reconnaître" [what makes people recognize the dish]³ (Lemasson, 2009, p. 94). This layering of ingredients, a fundamental element of Québécois cooking, evokes a widely used technique for making foreign dishes feel familiar. For example, lasagna was described in recipe books at the time of its introduction in Québec as "des rangs successifs de pâtes et de viande hachée, surmontés d'une couche de fromage râpé" [successive rows of pasta and minced meat, topped with a layer of grated cheese] (Coulombe, 2002, pp. 122-123). The name and the origins of the recipe remain a mystery and stimulate the circulation of myths. *Pâté* means pie and *chinois* Chinese. It has no dough, however, so it is not a pie. As we will see later, it has no link to China either. Perhaps the name is simply an example of the minimal influence of foreign dishes in Québec prior to 1960. We can find recipes with foreign-sounding names in local recipe books before then, but they were made with familiar ingredients and structures, and no integration of foreign culinary cultural principles (Coulombe, 2002, p. 95). While there were clear limitations on the availability of certain ingredients, this suggests conflicts between a desire for the exotic and a preference, or need, for the familiar.

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Just what was familiar to the Québécois palate? Of the three cultural groups closely associated with Québec history (French, British, First Nations), the French have primarily influenced Québec's cookery. A French dish, *hachis parmentier*, is interestingly similar to *pâté chinois*. It consists of mashed potatoes over ground meat. Surprisingly, the possibility that *hachis parmentier* might be the predecessor of *pâté chinois* is never discussed seriously by researchers. One of the only references is found in the food-based memoir of André Montmorency (1997), a Québécois actor known for his penchant for gastronomy, who presents a personal theory (p. 103). Given the importance attached to the memory of Québec's French roots, we would expect more stories from chefs and scholars connecting the meals together.

The British, who took political and economic control of the colony after 1760, also have a dish similar to *pâté chinois* called shepherd's pie. It consists of layers of ground meat, gravy, and mashed potatoes. Replace corn for gravy, and you have a "Chinese Pie." Interestingly, substituting one ingredient for another was the method most used to bring change in Québec cooking (Coulombe, 2002, p. 121); yet, not only has shepherd's pie never been thought of as a possible forbearer, but the idea of a close identification between *pâté chinois* and shepherd's pie is firmly rejected by Québécois chefs and scholars. In his massive anthology of the history of Québec cuisine, chef and journalist Jean-Marie Francoeur (2011) discards many possible root recipes for *pâté chinois* with a simple declaration: "c'est une variante du *shepherd's pie*" [it's a variant of shepherd's pie] (p. 478). By comparing rejected origin dishes to shepherd's pie, he denies the similarity but also creates an opposition: Francoeur tries to convince us that shepherd's pie and *pâté chinois* are so fundamentally different that one could not possibly be associated with the other. Jean-Pierre Lemasson, professor of urban and tourism studies at the Université du Québec à Montréal, is even more vehement in his rejection of shepherd's pie. Writing lyrically about a tendency to translate the name *pâté chinois* into shepherd's pie, he denounces such "traductions culturellement erronées" [culturally erroneous translations] that not only "brouillent notre identité culinaire" [blur our culinary identity] but sanction "l'idée que ce n'est pas un plat authentiquement Québécois ni une de nos créations culinaires les plus originales" [the idea that it is not a genuinely Québécois dish, nor one of our most original culinary creations] (Lemasson, 2009, p. 100). If what he refers to as the "divin paté" [divine pie] (Lemasson, 2009, pp. 13, 34) is found to have derived from a British idea, it would no longer be Québécois.⁴

WHAT IS SAID ABOUT PÂTÉ CHINOIS?

Let us turn our attention to the discourses surrounding *pâté chinois*. In the twentieth century, the dish was talked about in three diverse ways, which seem to correspond to three major periods in the search to define and to redefine Québécois identity. Before the 1970s, the definition of Québécois identity was crystal clear, lived daily, and unspoken. Being Québécois meant being part of a French Catholic family in

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Québec (Mathieu, 2001, p. 30). Anybody else living in Québec was Canadian. During the same period, *pâté chinois* was a common food that everybody knew how to make—just like the national identity, it was an everyday, even tacit fact. There was no need to define and to explain the making of *pâté chinois*. Many *plats de desserte*—meals made from leftovers—were found in recipe books, but not *pâté chinois* (Lemasson, 2009, p. 69). To find traces of its existence, we have to turn to newspaper articles. Its first appearance is a mention in *La Presse* on November 19, 1930 where *pâté chinois* is described as an established dish (Francoeur, 2011, p. 414). Historians studying recipe books argue that a recipe starts appearing in books only when it is considered culturally significant (Lemasson, 2009, p. 71). The absence of *pâté chinois* in recipe books therefore suggests that it did not represent a proper Québécois dish *per se*, but rather a simple method of recycling leftovers.

After the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s, many things changed in Québec society and the influx of immigrants was a factor of change.⁵ The definition of Québécois identity as being a part of a French Catholic family no longer sufficed, and defining and illustrating Québec's common culture became increasingly important with the introduction of new cultures (Mathieu, 2001, pp. 30-32). In this context of redefinition of identity, *pâté chinois* started appearing in "collections de recette de nos grands-mères" [our grandmothers' recipe collections] (Lemasson, 2009, p. 77). These types of books are repertoires of food heritage organized to represent the past in a way fitting the symbols the people desire to convey at that time (Aubertin & Sicotte, 2013, p. 6). Starting in the 1990s, *pâté chinois* developed a high profile. Within a few decades, it went from common and unassuming to being at the centre of Québec's cultural life, just as the exclusively francophone definition of Québécois culture was being challenged. In the 1980s, the political context in Canada had been leaning toward a valorization of cultural diversity rather than assimilation, but the real moment of realization took place the night of the 1995 Québec referendum to proclaim independence from Canada. When the leader of the separatist movement Jacques Parizeau blamed "l'argent et des votes ethniques" [money and ethnic votes] for the defeat, the locus of Québécois identity needed to be redefined (Mathieu, 2001, pp. 10-11).

In this context, *pâté chinois* became culturally significant, and it first rose to stardom through television. *La Petite Vie* was an extremely popular sitcom that ran from 1993 to 1999 in Québec. The show was a satire of a working-class family. Every Monday night, Francophones of all generations and every class rallied around their televisions to follow the struggles faced by the Paré family. Its success is still unsurpassed today in Canadian broadcasting. In 1995, the episode "Mlle Morin" had an audience of over four million and "Réjean Reçoit" reached 4,098,000 people (Desaulniers, 1996, p. 18). To give some perspective, Québec had a total population of 7,045,080 in 1996, with 5,784,635 people declaring French as at least one of their mother tongues (Statistics Canada, n.d.). On those two occasions, *La Petite Vie* thus reached more than 55% of the entire population of Québec, and about 70% of the French-speaking population.

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The whole series centred on two ideas: the relationship with Québécois language and a research and affirmation of identity (Nevert, 2000). We have already discussed these two ideas with regard to *pâté chinois*, a dish that, fittingly, was regularly featured on the show. The character of Thérèse brought *pâté chinois* to the small screens of millions of Québécois every week because she could never remember how to make it. The ingredients and structure had to be repeated to her constantly, less a list of ingredients than a mantra and norm to follow (Nevert, 2000, pp. 93-94). “Steak, blé d’Inde, patates” was the rule, and this expression quickly took hold in pop culture. It is still referenced in Québec today when somebody seems to have trouble with the simplest concept. What *La Petite Vie* did every week was to give the population a shared experience around a dish that has deep roots in Québec experience. The rigidity of *pâté chinois* in the show substitutes for an invariable feature of Québec culture, its language and French heritage, while making fun of the idea that there is an unchanging Québec culture.

As Thérèse can testify, the rule was not very flexible. *Pâté chinois* was required to stay close enough to the original to be recognized. That is why chefs have a hard time bringing glamour to the dish. In his final chapter, Lemasson (2009) discusses how any deviation in ingredients, structure, or name is blasphemous. These “variations hérétiques” [heretical variations] (p. 100) constitute for Lemasson a “détournement culturel, une tentative d’enlèvement symbolique, une prise d’otage avec vol d’identité qualifié” [cultural misappropriation, attempted symbolic kidnapping, hostage-taking with identity theft] (p. 99); however, he does make exceptions for the recipes of seven Québec chefs, and even praises them for elevating *pâté chinois* to the realm of gastronomy (pp. 97-99). As long as the ingredients are from Québec, he makes allowances for changes. Acceptable substitutes for the meats are ham, duck, deer, or *boudin*, a blood sausage common to nations of French heritage. Contrary to Lemasson’s earlier diatribes against corn replacements, it is often replaced in the recipes presented, while potatoes rarely are. Meat, identified earlier as the French ingredient, seems to be the least important, while British potatoes are stable. This can be explained by a shift of perceptions about meat and potatoes today. Meat is associated with money, and thus with the English Canadians, while potatoes are associated with impoverishment and the French Canadians (Deglise, 2007b).

The trend started by *La Petite Vie* and chefs caught on. *Pâté chinois* is now featured prominently in books, museums exhibits, and in the press. The readers of *Le Devoir*—a French-Canadian elite newspaper that has been supporting the idea of independence (Charron & Bastien, 2012; Descôteaux, 1999) elected it as Québec’s national food, a controversial choice due to the dish’s working class roots. By the mid-1990s, *pâté chinois* was increasingly saturating both the common and elite francophone culture daily.

WHAT DOES *PÂTÉ CHINOIS* TELL US?

What was the message and cultural meaning carried by *pâté chinois*? The aim of *Le Devoir*, chefs, and scholars was to create a shared experience and a shared past, to forge a community that would rise above inequalities and differences, and define the limits of that community. In other words, reinforce the nationalist sentiment that had been struggling ever since 1995 (Anderson, 2006, pp. 6-7). This objective is reflected in the circulating myths about *pâté chinois*, which focus on finding the origins of the dish and determining an explanation for its name.

What is Chinese about *pâté chinois*? Nothing other than its name. The most widely propagated theory is that it was fed to Chinese railroad workers in the West by British cooks. This story has been disproven more than once, however. The truth is that these Chinese workers cooked for themselves with ingredients they knew, such as rice, salmon, and tea. They did not use potatoes nor eat beef (Francoeur, 2011, p. 475; Lemasson, 2009, p. 40). Another theory is based on the premise that American statistician Carroll D. Wright once referred to the French-Canadian immigrants as the “Chinois des États de l’Est” [Chinese of the Eastern States] (Francoeur, 2011, p. 478). Clearly, these two unproven theories do not reveal a direct link with Chinese people; rather, they imply a denunciation of the British and American behaviours towards minorities. Lemasson (2009) speculated on many other possibilities for a Chinese connection. All of his suppositions relate to word plays, placing these theories squarely in the realm of the nation’s relationship with the French language. He proposes, for example, that *chinois* was used to mock the Catholic Church, which, at the beginning of the twentieth century, was hard at work in its evangelization campaign in China (p. 88). Additionally, the expression “c’est du chinois pour moi” [it’s Chinese to me] in the sense of “I find it complicated,” is common in Québec.⁶ Such use of antiphrasis is habitual in Québec. Some have seen a link there, because the dish is not complicated to make, although searching for *pâté chinois*’ origin and history is shrouded in mystery (Lemasson, 2009, p. 87).

As for stories of a French origin, there are few. As discussed previously, *hachis parmentier* is not considered as a predecessor. One theory supposes that *pâté chinois* was first eaten in the Nouvelle-France town of Lachine as early as the mid-seventeenth century. The town’s name came in mockery of the land owner’s intent to find an inland passage to China (Francoeur, 2011, pp. 480-484); however, there is no proof of the existence of the dish in Lachine in the seventeenth century. Another theory suggests that *pâté chinois* evolved from *tourtière*, a meat pie. In his book, Francoeur (2011) explains that *Chine* evokes *échine*, or “chyne” in English. The word refers to cuts of meat from the back of animals used in *tourtière*. The crust of the pie would have disappeared, replaced by earthenware because of the rising price of flour at the end of the nineteenth century. Potatoes would have been added to complete the meal and corn would have replaced other vegetables during a period of famine (pp. 490-494). It is worth mentioning that these two theories are rather recent and

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are not integrated into the folklore. They point to a conscious effort made to find and protect French origins.

The myths of an Anglo-Saxon origin for the dish are more varied. The best known, first reported by the linguist Claude Poirier (1988), links *pâté chinois* with the town of China in Maine. He stated that Americans knew the dish under the name China Pie. The town of China was in an area of high French-Canadian immigration, leading Poirier to believe that the Québécois appropriated the dish and brought it home. Lemasson (2009) rejects this theory, however, and posits *pâté chinois* as a creation of French Canadians exiled in New Hampshire, rather than a dish recuperated from the Americans (pp. 50-51). Contrary to Maine, he claims that New Hampshire had sufficient numbers of French Canadians working in the mills to sustain the propagation of the dish beyond the state. Although Poirier suggests a French-Canadian appropriation of a New England dish, the emphasis put on the high French-Canadian immigration hints again at an effort, shared by Lemasson (2009), to avoid asserting an Anglo-Saxon origin to *pâté chinois*.

After examining the origin myths of *pâté chinois* and its three possible influences (Chinese, Anglo-Saxon, and French), a clear pattern emerges. Firstly, the theories related to Chinese people need to be folded into those of Anglo-Saxon origins. The railroad worker story, while disproven, holds strong because it tells the story of a food that was forced upon the Chinese, seen as inferior and treated bleakly by the British. The Québécois also feel they were the victims of exploitation and bad treatment by the British and Anglophones of Canada (Létourneau, 2004, p. 108). Secondly, the French theories are of two kinds: those linking to European-French origins, and those highlighting particularities of the Québécois French language. Finally, what we learn from the Anglo-Saxon theories, or rather *how* those theories are discussed in Québec, is a resistance to defining the dish's Anglo-Saxon elements, reflected in a strong emphasis of the Québécois roots of the meal.

As we have seen, *pâté chinois* reflects and strengthens the Québécois identity. From an ordinary food, it became a trendy king, part of the collective popular imagination of Québec, disseminating its message for all: we are one, we are French-speaking (Aubertin & Sicotte, 2013, p. 153). This constant reminder came at a time when the foundations of Québécois identity were shaken and there was a need to reinforce weakened social bonds, which is one of the primary purposes of patrimony (Aubertin & Sicotte, 2013, p. 5). Perhaps when my grandmother was making *pâté chinois* not as a layered dish with well-divided ingredients, but as an integrated whole, she was not just making life easier for herself. Maybe she was imagining a new idea of Québécois identity, more attuned to what people wished for after the 1995 referendum, instead of what they got: variations of the same old francophone identity.

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¹ *Blé d'Inde* is a term commonly used to refer to corn in Québec. The name is said to originate from the beliefs held by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century colonizers who had reached India. While the term is now rarely used in the rest of the Francophone world, where the word *maïs* [maize] is typically preferred, many Québécois have held on to this particularism.

² In the context of Québec, the terms “French Canadian” and “Québécois” have been generally used to refer to French-speaking residents of the province. The difference guiding their use is both historical and political. “French Canadian” has been used since the British Conquest to refer to the French-speaking population living in Canada. The use of *Québécois* became more prominent in the twentieth century as the Québec identity and sovereignty movement took shape.

³ All translations are mine.

⁴ The First Nations have given French Canadians ingredients to cook with, but native dishes are not part of the common Québécois culinary repertoire.

⁵ Prior to 1960, the province was under the tight conservative control of Premier Maurice Duplessis (Union National Party) and the Catholic Church. The sixties saw the election of the Liberal Party which oversaw the liberalization of society, culture, and politics, as well as a fast secularization. The economy moved from a survival to a growth mode.

⁶ “C’est du chinois pour moi” is analogous structurally and semantically to the common English expression “it’s Greek to me.”