

# Consuming collective identity : food myths in contemporary Chinese aesthetic representations

Autor(en): **Riemenschnitter, Andrea**

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# CONSUMING COLLECTIVE IDENTITY. FOOD MYTHS IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE AESTHETIC REPRESENTATIONS

Andrea Riemenschmitter, Zürich

## *Abstract*

Well before they self-consciously relate to history, all communities, whether religious or secular, national or local, administer their own inventories of food symbolism. Because the usages of food can be multifarious and historically contingent even in its most essential functions, like nutrition, cure, or pleasure, not to speak of the purely imaginary connotations such as provider of collective identity and spiritual transformation, it is not surprising that the local aesthetic imagination engages in a constant dialogue with its surrounding, extra-aesthetic alimentary discourses. In this paper, I aim to explore the changing symbolic investments in sitiogonic narratives of early 20<sup>th</sup> century China authors and their recent successors, arguing that both modernist and post-Maoist cultural producers envision a close relationship between the kitchen and the writing desk, or the stomach and the brain, and that a thorough revision of the ingredients and processing of the modernizing nation's key ideologies conducted by the latter has brought about a refreshing reconfiguration of local identities that wilfully transgresses the homogenizing nationalist cultural imaginary of the territorial state/s. For this purpose, literary texts from, among others, Lu Xun, Cao Yu, Wang Ruowang, Su Tong, Zhang Wei, Maxine Kingston Hong, Amy Tan, and Leung Ping-kwan, as well as movies by Juzo Itami and Lee Ang, will be analysed.

## A saga of eating?

There is an abundance of alimentary themes and tropes in ancient Chinese literature. They range from early fertility and agricultural myths to medieval tales about drugs or extra-terrestrial food, and, finally, taxonomies of edible substances, which can be said to form a proto-science of nutrition.<sup>1</sup> There was, moreover, not only a broad knowledge about what is edible and nutritious in traditional Chinese culture, but also an elaborate art of the culinary. Historical sources testify to how, from earliest times, aristocrats as well as members of the

1 Several early medieval cosmographies can be indicated as predecessors of later systematic descriptions of medicinal food usage; see FAN, 1980; see also YUE, 1999):43f. On food and related religious beliefs in traditional China see STRICKMANN, 2002.

educated elite used to indulge in their appetites for unusual, rare, or refined dishes. While, among the wealthy and educated social classes, the cultural status of the art of the cuisine grew over the centuries, a considerable part of the rural population suffered from severe starvation even in times when the inevitable natural calamities remained within the bounds of endurance. However, the ordinary people's experiences of hunger and deprivation do not receive much attention in the premodern literary production. Not surprisingly, modernist intellectuals discovered this subject matter for their own discursive agenda, namely, the criticism of feudal traditions.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several famines not only killed millions of people, but also deeply traumatized the survivors. As supplements to the history books, and in an effort to reflect the practice of retrospective signification among the population, modernist tales of hunger and miraculous salvation contributed to the collective inscription of meaning into those years of suffering. Embedded in the cognitive framework of anthropological quest, many of those tales explore human behaviour in the face of starvation. They reflect the crisis in terms of unsatisfied bodily needs and unusual survival skills, such as the discovery of real or imaginary food substitutes. While the nation's internal cultural memory only gradually recovered from the experience of prolonged crisis, the sophistication of Chinese cuisine was made famous globally by leagues of migrants who, at the same time, sold their labour force as cooks in order to fill their families' stomachs. As diasporic authors engage with these estranged people's different hunger stories and thus participate in a discourse of incorporated, shared experience, questions of local subjectivity, authenticity, and discursive authority arise. From the dynamics of confrontation between internal and external narratives, new perspectives and perhaps some kind of postnational imagination can be generated.

There are good reasons to conceptualize 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese history as a "saga of eating". Besides the study of cannibalism as a key trope with several variants – i.e. hunger, vindictive, and "gourmet" cannibalism – by literary historian Yue Gang,<sup>2</sup> there are other literary models of consumption, some of which having been explored by anthropologist Judith Farquhar.<sup>3</sup> What to me seems to be still awaiting our attention is the symbolism employed in some sitiogonic narratives of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the strict sense of the term as defined by Bruce Lincoln, sitiogonic myths are founding myths about the nature and origin

2 YUE, 1999:2.

3 FARQUHAR, 2002.

of food,<sup>4</sup> that is, tales with a predominantly alimentary theme, which provide a comprehensive narrative sequence interspersed with divine or fantastic elements. They may allude to the transmission of knowledge about the cultivation or preparation of food to the human community by deities, such as mythical emperor Yandi's invention of farming and mythical emperor Huangdi's introduction of the stove. Others may tell the story of a divine hero who rescues the community during a natural calamity, like emperor Yu's success in controlling the flood disaster along the river Huang, or archer Yi's victory over the primordial drought by eliminating nine of the originally ten suns. Obviously, both modernist and post-Maoist narrative representations never rely on myths as the only layer of signification. Rather, it is through a prismatic web of codes that those tales achieve their persuasive power.

With my selection of literary and filmic representations, I aim to investigate especially those mythically orchestrated narratives, which, in their sagas of eating, represent the kitchen, the dining-table, the rice bowl, or, as it were, the mouth that begs, eats, and talks, as a meeting point of multiple histories. In accordance with the fragmented, hybridized cultural imaginaries of a post-utopian and rapidly globalizing world, my texts suggest an uncanny coexistence of, i.e., *etiquette* fragments derived from the traditional banquet culture, such as prescriptions, restrictions, and taboos,<sup>5</sup> with myths and rituals of sacred communion in scenarios apparently composed of the most secular, everyday-day family dining modes and habits. From notions of eating as biological necessity, as constitutive of social practice, and as historical experience, this leads us to visions of the culinary as a vehicle for the re/construction of collective identities.<sup>6</sup> Finally, I want to outline the contours of an emerging notion of self-reflexive visceral alterity that dismisses the principle of national homogeneity in contemporary aesthetic representations within and without mainland China.

4 "One item of the macrocosm often had a separate section of the creation account allocated to it alone. This was food, the nature and origin of which were treated in what I will call a *sitiogony* (from Gk *sitos* 'food, bread, grain'), that is, a myth of the creation of food." LINCOLN, 1986:65.

5 For a discussion of dining conventions and their cultural impact in the western context see VISSER, 1991.

6 For general surveys of Chinese food and cuisines see ANDERSON, 1988 and SIMOONS, 1991.



## Bitter Pills

Inspired by the European enlightenment, Chinese modernism created a negative founding myth of the failed nation-state. Especially the leading, leftist urban authors of the May Fourth movement attributed China's weakness in the face of the imperialist forces to the empire's decadent, elitist traditional culture. When nationalism developed as a site of resistance to both internal feudalism and foreign imperialism, the reception of 19<sup>th</sup> century European romantic folklore collections as well as western philosophical debates about religion and world mythologies inspired Chinese intellectuals to scientifically resurrect their own folk traditions.<sup>7</sup> One of the key narratives of their time represented the failure as always already functional, inscribed into the earliest mythologies of Chinese communities with, i.e., the rather unheroic figures of Pan Gu, Fu Xi, and Nü Wa.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, those myths were revisited by modernist authors of literary texts and, in order to serve the present times, underwent considerable transformations. Between 1922 and 1935, Lu Xun (1881–1936) wrote eight re-interpretations of ancient myths, simultaneously deconstructing and developing them into what could be called negatively encoded national myths. The almost encyclopaedically structured collection, which he later published in one volume by the title of *Old Tales Retold* (Gushi xinbian), contains several stories with sitiogenic elements. One of them is *Gathering Vetch* (Cai wei), which tells the story of the aristocratic hermit-brothers Bo Yi and Shu Qi, who out of protest against the change of dynasty, refused to eat the grain of the new Zhou rulers and voluntarily starved themselves to death at Mount Shouyang. For the Han historian Sima Qian (c. 145–c. 85 BC), as well as for generations of literati to come, this story had been internalized as a functional part of their moral consciousness, to be told and retold, written and rewritten in times of social crisis. In Lu Xun's version of the tale, the morale is subverted by the author's ironic bricolage of several previous versions. Moreover, the myth is antagonistically situated in a contemporary environment. Thus, the aristocrats are living rather comfortably in a sort of retired officials' home and they eventually decide to leave because they are annoyed with their daily diet of hardly digestible pancakes. Once in the mountains, they not only starve to death, but also fail to achieve posthumous veneration on account of a local woman who questions their herbal diet. She first explains that the vetch they eat also belong to the new ruling house

7 HUNG, 1985.

8 YANG/AN/TURNER, 2005.

of Zhou, so, in her eyes, there is actually no point in their refusal of the cultivated grains. Later, she tells those among the villagers who express their respect for the hermits that they had actually died from greed. In this context, she claims to have observed how they attempted to kill and eat the sacred doe who had been feeding them with its milk.<sup>9</sup> The age-old myth of defiance toward a despotic ruler by retiring from office and living on wild herbs was thus ridiculed by Lu Xun in order to call his compatriots to more efficient forms of political resistance.<sup>10</sup> He quite ingeniously exposed the biopolitical mechanism<sup>11</sup> of control over the (starving) subjects: first, by describing how marginal members of the elite could use the surplus moral value of disciplined fasting for their own, more or less selfish aims, and second, by questioning the persuasive range of such symbolic agency that, even if carried out with perfect integrity of intentions, can

- 9 LU, 2005. The notes trace the various origins of different parts of the tale; Sima Qian's version can be found in *Shiji* VII, 61, tr. in NIENHAUSER, 1994:1–8; for a discussion of the different philosophical issues that were involved in premodern versions see VERVOORN, 1983 and GRAHAM, 1990:86–90.
- 10 In the early Qing years, during the later 17<sup>th</sup> century, loyal Ming remnants (Ming yimin) would still describe their changed fates as a bare life condition by employing notions of their chewing nothing but wild herbs after the fall of their dynasty. References can be found in Zhang Dai, *Prefaces (Zixu and zuozhe zixu) to Xihu mengxun*, in: ZHANG, 1982(a) and in his *Tao'an mengyi*, ZHANG, 1982(b):1–4, 3f., for instance. The author mentions in *Tao'an mengyi*, that although he lives on wild herbs and very often has nothing to make fire with, he has survived for a long time. Therefore, he continues, the legend of Boyi and Shuqi's death of hunger must be a posthumous embellishment to the original story (“Shi zhi Shouyang er lao zhi tou e si, bu shi Zhou su, haishi houren zhuangdianyu ye.”), see ZHANG, 1982(b):3.
- 11 By using G. Agamben's term, I refer to those (still scarce) aspects of bare life that have experienced intentional control from traditional social institutions and are, therefore, outstanding from the prevalent premodern practice of assigning the responsibility for creaturely life to fate, that is, to the respective belief systems. With various examples, such as Human Rights declarations, eugenics, refugee politics, and political prisoners in concentration camps, Agamben argues that only the modern sovereign state usurps total power over its subjects: “If it is the sovereign who, insofar as he decides on the state of exception, has the power to decide which life may be killed without the commission of homicide, in the age of biopolitics this power becomes emancipated from the state of exception and transformed into the power to decide the point, at which life ceases to be politically relevant. When life becomes the supreme political value, not only is the problem of life's nonvalue thereby posed, [...] but further, it is as if the ultimate ground of sovereign power were at stake in this decision. In modern biopolitics, sovereign is he who decides on the value or the non-value of life as such.” AGAMBEN, 1998:142.

easily be devalued by counter-narratives stemming from commoner opponents who do not share the agents' education and political vision.<sup>12</sup>

However, May Fourth modernism not only rejected such elite "wild herb conservatism", but was also critical of a variety of traditional food myths, eating conventions, and tastes that were considered to be superstitious, or even barbarian. As a consequence of the new nation's urge to construct a modern collective identity, many authors felt that the classical borderline between a human self and its inhumane others needed to be redrawn. Certain elements of the cultural imaginary that were held to be irrational, like myths and superstitious customs, were found to be useful, as they would locate the enemy inside rather than outside the community's boundaries. Much has been written about Lu Xun's contempt for traditional Chinese culture, which he critically investigated from an outsider's point of view by imagining a modern, westernized national culture, shaped after the Japanese example that figured as a blueprint for his scathing criticism of contemporary Chinese backwardness. In one of his most famous stories, *A Madman's Diary* (Kuangren riji, 1918), he derived his trope of traditional elite culture as cannibalism from legends transmitted in the historical records. The madman's anxiety about a possible contamination of his own food with human flesh reversed the primitivist discourse of the civilized, non-cannibalistic community and its alien, barbarian, man-eating others to reveal that the enemy predominantly was hidden within the nation's boundaries, rather than openly attacking from outside.

For Lu Xun, the modernist idea of cannibalism as a negative founding myth implied a cultural imaginary that was based on superstition. He especially shocked his audience with the observation that superstitious beliefs could eventually be shared among the elite and the common people without education. This idea is reflected in his story *Medicine* (Yao, 1919). This text tells the story of a poor mother who waits for an execution in order to feed her sick son on the victim's blood, which was traditionally believed to be a drug for the cure of tuberculosis. As the victim is a martyr of the revolution, a symbolic extension of the execution creates a link between the *ancien regime* and therapeutic cannibalism, implying that the conservative elite would feast on the vital energy of its most idealistic youth.<sup>13</sup> However, western medicine can turn out to be equally harmful when in the hands of a Confucian patriarch. Cao Yu (1910–1996), in his drama *Thunder-*

12 Wu, 1996.

13 In 1993, Mo Yan used this story as a model for his short story *The Cure* (Ling yao), tr. GOLDBLATT, 1995:172–181.

*storm* (Leiyu, 1934), hints at the fallibility of even the most scientific medical cures, if combined with the wrong diagnosis.<sup>14</sup> The patriarch employs first traditional herb drugs and then a German psychiatrist to cure his second wife, whose “illness” consists of lovesickness and a taste for modern feminist liberation. Of course, the psychiatrist does not oppose his male patron and even confirms his strategy of shutting the rebellious woman in her room. The patriarch’s idea to compensate his victim’s suppressed desire with old drugs and new, imported therapies parallels the abuse of power in traditional Confucian society with a decadent sitiogonic imagination.<sup>15</sup> When patriarch Zhou forces his wife to swallow the bitter and useless dose of medicine in front of the horrified rest of the family, the trope of forced feeding, based on female defiance and one of its lesser visible patriarchal responses, comes to be used as a metonymy for the oppressive, self-sufficient authoritarianism of the old Confucian society. Only later do we learn that the patriarch himself, in his youth, had been forced down an equally bitter pill, when he was separated from his first concubine and their second infant son against his will. He actually is a victim as much as an agent of a tradition he nevertheless relentlessly perpetuates.<sup>16</sup>

### Eating bitterness – imagining sweetness

Shen Congwen (1902–88), on the other hand, had set out to establish a positive sitiogonic repository by evoking the emotional warmth of rural communities in the regional hinterlands. In the face of his own emotionally deprived, hungry, and desolate city life as a student in Beijing, he wrote nostalgic tales of life in homely rural abundance – tales of delicious food, humane habits, and healthy appetites.<sup>17</sup> His approach contests urban May Fourth modernism’s violence-rid-

14 CAO, 1996.

15 On the importance and functions of food in contexts of ritual and entertainment performance see WEST, 1997.

16 In this context, Jane Marcus’ contribution on British women’s passive resistance during WW I is enlightening, especially when read along with Cao’s ironic reference to patriarch Zhou’s abuse of western Freudianism for his own purpose. He adopts it to legitimize his ruthless exertion of control over his wife, for instance by shutting her in her bedroom, ostensibly on account of her sensitive nerves. See MARCUS, 1989.

17 SHEN, 1983; see also KINKLEY, 1987. See also the interesting resumption of this motive by Wang Meng in his story *Thick Congee*, which ridicules the fashion among his compatriots to eat unpleasant western style food in order to become “modern”. See WANG, 1993.

den founding myth by suggesting a positive, regionalist national imaginary. It became influential only with a considerable delay of half a century, that is, after the worst years of starvation and class struggle were overcome. Meanwhile, the Maoist “hungry revolution” had added a number of new entries to the cultural semiotics of eating. Among them, Mao’s suggestions to digest progressive foreign cultures as cultural food (*wenhua shiliang*), to eat the (food of the) rich in order to redistribute wealth, or the ceremonies of eating/remembering bitterness in order to cherish present sweetness (*yiku sitian*), figure prominently.<sup>18</sup> Besides, Christian topics like the Holy Communion were successfully implemented in Mao’s inventory of revolutionary food symbolism. The cultural text, says Yuri Lotman, represents the most abstract model of reality from the point of view of a given culture, that is, its philosophy of life.<sup>19</sup> A preliminary inventory of the constituents of a contemporary Chinese cultural text about eating suggests *chiku* (eating bitterness) as one of the key metaphors. Whereas the ahistorical, consumerist hedonism of the youngest generation of urban Chinese writers is a recent and maybe temporary phenomenon, *chiku* has a long tradition and can be seen as a cultural key term throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century China.<sup>20</sup> Post-Maoist historical fiction, which, shortly after Mao’s death, started to investigate the traumatic memories of the later, radical Maoist years by telling stories about this period’s man-made famines, is largely concerned about the residual bitterness of being dispossessed of one’s own memories. Thus, the stories critically engage with the official politics of amnesia and investigate how people managed to control their hunger in silence, or even isolation.

One of the earlier narrative representations of the famines is Wang Ruowang’s (1918–2001) *Hunger Trilogy* (Ji’e sanbuqu, 1979).<sup>21</sup> The story is a fictionalized account of Wang’s own life, in which he encountered serious starvation for three times in succession. His first experience of hunger dates back to when he was a political prisoner of the KMT at age 16. Due to his youth, his older fellow prisoners supported him with instructions on how to survive and with donations of supplementary food they had spared from their own rations. As the enemy was distinct, the morale of the starving communist revolutionaries was extremely high. Only in a few moments of utter despair would the main protagonist’s desire for food turn into delirious greed and envy, especially in

18 YUE, 1999:150ff.

19 LOTMAN, 1975.

20 BERRY/FARQUHAR, 2005.

21 WANG, 1979.



moments when he had to watch someone else eat. As painful sleeplessness and bodily weakness gave little room for other distractions, everybody joined in producing imaginary feasts by contributing vivid descriptions of their favourite dishes and restaurants. Whereas this is not quite the kind of cultural nutrition (*wenhua shiliang*) Mao had in mind when he encouraged the masses to read and digest cultural texts,<sup>22</sup> those imaginary banquets in Wang's plot ritually bind together the political prisoners. After the model of the Holy Communion, they have a shared vision to consume, so that their imaginary banquets fulfil the same function of spiritual empowerment. Wang's second experience with hunger is not devoid of positive aspects, either. In the middle part of the trilogy, a flight from Japanese troops in bleak rural Shandong is recounted. This time, the narrator and his comrades get lost and face starvation in a dense forest of shrubbery. While sharing emergency meals consisting of their only female comrade's fiancée gift provisions – sugar and coffee – first, and raw grasshoppers and green moth larvae last, they keep telling themselves that “[t]here's no such thing as a hopeless situation for man”.<sup>23</sup> The mythical connotations of this sacrificial struggle for a better life and future become fully apparent when it is tragically devalued by the reality of Cultural Revolution politics – and especially by Mao's prisons, where the author ends up in the third part of the trilogy. No prisoner is supposed to escape alive from those confinements, and the distribution of food follows the logic of increasing the starving prisoners' pains rather than nourishing them. Apart from its mission to warn later generations of what can happen when people surrender to any authoritarian system, Wang's as well as many other prison and labour camp reports<sup>24</sup> can be read as an anthropology of hunger; with the premonition that, while hunger is always a liminal human experience, its painfulness, like the pleasure of good food, very much depends on the social environment and ideological conditions of the consuming subject.<sup>25</sup>

22 MAO, 1968:667.

23 WANG, 1991:51.

24 See for instance ZHANG, 1995.

25 This line of argument is of course not meant to deny that this kind of early post-Maoist revisionism has its own ideological agenda and, thus, has its own set of persuasive fictitious constituents. For a more self-reflexive employment of the hunger trope in later fiction see the prison meal episodes in MO, 2005. The peasants who, upon the district officials' inability to organize the marketing of their harvest, have staged an insurgency, experience an idea of good food for the first time in their lives in prison. However, they are offered appetizing meals only under circumstances that render consumption (nearly) impossible, see especially chs. 7, 12, and 18.



This second sitiogonic founding myth of a traumatized society, that is, the revolutionary starvation that people had to endure during the years of radical Maoism, does not only involve political prisoners, but also the ordinary folks in post-Maoist fiction. An extreme case is stated in Mo Yan's (b. 1955) novel *Big Breasts Wide Hips* (Fengru feitun, 1995). The main protagonist Shangguan Lu Xuanr, whom Red Guards send to work in the now government-owned local corn mill, secretly swallows grains to feed her starving offspring with. To this purpose, she has learnt to use her stomach as a granary by first swallowing and later throwing up the precious grains.<sup>26</sup> This rather peculiar capability is only a minor ornament to Shangguan's resourcefulness in nourishing her family, which primarily manifests itself in her prolonged breastfeeding of a grown-up son and her innumerable grandchildren. Yu Hua's (b. 1960) novel *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* (Xu Sanguan maixue ji, 1995) tells a similar story about a father as both, a feeding body and spirit.<sup>27</sup> In this novel, protagonists Xu and his wife survive the vicissitudes of the Maoist regime through a kind of physiological bartering. Xu literally feeds his family on his blood, as he goes selling it in times when food is too expensive to afford by means of his regular income, or when hospital bills must be paid. The procedure of blood selling is described as a rich ritual, to be religiously observed by Xu after his initiation by some of his fellow villagers. From 1958 onwards, during the worst famine years of the Maoist period, Xu moreover resorts to the same strategy of imaginary banquets as is recounted in Wang's *Hunger Trilogy*. Every member of the family is invited to order his or her favorite dish, which is successively cooked and served in great verbosity by Xu. Whereas the starved prisoners in Wang's novel delight in the idea of utmost variety and finesse of their spiritually consumed dishes, Yu Hua's hungry family, on the contrary, consumes unity. Every member wants to eat a huge portion of fat, red-fried pork meat. Protagonist Xu drives home the point of humane unity in difficult times by complaining that, in this case, it would have spared him a lot of trouble had he "cooked" one large dish for everyone to share.<sup>28</sup>

Food consumption, as Friedrich Nietzsche has observed,<sup>29</sup> is one of the aspects of life that give colour to existence, but have no history or philosophy of

26 Mo, 1995:466–8.

27 YU, 1996.

28 YU, 1996:119.

29 "Bisher hat alles das, was dem Dasein Farbe gegeben hat, noch keine Geschichte [...]. Kennt man die moralischen Wirkungen der Nahrungsmittel? Gibt es eine Philosophie der Ernährung? (Der immer wieder losbrechende Lärm für und wider den Vegetarismus beweist

their own. Even though the predominant colour is black in all of the above-mentioned texts, both a history and philosophy can be derived from them. They represent different forms of cultural hunger management that have been successfully implemented by one or more players. The agents even abstain from consuming their meagre provisions in order to feed freedom, or even feed their own bodies to the future generation.<sup>30</sup> While, in these hungry histories, survival to a high degree depends on the subjects' individual resourcefulness and will power, Yu Hua's novel *To Live* (Huozhe, 1992)<sup>31</sup> represents the Maoist politics of the masses as historical contingency that left no room for a subject's live-saving agency. Yu's family chronicle roughly covers half a century and is well known beyond Chinese boundaries on account of the much acclaimed film *To Live* directed by Zhang Yimou (Huozhe, 1994). It is based on the story of Fugui, a rich landlord's son, who loses his property as a gambler but then reforms his ways and becomes a worthy albeit hapless family head who supports his family as a puppeteer first, and as a farmer later. His wife, daughter, son, and son-in-law all die successively from malnutrition, sickness, or silly accidents. Toward the end of the novel, the family's last descendant Kugen dies as his grandfather feeds horse-beans to the feverish, starved boy without taking into account the acute danger of the boy's overeating. The movie, with grandfather and grandson fantasizing about a brighter future, ends on a more conciliatory note than the novel, but illustrates this same idea of nutritional mismanagement of starved bodies.

While the above-mentioned narratives all celebrate the integrity of the human heart and a heroic defence of the family through control of the mind over the body, Su Tong's (b. 1963) novel *Rice*<sup>32</sup> declares moral failure in the face of starvation. It is a story about members of different social groups in a southern river port town, who are not only relying on, or participating, in the local rice trade, but are also involved with each other in various social networks. There are, however, practically no emotional bonds between the protagonists, not even between husband and wife, or father and son. Originally an innocent refugee from a flood famine region, the main protagonist's personal integrity is rapidly ruined by the corrupt city life. Not until he faces death does he regain some of his youthful idealism, and he establishes an agrarian development project at his

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schon, dass es noch keine solche Philosophie gibt!)” Friedrich Nietzsche, “Etwas für Arbeit-same”, in: NIETZSCHE 1887, I, 7:38f. See <http://www.textlog.de/21174.html>; last viewed 08-08-2006.

30 MINTZ, 1997.”

31 YU, 1992.

32 SU, 1996:3–222.

home village. For one precious moment, he even manages to view himself as a respected rural community member, which makes all the difference as compared to his unappealing city life. The negative image of city corruption and violence, as mirrored in several scenes of individual bestiality including main protagonist Wulong's disintegrating rice fetishism with its intermingled, perverted categories of both the sexual and the alimentary, is thus not represented in the novel as marking the point of total impossibility of a future historical change. Although it is too late for the protagonist, or his children, to return to his allegedly intact rural origins, he heavily invests in a vision of spiritual homecoming in terms of both economic and emotional capital.<sup>33</sup>

The myth of unity as virtuous simplicity shines through both opening and closure of Su's novel, but is not given much agency beyond the utopian vision of the main protagonist. Although Wulong is symbolically invested with some traits indicating his semi/divine origin,<sup>34</sup> he is not a mythical saviour like his prototype Yu, the tamer of the floods. History, which is identified with human greed and cruelty, has defeated the order of myth, so that harmony based on moral integrity has little chance to survive. Food, and especially the lack of food, acts as the most meaningful signifier of the dysfunctional Maoist society in many post-Maoist literary texts. Those new hungry histories argue, by confronting Mao's utopian myth of the new man who is tasting eternal sweetness with primordial images of the chaos and destruction that have been caused, that a reconstruction of the cosmos/nation as civilized society must be achieved. Rather than Mao's religious value system of salvation and creation that relied heavily upon the idea of violent redistribution of wealth, memory is the key to this new type of historical fiction.<sup>35</sup> In the face of more and more excessive food consumption that they find themselves confronted with today, these authors may feel that the contemporary society's physical as well as emotional well-being depends on its capability to responsibly reform the people's eating habits.<sup>36</sup>

33 PROBYN, 2000:61.

34 He is portrayed as an orphan who is collectively raised by the villagers and given a home in the local shrine. After his flight to the city, the pagoda that is located in the street where he lives gives him some emotional comfort, arguably as a successor to the shrine. See, for instance, SU, 1996:57, 88f.

35 Zhang Qinghua discusses the major orientations of what he calls *new historicism* in contemporary historical fiction. See ZHANG, 1998.

36 Yan's grotesque and sobering novel *Mingding guo*: MO, 1992.

## Bittersweet and wholesome

As it is a memory of acute crisis and deprivation rather than one of culturally balanced harmony between man and nature, what is missing in many hunger stories of the revolutionary era are (however secularised) references to cosmological values. In traditional societies, such values were invoked in order to establish a connection between humans and gods in the process of agrarian production. From sowing to the distribution and, finally, ingestion of food, agricultural communities viewed their activities as a cycle of virtuous transactions with the gods.<sup>37</sup> Conceptions of transubstantiation through divine food induced humans to perceive food consumption as an embodiment of spiritual energy. In this line of thought, we understand how a community's basic food supplies, like rice, potato, wheat, or millet, could define its basic features of self-perception and provide its shared notions of health, taste, or moral disposition.<sup>38</sup> Across all social levels, the kitchen looms large as a gastropolitical centre, argues Arjun Appadurai, since this is the place where both food and the meal participants receive their respective civilizing treatments – through cooking as well as practices of distribution that may entail either homogenizing or heterogenizing effects. The latter are produced if tensions occur because the various social positions at disposal fail to be properly negotiated among the company at table. In this case, the balance between intimacy and distance, equality and hierarchy, solidarity and segmentation can be disturbed.<sup>39</sup> When available in sufficient or even abundant quantities, food occupies a central position in many social activities and thus develops even greater relevance as a symbolic medium. Having enough food to eat at one's disposal means independence, or power – comprising different hierarchies, such as control of the mind over the body, or the social distinctions between elite and commoner, self and other, male and female, etc. With growing distance to biological needs, Deborah Lupton observes, consumption habits “serve to mark boundaries between social classes, geographic regions, nations, cultures, genders, life-cycle stages, religions and occupations, to distinguish rituals, traditions, festivals, seasons and times of day.”<sup>40</sup> But even on the most frugal alimentary levels, as we shall see below, consumers seek to trans-

37 APPADURAI, 1981:496.

38 See OHNUKI-TIERNEY, 1993:3–11, *passim*.

39 APPADURAI, 1981:508.

40 LUPTON, 1996:1.



gress the rather banal practices of everyday life by embedding their eating habits into more complex systems of meaning.

My example is drawn from Zhang Wei's (b. 1955) novel *September Fables* (Jiuyue yuyan, 1993), a fictional ethnography of rural life in a small Shandong village.<sup>41</sup> Its inhabitants are moderately hostile to strangers, as can be derived from the name they have chosen for a neighbouring community of latecomers, *Tingba*, which refers to a poisonous kind of fish. Those outsiders are not considered to be acceptable marriage partners, and normally there is not much traffic between the two places. Throughout the year, that is, when it is not harvesting time, the region lives on half-rotten, hardly digestible chips of dried sweet potato. These chips normally are served unprocessed for meals, and can be a challenge to human digestion, especially with respect to the stomachs and teeth of the elderly people. Resignation prevails in this environment of poverty and backwardness, but there are also moments of shared happiness and of heroic departures into a better future, whose call-up is more precious in the author's eyes than the superficial or hackneyed expressions of grievance about the past or the present by detached intellectual novelists like himself.<sup>42</sup> The fable of the "Black Pancakes" (Hei jianbing), according to the author, is one of the many true stories in the book that are still remembered by the elderly of the region;<sup>43</sup> it can thus be concluded that the story represents a sitiogonic myth in the making. A couple of strangers with unusual talents turn the suspicious, gossipy and violent atmosphere that prevails in this village into a homely public sphere of liberal tool sharing and heartfelt mutual concern by introducing a technology to render the potato chips both more palatable and wholesome.

Jinxiang, a man in his fifties, is a gifted storyteller, who is sought after in the whole district during the leisure time in winter. Villagers from near and far would then come and pick him up respectfully with an oxcart. However, he is "lent out" by his home community only to those places where the people are in friendly terms with the village. To a certain extent, conflicts between different communities can thus be solved by the respective community heads' negotiations of Jinxiang's availability. As a stranger, and because his health is not good, he had not been given a wife by the local villagers. One day, a woman vagabond named Qingyu appears on the scene. With torn clothes, dishevelled hair,

41 "Heijianbing", in: ZHANG, 1998: 37–95.

42 "Because I have made an effort to detach myself from feelings of desolation towards life, I could transcend my despondency. From then on, my voice was not only raised for self-comfort, but even more so in order to incite." ZHANG, 1998(a): 351.

43 ZHANG 1998(b): 359f.

pregnant, dog on a leash, and mumbling nonsensical rhymes to herself, she steadfastly stands below a poplar tree for several weeks, until someone humorously suggests giving her to Jinxiang as his wife. After a period of liminality, during which the villagers mock and attack the strange new family, the woman settles down and miraculously starts to cook good food from the bad raw material. She knows how to make delicious, easily digestible black pancakes by grinding the rotten chips to flour as a base for pancake dough and baking it on a flat pan. For the pan, Qingyu has to use a substitute until her husband ventures to make a long, spooky journey across the mountains in order to buy a real pancake pan from Qingyu's home region. Jinxiang, who returns sick and exhausted, dies as a hero from the after-effects of his journey, but the pan continues to circulate freely among all villagers:

That pan was simply sanctified. It was the object of the whole village's pious veneration. Impossible for it to belong to one single family or household; it had to circulate around the whole village. If this family wanted to get the pan from another family, it would at least mobilize two people who, as soon as they entered the doorway, would say: "We come to borrow the pan!" Jinxiang became a hero of the *Quest for the Western Holy Scriptures* [xitian qujing], deeply respected as a model by the whole village. Even after a very long time, when Jinxiang had long left this world, people would still teach their offspring to develop great ambitions by confronting them with Jinxiang's example, saying: "Take a good look at that fellow Jinxiang, all alone he searched the highest mountains in order to carry home the pan on his back!"<sup>44</sup>

Before long, the villagers' traditional morning greeting, "Ah, that rumbling and scorching in the stomach!", has become history.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, their fabulous origin predestines the black pancakes to fulfil the function of constituting village identity by playing a central part during ritual events, such as collective feasts or feuds. There is very little if any metaphysical impact in Zhang Wei's story. Yet, his new mythical heroes are inscribed with what would have been divine traits in older oral myths. From the point of view of their origin, both heroes are not rooted in the region. Furthermore, they both have unusual personalities and talents, and bring superior knowledge from outside into the community. One of them even dies upon the fulfilment of his mission.<sup>46</sup>

44 ZHANG, 1998: 58. Here, as in the following, I use my own translations.

45 "Shaoweili, shaoweili!" ZHANG, 1998: 50.

46 The combination of two culture heroes and their deeds in one single founding tale can be taken to be a fine example of Lévi-Strauss' law of duplication, which says that one myth



In an interview, Zhang Wei has remarked that local readers found his book extremely satisfying in terms of what today's rural life in Shandong is like.<sup>47</sup> From his words we can derive several insights. First, food is not only a central concern in daily life, but also a major source of aesthetic inspiration in peasant storytelling. Second, the author's ethnographic approach helps to render an important part of the nation's collective imaginary widely accessible while detaching it from the ideological agenda of nationalism. This kind of ethnographic perspective of some regionalist writers, who seek to return to, or unearth, a more comprehensive spirit of identity – a kind of pluralistic culturalism that neither overlooks, as in traditional concepts, nor constructs, as in Maoism, the minds of the less educated others – has, to a certain degree, equally been adapted by filmmakers who seem to highly estimate the heterogeneous variety of rural landscapes with their respective mythologies and symbolism as rewarding sites of contemporary culture to be studied and represented. The actuality of sitiogonic mythmaking in the countryside moreover suggests that today's rural communities are as flexible and as much in the making as the urban ones.<sup>48</sup> As Zhang, when asked about his preference for the representation of village life, once conceded, the comparative smallness of a village can be an advantage which promises better understanding. For example, to record the old peasants' stories can inspire an investigation into those habitually employed symbolic registers of food and meals that are operative in processes of cultural identity consumption. In *September Fables*, people's daily lives and the village's history are both shaped by the sweet potato:

During those years, the sweet potato was the basic nutrition of the small villages. If you want to write about this epoch's daily life, you cannot avoid writing about the sweet potato. It is intimately linked to the pleasures and pains of the people of that time, to all kinds of

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usually contains several similarly structured plot components with which to simultaneously hint at and hide its morale. See "The Structural Study of Myth," in: LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1968.

47 *Reporter*: "It appears that there is a large amount of allusions and symbols in this book, this adds to the novel's atmosphere of mystery and alienation [...]" *Zhang*: "These days, I am often confronted with this question. Nobody has ever discussed it. After *September Fables* was published, common readers do never ask this kind of questions, it was always those who are professionally occupied with literature who asked them. For instance, there are many people at Haijiao in Dengzhou district who know me. Of course they paid even more attention to what I have written. In general, their remarks after reading were like this: 'No mistake, everything is exactly so, I know of all these things!'" ZHANG, 1998(b):357f.

48 This argument has been raised by Liu Xin, too. See his report on fieldwork in a Shaanxi village: LIU, 2000.

stories about them. I ceaselessly wrote about it, until I gradually developed a special affection for it.

In this way, I devoted even more attention to the sweet potato, while to a certain extent neglecting the other farm produce, like wheat or legumes. Naturally, they were not nearly as widespread as the sweet potato back then: a man who could not eat wheat even once in a year was a common phenomenon.

As I have already said, because I ceaselessly wrote about the sweet potato, I grew a specific passion for this particular farm produce. More and more, I fancied its outstanding beauty, the impossibility to substitute it. It has a burning red surface, which glows like incandescent fire on the fields as soon as it is dug up. Moreover, its relationship with the people is extraordinary; of all the different kinds of crops, the sweet potato is most intimately linked to man. This is a fact.

The villagers make a great variety of dishes from the sweet potato: dumplings, cakes, bread, and pancakes. Besides its stemming from necessity, this also implies a kind of emotional warmth. Even in times of bitter poverty, it remains the last source of comfort and safety to the villagers. I was moved by this both popular and extraordinary relationship.<sup>49</sup>

In times of famine, the consolation of chewing on a half-rotten sweet potato chip may have inspired similar feelings of excitement that readers of *September Fables* witness to arise from a stranger's black pancake recipe in a time of relative abundance. The pancake considerably ameliorates the peasant stomachs' food tolerance, and therefore their entire health condition. In Zhang's view, taste and digestion are thus the keys to an embodiment of both old and new notions of collective identity in today's regional cultures.

### Transnational foodscapes – towards a new ethics of consumption

However, taste is not only a biological condition, but also a social construct.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, it is geohistorically determined, so that the same person, while probably remaining emotionally attached to the cuisine she has grown up with for the rest of her life, can adopt very different eating habits, once she finds herself immersed in other environments. As we have seen, even in the hungry histories of post-Maoist writers the fantasizing protagonists' appreciation of an imaginary, delicious meal privileges the sensual over the nutritional qualities. Conceptions like appetizing freshness and variation, pleasant commensality, or else the more adventurous temptation of harmoniously combined, spicy tastes, com-

49 ZHANG, 1998(b):363.

50 BOURDIEU, 1984.

posed as mixtures of “passion and poison, virtue and vice” (PROBYN 2000:145), loom even larger in tales of gastropolitical persuasion. Moreover, food metaphors easily lend themselves to the aesthetic expression of the core values of a given culture. In our era of globally dispersed *ethnoscapes*,<sup>51</sup> however, those core values, together with cultural boundaries, tend to become destabilized. This leads to processes of constant, self-conscious re-invention, or hybridization,<sup>52</sup> of identities even within the span of individual biographies. Cooking, as both ritual and experimental agency, easily lends itself as a symbolic code for the required relish for permanent value conversion. Needless to say, what holds true for individuals can be equally valid for communities, or nations. When we explore the trajectories of contemporary foodscapes, we often find them to reveal that the allegedly pure geopolitical origins of national cuisines are imaginary, and that their real history is more often than not multicultural. Especially authors and filmmakers with a diasporic cultural background have developed an interest in the self-reflexive potential of appetites.

In Juzo Itami’s (1933–97) movie *Tampopo* (1986), a bowl of *ramen* is represented to combine in its taste the nation’s most sublime aesthetic paradigms of purity, simplicity, and perfection. The civilizing power of a bowl of soup is amazing; by means of interspersed episodes that give negative (upper class) examples of “bad taste”, the exquisite taste of female protagonist Tampopo’s *ramen* makes life meaningful, promotes creativity and *joie de vivre*, rules sexual desire, and pacifies violence. Gastropolitics, by means of its unobtrusive tenderness, in this movie is displayed as a most efficient mediating force for the negotiation of cultural differences between various social groups. It fuses the knowledge of Chinese chefs about noodle production with that of various sub-cultural, infinitely specialized Japanese expert-connoisseurs of the broth. The sublime value of Japaneseness as cultural homogeneity is thus at the same time unveiled as a myth and celebrated as the essence of unified, balanced alterities. In accordance with Hong Kong’s historical vicissitudes, on the other hand, relational rather than essentialist identity constructions were required. Films like *Ho Moon Yau Yin / Haomen Yeyan* (The Banquet, 1991) – a charity star coproduction cast by four famous directors in favour of flood victims in Mainland China –, or *Gam Yuk Moon Tong / Jinyu Mantang* (The Chinese Feast, 1995) by Tsui Hark, and especially Stephen Chow Sing-chi’s *Jeung San / Shi Shen* (The God of Cookery, 1996) all more or less sell a local Hong Kong identity as a glorious

51 APPADURAI, 1996.

52 BHABA, 1994.

brew of refined martial and culinary skills. In those movies, Chinese (culinary) culture acts as a source of both rejuvenating inspiration and fiendish competition, which can be explained with Hong Kong's position of limbo between China and the western powers, and especially with the anxieties of the (then) imminent 1997 handover.<sup>53</sup>

When delicious food is beautifully arranged, the dining table is the locus that ideally unites people who gather around it. In Taiwanese director Ang Lee's (b. 1954) movie *Yinshi Nannü* (Eat Drink Man Woman, 1994) on the contrary, the family permanently threatens to disintegrate at table.<sup>54</sup> Father Zhu (Chu) and his three daughters eat separately and harbour contesting worldviews and tastes during the week, but unite for a ritual family dinner every Sunday. Because everybody is hiding their individual lives' secrets from each other, the meticulously prepared and beautifully arranged Sunday dinners of star cook Zhu cannot substantially fulfil the intended integrating function, which is symbolized by Zhu's loss of gustation. Only after all family members' secrets have been revealed and successfully digested, Zhu's gustation is miraculously restored. On its aesthetically alluring surface, the movie can be read as a homage to the (Trans-)Nation's *Haute Cuisine*. Lee Ang's movie thus takes over the role of the beautifully illustrated cook books of the Seventies that were dedicated to the creation and transmission of national cuisines in the era of a growing market of world tourism,<sup>55</sup> and, similar to Juzo Itami's approach, adds a new layer of meaning by uniting the tastes of Taiwan and the People's Republic of China within his cinematic cauldron. On a more universal level, the movie exposes the daily determination and discipline that is required of contemporary families who need to permanently negotiate an avalanche of conflicting desires in a both thoroughly individualized and globalized contemporary society like Taiwan's.

People in exile sometimes find out to their surprise that the memories they supposedly share with their resident compatriots and relatives take on considerably different meanings after they have left their country. The trauma that divi-

53 See LU, 2000, and ABBAS/WU, 1997.

54 "Everything is much different in *Eat Drink Man Woman* than the other films I've made. It has a bigger cast and a lot more complex story line [...] I started thinking about families and how they communicate. Sometimes the things children need to hear most are often the things that parents find hardest to say, and vice versa. When that happens, we resort to ritual. For the Chu family, the ritual is the Sunday dinner [...] At each dinner the family comes together and then something happens that pushes them farther apart." (Lee, Ang); see <http://www.movie-reviews.colossus.net/master.html>; last viewed 03-10-2003.

55 See APPADURAI, 1988, and APPADURAI, 1994.

des one's live story into before and after exile may be responsible for a trend to essentialize things past among diaspora communities. Maxine Kingston Hong (b. 1940), in her novel *The Woman Warrior* (1976),<sup>56</sup> tells the story of her China-born mother as a modern woman who had enjoyed medical education in China but was not allowed to practice her profession in California. In order to negotiate between her memories of atrocities done to earlier generations of women in her family in the name of traditional culture, her own road to emancipation, and its interruption by exile, she chose *chiku*, the ability to eat bitterness, as the core virtue to be learnt by her American-born children so as to maintain their Chinese-ness. Contrary to the mother's pedagogic aims, however, the children rejected her disciplining, deliberately disgusting form of Chinese cuisine and craved for the synthetic purity of American fast food instead. In Amy Tan's (b. 1952) novel *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), China is remembered as the place where the external, historical crisis was aggravated by the personal, internal disaster of the narrator's mother, who in first marriage had been forced into a totally dysfunctional traditional family. After her rescue by the second, American-born Chinese husband, she identifies the mischievous first husband with the mythical kitchen god. According to the legend, he was a never-do-well who, after his death, was bestowed the important divine position on behalf of his virtuous wife.<sup>57</sup> Throughout the novel, the dining table is the site where conflicting value systems clash. From the war over the taste of bitter cabbage between vicious first husband and defiant wife<sup>58</sup> to a funeral dumpling contest between mother and aunt, the narrating daughter shows herself to be torn between respect and scorn for her mother's stubborn, superstitious culturalism. In the end, as she remarks that divinity ought to have been bestowed to the kitchen god's wife, she accepts her own position by both stepping into and transcending her mother's world.

56 HONG, 1989.

57 There is an ironically matching phenomenon of the empirical with the fictional in Mao's divinization as kitchen god, as it occurred in Mainland China's hinterlands during the late 1980s to early 90s. See LANDSBERGER, 1997.

58 "Wen Fu had asked the cook to prepare a dish he liked, pork with a kind of sweet cabbage. I liked this dish, too. But that summer the cabbage was bad, the flavor of the bad water it drank. When Wen Fu asked me how I liked the dish, I was honest. 'Bitter,' I said. The next night, he ordered the cook to make that same dish for me, nothing else. He smiled and asked me again, 'Now how do you like it?' I answered the same way as before. Night after night, it was the same question, the same answer, the same dish the next day. I had to eat that bitter cabbage or nothing. But I didn't give up. I waited for Wen Fu to grow tired of this cabbage game. And after two weeks' time, my stomach proved stronger than his temper." TAN, 1991:358f.



Instead of painfully essentializing origins, migrants not uncommonly resort to brewing “newness” out of their displaced identities on the kitchen stove.<sup>59</sup> Hind Sufyan in Salman Rushdie’s (b. 1947) *Satanic Verses*, while still in India and in what we might see as a quest for incorporated liberalism, starts to engage in culinary pluralism at a moment when her husband endures persecution for his outspoken political views. Later, in exile, her appetite for newness deteriorates into excessive food consumption as a compensating strategy that she adopts in order to balance her dissatisfaction with the real conditions of the imagined, multicultural model community:

Gradually her espousal of the cause of gastronomic pluralism grew into a grand passion, and while secularist Sufyan swallowed the multiple cultures of the subcontinent – ‘and let us not pretend that Western culture is not present; after these centuries, how could it not also be part of our heritage?’ – his wife cooked, and ate in increasing quantities, its food. As she devoured the highly spiced dishes of Hyderabad and the high-faluting yoghurt sauces of Lucknow her body began to alter, because all that food had to find a home somewhere, and she began to resemble the wide rolling land mass itself, the subcontinent without frontiers, because food passes across any boundary you care to mention.<sup>60</sup>

Rushdie, like many other postcolonial “boundary writers”,<sup>61</sup> has been criticized for what appeared to be his fallacy of remapping the orientalist triangle between reason, (irrational) sensuality, and gendered ethnicity. In the *Satanic Verses*, he seemingly catered to gender stereotypes by ascribing the higher realms of intellectual internationalism to Mahommed while leaving to his wife to deal with its lower, visceral aspects.

While, for migrant authors, it may not be easy to avoid being accused of satisfying some fancy New Age, or else parochial “white, middle-class, ‘mainstream’ readers”’ appetite for alien cultural elements,<sup>62</sup> it is considerably more difficult to answer the question of how to represent multicultural metropolitan modernity beyond the established inventories of myths and stereotypes. Leung Ping-kwan (b. 1948) offers a solution that can be interpreted as drawn from a marginal tradition, namely semi-ascetic eremitism. “Rather than modalities of glamour, excess, extravagance, and waste – modalities normally associated with [Hong Kong’s] materialism and consumerism – he teaches us ways of

59 “*Mélange*, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that, is *how newness enters the world*.” RUSHDIE, Salman, “In Good Faith”, cited in: SHI, 2003:207.

60 RUSHDIE, 1988:246.

61 SHI, 2003:208.

62 MA, 2001:30.



discovering treasures in the plain, the modest, and the prosaic,” comments Rey Chow in her foreword to Leung’s lyrical anthology *Travelling With a Bitter Melon*.<sup>63</sup> Small particularities and communicative encounters between consumers of different cultures present themselves through the symbolism of a conciliatory cuisine in Leung’s aesthetic project *Foodscapes* (Shishi jingguan)<sup>64</sup> that has been carried out together with photographer Lee Ka-sing and English translator Martha Cheung. If his concept of post-national identity contains a core value at all, it must be a taste for the hybrid and the transitory. Leung, in his poems, has explored what potentially happens when two cultures get married in his poem *Teacoffee* (Yuanyang),<sup>65</sup> or how the loss of self through cultural pluralism leads to an attitude of questioning the ideological foundation of nations, namely their myths of origin and historical master narratives, so as to look for, and find, new ways to cope with our manifold, displaced histories. Memory and the art of hermeneutic digestion can be the key, he suggests in his poem *Mussels in Brussels*, saying that, “Thousands of miles away,” mussels “still taste of / The ponds and lakes that bred them. All mussels have their own / History. There isn’t a mussel pure and metaphysical.”<sup>66</sup>

The variety of tastes evoked by Leung is not to be confused with arbitrariness. There is an ethics, a politics, and a history of (transcultural) consumption.<sup>67</sup> In *Foodscapes*, this kind of palatable alterity crystallizes to offer an alternative founding text of (post)modern Hong Kong that negotiates its cultural identity by permanently enacting distinction games between its multiculturally encoded members. It looks like Leung may have discovered a site of consumption on which to build a liberating, autonomous poetic zone in Gregory Lee’s sense.<sup>68</sup> Can the appetite, rather than the abstract mind, constitute a new centre of critical subversion and act as a means for resistance to state authorities?<sup>69</sup> Devoid of the mythic terror of mainland Chinese hunger (and its ensuing compensatory buli-

63 CHOW, Rey, “Foreword: An Ethics of Consumption”, in: CHEUNG, 2000:9–17.

64 LEUNG, “Teacoffee/Yuanyang”, CHEUNG/LEE/LEUNG, 1997:2.

65 Ibid.

66 “Mussels in Brussels”, *ibid.*:12.

67 KUBIN, 1999:109; see also KUBIN, 2001.

68 “The processes of hybridity, as I understand them, are the processes of renewal and of meaningful and emancipatory change. The deployment of a strategy of intersemiotic hybridity is, it seems to me, the way forward culturally and politically to greater and more frequent zone-moments of autonomy.” LEE, 1996(a):270.

69 See especially Leung’s poem “A Restaurant in Poland”, in: CHEUNG, 2000:196f.

mia),<sup>70</sup> food consumption is linked to a conception of autonomous, cultivated connoisseurship in Leung's poetic texts. Consequently, the appetite in his anthology *Foodscapes* is more than a primitive instinct to announce bodily needs. Linked to the stomach as well as to the intellect, the sensitive human tongue is the location of culture, envisioned to reinvent a new community of self-conscious consumers who collectively create not only subversive linguistic, but also viable culinary *mélanges* to mark their autonomy.<sup>71</sup> Together with this new culture of moderate hedonism comes serenity, a half-forgotten traditional hermit virtue that now reappears in the figure of the survival artist, who can be read as a post-modern successor to the modernist *poet maudit*.

Gregory Lee's and Rey Chow's ideas of an alternative community beyond roots and hybrids, that can also be discovered in Leung's poems for the multimedia exhibition *Foodscapes*, alter the logic of secondary, or modern myths by creating a postmodern variant of mythical persuasion, as they continue to borrow from primordial worldviews the promise of, or search for, a better world while not, like modern myths,<sup>72</sup> hiding or discarding their essentialist images, but rather engaging those same images and their contexts in new games of signification. Obviously, even after a century of political abuse, contemporary Chinese cultural workers do not principally reject the persuasive power of myths. Their motivation for mythical encodings can be diverse, though. Sometimes, the alleged simplicity of rural communities can be deconstructed by them through historical legends that reflect the ways villagers perceive, and have embodied, their pasts. At other times, the depressing experiences of estrangement in metropolitan life may be compensated viscerally through the pleasures of foreign food consumption, as is suggested in the aesthetic explorations of Leung Ping-kwan and several well-known, transnational movie directors. The abundance of food

70 For a biting allegory of contemporary, globalizing China's collective bulimia see MO Yan's novel *Mingdingguo* (Wine Republik), 1992, and the analysis by YANG, 2002(a).

71 "Is there an emancipatory and hopeful 'hybridity' which is not the hybridity negatively critiqued by Rey Chow but which has the features of that 'alternative community' she describes as containing 'neither roots nor hybrids'? I think that there could be and it would have much to do with the potential and space afforded by Hong Kong's own language, a language which is neither English nor standard Chinese (Mandarin/Putonghua), but 'the »vulgar« language in practical daily use – a combination of Cantonese, broken English, and written Chinese, a language that is often enunciated with jovial irony and cynicism'." LEE, 1996(a):264f.

72 According to Roland Barthes and others, secondary myths are culturally determined patterns of persuasion, that is, narrative structures largely detached from their original texts, to be found in literary as well as practical and scientific discourses. See BARTHES, 1956.

tales and sitiogenic representations among contemporary Chinese cultures around the globe suggests that the digestion of strange food, or visceral alterity, can be used as a signifier for either the mediation of conflicting cultural identities, or a growing resistance to the obtrusive, nationalistic homogenizing labour towards even non-conflicting subcultures. Many more aesthetic foodscapes deserve further investigation with respect to their individual recipes for a more complex historical consciousness that would take into account the growing significance of existing or emergent meta-national loyalties and solidarities<sup>73</sup> in China and elsewhere.

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73 By using the notion of meta-national instead of (i.e., Appadurai's) postnational loyalties I would like to suggest that, what one finds now in Chinese post-Maoist historical narratives, is more a criticism of the forced nationalistic translations of existing, non-national social forms in 20<sup>th</sup> century China through aesthetic modernism than an interest in their post-national variants in the context of globalization. See APPADURAI, 1996:139–199.

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