

Culture Sojourner---a Long Forgotten Perspective but Suitable Stance for Food Memoir Writers

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ABSTRACT

Culinary memoir is a kind of literature that has received attention worldwide in recent years. It recalls food stories in autobiographical form, which reflects the following main contents as traditional culture of a specific ethnic group, self-construction, cultural cognition of ethnic minorities in the heterogeneous cultures and reflection on the process of cultural integration. However, at present, foreign papers mainly focus on the national food culture recorded by the national authors in the heterogeneous culture, and on the process of the integration of the national culture and the heterogeneous culture. Little attention is paid to culinary memoir created by cultural sojourner, which is the mainstream and promising food memoir in China. The purpose of this paper is to study the representation of multi-ethnic cultural exchange and blending under the vision of culinary memoir, based on the textual study of Dunlop Fuchsia's *Shark's Fin and Sichuan Pepper* and Wang Zengqi's food memoirs collected in *One Food, One Taste*.

KEYWORDS

Food memoir; cultural sojourner; cultural communication

In 2020, LuckyPeach magazine published an article titled "Chinese Textbooks Are the First Guidelines for Food Appreciation in Your Life". The article wittily sums up how the prose writers' vivid depictions of food in Chinese textbooks have made generations of students yearn. The texts mentioned include "*Childhood under Locust Tree*" by Yi Li, "*Salted Duck Eggs on the Dragon Boat Festival*" by Wang Zengqi and "*I Love the Bayberry in My Hometown*" by Wang Luyan. These texts may fall in the category of food memoir. Food memoirs are autobiographical texts that convey feelings about the culture associated with food through depictions of food, the cooking process and diet. Food memoirs are considered a subspecies of food writing. (Barbara Frey Waxman 2008: 1) It is characterized by a special focus on the emotional connection between food and people, which often involves the change of identity cognition in the process of socialization and the impact in the process of cultural communication, which the author evokes the reader's resonance about related memories by deliberately creating metaphorical associations. Researchers have explored extensively the definition of food memoir and its significance in literature teaching (Barbara Frey Waxman, 2008). Due to the unique function of food memoir to perceive, record and transmit the essence of culture, different researchers have explored its relationship with feminist writing (Arlene Avakian, 2014) and ethnic and post-colonial writing (Jopi Nyman, 2009). In China, the popularity of fast-paced reading among the general population and the tradition of Chinese food writing have significantly contributed to the focus on the food memoir text itself, but not the concept of food memoir. Therefore, this paper aims to define food memoir in the context of contemporary China by comparing the text contents of Chinese food memoir in current Western studies, and points out how to explore the focus of Chinese classic food memoir that is different from that of the West in the context of the lack of Chinese ethnic and post-colonial writing texts.

1 Foreign Definition and Contemporary Research Focus of Food Memoir

1.1 Foreign Definition of Food Memoir

As China has not yet extended the study of food writing to the subspecies of food memoirs, it is necessary to examine the current definition of this literary form abroad. What is now certain is that food memoirs are a branch of food writing, or gastronomic writing, which can be defined as a literary genre that uses food as a central theme or subject matter to communicate broader cultural, social, and historical meanings. As Ruth Reichl notes in her book *Garlic and Sapphires: The Secret Life of a Critic in Disguise*, food writing is "as much about the culture surrounding food as it is about the food itself" (Reichl 2005, : 3). The particularity of food memoir compared with its parent classification mainly lies in that: 1) Different from another kind of autobiographical food writing, the narratives of food memoir either begin with childhood or that interpose frequent flashbacks to earliest formative experiences (Barbara Frey Waxman, 2008). 2) Unlike other forms of food writing that may focus on culinary traditions, recipes, or restaurant reviews, food memoirs delve into the author's own experiences and memories related to food. These memoirs often explore the emotional, cultural and transformative aspects of food in the lives of their authors.

1.2 Historical Changes in the Direction of Food Memoir Research in West

M.F.K. Fisher is generally regarded as “first food memoirist”. Her food memoir is usually combined with travel memoirs. Her works have already contained what food memoir is all about: food and memory, and feedback on the cultural phenomena behind it. However, if we look at the current research direction of food memoir in academia, this most common form seems to have received relatively little attention. Most current academic research prefers to associate food memoirs with ethnic writing, paying less attention to the simplest food memoir texts. In other words, either food memoirs by non-minority writers that do not specifically focus on cultural integration are of low research value in Western countries, or such texts are not competitive enough in the book market, resulting in a weakness in related writing. Both of these two reasons may be due to the West's unique historical and cultural background in ethnic integration. It is hard to deny that there is an inherent Western cultural centrism in this tendency, in which Western culture is taken for granted, not heterogeneous, and thus not intriguing or worth studying.

2 Overall Characteristics of Chinese Food Memoir: The Perspective of Cultural Sojourner

2.1 Characteristics of Mainstream Food Memoirs in China

At present, Chinese food memoir texts consist mostly of the simplest kind of “food+memoir”, which does not favor the food memories of a certain group. Most popular Chinese food memoirs span a long period of time and are fairly scattered in location. For the Chinese, the most familiar food memoirs are usually accounts of cuisines tasted by the author in different regions of the vast land, and convey the author's experiences of cultural exchange and specific emotions through changes in eating habits in the context of regional changes. This is due to the great disparities in geographical conditions and ethnic diversity in China, and the food culture and habits of different places are naturally completely different. Sometimes the difference in eating habits between two neighbouring provinces can be almost as great as that between countries. The result is that when authors travel to a part of the country and have food-related memories there, those memories tend to contain the same level of culture shock that foreign authors get when they communicate across borders. On this premise, the writer might be viewed as a “cultural sojourner”.

2.2 Conception of Cultural Sojourner and A Few Examples

“Cultural sojourner” is a term that is often used to describe individuals who temporarily reside in or interact with a culture without fully assimilating or becoming permanent residents. This concept emphasizes the temporary nature of an individual's presence within a culture and acknowledges their role as an observer, participant or intermediary during their time in the new cultural context. It also highlights the distinctiveness of their experience compared to both short-term tourists and long-term immigrants, as they occupy a unique position at the intersection of engagement and transience within the host culture.

Classical food memoirs from the very perspective abound in China. For example, several representative locations in Wang Zengqi's work clearly bear food memories, and apart from those stories that happened in his hometown, the others are vivid representatives of food memoir from a cultural sojourner's perspective. By experiencing food in different cities and communicating with people in different food cultures, the author demonstrates the diversity of Chinese culinary culture.

Also worth noting is another form of food memoir, written by a foreigner who has experienced Chinese food and culture. Such texts are few in number and not currently mainstream, but the popularity in China of one of them, Dunlop Fuchsia's *Shark's Fin and Peppercorns*, seems to illustrate the potential of such texts. The book recalls the author's food-related memories as a British overseas student in Chengdu, Sichuan province, in the 1990s. Food memoirs about the culinary experience in China from a foreign perspective familiarize the food on the Chinese table, reflecting and further enhancing China's cultural influence, also enabling us to find our own problems in cross-cultural communication.

3 A Textual Analysis of Wang Zengqi's Food Memoir -- the Equal Cultural Communication

3.1 A Historical Trace of Food Writing in China

China has a long history of food writing. Writers have always liked to include descriptions of food as a spice in their works, such as the typical aristocratic diet depicted in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. In the Qing Dynasty, Yuan Mei wrote the earliest cookbook “*Recipes from the Garden of Contentment*”, which, compared its western counterpart, blended more personal experiences and emotion in some parts, coming across as food memoir to some extent. However, Chinese people also hold the idea of “a gentleman should stay far away from the kitchen” (君子远庖厨), so that not until modern

times, writers like Lu Xun and Liang Shiqiu began to create essays with food memories as the main content.

3.2 Comparison from the Perspective of Cultural Sojourner in Food Memoirs of Wang Zengqi

One key word of Wang Zengqi's food memoir is comparison. For example, in the article "Tofu", he begins by listing in detail the types of tofu in different places across the country, and then compares the two different methods of tofu in his memory: "Lin Jinlan and I were in Wuyi Mountain... Jin Lan loves tofu, so the guest house serves us with a large plate of tofu for each meal, but the tofu was mixed with green garlic... It's not a good match." (汪曾祺.《一食一味》.103-104) "Sichuan Douhua (四川豆花) is wonderful. A few writers and I traveled to Sichuan and dined at Leshan. . . . Me and Jinlan... Both asked for a bowl of Douhua. It was served with nothing but a bowl of tasteless juice. We picked up Douhua with chopsticks, dipped it in seasoning to eat. The seasoning is mainly composed of savory beans. Jinlan and I each ate a bowl of hot white rice, which tasted wonderful with Douhua." (汪曾祺.《一食一味》.109-110)

In both instances, he recounted eating tofu with his friend Lin Jinlan in two different parts of China, showing the very different eating habits of people in the two regions. Sometimes he would end his narrative with a brief personal opinion, which is a pure comparison without bias. It's a sense of freshness that comes from a cultural sojourner's initial experience of different regional cuisines, and it could also be considered a cultural shock of food. Wang is indeed familiar with these shocks, having traveled all over the country and experienced different food cultures. These regional differences are often humorously categorized in his articles as "here (这边)" and "there (那边)" or variations like "inside Zhangjiakou" and "outside Zhangjiakou" (汪曾祺.《黄油烙饼》. 7). With this deliberate classification, Wang Zengqi's food writing always contains the element of comparison. He has a strong ability for associative thinking in his writing and constantly compares the food culture of a certain place with another food culture. And these two or more comparators are equal, different from that in Western food memoir, in which Western food culture is an implicit comparator that is taken for granted to discipline and change other food cultures.

3.3 Attitude Conveyed Through the Comparison in Wang Zengqi's Food Memoirs

For comparison, food memoirs relatively created by Wang Zengqi and an Indian-British author will be cited. Jaffrey is an Indian author. In her food memoir *Climbing the Lemon Tree*, she recalled the experience as she first tasted American canned foods: "All I remember is that my cousins and I tore them open as if they were Christmas presents..... I rolled mouthfuls slowly around my tongue and pronounced each of them to be exotic and wonderful. I had never eaten tinned fruit or meat before." (183-84) Even as a young child, she can taste the cultural meaning behind the canned food: she gives the symbolic meaning of the experience, as her true integration into the global hegemonic culture - American culture. Given this underlying sense of inferiority, it's hard to determine whether the "food culture combination" she refers to is an active innovation or a forced compromise.

Similarly, Wang Zengqi's "Pastoral Hand Meat" (手把肉) also describes the collision and fusion of food culture from the perspective of children. In the introducing part, Wang describes how a young Mongolian girl act as a freewheeling culture sojourner. "The little girl has no interest in braised sea slugs or crispy fish. I asked her what she would like to have-- 'lamb'! I called the waiter and asked whether they serve lamb, while she replies they have only sauced lamb...A plate of shank was served and the girl scoffed them all without rice. Her mother exclaimed: 'What a Mongolian child! Is the first time she enjoyed the food since she came to Beijing!' " As a cultural sojourner dining in Beijing, which is generally recognized as one of the most influential cultures in China, the girl appears confident and secure. She didn't show evidence of helplessness as if struggling to cater to the hegemony of another food culture. When facing the difference in eating habits, she feels free to shrug her shoulders and comment whether it is her taste or not. because she knows that her "minority" status - at least when it comes to eating - is not permanent. The little girl's attitude is emblematic of China's general approach to food culture, and it is one that emerges from Wang Zengqi's food memoir.

In fact, in the next part of the article, Wang Zengqi records Mongolian food culture from the perspective as a culture sojourner, awkwardly - "the Mongols are able to deal with their lamb with knives very skillfully... When little kids can not done well enough, their mother will scold: 'Eat neatly, don't be like those Gan Bu (干部)!' (A reference to Han officials who regularly inspect work at the grassroots level) ' Gan Bus are not as careful as herdsmen, and may be less likely to use knives." Two characteristics of Wang food memoir can be drawn from the introduction of Inner Mongolia food culture. First, he shows differences in food culture between regions from the perspective of cultural sojourner, and that the relationship between cultural sojourner and the host country can often reverse. Second, as he candidly shows the differences in cultural exchanges between ethnic minorities in China, the crux of the passage is usually how such differences can be eventually accommodated and compromised by the host culture. Under such a relationship, the cultural integration between different food cultures also seems more natural, and different ethnic groups are willing to try dishes from another food culture, although the methods are slightly different.

In most of his articles, he uses the transformation of culture sojourner identity to show how the same ingredient is

done differently in different regions, and how people enjoy the same food in different ways. This attitude is also very obvious in his works, and it can also be regarded as an easy experience to form as a cultural sojourner in the Chinese cultural circle, that is, to convey a considerate camaraderie through sharing the same food and appreciating each other's food culture.

3.4 The Research Value of Wang Zengqi's Food Writing as Food Memoir from the Perspective of Cultural Sojourner

The above comparison reflects how Wang skillfully uses the perspective of cultural sojourner to reflect the equal food culture exchange among ethnic groups in China. For Chinese, we do not belong to a unitary nation, nor do we belong to an unequal cultural melting pot composed of immigrant countries and mainstream ethnic groups. Therefore, the phenomenon of cultural sojourner among ethnic minorities is more common. This kind of equal and daily cultural exchange is not unique to China, but it is obviously more frequent and natural in the context of a unified multi-ethnic culture. What we need now is a new understanding of this text -- food memoir from the perspective of culture sojourner.

4 Text analysis of "Shark's Fin and Sichuan Pepper" by Dunlop --North-South dialogue Abandoning Colonial Tone

4.1 Challenges and Bias in the Food Culture Exchanges between China and Western Countries

Generally speaking, when it comes to the food culture exchanges between China and European and American countries, Chinese people inevitably become sensitive, because for a long time, the mainstream culture in Europe and the United States tends to look at Chinese food culture with a "different" vision. As Chinese American scholar Rachel Kuo talks about in *The Feminist Guide to Being a Foodie Without Being Culturally Appropriative*: "And it seems like whenever there is a "bizarre" or "exotic" cooking ingredient, it's associated with foods from my culture and childhood. 100-year-old egg. Duck bills. Stinky tofu." (Rachel Kuo, 2015) This bias, in the first place, may stem from the underlying ideology of some Westerners, who still tend to believe that less developed countries are also flawed when it comes to food culture. Eating habits, words like "exotic", "alien", and even "outlandish". In addition, secondhand information can also account for the bias. In this case, it is hard not to wonder if Western writers could leave their own cultural circle to the "wild land" in the Western context for a long period of time, stay away from the stereotyped and stereotyped Chinese food, and go closer to Chinese street food, whether their ideas could be changed?

4.2 Cultural Sojourning Through Food: Fuchsia Dunlop's Exploration of Chinese Cuisine

Best seller *Shark Fin and Sichuan Pepper* gave us a positive answer, which may also account for why this book on Chinese food is so popular in China-- we don't see the condescending gaze of Western civilization between the lines of her articles. Fuchsia knows all too well how closely culture and food are linked. In the foreword to *Shark's Fin and Peppercorns*, she exposes the European wariness of the culture that food carries ---" Perhaps it is safer that way. . . It is dangerous to eat the food of other nations. With one bite, you will inevitably lose your most fundamental cultural identity." (Dunlop Fuchsia. *Shark's Fin and Sichuan Pepper*. 2018) However, living in Si Chuan, China, she bravely took that step, which not only broadened her food world, but also innovated a western perspective on Chinese food. Here, the status of cultural sojourner means that Fuchsia is always a sojourner (not a permanent resident, but one who is more likely to gain insight into Chinese culture than a short-term traveler.) This feeling is very subtle. The state of it is probably typical when Fuchsia herself has been accustomed to the lazy service attitude of the owner of a particular noodle restaurant. Her classmates would still find it funny and doubtful as she cooked "Yu Xiang Rou Si (鱼香肉丝)" for her obvious English identity.

For Chinese readers, such texts help us see the blind spots and shortcomings in cultural exchange. For example, in the chapter "Only Wild People Eat Salad", the author records an ironic phenomenon: "Whenever Western food is mentioned, everyone (referring to Fuchsia's Chinese friends) starts to express stereotypes: 'Western food is boring! 'or' Western food is too easy to cook! "My own countrymen, on the other hand, with their limited knowledge of Chinese food, see a vast country with hidden regional cuisines as a boring set menu of spring rolls, sweet and sour pork and fried rice. (Dunlop Fuchsia. *Shark's Fin and Sichuan Pepper*. 2018) This extract mainly shows the slightly repellent attitude of Chinese people towards cultural exchanges in the 1990s, but till today, but in the comment section of this paragraph on the wechat reading app, it can still be seen that there are still readers who insist angrily that western food is the food eaten by wild people. In this regard, Fuchsia laments that her own goodwill in cultural exchanges often seems to be ignored by the Chinese. In response to her exclamation, Chinese readers may feel that it is finally the turn of Westerners to feel

unacceptable and overwhelmed in the face of our conscious culture. Behind this unhealthy vengeful mentality, however, it does reflect another problem in the North-South dialogue, one that is likely to be solved by changing our own mindset.

In contrast to Chinese food memoirists, foreign authors tend to incorporate more historical research into their descriptions of Chinese food and combine them with real-life experiences, which gives Chinese readers a new perspective on their own culture and helps break down stereotypes of Western readers.

For example, in the chapter "A Dream of Red Mansions", Fuchsia first introduces the history of Yangzhou, which might be oversight Chinese writers out of familiarity. Her curiosity has indeed propelled her to invest time in tracking the history of Yangzhou development, laying a rigorous foundation for the narrative in later parts. Before her tour, she surmised that Yangzhou, like other ancient cities in China and other parts of the world, may have been commercialized and modernized beyond recognition..She found, however, that Yangzhou had not entirely lost its antique quality, but could find echoes of the refined and elegant atmosphere of the past..Fuchsia writes in this chapter that Yangzhou is the last piece in her sentence pattern puzzle of Chinese food. Prior to this, she had a deep understanding of the cuisine of other regions of China, especially Sichuan, and could sensitivities observe the differences between the contemporary Yangzhou cuisine culture, the Yangzhou cuisine culture recorded in historical records and the cuisine culture of other regions of China, as well as the few years of her experience as a cultural sojourner in China. It's hard for her to do both if she had not experienced Chinese culture as a culture sojourner for years.

5 Conclusion

For a long period, food memoir has not received much attention in Chinese literature. Nevertheless, as discussed above, elements of food memoir can be found in many Chinese essays, and the value of the information conveyed in these elements does not lag behind that of foreign food memoir. Take Wang Zengqi's food memoir as an example. They convey deep affection for fellow men and everyday life from a unique Chinese perspective. Similarly, we can see such factors in some areas of pan-literature, such as the documentary "A Bite of China". These all give evidence to the fact that food memoir has never been out of our sight. What we need now is to discover its value as a literary work and develop a writing model that fits the cultural context. With increasing internal migration and international cultural exchanges, there will only be more and more chance for writers to create related literary works.

In addition to encouraging the creation of food memoir from our own countries, we should also welcome foreign authors to experience Chinese cuisine, take their creations as opportunities for self-reflection, and broaden our thinking on food writing. It is also important to emphasize the improving of the quality of food memoir. Food memoir as a work of literature needs to be deeper in than a cookbook or a travel brochure passage, as for which is in concern, the broadness of vision brought by eliminating prejudice, the beauty of writing brought by reading more classics, and the historical accomplishment brought by the spirit of research will all be helpful. What the writers need is an ability to connect past and present, food and culture in a way that is enjoyable.

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