



Michelin is preparing a Hong-Kong edition of its world renowned guide ([Michelin Guide Hong Kong and Macau 2010](#)). Michelin started as a French gastronomic guide, but went out of France 30 years ago, first in the UK and now in more than 30 countries. However, so far (apart from a recent Tokyo edition), Michelin has limited its domain to western countries. It may be the case that, despite some cultural differences among western cuisines, Chinese cuisine presents a special challenge for Michelin judges. Indeed, it seems hard to learn a new tradition and forget the aversion we have for exotic delicacies (see the photo of a century egg, a duck, chicken or quail egg preserved for several weeks to several months. After the [process](#) is completed, the yolk becomes a dark green, cream-like substance with a strong odour of sulphur and ammonia, while the white becomes a dark brown, transparent jelly with little flavour or taste). Would Michelin judges be able to evaluate Hong-Kong restaurants properly?

Disgust is a universal disposition. It has a specific facial expression and produces some specific psychological inferences (if a disgusting object is - even briefly - in contact with an otherwise acceptable food, it tends to render it inedible). Disgust is a useful psychological tool for such an omnivorous species as humans. It helps us to learn from others which foods are edible and which ones are not. According to [Paul Rozin](#), our aversions develop between the age of four and eight and things that are said to be disgusting remain disgusting for the rest of our life. This is a good case of encapsulation: you can consciously try to bypass your intuitive aversions, but whatever your reasons, you may not be able to convince your gut feelings that a green and black egg is edible. Thus, disgust is both universal and cultural. Like language, it is a universal mechanism that needs cultural input.

The way disgust works means that if Michelin judges have grown up in a western culture, they may be unable to properly appreciate Chinese cuisine. Indeed, there is a Chinese cuisine for Westerners (as there are French cheeses for the rest of the world...). On the other hand, if Michelin choose Chinese judges, the guide may be useless for western people. Therefore, Michelin faces the following question: is a universal Michelin guide possible? Or do we need a Michelin guide of Hong-Kong for Western people, another one for Chinese people, and probably many more guides for each culinary tradition?

Today, relativism has retreated from an empirical statement to a methodological precaution. As Michael F. Brown suggests in a recent article in [Current Anthropology](#), anthropologists have ceased to adhere to the thesis that people live in different worlds and only consider relativism as the practice of suspending judgement until a belief or practice can be understood within its total context (it could be the case that even boasian anthropologists were more methodological relativists than empirical ones, as Steven Lukes argues in a recent [book](#)). However, cuisine may be one of the few domains in which empirical relativism is fully valid. It seems that for cuisine, we live in different and non comparable worlds. But I may be for once too relativistic. The fellow ethnographers of ICCI may correct me about how a western scientist can adapt to exotic cuisine.

Manual Trackback: [Miss Conduct](#) - Boston Globe's Miss Manners.