

A “Consuming Identity” in China’s Modernity: Contextualizing Cannibalism in Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature

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Abstract This article contextualizes the trope of cannibalism as it developed in modern and contemporary Chinese literature. Tracking the trajectory of this trope, so the article argues, illuminates the colonially-driven, hierarchy-induced violence demonstrating China’s modernity (re)entering into crisis even after a century of revolution and modernization. In the shadow of Western colonial invasions and domestic disorder, May Fourth intellectuals realized China’s need to modernize to survive the threat of being colonized—or consumed. This existential crisis, in turn, drove a desire to consume and colonize others; thus, modern subjectivity came to be built on consumption, becoming, in essence, a “consuming identity.” This consuming identity reflects violence in various forms of hierarchy, be it feudalistic, revolutionary, or capitalistic. May Fourth literatures of cannibalism envision the potential salvation of awakening modern subjects by portraying modern subjects’ ambiguity in, and anxieties about, cannibalism. Contemporary literatures of cannibalism, in contrast, present a doomed conception according to which consuming identities and desires for objectification and cannibalistic consumption prevail over—or consume—all.

Keywords cannibalism; modernity; hierarchy; coloniality; May Fourth

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a pathology of China's modernity—to the field of modern Chinese literature and history. Dr. Tsai's research examines the rhetoric of “enemies of the state” behind the discourse of cannibalism and demonstrates that this discourse's thematic evolution reflects China's traumatic modern experiences. *Cannibalism as Pathology* uncovers China's modernity and its dynamic relation with colonialism, nationalism, authoritarianism, and global capitalism. Dr. Tsai has published “Cannibal Labyrinth: Narrative, Intertextuality, and Politics of Cannibalism in Mo Yan's *The Republic of Wine*” and “Sinicizing Islam: Translating the Gulistan of Sa'di in Modern China.”

When the literature and discourse of cannibalism emerged on the eve of the May Fourth Movement, China was situated at a temporal and spatial intersection in which colonialism, imperialism, and nationalism met and stimulated the development of China's modernity and its crisis. This article investigates the reoccurrences of the cannibalism theme in modern and contemporary Chinese literature and their significance throughout China's socialist modernization. The trope of cannibalism in China's modernization therefore yields cross-boundary perspectives and historiographies and produces a cultural critique that problematizes modernity in China.

The discourse of cannibalism in Western anthropological studies renders criticism on how the colonial perspective views cultural differences. In the context of modern and contemporary China, however, this discourse reveals the complex power dynamics of colonialism, nationalism, capitalism, and authoritarianism in China's modernization. If Lu Xun and the May Fourth reformers predominantly use the trope of cannibalism to criticize traditional values, which were the main target of removal during the May Fourth Movement and high-socialist campaigns in revolutionary China, what does the continuation of the cannibalism trope in literature mean in post-revolutionary China? This article answers this question by introducing the literary trope of cannibalism as a pathology of China's modernity in crisis. In this study of the disease of modernity, the detrimental contributors and consequences of China's modernity are revealed to be coloniality and hierarchical violence - both are egoistic and dehumanizing.

To examine cannibalism as pathology of China's modernity, I first discuss colonialism through an exploration of the relationship between China's modernity and rhetoric of cannibalism. By providing an analysis of the contemporary literary discourse of cannibalism, especially medicinal cannibalism, this article reveals the birth of a “consuming identity” in modern China. Then, I argue that hierarchy-

induced violence is another form of modernity in crisis that the trope of cannibalism has revealed to us. The hierarchies are first feudalistic, then revolutionary, and now capitalistic. Literary works on cannibalism manifest the evolution of the forms of hierarchy-induced violence and this violence’s invariable core of egoism and dehumanization. This article uncovers China’s cannibal modernity and its dynamic relation with colonialism, nationalism, capitalism, and authoritarianism.

Western Colonial Discourse of Cannibalism

Western scholars have long discussed their observations on the practice of cannibalism. Anthropology offers various perspectives on the subject. Some anthropologists studying Aztec society have found that cannibalism was a product of the economic and ecological circumstances that utilize human flesh for consumption.¹ Others disagree with this point and consider the cannibalistic act to be a ritual of religious transference that has cultural and spiritual significance. Within this perspective, the institutionalized eating of humans is an expression of psychically primitive oral and sadistic impulses.² Yet another group of anthropologists take cannibalism as the constitution of an “other” that is nominally unrelated to a colonial “us.”³ These scholars believe that, in European colonial discourse, cannibalism is an ethnocentric impression of the non-Western world. The representations of cannibalism, as argued in Maggie Kilgour’s seminal piece, is underpinned by the binary definition of self/other. Cannibalism, as Peter Hulme puts it, evokes “the image of ferocious consumption of human flesh frequently used to mark the boundary between one community and its others” (86). In the

1 *The Ethnography of Cannibalism*, edited by Paula Brown and Donald Tuzin. Washington, D. C.: Society for Psychological Anthropology, 1983. Gzowski, Peter. *The Sacrament: A True Story of Survival*. New York: Atheneum, 1980. Michael Harner, “The Ecological Basis for Aztec Sacrifice.” *American Ethnologist* 86, no. 4, 1977, pp. 46-51. Harris, Marvin. *Cannibals and Kings: The Origins of Cultures*. New York: Random House, 1977. Eli Sagan, *Cannibalism: Human Aggression and Cultural Form*. New York: Harper and Row, 1974.

2 Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976. Peggy Reeves Sanday, *Divine Hunger and Cannibal Monsters: Cannibalism as a Cultural System*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

3 William Arens, *The Man-eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979. Marvin Harris, *Cannibals and Kings: The Origins of Cultures*. New York: Random House, 1977. Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797*. London: Caribbean Area, 1986. pp. 78-87. Maggie Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism: An anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.

anthropological study of cannibalism, we find analyses of what cannibalism means and debates on the existence of cannibalistic practices. We also discover what cannibalism represents in Western anthropological discourses: it can be a colonialist way to perceive the (racial) other in the formation of a colonial self/subject.

Chinese Traditional Discourse of Cannibalism

Cannibalism in ancient and imperial China contains different cultural meanings; learned cannibalism has been practiced for its emotional, ethical, and medicinal benefits and can be dated back to 1122 B.C.¹ In *Cannibalism in China*, historian Key Ray Chong categorizes the practices of cannibalism in China into “survival cannibalism” and “learned cannibalism.”² Chong argues that the practices of learned cannibalism in China³ express secular ideals, such as loyalty to superiors and filial piety toward senior family members. The Chinese have understood learned cannibalism of this type in terms of love and loyalty toward family or political superiors. These non-religious, secular ideals, intertwined with medicinal and culinary discourse, have shaped Chinese thinking and behavior (Chong 171). The practice of cannibalism is deeply intertwined with feudal values, especially filial piety and loyalty, and helps to reinforce them.

The May Fourth Discourse of Cannibalism

The May Fourth intellectuals highlighted the aforementioned connection between feudal values and cannibalism, mostly in a critical way. The May Fourth Movement is a radical cultural-intellectual-literary movement that has earned its name from the student protest on May 4, 1919 that sought for maturing the modern state under the threats of Western colonialism, diplomacy failure, and domestic disorder. Challenged by Western imperialism and the crisis of national survival, the May Fourth thinkers reflected on national characteristics and reimagined the path to China’s future. This is an era marked by an intellectual climate of what Mao

1 According to Key Ray Chong, historical record shows that Chou Wang, the last ruler of Yin, whose reign ended in 1122 B. C. was accused of acts of cannibalism to show his degree of anger.

2 According to Chong, survival cannibalism in China is not distinct from survival cannibalism in the rest of the world. However, certain practices of learned cannibalism are only seen in China. These particular practices of learned cannibalism in China therefore become spotlighted in the discussion of cannibalism in Chinese history and literature.

3 In his chronological studies of cannibalism, Chong classifies learned cannibalism from the Han to Ming dynasties into acts intended as (a) punishment for disloyal and jealous persons, (b) revenge, filial piety, love and hatred, (c) brutality for mental and monetary satisfaction, or (d) medical treatment for loved ones.

Zedong called “searching for truth from the West” (Yü 184). Knowledge of Western biomedicine, in particular, played a more significant role in the health of the nation, both physically and metaphorically. In the 1910s, knowledge of medicine was considered inseparable from the future of the Chinese race.¹ The battle over cultural authority between Chinese medicine and Western biomedicine was central to the formation of a modern Chinese state and its existence under the ongoing threat of Western imperialism and cultural colonialism. Contemporaneously, the inauguration of the journal *New Youth* in 1915 and its renunciation of traditional Chinese culture preconditioned the May Fourth Movement, which swept across China in 1919. The debate over cultural authority tinted China’s modern discourse of cannibalism with a shade of cultural colonialism. In “Cannibalism and the Chinese Body Politic,” Carlos Rojas contextualizes the discourse of cannibalism in cross-cultural perception: the May Fourth reformers, including Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879-1942), Hu Shi 胡適 (1891-1962), and Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936), adopted a Western biomedical metaphor of remove “the” cannibalistic white blood cells to prompt their contemporaneous Chinese to “combat social cannibalism *with* cannibalism, devouring those reactionary elements of society before they can succeed in devouring us” (“Cannibalism” 39, emphasis in original). This cultural discourse deemed a cultural authority to Western and biomedical methodologies in treating China’s existential crises.

The May Fourth writings on cannibalism shared a critical view on the connection among cannibalism, China’s societal disorder, and Western cellular immunity. Chen Duxiu, in his editorial essay in *New Youth* (1-6) and a later essay (46- 69), examined national revival through a Western biomedical lens and metaphor of cellular cannibalism and regeneration. Hu Shi, in his analysis of “An Enemy of the People” in *New Youth* in 1918 (9-28), understood the health of the society and nation relies on cannibalistic battles achieved by white blood cells. Lu Xun 魯迅, whose real name is Zhou Shuren 周樹人, used cannibalism in “A Madman’s Diary” (*Kuangren riji* 狂人日記, 1918) and “Medicine” (*Yao* 藥, 1919) as a cultural critique of tradition and feudal values in China: “A Madman’s Diary” was written with the intention of awakening Lu Xun’s fellow Chinese by revealing the protagonist’s goal and failure to “saving the children” from cannibalism. “Medicine” criticized China’s backwardness by portraying a child’s cannibalistic consumption of a revolutionist for medicinal purposes. Lu Xun’s “A Madman’s Diary” inspired

1 David Luisink, “State Power, Governmentality, and the (Mis)remembrance of Chinese Medicine.” *Historical Epistemology and the Making of Modern Chinese Medicine*, edited by Howard Chiang. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015. pp. 162.

Wu Yu 吳虞 (1872-1949) to criticize literary and historical accounts of cannibalism for the sake of Confucius ideology and thereby to condemn Confucianism. In “On Cannibalism” (*Tan shiren* 談食人, 1937) and “Eating Martyrs” (*Chi lieshi* 吃烈士, 1925), Lu Xun’s younger brother, Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885-1967) foregrounded the linkage between survival or hatred cannibalism and sensations of human flesh consumption. His “On ‘Cutting One’s Flesh to Heal One’s Parent’” (*Guanyu gegu* 關於割股, 1935) criticized the use of human flesh as a practice of traditional Chinese medicine. The image of rotten cells that devour a nation or a national from within was realistically illustrated by the underlying economy of Wu Zuxiang 吳組緇 (1908-1994)’s “Little Lord Guanguan’s Tonic” (*Guanguan de bupin* 官官的補品, 1932), which permits “the landlords to feed, quite literally, on the blood and milk of their tenants” (Birch 15) in the prerevolutionary era in China.

Within this rich literary milieu of cannibalistic metaphors during the May Fourth period, Lu Xun’s writing of cannibalism engaged complex cultural reflections and produced the widest and most enduring readership and discussion. As the leading literary figure of the May Fourth Movement, Lu Xun established a literary convention to converse and negotiate with tradition in a time of rapid changes, including the fall of the Qing Empire, the establishment of the Republic of China, and forceful foreign involvements. Lu Xun’s cannibalistic allegories of “Diary of a Madman” and “Medicine” establish enlightened subjects who recognize classical and feudal ethics as cannibalistic and therefore call for reform. The madman in “Diary of a Madman” can be read as an enlightened subject who acknowledges that the didactic teaching of “Confucian Virtue and Morality” in the history of China illustrates the logic of “eating human.” The madman looks for the innocent who has neither eaten anyone nor been eaten and asks for help to “save the children” from becoming cannibalistic or cannibalized. Through the dual narrative Lu Xun devised in “Diary of a Madman,” readers see the failure of this reformist plea. Similarly, Xia Yu, the revolutionary martyr in “Medicine,” is another enlightened subject who, at the end of the Qing Dynasty, calls the restoration of the people’s rights and for revolutionary change. However, both characters inevitably are cannibalized—allegorically or literally. On one hand, the madman’s paranoia, expressed in questioning everyone’s intention to cannibalize, is eventually “cured”; he is back to “normal” and employed as a government official. This change implies that he is culturally cannibalized—incorporated and assimilated. On the other hand, Xia Yu 夏瑜, whose name symbolizes the jade luster of the Chinese ethnicity, is executed as an “enemy of the people” for being an anti-Qing revolutionary; he is then literally cannibalized. His blood is sold to the ignorant Hua family, who

believe that human blood cures tuberculosis, and is consumed by the tubercular son, Hua Xiaoshuan 華小栓, whose name symbolizes the clot in the lifeblood of the Chinese ethnicity. The martyr’s blood does not save the wretched body from the conservative superstitious family; the cannibal and the cannibalized both perish. Contemporarily, Hu Shi and Zhuo Zuoren also criticized the rhetoric that legitimizes the metaphorical and literal cannibalization of “an enemy of the people” in their essays, “Ibsenology” and “Eating Martyrs.”

When Lu Xun criticized traditional medicine and called on his countrymen to save those children who had not turned into cannibals or had not been cannibalized by traditional culture, he also discredited the concepts of Chinese medicine and Chinese culture and linked them to the illness and decline of the country. During the May Fourth Movement and thereafter, China’s modernity existed under the threat of imperialism and colonialism and evolved as the struggle between traditional and Western values and systems reshaped cultural authority and governmentality. The trope of cannibalism in modern China appropriated the Western biomedical metaphor of cellular cannibalism; this cultural imagination navigated China’s modernization and involved multiple dimensions of cultural colonization and cannibalization that is worth examining.

Coloniality in China’s Modernization

Modern discourse of cannibalism has become inseparable from China’s critique of tradition and its pursuit of modernization. At the fall of the Qing dynasty and during the May Fourth period, the urge to critique tradition and the desire for modernization were born out of a national crisis during a transition of political regimes and invasions of imperialist forces. Carlos Rojas argues that in response to this crisis, the May Fourth reformers adopted a Western biomedical “cannibalistic” metaphor of white blood cells in the immune system that “engulf” harmful cells and extend human longevity. The reformers therefore used a colonial discourse of cannibalism that is grounded on an action of “‘ingesting’ social-cultural ‘alterity’” and suggested the Chinese “combat social cannibalism *with* cannibalism” (“Cannibalism”). This colonial discourse of cannibalism derives from Western anthropological and biomedical perspectives and shapes the understanding and imagination of the relationship between self and sociocultural others. Yue Gang (67-100) has a similar observation about how the May Fourth cultural movement, with its motivation to modernize China, inherited a colonial legacy that separates the enlightened self and cannibalistic others and generates the need for assimilating the others through consumption.

Based on the foregoing reflections, I argue that this May Fourth cultural and literary discourse of cannibalism was developed out of a fear of being consumed by the other during the time of Western colonial and imperial expansion and rapid modernization. This fear therefore developed into a desire to consume the other and eventually created what I call a “consuming identity” that embodies colonial expansions and excessive desires for consumption in the process of China’s modern nation-building. Chinese discourse of modernization took tradition as the cannibalistic other and appropriated the Western colonialist “civilizing mission” of educating the uncivilized other. The Chinese modern discourse of cannibalism in relation to China’s modernization involves forging a “Chinese” identity around consuming the cannibalistic “others”—namely, “cannibalistic” Chinese tradition and Western colonialist powers—before being consumed by them. This identity adopted a cultural colonialist perspective and perceived Chinese traditions and values as backward and uncivilized. China’s modern discourse of cannibalism is a form of cultural colonialism and cultural cannibalism—a discourse based on a self-identity that colonizes and cannibalizes the cultural other. The consuming quality in colonialism gives birth to a “consuming identity,” which simultaneously negates and affirms cannibalism.

Therefore, China’s modern discourse of cannibalism is associated with cultural colonialism in several ways. Striving against the crisis of external colonialism, the nation seeks to “battle cannibalism with cannibalism” and appropriates a colonialist rhetoric that the “civilized” self should educate the “uncivilized” cannibalistic others. This demonstrates double layers of “civilizing mission” in cultural colonialism in the senses that Western “civilized” subjects should educate the “uncivilized” Chinese, and that Chinese “civilized” intellectuals should educate the “uncivilized” Chinese public. This concept of cultural colonialism dictates a system of subordination in which one conceptual framework or cultural identity is dominant over others. This systematic subordination is carried into China’s modern nation-building. At its contemporary transition, the discourse of cannibalism reveals a “consuming identity” that is born out of both a fear of and a desire for cannibalization: it first consumes “cannibalistic” others—Chinese tradition and Western imperialism in modern China—and then later evolves to consume “the other” of socialist China, which is the “counterrevolutionary” enemy. Moreover, moving away from the failure of the revolutions, post-socialist China embraced marketization and consumerism. A new form of consuming identity that commands the consumption of the economic Others was formed and represented in literature. Contemporary Chinese writers portray a world of cannibalism in which

people produce, sell, and consume human beings for health, pleasure, and profit. The discursive evolution of cannibalism in socialist and post-socialist China will be introduced in later sections of the article through analyses of contemporary literature.

The Violence of Hierarchy

It is important to examine the discourse of cannibalism in modern China within the colonialist framework. However, prior to its exposure to Western anthropological and biomedical perspectives, the discourse had carried rich historical, cultural, and medical contexts from China’s imperial past. Lu Xun’s stories and the May Fourth thinkers’ essays primarily use cannibalism as a critique of these historical, cultural, and medical ideologies. It is commonly understood that feudalism and Confucianism are what May Fourth reformers criticized and worked to eradicate. However, Lu Xun’s writing, instead of explicitly targeting “feudalism,” revealed a nuance and depth to his observations about power dynamics between mastery and servility: I propose that his writing elaborated the destructive and cannibalistic nature of hierarchy itself, rather than of feudalism.

In his 1925 essay, Lu Xun explicitly demonstrated China’s cannibalistic hierarchy of mastery and servility by stating that “we [the Chinese] have already prepared ourselves well in advance by having noble and common, great and small, high and low. Men may be oppressed by others, but they can oppress others themselves. They may be eaten, but they can also eat others. With such a hierarchy of repression, the people cannot stir, and indeed they do not want to.” He concluded that “[o]ur vaunted Chinese civilization is only a feast of human flesh prepared for the rich and mighty. And China is only the kitchen where these feasts are prepared.” He also explained the persistence of the hierarchy as the following:

Because the hierarchy handed down since ancient times has estranged men from each other, they cannot feel each other’s pain; and because each can hope to enslave and eat other men, he forgets that he may be enslaved and eaten himself. This since the dawn of civilization countless feasts - large and small - of human flash had been spread, and those at the feasts eat others and are eaten themselves; but the anguished cries of the weak, to say nothing of the woman and the children, are drowned in the senseless clamour of the murderers. (“Some” 138-141)

Lu Xun, in his stories and essays on cannibalism, depicted a world in which the

hierarchy of mastery and servility dominates all subjects of the Chinese civilization and that the future of the civilization relies on eradication of this hierarchy.

Regardless of whether Lu Xun was unconsciously adopting the western colonial discourse to contextualize cannibalism in modern China or was doing so strategically, he observed a hierarchical, suppressive structure that existed prior to the arrival of Western impacts. The hierarchy of mastery and servility that Lu Xun identified in his writing is the foundation of feudalism and traditional feudal values. This hierarchy, however, is not restricted to feudalism and has unfortunately been preserved through the violent history of Chinese revolutions. It can even be said that it is through violence that hierarchy has been preserved. The Zhou brothers—Lu Xun (Zhou Shuren) and his younger brother, Zhou Zuoren—both noticed this suppressive mechanism. For example, in the context of the transition to socialism in Russia, Zhou Zuoren observed that the old system had been overthrown, but what survived was the same mechanism of intellectual persecution—the suppression was from the emperor in the past and is now from the masses.¹

Similarly, some May Fourth reformers repeated the same violence and suppression: instead of recognizing that hierarchy-induced violence against the inferior is the source of brutality and the roadblock to advancing modernity and liberating humanity, the May Fourth “enlighteners” who believed in Marxism began legitimizing violence to win popularity and political authority. They were optimistically convinced by progressionist historiography and mistakenly believed that violence and revolutionary destruction were the key to liberating China. These beliefs ultimately led to intellectual persecution and ideology-driven political oppression. Although the goal was to create an egalitarian world without further oppression, these methods created “new forms of inequality” “as CCP cadres emerged as a class with special privilege” (Wasserstrom and Cunningham 12). CCP cadres had envisioned a future of equality accomplished through violence to seize power; hence, a new, revolutionary hierarchy was created in a political frenzy by the CCP cadres. In this hierarchy, the aforementioned criticized dynamics between mastery and servility continued in the form of “revolutionary” and “counterrevolutionary.” To Zhou Zuoren, this continuation of violence was inevitable, because people were not truly enlightened and didn’t understand the meaning of being human. Ironically, this May Fourth thinker, who “consistently denied the legitimacy of violence as a force for modernizing China” and who voiced concerns and critiques of such “cannibalistic” violence, was unable to escape

1 Li Tonglu, “The Sacred and the Cannibalistic: Zhou Zuoren’s Critique of Violence in Modern China.” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 36, 2014, pp. 25–60.

from his fate of being symbolically “cannibalized” by such violence in Chinese revolution.¹

Like many of other May Fourth thinkers, Zhou Zuoren problematized how celebrated cannibalism was glorified, legitimized, and sacralized; the practices of celebrated cannibalism were historically conducted by the loyalists of imperial China in resistance to foreign invasion. However, Zhou saw in this celebrated cannibalism another layer of the problem: he criticized aestheticization of cannibalism as “a symptomatic act that marked the point of no return for the fall of humanity” (Li 30-32). I perceive Zhou’s insight into China’s embrace of violence through moral, linguistic, and culinary aestheticization of cannibalism as a reason for his belief that that “the ‘barbaric’ cultural Other” of “cannibalistic Confucianism” was “inherited by the Enlightenment thinkers and thus made the Enlightenment impossible” (Li 25). His observation of how Chinese culture aestheticizes, euphemizes, and romanticizes acts of celebrated cannibalism also demonstrates an aspect of cannibalism that was not previously revealed or discussed by the May Fourth writers, that is, the desire for cannibalism. This aspect, however, has been elaborated in contemporary Chinese literature, where the trope of cannibalism has become a nexus between violence and political, literary, culinary, and medical discourses.

Cannibalistic Hierarchies of Revolution and Capitalism in Contemporary Literature

In the study of cannibalism in contemporary Chinese literature, I examine contemporary writers’ engagement with the century-long dialectic. I investigate how they have written about cannibalism as a social criticism by exploring the ethical choices within collective actions, choices which are made in the context of political mismanagement, social hierarchy, and inequality. Chinese modernity is imagined and experienced through a progressive, revolutionary historical point of view. China’s search for modernity “was shaped in the historical context of imperialist expansion and a crisis of capitalism” and “could not avoid the multiple problems of Western capitalist modernity” (Wang 14). Mao’s socialism in its ideal form, as Wang Hui puts it, is a progressive, modernized ideology that is a critique of capitalism in the process of modernization. Chinese postmodernity in

1 Zhou Zuoren mysteriously passed away during the intellectual persecution of the Cultural Revolution. The reason of his death remains unknown to this day. See Li Tonglu, “The Sacred and the Cannibalistic: Zhou Zuoren’s Critique of Violence in Modern China.” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 36, 2014, pp. 25-58.

post-Mao China presents an antirevolutionary thrust in a post-socialist society after experiencing modernity as revolution and socialism and their failures.¹ The resuming phenomenon of cannibalism in literature reflects China's experience and imagination of modernization in the post-revolutionary, post-socialist era. The discourse now debunks the progressionist historicity and emphasizes the dynamics between the fear of and the desire for cannibalism. I argue the trope of cannibalism helps reveal the persistence of hierarchical violence that took place throughout modern history. Furthermore, hierarchical violence is at the core of cultural critique in cannibalism, be it feudal, revolutionary, or capitalist.

In response to the “enlightenment” wave initiated during the May Fourth Movement and the subsequent torrent of revolution in China, Liu Heng 劉恆 (1954-), Jiaping wa 賈平凹 (1952-), Mo Yan 莫言 (1955-), and Yu Hua 余華 (1960-) all raise their questions about enlightenment and revolution within the framework of cannibalism. Among these writers, Liu Heng remains in critiquing tradition as the May Fourth intellectuals initiated. His *Green River Daydreams* (*Canghe bairimeng* 蒼河白日夢, 1993) is set to begin at the turn of the twentieth century—the end of the Qing dynasty and the beginning of the Republican era—and narrates a rich family's history in modern China. In this novel, Old Master Cao Ruqi's insatiable medicinal dietary behaviors, including medicinal cannibalism, are motivated by his desire for longevity. The novel ultimately depicts a hopeless end where all major characters' searches for national or individual revival fail as death descends on the household. Like the metaphorical significance of cannibalism in Lu Xun's writing, Liu Heng's depiction of medicinal cannibalism also demonstrates stifling formalities and traditions of the Cao family/China that resulted in their demise. Unlike Lu Xun's description of the naiveté of the cannibal in “Medicine” or the madman's fear of becoming a cannibal or being cannibalized in “A Madman's Diary,” Liu Heng's story of cannibalism exposes the exploitative desire to cannibalize to prolong life.

Mo Yan, Jia Pingwa, and Yu Hua, on the other hand, push their probes in enlightenment, revolution, and violence further. Mo Yan's “The Cure” (*Lingyao* 靈藥)² and Jia Pingwa's *Old Kiln Village* (*Gulu* 古爐, 2011) both directly engage

1 Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang, *Postmodernism and China*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000. Judith Farquhar, *Appetite: Food and Sex in Post-Socialist China*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.

2 “*Lingyao* 靈藥” [The Cure] is published in a collected volume of Mo Yan's short stories written between 1990 and 2005, *Yu dashi yuehui* 與大師約會 [Meeting with the Master]. However, its English translation is published in *Chairman Mao Would Not Be Amused: Fiction from Today's China* (1995). Therefore, “The Cure” was written and published between 1990 and 1996.

with Lu Xun’s notion of the heritage of cannibalism in “Medicine” (*Yao Yao*, 1919) and explore absurdity and egoism in the Maoist revolutions and political campaigns that ultimately resulted in desolation and despair. Mo Yan’s “The Cure” portrays an ineffective practice of medical cannibalism in Mao’s revolutionary new China. The consumption of the flesh of the “class enemy” only led to the unwitting eater’s agony and death. Jia Pingwa’s *Old Kiln Village* elaboratively narrates the egoistic ambitions and desires that revolutionaries possessed during the Cultural Revolution, which generated factional clashes and fatal violence. The novel concludes with a cannibalistic incident that takes place at the public execution of the losing side of the “revolutionaries.” This ending metaphorically discloses the failure of revolution. The novel explicitly and realistically depicts the foundation of political hierarchy and struggle: during high-socialist political campaigns, hierarchical violence was stripped of its feudalist appearance and appeared to be a new revolutionary form between “revolutionary” and “counterrevolutionary.” At its core, however, the root of hierarchical violence is neither feudalism nor revolution, but egoism and dehumanization.

Yu Hua’s “Classical Love” (*Gudian aiqing* 古典愛情, 1988) problematizes, though only implicitly, physical and mental trauma in Mao’s history through an unconventional narrative of haunting and cannibalism. In the novella, a young scholar, Willow, falls in love with a beautiful maiden named Hui on his trip to take an imperial examination in hopes of winning an official rank. Willow loses track of Hui after failing the examination. The next time they meet, Willow is again on his way to retake the exam during a famine. After witnessing killings and selling of a mother and a daughter as meat, Willow eventually finds Hui in an inn; her leg has been dismembered and is being sold on the meat market. Willow purchases Hui and her leg, and then kills and buries her upon her request. He later becomes the guardian of her grave but results in ruining her resurrection because he exhumes her body to confirm the resurrection.

The novella portrays a world in which the children who were to be saved are instead doomed by human alienation and the collapse of faith in ethics that happened during and after the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution.¹ Yu Hua questions the Chinese Communist Party’s ethical negligence of their political actions during Mao’s era of high socialism; he breaks the literary conventions of the long-accepted ghost narrative and the genre of the scholar-beauty romance to create a tale of cannibalistic horror. His shift from romantic narratives of love and trust to a

1 For detailed analyses, see Tsai Yun-Chu, *You Are Whom You Eat: Cannibalism in Contemporary Chinese Fiction and Film*. PhD dissertation, University of California, Irvine, 2016.

horror narrative of betrayal and distrust symbolizes the collapse of tradition during the Cultural Revolution, which paradoxically took place without eradicating the most damaging element of Chinese traditional culture: hierarchy-induced violence. Cannibalism embodies the terror of a total cultural destruction that is espoused by the revolutionary goal of exterminating tradition to achieve modernity at the expense of human lives and humanity. The failure to eradicate hierarchy in the Cultural Revolution, however, highlights the ethical issue of authoritarian politics, in which making moral judgments about political action and voicing criticism of political leadership is prohibited. An inability to recognize the ethical problems that lie in the human agents and in the larger structures of society results in a cannibalistic world and a failure of rebirth. The eroticized narrative about “cairen 菜人” — human beings to be sold on the meat market and to be eaten as meat by other human beings— manifests the aspect of sensual desires, both sexual desire and appetite, in the trope of cannibalism for the first time in contemporary Chinese literature.

Moving away from the reflection on high socialism’s impact on human psychic, Chinese writers shift their focus to the impact of post-socialist market economy after the violent crackdown of the 1989 Democracy Movement. Mo Yan (1955-)’s *Republic of Wine* (*Jiuguo* 酒國, 1992), Lilian Lee 李碧華 (1959-)’s *Dumplings* (*Jiaozi* 餃子, 2004), Liao Yiwu 廖亦武 (1958-)’s “Chi-Fu the Gourmand of Fetus Soup” (*Ying'er tang shike chifu* 嬰兒湯食客遲福, 2013), and Yan Lianke 閻連科 (1958-)’s *The Day the Sun Died* (*Rixi* 日熄, 2015) all represent insatiable desires in post-socialist China in which consumerism and desire are upheld as the ultimate and sole value of life. Unlike May Fourth writings that treat the use of medicinal cannibalism as a regressive act of ignorance, characters in these three works actively long for the opportunity to cannibalize for health benefits. This is a paradigm shift from the portrayal of fear to that of desire. The three literary works mentioned above display a pathology of post-socialist modernity, that is, the capitalistic and consumerist hierarchy and its violence in post-socialist China. In the cannibalistic works of Mo Yan, Lilian Lee, and Liao Yiwu, an excessive desire for consumption is a prominent feature, which embodies the “consuming identity” in contemporary China. The consuming identity, remove the highlighted part, add “not only dehumanizes and consumes social others, but also marks the grotesqueness of human commodification in removed the highlighted part, add “China’s” market economy. In Mo Yan’s *The Republic of Wine*, human babies from poor families are sold and consumed as delicacies. In Liao Yiwu’s “Chi-Fu the Gourmand of Fetus Soup,” aborted fetuses become the most delicious delicacy that a gourmand can boast about. Similarly, in Lilian Lee’s novella, *Dumplings*, the aborted fetus is a

medicinal delicacy to elongate youth and beauty. All three literary works reveal dehumanization in contemporary China. The consuming identity portrayed in these works seeks to satisfy desires for consumption regardless cost, even at the price of human life. In the capitalization of human life, some lives are valued over others in the hierarchy of class and gender. The trope of cannibalism in contemporary Chinese literature provides a sketch of this consuming identity and serves as a critique of capitalistic excessive desire in post-socialist China where revolutionary ideals resign and consumerism prevails.

Yan Lianke’s *The Day the Sun Died* widens our understanding of desire and violence with the trope of cannibalism and develops this trope into an allegory in which corpse oil is commodified. This story allegorizes the spread of excessive desire as a sleepwalking epidemic within which unrestrained egoism and violence are amplified. Like Mo Yan’s *The Republic of Wine*¹, *The Day the Sun Died* presents a world of overflowing desire and violence and reveals its crisis with cannibalistic narrative and time. In this novel, Yan Lianke composes writing as a form of cannibalism by playing with the concepts of authorship, intertextuality, and censorship. He devises an incompetent narrator (a type of narrator that can also be seen in Mo Yan’s *The Republic of Wine* and Jia Pingwa’s *Old Kiln Village*) and an impotent writer (which can also be seen in Mo Yan’s *The Republic of Wine*) to demonstrate the precariousities of postmodern, post-socialist subjectivity. The character/writer Yan Lianke’s desire and inability to write, the character/narrator Li Nianian’s intellectual disability and narration, and the character Li Tianbao’s desire to be narrated all mutually affect how the story is told and what is told and complicate the relationship between character and writer and between narratee and narrator. Meanwhile, Yan’s intentional disruption of chronological continuity and sense of time brings “violence without time” under the spotlight. *The Day the Sun Died* chronologically narrates a day in the Gaotian Town, which is devastated by a sleepwalking epidemic; however, time seems to stop at the darkest hour when unrestrained-desire-incited violence permeates the world. Yan’s resolution to ruthless desire and violence takes the form of a symbolic cannibalistic redemption of burning purchased corpse oil with a human sacrifice to “waken” the sun.² Yan

1 For my analysis of cannibalistic narrative and time, see Tsai Tiffany Yun-Chu, “Cannibal Labyrinth: Narrative, Intertextuality, and Politics of Cannibalism in Mo Yan’s *The Republic of Wine*.” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 32, no. 2, 2020, pp. 230-276.

2 In the preface to the Chinese version of *Rixi* 日 熄 [The Day the Sun Died] published in Taiwan, Carlos Rojas also discusses the commodification of corpse oil, cannibalistic redemption, and the relationship between narrator and narrative in this novel.

Lianke's allegory of "violence without time" provides an unexpected turn of sacrificial redemption that is juxtaposed with writing as a form of cannibalism.¹

Conclusion

Like the findings of the Western anthropological discourse on cannibalism — *i.e.* that every colonial subject, even those who rejects cannibalism, inevitably finds a cannibalistic self in himself/herself — a modern Chinese subject ultimately finds a cannibal in the "civilized, righteous" self. The seemingly progressive view on rejuvenation of the nation through revolution, initiated with the metaphor of cannibalism during the May Fourth Movement, finds itself walking the path of cannibalizing "the other." Cannibalism in the context of modern China therefore manifests itself as pathology of China's modernity in crisis: coloniality and hierarchy. The consuming feature of colonialism generates a "consuming identity" that first consumes "cannibalistic" others—Chinese tradition and Western imperialism in the May Fourth era.

Then, the "consuming identity" evolves to consume the "revolutionary and capitalistic others" in the process of China's nation-building and modernization. Meanwhile, the hierarchical violence is another form of modernity in crisis that the trope of cannibalism has revealed to us. The hierarchies are first feudalistic, then revolutionary, and now capitalistic. The discourse of colonialism at the turn of the twentieth century, which gave birth to the discourse of cannibalism in modern China, has cultivated a "consuming identity." This identity was intended to treat China's modernity in crisis yet has developed a pathology of modernity in the twentieth-and-twenty-first-century China. Ultimately, contextualizing the trope of cannibalism in modern and contemporary Chinese literature provides an angle in conjunction with Western (cultural) colonialism and Chinese cultural politics to understand China's cannibal modernity and its dynamic relation with colonialism, nationalism, capitalism, and authoritarianism.

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1 More analyses on Yan Lianke's *The Day the Sun Died* can be found in the journal article, "Cannibalistic Paradox in Yan Lianke's *The Day the Sun Died*: The Pathology and Treatment of Modernity in Post-1989 Chinese Literature," which is currently under review with *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*.

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