

# Eat to remember. Gastronomical reconfigurations of hunger and imprisonment in contemporary Chinese literature

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**Abstract:** During the famine that befell China following the disaster of the Great Leap Forward, hunger was a major affliction for the people undergoing reform in the labor camps. Food—in terms of procurement, consumption, or just discursive recollection—was a central issue in the prisoners' lives and, as a consequence, descriptions of meals and eating practices are a recurring presence in Chinese literary texts that revolve around those carceral experiences. This contribution investigates three literary works that reconstruct personal experiences of imprisonment by way of eating: Wang Ruowang's *Hunger Trilogy* (1980), Zhang Xianliang's *Mimosa* (1984), and Yang Xianhui's *Chronicles of Jiabiangou* (2003). In these texts, food becomes a privileged perspective through which to look at how personal and collective memories are re-appropriated and re-elaborated, as well as to analyze how narratives of the past are consumed and produced.

**Keywords:** food, memory, prison, *laogai*, prison writing, hunger, contemporary Chinese literature.

**摘要:** 中国六十年代的大饥荒很深刻地影响到当时正在接受劳动改造和劳动教养的政治犯。在囚犯经验中，食物的收取、摄入及想象是一个很关键的问题，所以在聚焦个人监狱经验的中国当代文本里出现许多不同食物及饮食习惯的描述。本文的目标为分析王若望、张贤亮和杨显惠编写的关于劳动改造和劳动教养经验的三本文本。在《饥饿三部曲》、《绿化树》及《夹边沟记事》中，藉由食物做为特权视角，可以去看个人及集体回忆如何重新描写。透过这些特殊又有饮食性的监狱回忆去分析过去的叙述如何摄入及生产，历史如何被咀嚼、吞咽和吐出。

**关键词:** 食物，记忆，劳动改造，监狱文学，饥饿，中国当代文学。

## 1. A History of Hunger

From the late 1950s to the mid-1960s, Chinese history has been characterized by what can be framed as a national experience of hunger, brought about by a widespread famine that affected the whole country. Historian Kenneth Lieberthal has defined it as “the most devastating famine of the twentieth century in China (and probably in the world)” (Lieberthal [1987] 2008, 318). National starvation was the consequence of disastrous economic policies implemented as part of the Great Leap Forward plan by a political leadership essentially unable to foresee or assess the effects of their choices. The plan was aimed at boosting both the agricultural and the industrial sectors, by establishing a set of unre-

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alistic goals in relation to production quotas of grain and steel, to be reached within the next five years. Workers throughout the country were mobilized and pushed to produce. Farmers, for instance, were compelled to sell the surplus of their grain production to the state, but the quotas set by the local cadres—who in turn received pressure from the central government—were too high, leaving the farmers in a very difficult position, since they were already barely producing enough for their own sustenance. As reconstructed by Frank Dikötter, who conducted extensive research on local and national archives in China, by the end of April 1958 “hunger and want had spread across the country” (Dikötter 2010, 443), and people started to die from starvation. Many resorted to scavenging, and when even wild edibles were gone, they turned to tree bark, tree leaves, mud, and even toxic mushrooms (Dikötter 2010, 282). Cannibalism was a recorded occurrence too. Even though officials were engaged in systematic cover-ups, some documents have managed to survive. Yang Jisheng 杨继绳, who in 2008 published a highly influential study on China’s famine based on archival sources and interviews with survivors, reports 63 registered cases of cannibalism in Feiyang county (Anhui province) between 1959 and 1962 (J. Yang 2008, 271), and Dikötter mentions a 1961 report from Lanxia, a city south of Lanzhou (Gansu province), that registered some 50 cases (Dikötter 2010, 321–2). Usually, these incidents involved the exhumation and consumption of cadavers, whereas murders for cannibalistic purposes were much rarer (Dikötter 2010, 323).

According to Yang’s reconstruction, the death toll was reportedly higher in Sichuan, Gansu, Anhui, Shandong, Qinghai, Henan and Hunan (J. Yang 2008, 593). All in all, the total number of population loss directly or indirectly related to the famine is indeed difficult to assess, though according to estimates built on the 1984 Statistical Yearbook and on the 1953, 1964, and 1982 censuses, the toll could be a number between 23 and 38 million (Dikötter 2010, 324–33).

In the labor camps—*laogai* 劳改 and *laojiao* 劳教<sup>1</sup>—which were usually located in the country’s most remote areas, the famine hit particularly hard, with varying degrees of intensity depending on the camp location but also on food rationing policies. As noted by Harry Wu in his prison memoir, “three criteria determined the allocation of portions: your political attitude, your adherence to camp regulations, and your age, size and labor potential” (H. Wu 1995, 90). In the camps, hunger was effectively used as a strategy for control, as it kept the inmates weak and less prone to insubordination. Engaging with Judith Herman’s study of trauma, Yenna Wu (2011, 56) poignantly points out the systematized withholding of food as a crucial traumatizing factor in the inmates’ experience of the labor camps. In Wu’s words: “The camps’ policies were designed to assert the party-state’s supreme power and to remold inmates into obedient masses by controlling their stomachs” (Y. Wu 2011, 56). Wu here does not necessarily refer to the circumstances related to

<sup>1</sup> Short for, respectively, *laodong gaizao* 劳动改造 (lit. “reform through labor”) and *laodong jiaoyang* 劳动教养 (“re-education through labor”).

the 1960s famine, but points at how, in the prison camps of the Mao era, food has generally been used as a disciplining strategy. In other words, starvation is configured as a traumatic experience, being an expression of what Herman frames as “organized techniques of disempowerment and disconnection,” executed with the purpose to “instill terror and helplessness and to destroy the victim’s sense of self in relation to others” (Herman 1992, 77. As quoted in Y. Wu 2011, 55).

With the death of Mao and the end of the Cultural Revolution, many political prisoners were eventually rehabilitated and released from the camps, and some of them started to write about their experiences of incarceration. Among them was Wang Ruowang 王若望, who in 1980 published *Hunger Trilogy* (*Ji'e sanbuqu* 饥饿三部曲), a novelized memoir of his incarceration experiences, which, as the title suggests, are tightly connected to the experience of hunger. Writer and poet Zhang Xianliang 张贤亮 was released from the camp in 1979, and *Mimosa* (*Lühuashu* 绿化树, lit. The green tree), published in 1984, was among his earlier literary texts dealing with his more than twenty-year incarceration experience in *laogai* and *laojiao* camps. *Mimosa*'s protagonist, Zhang Yonglin 章永麟, is an intellectual who has just been released from a labor camp and is sent to work as a retained laborer on a state farm. The novella follows Zhang's everyday life on the farm and probes the moral dilemma of a man struggling to reconcile his material needs to his spiritual aspirations. Finally, Yang Xianhui 杨显惠—the only writer included in this selection not to have experienced prison directly—in 2003 published a collection of stories titled *Chronicles of Jiabiangou* (*Jiabiangou jishi* 夹边沟记事) based on fieldwork and interviews with survivors of the homonymous labor camp located in the middle of the Gobi Desert, in Gansu province, which became sadly known for the high number of deaths related to starvation that occurred between 1958 and 1961.

Though belonging to different literary genres, respectively memoir, novel, and reportage, all the three texts are crucially set in the years of the great famine that befell China following the disaster of the Great Leap Forward—with the partial exception of Wang's novel, that is distributed on a longer timeframe, and includes the author's previous experiences of hunger. In these works, the recurrence of food—in terms of descriptions of meals and eating practices (real and imagined), the recounting of the everyday ordeals of food procurement and rationing, the harrowing descriptions of hunger's effects on the bodies of starved prisoners—is absolutely pervasive.

The three texts included in this analysis are but three examples of a bigger corpus of fictional and non-fictional works that emerged from the Chinese experience of the prison camp. As a matter of fact, some of these works that were published after the end of the Cultural Revolution were assigned the label “Big Wall Literature” (*Da qiang wenxue* 大墙文学) with reference to the high walls that delimited the camps (Li 1988).<sup>2</sup> The period of relative political relaxation

<sup>2</sup> From 1988 to 1990, the Shanghai Reform-Through-Labor Bureau published a monthly magazine dedicated to this literary category. See Kinkley 1991, 83.

that followed the death of Mao made it possible for writers to publish on such topics, though they still had to pay attention to political sensitivities and commit to a certain degree of self-censorship, which, according to Perry Link, constitutes a foundational part of “the socialist Chinese literary system” (Link 2000, 4).

Chinese prison camp literature has been the focus of Philip Williams and Yenna Wu’s study, where they take fiction and reportage—including Zhang’s and Wang’s works mentioned here—as entry points to analyze a carceral system based on the concepts of “remolding” and “re-education” through labor (Williams and Wu 2004). Conceptually, they take issue with Michel Foucault’s highly theoretical and rather totalizing vision of the prison (Foucault [1975] 1995), which in fact overlooks the actual complexities and ambiguities of lived carceral experiences (Williams and Wu 2004, 10; 53). From a literary perspective, Williams and Wu acknowledge both the mimetic as well as the symbolic function of literary texts, in that they do not merely offer a “mirror” or a “reflection” of the reality of the camps, but a narrative that “filters reality during the process of thought and representation” (Williams and Wu 2004, 14. Emphasis in the original). A similar approach is employed by Sebastian Veg in his analysis of Yang’s *Chronicles of Jiabiangou*, a text that is generally ascribed to the tradition of reportage literature (*baogao wenxue* 报告文学), although the author himself labels it as fiction (*xiaoshuo* 小说), in an effort to strategically blur the lines between reality and representation, so as to virtually be allowed more narrative space to discuss politically and/or historically sensitive topics (Veg 2014, 517).

Taking these texts as case studies, this paper investigates the modes of remembering a traumatic past in which personal and collective are intertwined, and in which the national experience of hunger is connected to that of incarceration. As I am going to illustrate in the next section, food memories are the privileged *loci* of this investigation, because eating—and by contrast hunger—are highly symbolic, foundational experiences in the context of modern Chinese history, and therefore, looking at how they have been reconstructed in literary texts might open up new perspectives through which approach an otherwise virtually inaccessible mainstream narrative of the past.

## 2. Eating Words, Eating History

In the Chinese language, the concept of eating is rendered with the character *chi* 吃,<sup>3</sup> which is graphically represented by a mouth (*kou* 口) on the left and the verb “to beg” (*qi* 乞) on the right. This curious etymology was noted by novelist Mo Yan 莫言 who, in a short story titled “Can’t forget about eating” (*Wang bu liao chi* 忘不了吃), writes: “The begging of the mouth, a mouth that begs; together they make the word ‘eat.’ It includes the meaning of craving, starving, and the humbleness [associated with those who beg for food]” (Mo Yan 1997,

<sup>3</sup> A variant of this character exists, 喫, which shares with 吃 the radical for “mouth” on the left.

92).<sup>4</sup> This passage was in turn quoted by scholar Gang Yue, who used this powerful metaphor to introduce his own study of the politics of eating and its literary representations in modern China, aptly titled *The Mouth that Begs* (Yue 1999).

From an etymological perspective, *chi* is, in a sense, illustrative of how social, cultural, and historical experiences can add meaning to the way words can come to be in the Chinese language. As a matter of fact, *chi* appears in several two- or multi-character words in which “eating” is used in a metaphorical sense, such as: *chicu* 吃醋, be jealous (lit. “eat vinegar”), or *chiku* 吃苦, bear hardships (lit. “eat bitterness”), or *chili* 吃力, strenuous, difficult (lit. “eat strength”). The semiotic richness associated to the word *chi* illuminates the multilayered cultural and symbolic relation that China has with food, so much so that Yue, in his above-mentioned book, defines China’s modern history as a “saga of eating” (Yue 1999, 1), pointing out how all the major historical events that have shaped the country’s modern history have been brought into discourse or can be analyzed through literal or symbolic gastronomic imaginations: from Lu Xun’s depictions of China as a cannibalistic society to Mao Zedong’s communist rhetoric built on “iron rice bowls” and “eating bitterness” (because “revolution is not a dinner party”) and finally, to Deng Xiaoping’s opening-up policies that promoted voracious consumerism.

In every culture, eating is never only about physical sustenance but also, and most importantly, an expression of social and cultural values and identities, which are usually performed in highly codified manners. This, as suggested by John Allen, explains why we as humans have so many memories related to eating experiences. In most cases, food memories are not only evocative of the eating practice in itself, but they can also trigger deeper (sometimes unexpected) emotions (Allen 2012, 150). Perhaps the most famous literary example of this proposition is Marcel Proust’s episode of the madeleines, recounted in the first volume of *In Search of Lost Time*: the taste of the shell-shaped cake dipped in tea is the involuntary trigger of fond memories of the narrator’s childhood. That is to say, when food-related memories arise, most of the times it is not only our experience with food that we are remembering, but all other social, cultural, and historical experiences that somehow we associate to that food item or alimentary practice.

That remembering is an essentially social construct had already been famously observed by Maurice Halbwachs, whose concept of “collective memory” has been very influential in figuring out that the way we make sense of things past has an influence on how those things are remembered socially and publicly (Halbwachs [1925] 1992). The concept was further elaborated by Jan and Aleida Assmann who pointed out the difference between a collective memory they call “communicative,” that is, limited to the transmission of recent (autobiographical) past mainly through informal media (living memory, communication in vernac-

<sup>4</sup> Lit. “口的乞求, 口在乞求, 一个‘吃’字, 馋的意思有了, 饿的意思有了, 下贱的意思也有了。”

ular language), and a “cultural” memory, that is concerned with a longer time frame and is mediated through institutionalized, highly symbolic forms, such as monuments, texts, rituals, and so on (A. Assmann 2008; J. Assmann 2008).

Literature, in particular, is a privileged medium of memory making, because, as pointed out by Astrid Erll (2011, 159), it “simultaneously builds and observes memory”. On the one hand, texts construct versions of the past—that can be subversive, traditional, innovative—but on the other hand, they make this process of construction observable (Erll 2011, 151). From a historical perspective, this resonates with Foucault’s attention to the “document” as no longer “the fortunate tool of a history that is primarily and fundamentally *memory*” (Foucault [1972] 1989, 7. Emphasis in the original) but as an object that participates in the constitution of history by way of its manipulation—i.e. by way of the meaning a certain culture attributes to that document. In other words, by looking at the ways in which personal memories have publicly been re-elaborated in textual form, we can analyze how past events have been re-appropriated, negotiated, and manipulated. This operation is particularly interesting considering the context of modern and contemporary China, in which history has officially been passed down as a one-sided, virtually incontestable narrative. In this sense, one can look at literature, as David Der-wei Wang points out, as a “complementing *and* contesting discourse” to history (D. Wang 2004, 2. Emphasis in the original).

This paper takes the alimentary discourse as the lens through which to access and analyze literary texts as complementing and contesting narratives to the official communist hagiography of hunger as a symbol of revolutionary endurance in the context of the labor camp. The aim is to examine and discuss how the works of Wang Ruowang, Zhang Xianliang, and Yang Xianhui problematize certain orthodox practices of remembering and forgetting, while in turn offering alternative narrative memoryscapes for an affective reconfiguration of traumatic histories.

### 3. Gustatory Nostalgias: Wang Ruowang’s *Hunger Trilogy*

Wang Ruowang’s *Hunger Trilogy* is a novelized memoir in which the author retells his threefold experience with hunger that has accompanied him throughout his life. The first time was in the 1930s, when Wang, then a teenager, was detained in Caohejing prison in Shanghai, sentenced by the Guomindang (GMD) for his communist activism. His second experience of hunger was during the Sino-Japanese war, when the protagonist and his team were trapped in a forest for a few days while chasing Japanese soldiers. Finally, the third encounter with hunger happened once again in prison; in the 1960s Wang was labeled a counterrevolutionary and detained in the same Caohejing prison, now under control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The first-person narration is that of the protagonist Wang Shouhua 王寿华, which is the author’s actual birth name. The text was first published in 1980 in the Chinese magazine *Shouhuo* 收获 (Harvest), and reprinted in a somewhat docked version in 1983

as part of the collection *Yanbuzhu de guangmang* 掩不住的光芒 (The Indistinguishable Light).<sup>5</sup>

Food narratives are a central element in the story, which in fact begins with an introductory note in which the author recalls a ritualized social practice centered on eating.

I don't know who it was to invent a type of religious-like ceremony called "eat to recall bitterness" [*chi yi ku fan* 忆苦饭]. They say it's to teach you not to forget class bitterness. On a given day, members of institutional organizations or military regiments gather at the same time to eat together. They eat a kind of steamed bun that is made of carrot peelings and leaves; if there are no carrots, they use sweet potato seedlings. Each person will eat one or two of these buns, even those who have stomach ulcers are obliged to eat them. They say that eating a couple of these buns will give you a proletarian consciousness, preventing you from becoming a revisionist. (R. Wang [1980] 1989, 78)<sup>6</sup>

The "eat to recall bitterness" ceremony that Wang mentions above is part of an indoctrination movement the CCP implemented in the 1960s, aimed at educating the younger generation to the suffering of the people before the liberation (G. Wu 2014). As part of the "recall bitterness" (*yiku* 忆苦) campaign, the party mobilized families and communities to share their memories of how harsh life was before the communist takeover. These stories circulated through a number of media, including film screenings, publications in literary magazines, as well as in the form of staged performance (a person would be selected to speak in front of an audience with the purpose of creating emotional engagement). Generally speaking, as Guo Wu points out, the campaign was "aimed at reenacting class struggle and reinforcing class awareness by invoking collective memory" (G. Wu 2014, 247). As Wang proceeds with the description, he recounts that a meal made of low quality ingredients—including tree leaves, potherb, bran, white mud—would be prepared and consumed together; the coarseness of the meal was a reminder of the hard life people had before the arrival of the communists. The way the meal was consumed also mattered, as the narrator explains:

When eating, you are not allowed to frown, you have to look as if you have completely accepted to be reformed. But if you do frown, then it's not a big deal, you can go with the flow and say: "I'm thinking about the suffering of the past and cherishing the present; I'm thinking about how oppressed I was in the old society, how sad." (R. Wang [1980] 1989, 78)

Food is a very meaningful site for the exploration of memory, because, as pointed out by David Sutton, unlike, for example, public monuments, it actively intercepts the intimate and the public dimension of eating, bringing togeth-

<sup>5</sup> My analysis was based on this latter version of the text.

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise specified, the translations of the Chinese texts are mine.

er individual bodies and collective institutions (Sutton 2008, 160).<sup>7</sup> However, Wang's text adds an element of disturbance to this ideal convergence of intimate and collective memories, because the author's personal recollection of the ceremony is very different from the institutional version. This contradiction is enacted through the semantic double-entendre implicit in the expression *chiku*. The "bitterness" that the participants in the eating ceremony are forced to eat is prepared on purpose (the coarse bun made with food scraps) whereas the protagonist of the story had to swallow a "bitterness" of a different kind.

As for me, when I swallow these two chaff buns, I think about something else; the hardships I have endured in the past were not about eating coarse food, because even that coarse food was very difficult to scrounge. I have experienced an extraordinary kind of hunger, the kind that leaves you wishing for death.

And now I want to tell you about the three times in my life in which I have experienced this sort of hunger, though it is not for the purpose of reinforcing any type of proletarian consciousness, but only to express a hope. Twice is bad, three times is too much; I hope I will not have to experience this hunger for a fourth time! (R. Wang [1980] 1989, 78)

The "eating bitterness" reenactment triggers the protagonist's traumatic memory of the hunger he had to endure, and the performance of ingesting scraps appears grotesque to a person who actually had to rely on food waste in order to survive. This brief introductory note is very telling of the author's intention, that is to renegotiate the way some memories have been institutionally sanctioned (and that he himself has been forced to swallow), and to propose, instead, an alternative version, one that is based on a lived experience.

As mentioned above, Wang's memoir actually compares three different experiences of hunger, and connects them to different parts of Chinese history. The first part of *Hunger Trilogy* focuses on the protagonist's imprisonment as a 16-year-old communist activist during GMD rule. While in prison, young Wang Shouhua participates in a hunger strike organized by his fellow inmates, who demanded better and more food from the prison administration. On the fifth day of the strike, our protagonist is exhausted, and about to give in to the enticing proposals of the guards, who had offered pieces of meat in exchange of their surrender. He starts hallucinating, to the point that "a piece of sweet-smelling, glistening, glowing pork" (R. Wang [1980] 1989, 99) appeared before his eyes. He feels like he himself is turning into that piece of pork, as he tells us: "when I pressed my fingers together they felt greasy and slippery" (R. Wang [1980] 1989, 99). The body of the prisoner becomes food, and not a random item, but pork, China's favorite. This hallucinatory metamorphosis, as Yue puts it, is a "powerful sign of the struggle between the political body and the physical body," between actual and symbolic hunger: for food and for justice (Yue 1999, 171).

<sup>7</sup> Sutton's study was focused on an ethnographic analysis of a community's alimentary practices in the Greek Island of Kalymnos.

Hunger strike is a rather powerful and direct practice of resistance to prison logic. But it is not the only one. Another, more subtle, strategy that Wang presents us is storytelling. When the protagonist is jailed for his counterrevolutionary crimes in the 1960s, in the midst of an epidemic famine, he recounts that “the prisoners had come up with a method to alleviate hunger, it was called ‘spiritual dining’ [*jingshen jucan* 精神聚餐]” (R. Wang [1980] 1989, 155). Taking turns, prisoners in the same cell would share descriptions of their favorite dishes or snacks.

All the great food from Yangzhou, Sichuan, Guangdong, and Shanghai were divided by type and described in detail. Even the sound of roasting in the cooking pot, the color, the fragrance and the flavor of the dish just prepared were vividly described, and in the end the narrator and the listeners were both copiously drooling. (R. Wang [1980] 1989, 155)

When they were done with food descriptions, prisoners would start recollecting all the food stalls in certain popular areas of Shanghai, and listed the prices of all the items as well. This recollection game is soothing at first, a way to “pass the time” (R. Wang [1980] 1989, 155). However, at one point, it becomes unbearable; our protagonist is feeling hungrier and hungrier, and eventually he begs his friends to stop.

*Jingshen jucan* figures as another kind of ritualized memory practice, although not officially institutionalized as the eating bitterness ceremony analyzed above. On the diegetic level, the narratively performed gustatory nostalgia fulfills an almost therapeutic function—the oral recall of their favorite foods makes the prisoners forget, even just for a moment, about their actual hunger. On the other hand, this verbal recounting is an exercise of memory-making, an affective recalling of a traumatic history that through literature can be narratively articulated and passed down to generations to come.

#### 4. Devouring Words: Metaphorical Bibliophagy in Zhang Xianliang’s *Mimosa*

Set in the early 1960s, Zhang Xianliang’s *Mimosa* is the story of Zhang Yonglin, a young intellectual—and sentenced rightist—who has just been released from *laogai* and sent to work to a state farm as a retained worker (*liuchang jiuye* 留长就业). At the farm, Yonglin meets a peasant woman, Ma Yinghua 马樱花, who will soon become to him a motherly figure and an object of desire at the same time. Looking at the simple yet honest life Ma Yinghua and the other peasants lead at the farm, Yonglin is caught in an existential crisis and starts to question his own identity as “intellectual.” The man is exhausted from the hard labor and starved to the point that: “hunger had become a heavy and bulky substance that rampaged in my stomach. It had even gained a voice that shouted to every nerve in my body: Eat! Eat! Eat!” (Zhang [1984] 1989, 52). Yonglin’s physical debilitation leads him to seek for a solace of the spirit, which does not refer to metaphysical or religious experiences, but rather, it exemplifies the protagonist’s commitment to his intellectual education, as he

constantly finds himself turning to the only book he owns in the camp: Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*. Yonglin received it as a gift from a fellow prisoner while still in *laogai*, a philosophy lecturer who suggested that in the book he might find out "how we have become what we have become" (Zhang [1984] 1989, 29). Our protagonist doesn't understand what his friend means by "we," whether it is the two of them, or perhaps he means "our country"? To which the friend answers: "Remember! [...] Our fate and the fate of our country are closely intertwined!" (Zhang [1984] 1989, 29), suggesting that Yonglin's quest to find meaning to his re-education experience is in fact in a way representative of the experience of a whole country.

As Sheldon Lu points out, in *Mimosa*, Zhang Xianliang reveals the mechanisms of deformation of the subject under socialism (Lu 2007, 45). Reading *Das Kapital* is supposed to rekindle Yonglin's political consciousness and help him transcend his individualistic, bourgeois tendencies, and yet, he is constantly confronted with the sense of estrangement he feels toward the uneducated peasants in the farm, and especially Ma Yinghua. In the camp, as pointed out by Han Shaoting, the man is scared of succumbing to the mundane necessity of food at the cost of his spiritual fulfillment (Han 2011, 81), and therefore, in order to state his hunger for intellectual nourishment, he turns to *Das Kapital*.

I secretly reached for *Das Kapital*, that I had put under my pillow. [...] Now, this book has become my only link to the rational world; only this book can let me access again my once familiar cultural life, that can make me rise from buns, carrots, pickled vegetable soup and gruel, and demarcate the difference between myself and a starving beast. (Zhang [1984] 1989, 51)

The book is the symbol of Zhang's long lost intellectual life, a cultural marker that makes him remember his existence is more than a constant battle for survival, and serves him to recognize himself as something more than a mere "starving beast." Even though *Das Kapital* is the only book the protagonist owns—and also one of the very few allowed texts in the camp—Zhang's inner world is made up of a rich intertextual fabric that abounds with unorthodox literary references (such as Dante, Byron, Chinese classic poetry, Pushkin, and more), as if the author of the novel were ironically contesting the authority of Marx's text, implying that the protagonist's obsession with it was in fact only dictated by the material and cultural famine he finds himself into, as suggested by Daniele Beltrame (2017, 193).

The parallel between Zhang's need for actual and spiritual nourishment is constantly played out in the novel, and eventually these two dimensions converge, as images of food materialize in his mind when he reads key passages from *Das Kapital*:

When I read [in *Das Kapital*] "Commodities come into the world in the shape of use values, articles, or goods, such as iron, linen, wheat, etc.," I savored the word "wheat" instead of concentrating on the meaning. I had a mental picture of bread, steamed buns, flapjacks, even cream cakes which made my mouth water. Then came

the equation [describing the exchange of commodities]. A “coat,” “tea,” “coffee,” “wheat,” what a feast! Imagine wearing a spotless white coat (instead of huddling in a torn quilt), with some Keemum tea or Brazilian coffee in front of you (rather than an empty tin), cutting up a cream cake (not a carrot)—that would be a feast fit for the gods! My imagination enabled me to blend all the banquets I’d ever attended, seen or heard about. But all those delicacies distracted me from “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof.” And on that cold silent winter day there wafted over that appetizing smell of the food I’d been imagining. I started to have stomach spasms. (Zhang [1984] 1989, 76–7. Translation by Yue 1999, 190–1)

Marx’s words transform into food in the imagination of the avid reader, but they fail to bring him any kind of physical or spiritual fulfillment. On the contrary, the more Zhang gorges on Marx’s words, the more hungry he feels. Words cannot compensate for his real hunger, and therefore, as Yue contends, the boundary between food and words, between physical and spiritual, is distorted in a wicked playfulness, and actually leaves nothing but pains in the body, in the form of stomach spasms (Yue 1999, 191). The scene is infused with religious undertones—the whole image of words literally turning into food is vaguely reminiscent of a crooked transubstantiation, in the sense that the word has not become flesh as it should have, and on the contrary, the flesh remains hungry and weak. This religious posture, as once again underlined by Yue (1999, 186–7), is not self-contradictory if read in the light of the religious-like devotion Chinese intellectuals ascribed to Marx and his thought.

In other words, the imaginary feast Zhang Yonglin summons from the reading of Marx’s words is crucial in the development of his subjectivity. In the novel, hunger ironically does not function as the ideological catalyst to fulfill his socialist re-education, but on the contrary, it constantly confronts him with the conflict between his material and spiritual desires.

##### 5. Binge Eating as Traumatic Haunting: Yang Xianhui’s *Chronicles of Jiabiangou*

*Chronicles of Jiabiangou* is a collection of stories detailing life and death in the infamous Jiabiangou labor camp located in the middle of the Gobi Desert, between the late 1950s and the early 1960s. The book is based on interviews that the author, Yang Xianhui, a Gansu-based writer, conducted with the survivors of the camp. Yang then re-arranged the stories in his own fashion, though the narration is generally constructed from the point of view of the interviewee, who recounts his/her own experience.<sup>8</sup> The text explores the tragedy of hunger and reconstructs the incarceration experiences of sentenced rightists that underwent reform in Jiabiangou labor farm. In the stories that make up the book, the alimentary element is very strong. Indeed, the portrayal of food-related ep-

<sup>8</sup> The stories of Jiabiangou were adapted into a documentary film called *Jiabiangou* 夹边沟 (*The Ditch* in English) directed by Wang Bing 王兵 and presented at the Venice Film Festival in 2010.

isodes often appeals to a grotesque aesthetics that is aimed at evoking disgust in the reader. For instance, the story “Eating one’s fill” (*Baoshi yi dun* 饱食一顿) features a man eating the vomit of his fellow prisoner who the previous day had gorged on potatoes. Another story, “Woman from Shanghai” (*Shanghai nüren* 上海女人), contains scenes of cannibalism: a prisoner finds out that some of his fellows have been secretly harvesting and eating organs from dead people’s corpses. In other words, in his exploration of hunger and its effects on the human body and psyche, Yang really takes the concept of “food” to extreme ends, using disgusting food memories to convey the trauma of the past.<sup>9</sup>

One characteristic of trauma, as observed by Cathy Caruth, is the experience of constant returning, an inevitable going back to the place and time of the traumatic event. Caruth (1996, 4) calls it the “double wound”; the fact that trauma lies not only in the violent original event, but in how its “unassimilated nature,” i.e. the impossibility of integrating it within the frameworks of everyday life, “returns to haunt the survivor later on”.

This attention to trauma, food, and memory is present throughout the book, but it is particularly compelling in the story titled “The thief” (*Zei gutou* 贼骨头). The protagonist, Yu Zhaoyuan 俞兆远, has spent three years in Jiabiangou as a sentenced rightist. He was eventually released and, in 1979, sent back to his home in Jinta county (Gansu). When one day a neighbor asks him how he managed to survive the camp, Yu replies: “I was an irredeemable thief” (X. Yang [2003] 2008, 100). During his captivity in Jiabiangou, Yu had become very good at stealing food, which is what eventually kept him alive. He had not always been a thief though; as a kid, he received some Confucian education from his father, and he had always considered the idea of stealing shameful. Only after witnessing the death from starvation of two of his fellow prisoners, Yu finally decided he had to do something if he wanted to survive. That is how he began stealing: grain from the farm’s warehouse, dough from the communal kitchen, corn ears, peanut leaves, even pesticide-covered wheat seeds that he and the other inmates were supposed to plant in the fields. When the camp was evacuated, in 1961, the prisoners were finally allowed to leave and Yu returned home. But his hunger never went away.

Three months after I returned home, my legs had already gained their strength back, but my stomach was still unbearably hungry. I thought about food day and night, and especially craved raw grain. It didn’t matter how much actual food I would eat, my stomach always felt empty. (X. Yang [2003] 2008, 177)

The trauma of starvation has modified Yu’s cognitive framework, so that even when he has eaten his fill, he still feels hungry. Like a lurking presence, hunger comes back to haunt the man, to the point that he develops an obsessive-compulsive disorder, which eventually manages to disrupt his marital relationship.

<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the disgust aesthetics in *Chronicles of Jiabiangou*, see: De Marchi 2021.

One day, while my wife was at work, I opened a wooden box where she had stored the corn flour, filled a teacup and hid it in my bookshelf. Every night before going to bed I would eat a spoonful or two. The raw flour was so fragrant and sweet! If I didn't have my spoonful I couldn't sleep, my stomach growling in hunger. I didn't overcome this eating habit until the winter of 1962, when my wife filed for divorce. In the courthouse, she admitted that the cause of the divorce was my habit of stealing and eating the raw flour. She said she couldn't bear the humiliation any longer; the neighbors all knew it, they thought she was purposefully withholding food from me, and this had forced me into the habit of stealing grain. (X. Yang [2003] 2008, 127)

Yu's wife does not understand her husband's obsession with food, and cannot bear the thought of her neighbors believing she is withholding it from him. On the other hand, Yu cannot get rid of the habit of stealing food he developed in the camp; the story of his trauma cannot find a suitable language to be expressed into, and therefore it keeps repeating itself in an endless loop.

The idea of the past as a lurking presence in the narrative entanglement of our present has famously been addressed by Jacques Derrida, who elaborated on the concept of "hauntology," prompted by Francis Fukuyama's reflections on "the end of history." In registering the collapse of communism and the rise of capitalism, Fukuyama (1989) recognized the existence of a clear boundary between the past and the present, whereas Derrida, who rejected this idea, envisioned history as a temporal disjoining, and the present as an ontological illusion; if we want to navigate it, we need to "learn to live *with* ghosts" (Derrida 1994, xvii–xviii. Emphasis in the original). In *Chronicles of Jiabiangou*, Yang Xianhui displays perverse gastronomics and maniacal incorporations as a way to examine how the remnants of Chinese modern history constantly come back to haunt the people who have survived it. A specter lurking in the darker corners of collective consciousness, the trauma of imprisonment and starvation is brought back to light thanks to literature, which, far from being able to provide consolation or retribution, nonetheless offers the possibility for reconfiguration and narrativization.

## 6. The Gut Remembers: Concluding Remarks

From the perspective of embodiment, eating is an utterly sensuous experience—it requires our engagement on a multisensorial level, which makes it a very interesting medium for the study of memory, both as cognitive as well as affective recollection (Sutton 2001; Holtzman 2006). Furthermore, because of the context in which food is prepared and consumed, which involves meaningful social contact, gastronomic memories are not only concerned with the gustatory experience *per se* but they are always symbolic of something else. Socially structured alimentary practices can indeed be vehicles of collective memories, both in a communicative as well as cultural sense (J. Assmann 2008). In other words, food is a "form of historical consciousness" (Sutton 2001, 26), and looking at how, in the context of modern China, that consciousness has been reconfigured through a medium like literature—which traditionally stands as

a challenging discourse to official historiography—opens up new and perhaps unexpected sensuous memoriescapes.

In the literary texts that reconfigure the experience of the Mao-period labor camps, food is a key element around which the narration is developed. In *Hunger Trilogy*, Wang Ruowang unveils the hypocrisy of institutionalized forms of memory by playing with the metaphorical and literal meaning of the “eat to recall bitterness” campaign. Through food and eating rituals, the memory of hunger and incarceration is re-appropriated and reconfigured in an affective dimension. Zhang Xianliang, instead, plays with the apparent contradiction between the literal and metaphorical sense of eating that is so eloquently embodied in *Mimosa*’s protagonist, Zhang Yonglin, whose ordeal with physical and metaphysical nourishment represents the inner struggle of the whole Chinese intellectual class caught between personal desires and ideological righteousness. Finally, Yang Xianhui’s *Chronicles of Jiabiangou* configures compulsive eating as the manifestation of the ways in which repressed historical trauma can come back to haunt collective memory.

As pointed out by David Wang (2004, 123), in Communist rhetoric, hunger is not only meant as bodily deprivation, but represents the actual driving force toward class awareness, the realization of one’s own self-indulgent ways of thinking, which at the same time brings about the possibility of redemption. The ability of the individual to bear hunger testifies to his or her commitment to the revolutionary cause. To borrow Wang’s words: “From bodily destitution to political institution, hunger, as a spiritual state, has been reified, so to speak, in the discourse of revolution” (D. Wang 2004, 123). The texts analyzed above take issue with hunger as an expression of a collective traumatic experience; they expose the hypocrisy behind the way it has been appropriated by mainstream ideology to suit a political agenda and subvert its meaning by reconfiguring it in its corporal dimension.

Because, as Caruth suggests, trauma enters our consciousness only belatedly, as a haunting presence, then, as argued by Anne Whitehead, we need to rethink our engagement with the past (Caruth 1996; Whitehead 2004, 13). If historical narratives—no longer available as infallible knowledge—must be reconceived as something that “perpetually escapes or eludes our understanding” (Whitehead 2004, 13), then, literary narratives can figure as ideal vehicles to convey the ways in which the non-referentiality of history expresses itself. To this end, gastronomic imaginations and food discourses figure as particularly fruitful explorational perspectives through which to address personal and collective experiences of history, in that they help us access these experiences as part of an embodied, intimate, and sensory narrative configuration that can possibly facilitate our emotional—gustatory—participation and recollection.

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