

Rethinking Postcolonialist Assumptions and Portrayals of Cannibalism in Modern Chinese Fiction¹

Yenna Wu

ABSTRACT

The end of the twentieth century has witnessed a strong fascination with cannibalism in literature, film, and cultural studies, particularly in the West. Postcolonial theorists argue that cannibalism is a myth which expresses Western cultural biases, a myth created by European imperialists to justify their colonizing ambitions. Since they do not believe that cannibals existed, these theorists turn to dismantle ethnohistorical accounts and anthropological studies of cannibalism and claim they are false. These critics also adopt a rather dogmatic paradigm: the colonialists have political power and dominance, and thus they can control and exploit those colonized "others." This paper argues that we need to be cautious about applying these theories to China. These theories have limited use in discussing the portrayals of cannibalism by modern writers such as Lu Xun, Wang Jingzhi, Yu Hua, Mo Yan, Zheng Yi, and Liu Zhenyun. A close analysis of Liu Zhenyun's "Reminiscing 1942" (1993) in fact reveals that the author reverses the postcolonialist paradigm: instead of condemning the "imperialists," he implies that under certain circumstances some Chinese people would rather be colonized by Western or Japanese "imperialists" than be controlled by their erratic authoritarian government.

KEY WORDS

cannibalism

ethnographers

archaeological evidence

Wang Jingzhi 汪靜之

Mo Yan 莫言

Liu Zhenyun 劉震雲

anthropologists

postcolonial theorists

Lu Xun 魯迅

Yu Hua 余華

Zheng Yi 鄭義

“Wengu yijiu sier” 溫故一九四二



Cannibalism, defined as the eating of the flesh of members of one's own species, or "the conspecific consumption of human tissue" (Tim White 9), is ordinarily a repulsive topic. Yet the end of the twentieth century has witnessed a strong fascination with cannibalism in literature, film, and cultural studies, particularly in the West. Western studies of cannibalism of this century can be roughly divided into three groups, in chronological order: anthropologists looking for evidence of cannibalism; anthropologists accepting the evidence of cannibalism and reinterpreting its meaning; and postcolonial theorists.

As the century began, anthropologists sought to study the practice of cannibalism in certain geographical areas, such as New Guinea and Fiji. Following this, a second group of anthropologists accepted without question that cannibalism existed in those areas; they then reinterpreted the practice of cannibalism, seeing it not as a cruel, inhumane act but the performance of a ritual, a symbolic act. For example, Peggy Sanday (1986) interprets Aztec human sacrifice or the mortuary cannibalism of certain tribes as mythical and transformative. A third group—postcolonial theorists—emerges in the latter part of the century. This group in particular questions the findings of the first group's studies of cannibalism.

There are certainly historical precursors for the second group that attempts to elevate the cannibal to the status of "noble savage." Montaigne (1533-92) had already suggested how Western society appeared even more cruel and cannibalistic than that of primitive cannibals (150-59). The ideas of the third group are not entirely original. In the past, a number of enlightened humanists found the thought of man eating man so repulsive that they had great difficulty accepting it as fact. As early as 1871, Mark Twain was already objecting to some

paleontologists' claims of having "proof" of ancient cannibalism (Tim White 13; Osborne 36). Ashley Montagu (1937) was also very skeptical, dismissing cannibalism as "a pure traveler's myth" (qtd. in Tim White 13-15).

William Arens and the Postcolonial Debate

William Arens's controversial book (1979) probably provided the greatest impetus for the ideas about cannibalism subsequently articulated by the postcolonial theorists. While not entirely denying the existence of survival cannibalism, Arens insistently challenges the credibility of the evidence for customary cannibalism, claiming that such cannibalism is a myth conjured forth by Western anthropologists. Arens declares: "The idea of 'others' as cannibals, rather than the act, is the universal phenomenon. The significant question is not why people eat human flesh, but why one group invariably assumes that others do" (139). Arens thus believes that the anthropologists "assume" that other ethnic groups eat human flesh without evidence, and that they are guilty of false accusation of others due to some sort of ulterior motive. Arens's use of the word "universal" reveals that he believes such "assumptions" are universal; yet the assumption of "others" as cannibals is in fact not as universal as Arens claims, and the anthropologists criticized by Arens in fact studied only what was particular to a given culture.

Although Arens's hard-line skepticism about the "evidence" in historical and ethnographical sources is not new, it is useful to the extent that it challenges anthropological studies of cannibalism, demanding that studies present evidence in a more scientific way. Yet Arens's standards may be too stringent to be feasible. Cannibalistic acts are not always performed in public, especially not when outsiders are there to witness or photograph the actions. In addition, in this age when customary cannibalism has almost certainly disappeared, what can be relied upon as credible evidence? In his review of Arens's book, R. Needham correctly indicates that cannibalistic practices were usually history before the advent of modern anthropology (qtd. in Tim

White 16). Given such circumstances, should we still, following Arens, distrust and dismiss all the written histories and ethnographies and insist that only documentation by first-hand witnesses count as evidence? In my view, although histories and ethnographies should be examined critically, they should not be dogmatically dismissed en masse.

A brief digression on the use of term is in order here. We have so far distinguished survival, ritual, and customary cannibalism in our discussion. However, since this paper deals with the postcolonial critics' views on cannibalism, and since they generally do not distinguish one kind of cannibalism from another, from this point on we will use cannibalism to refer to all kinds of cannibalism, unless otherwise indicated. These critics' failure to make distinctions between the major varieties of cannibalism is one of their limitations; yet this is not the focus of this paper.

Responding to Arens's challenge, Tim White places cannibalism in an archeological context and looks for osteological evidence, mainly human bone fragments. In his assessment of some claims for cannibalism in the archeological record, Tim White finds very little archaeological evidence for cannibalism in Africa, in spite of the many ethnohistorical accounts of it there. However, Tim White does find excellent evidence of cannibalism at the Neolithic (3000-4000 B.C.) site of Fontbrégoua Cave in southeastern France. Furthermore, using scientific methodology to carefully examine and analyze 2,106 bone fragments in the Mancos Canyon in southwestern Colorado, Tim White concludes that cannibalism did take place there in the early 12th century. While inferring the case of cannibalism from Anasazi remains, he is careful not to characterize all Anasazi as cannibals (xix). Tim White's book thus throws into question ethnohistorical accounts of cannibalism in Africa, Mesoamerica, and the Pacific; at the same time, however, it clearly indicates that some types of cannibalism were practiced in other areas.

Arens's skepticism regarding the evidence of cannibalism thus contributes to the awareness of the need for more scientific study. However, his suspicion of the motives of the ethnographers and an-

thropologists who wrote about cannibalism has rather controversial consequences. Following Arens's lead, some postcolonial theorists argue that cannibalism is a myth which expresses Western cultural biases, a myth created by European imperialists to justify their colonizing ambitions and conceal their other ulterior motives. Since they do not believe that cannibals existed, these theorists turn to dismantle ethnohistorical accounts and studies of cannibalism and claim they are false. Indeed, ethnohistorical accounts of cannibalism need to be examined critically, since some of them may well be imaginary. Yet these theorists' denial of cannibalism and their suspicion of those who seek evidence for cannibalism have become a bias in itself.

At first sight, Tim White's discoveries appear to simply confirm what the postcolonial theorists would object to: assertions by white empire-builders that those indigenous nonwhite peoples practiced cannibalism in the Americas. Yet a more careful reading reveals that White should be given credit for transcending some of the "colonialist bias" alleged by these postcolonial theorists. Tim White clearly indicates that Europe—supposedly the "civilized" region and sites of the "imperialists," using the postcolonial terminology—contains evidence of cannibalism. Yet ironically, Tim White's motives are still questioned by the postcolonialists. In response to White's study, Arens not only states that "it's impossible to prove that cannibalism took place," but also tries to psychoanalyze White: "I think [White] was seduced by the idea of cannibalism. It was inevitable that he concluded that the people were cannibals" (qtd. in Osborne 34). In other words, the postcolonialist critics simply object to any studies in search of evidence of cannibalism, assuming such studies to be biased from the very beginning.

China in the Context of Postcolonial Assumptions about Cannibalism

Yet what role does China play in this? Western postcolonial theorists rarely pay attention to the question of cannibalism in China. These scholars tend to focus on geographical areas about which more Euro-

pean accounts of cannibalism had been written. And when they view cannibalism as a form of discourse or a trope in contemporary times, they look at primarily Western writings. Furthermore, the range of the postcolonial critics' evidence (if it is primarily linguistic) and their method of "discourse analysis" are far too limited. To include countries such as China in their purview, they would also have to develop linguistic skills that are not easy to acquire.

In addition, the postcolonial critics tend to adopt a rather dogmatic and simplistic paradigm: the colonialists and imperialists have political power and dominance, and thus they can control and exploit those colonized "others." The "others" include natives, women, and the underclass—the so-called "subalterns." These critics therefore examine the discourse of cannibalism, focusing on such topics as race, class, gender, and imperialism (Hulme 3).

Such a methodology might work to some extent if it were limited to a specific historical era (i.e., the colonial period); certain regions (the colonizing and the colonized countries); or specific agents and "victims" (the colonizers versus the colonized). Yet the postcolonialists' topics (familiar and not original) are too restricted, and their arguments are reductionist. A country like China probably does not fit into the paradigm easily. Though an imperial power long in East and Central Asia, China does not fit into Eurocentric paradigms of imperialism. Nor does China appear to fit in easily as the "colonized, cannibalistic Other," since China never became a European colony, and there were not many European ethnohistorical accounts of cannibalism in China. The fact that the postcolonialists' paradigm is not applicable to China may be another reason for them to leave China out of their discussion.

Does postcolonialism contribute anything to the study of claims of cannibalism in China? The postcolonial critics' skepticism, though not original, is useful to some extent. A stringent and open-minded re-examination of earlier ethnohistorical accounts and anthropological studies of cannibalism could contribute to our knowledge in this area. Some archaeologists believe that the Peking man found at Zhoukoudian 周口店 (Choukoutien) ate human flesh, particularly the brain and bone marrow (Cunningham 93-94; Chang 48). Others such as

Eugene Anderson argue that archaeological findings prove that this is incorrect (8). It will require very advanced technology and careful osteological analysis for any broad consensus to be reached on this issue. The numerous records of cannibalism in Chinese history and anecdotal accounts need to be further examined and double-checked against material evidence, if it is available.

While offering a helpful admonition to be cautious, the postcolonialist model ultimately is of limited use, especially to scholars studying China. Applying this model to all eras, all regions, and all peoples will lead to some egregious errors.

I did point out in another article that the Japanese scholar Kuwabara Jitsuzo's 桑原鷲藏 (1924) work on Chinese cannibalism written during the Japanese expansion of its sphere of influence in Manchuria may have "lent support to the belligerent Japanese government's colonial and political designs on China" ("Morality and Cannibalism" 26). Such motives are palpable, for Kuwabara asserts that in contrast to the Chinese, the Japanese do not ever eat human flesh. Yet how should we treat travel literature such as the ninth-century Japanese monk Ennin's diary, the thirteenth-century Venetian Marco Polo's book, and some nineteenth-century missionaries' reports, which mention cannibalism in China? Since they were written by non-Chinese, should they therefore be regarded as necessarily shaped or distorted by cultural bias, designed to conceal ulterior motives, and calculated to further colonialist ambitions? I would suggest that one examines these accounts as well as their historical contexts carefully before concluding that they reveal an imperialistic bias.

There are also problems in postcolonialist critics' application of post-structuralist, neo-Marxist, and neo-Freudian theories to the study of cannibalism. As I have discussed in more detail in another paper,² the contemporary American cannibal Jeffrey Dahmer is clearly a psychopath, a sadist and sexual pervert. Yet the critic Maggie Kilgour adopts some of Freud's ideas and concludes that cannibalism was "Dahmer's grotesquely pathetic way of trying to transcend the isolation of his private subjectivity, to reestablish identification with others, by deconstructing, literally dismembering, difference" (258). Kilgour

would have us perceive a dangerous pathological case as a modern tragedy, and a serial murderer and cannibal as a tragic hero. Such post-structuralist interpretations as Kilgour's are both erroneous and morally obtuse.

Cannibalism in Modern Chinese Fiction

We thus need to be extremely cautious about applying postcolonial theories to China. The idea of cannibalism has special meanings in Chinese culture and there are various types: survival, due to hunger, famine, or siege; ritual; revenge; punitive, i.e., a supreme punishment and degradation visited upon one's mortal enemies; "gourmet"; medicinal; and, related to this last type, sacrificial, the supreme display of self-sacrifice (in the slicing of one's own flesh) according to the dictates of filial piety or loyalty.³ It is perhaps inappropriate to apply Freud's unfounded idea of the death wish in the Chinese case. The Chinese people have tended to go to great lengths to extend life as much as possible. Taoist yoga and elixirs of life certainly reflect a desire for longevity. Cannibalism in China can hardly be seen as an expression of some sort of baseless "death wish." Medicinal cannibalism, in particular, aims precisely to extend the cannibal's life or cure his illness.

In 1908, the modern Chinese writer Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936) regarded the imperialists as "beasts," while calling the Chinese nearly "human" (Pusey 85). While such an attitude may correspond exactly with the ideology of the postcolonialist critics, it triggers a very different reaction from a scholar of a humanitarian and egalitarian mind: In James Pusey's view, Lu Xun's theory of "animal-natured" imperialists is "racist" (84).

Ten years later, however, Lu Xun exhibited quite a different attitude toward Westerners and the Chinese people. In his famous story "The Diary of a Madman" ("Kuangren riji" 狂人日記) published in 1918, interestingly, Lu Xun's denunciation of the Western "imperialists" gradually receded to the background as he became more and more critical of his own people. In this story, Lu Xun accused his fellow

citizens of “eating people” (Pusey 85); Lu Xun also used animalistic epithets such as “wolves,” “hyenas,” and “reptiles” to refer to the Chinese, highlighting their supposedly cruel nature. All of traditional Chinese society, Lu Xun claims, was one in which “men eat other men.”

The madman tries to urge the people to change, warning them that otherwise they will eat themselves up, or be exterminated by “real people” (*zhende ren* 真的人, Lu Xun 1973, 15-17). The “real people” refers to those who have advanced in the evolutionary hierarchy, abandoned the savage practice of cannibalism, and achieved a higher regard for human life.⁴ The story reveals that instead of regarding the Westeners as beasts victimizing the Chinese, Lu Xun now sees the Chinese victimizing themselves and placing themselves in danger of being exterminated by the “real people.”

Lu Xun’s madman still has some hope of changing his fellow people and saving the children. Yet an essay written in 1925, “Random Notes Jotted Under the Lamp” (“Dengxia manbi” 燈下漫筆), shows that Lu Xun had become cynical and combative. In this essay, he denounces China and traditional Chinese culture for its lack of humanitarian values (Lu Xun 1974, 199). He warns his fellow Chinese against self-complacency and about future calamity, and urges the young people to overthrow the traditional civilization (which he views as inhumane). At the same time, he claims that he would sincerely thank the foreigners who “detest China,” rather than praising Chinese civilization. In his opinion, the foreigner who is repulsed by China “must be someone who is unwilling to eat the flesh of Chinese people” (Lu Xun 1974, 196). In other words, the foreigners who shake up the Chinese people’s complacency about their own culture are the true helpers: they assist in awakening the Chinese so that the people will reform themselves and survive. As implied by Lu Xun, foreigners who would instead continue to enhance Chinese people’s self-complacency would only speed up the destruction of China; they therefore are potential participants in China’s human-flesh banquets.

Lu Xun’s use of cannibalism primarily as a metaphor for social exploitation exerted much influence on his readers and on later authors. Yet this century would still witness cases of survival, punitive, and

medicinal cannibalism in China, though some other types of cannibalism recorded in premodern writings have disappeared.

Continuing Lu Xun's largely metaphoric use of cannibalism, Wang Jingzhi 汪靜之 (1902/03- ?) wrote a short story "Human Flesh" ("Renrou," 人肉 1925?), depicting a woman being eaten by a group of hungry men.⁵ Yu Hua's 余華 (1960-) "Classical Love" ("Gudian aiqing," 古典愛情 1988) is an allegory, set in the traditional past.⁶ A young lady of a wealthy family becomes impoverished and, during a famine, is sold to the human flesh market.⁷ Both stories emphasize patriarchal oppression of women.

It is not merely fortuitous that after the June 1989 massacres in Beijing and Chengdu,⁸ several literary works featuring cannibalism were published. Mo Yan's 莫言 *Boozeland* (*Jiuguo* 酒國, "wine country," 1992) is set in contemporary times, and describes gourmets who cook and eat baby boys.⁹ While Lu Xun wants to "save the children," Mo Yan writes a parody about "eating the children." Though seemingly a fanciful account of the depravity and corruption of officials, Mo Yan's novel indirectly condemns the communist leaders who ruthlessly killed unarmed young students and their supporters around Tian'anmen in 1989.

By contrast, Zheng Yi's (1947-) 鄭義 *Scarlet Memorial* (*Hongse jinianbei* 紅色紀念碑, 1993) is a report of cannibalism in some counties in Guangxi during the Cultural Revolution.¹⁰ In Zheng Yi's analysis, Mao Zedong is responsible for such atrocities because Mao encouraged his people to kill "class enemies." In addition to checking many secret documents which the regime tried to cover up and destroy, Zheng Yi interviewed a number of former cannibals, the relatives of cannibalized victims, and witnesses. He also managed to take photos of two former cannibals. Indeed, even William Arens will not be able to dismiss lightly the existence of the cannibalism reported by Zheng Yi. From the cannibals' confession, it is clear that the motives for cannibalism were not solely punitive and political, but sometimes included the practical desire to obtain the supposedly medicinal effects of cooked human flesh. The belief that certain human organs such as the liver are particularly fine tonics motivated a number of people to eat human

flesh.

Liu Zhenyun's 劉震雲 (1958-) "Reminiscing 1942" ("Wengu yijiu sier" 溫故一九四二, 1993) also brought the issue of cannibalism back within a specific historical period, merging it with reportage, politics, and philosophical reflections on colonialism. The young narrator-cum-writer is a native of Henan province. In 1992 he embarks on a journey back in time and space: he returns to his native place to investigate various issues surrounding the severe famine there in 1942. From the summer of 1942 to the spring of 1943 during the Sino-Japanese War, the thirty million people in Henan suffered from calamities caused by droughts and locusts. As many as three million people starved to death.

The narrator interviews a number of survivors of the famine, including his relatives. He also checks into government records, local gazetteers, and journalistic reports. The narrative weaves together various parts: interviews; lengthy quotes or summaries from documents and reports; and the narrator's comments and analyses on the situation in 1942 as he unearths the materials.

The most important sources that the author draws upon, appropriates, and comments at length appear to be Theodore H. White's *In Search of History: A Personal Adventure* (1978) as well as Theodore H. White and Annalee Jacoby's *Thunder Out of China* (1946).¹¹ The narrator-cum-writer admits, "I have clearly become aware that Bai Xiude 白修德 (Theodore H. White) will be the protagonist of this literary work" (476). The author has complex and somewhat ambivalent feelings toward Theodore H. White, the former correspondent of *Time* magazine. Aware that no one was concerned about the famine in Henan in 1942, and even the survivors are not concerned about it fifty years later, the narrator realizes that White was the only person to have cared about the famine. Yet the narrator feels embarrassed about the fact that the Chinese were so apathetic about their country's own famine that a foreign reporter had to step in to help, and that famine victims had to depend on this foreigner for eventually obtaining relief (476-77).

The main target of attack is the national leader of that time, Gen-

eralissimo Jiang Jieshi 蔣介石 (a.k.a., Chiang K'ai-shek). The narrator accuses him of caring only about the aggrandizement of his own wealth and power, living extravagantly all the while ignoring, denying, and suppressing reports of famine. In addition, the narrator blames the landlords, government officials of the Nationalist Party, and military officers—all of whom allegedly exploited the poor stricken by famine: instead of getting relief from the Central Government, the famine victims were forced to continue paying taxes and military grain levies. As a result, many of them either fled to other provinces or starved to death.

The author criticizes Generalissimo Jiang's censorship of newspapers for his own ulterior motives. On February 1, 1943, the newspaper *Dagong bao* 大公報 published a battle-zone correspondent's report on famine victims. This report so enraged Jiang that he ordered that the newspaper cease publication for three days (481; cf. White and Jacoby 166). The narrator remarks satirically, "although many people blamed Jiang's rage on his bureaucratism," it is in fact because "Jiang was unwilling to let such a trivial matter as thirty million famine victims influence his brain" (481). In the author's depiction, Jiang only cares about "important" affairs that might threaten the stability of his rulership, yet he does not regard the famine as one of the important affairs worthy of his attention.

The author obviously finds it ironic that it was a Westerner, Theodore H. White, who was instrumental in bringing relief to the suffering people. White took a trip to Henan in February, 1943, and reported at length on the horrible situations he had seen or heard about. White witnessed, and his companion Harrison Forman photographed, how wild dogs were feeding on human corpses, and White also reported incidents of cannibalism (476-80). When White met with Generalissimo Jiang and informed him of the suffering in the afflicted areas, at first Jiang denied it. White reported the scene in his book: "I tried to break through by telling him about the cannibalism. He said that cannibalism in China was impossible. I said that I had seen dogs eating people on the roads. He said that was impossible" (White 155). After White showed Jiang the photos of the wild dogs eating corpses, Jiang finally ordered relief action. The narrator uses his imagination to re-

construct this scene of confrontation, depicting Jiang as uncaring and hypocritical (487-90).

Theodore H. White was much more fortunate than the Chinese battle-zone correspondent for the *Dagong bao*. When White's report on the Henan famine appeared on *Time* magazine, Madame Jiang Jieshi (Mrs. Chiang) was visiting the United States and was infuriated by the report. She asked Harry Luce to fire White, but Luce refused (White 154). In relating this incident, the narrator exclaims, "After all, it is a country in which there is freedom of the press!" (486).

Aside from envying the freedom of speech in the West, the narrator creates much irony by juxtaposing Jiang's treatment of the *Dagong bao* and his treatment of White. According to the narrator, Jiang may treat his own citizens as second-class citizens, yet he dares not offend a Westerner for fear of offending Western countries. Furthermore, Jiang could order a Chinese newspaper to cease publication, yet could not order *Time* magazine to cease publication (486). The narrator says with tongue in cheek that he and the thirty million famine victims of his native place are not grateful for the *Dagong bao* report, since it only enraged the Generalissimo and made matters worse. Instead, they are grateful to White, who truly helped out the starving people (485). In fact, the *Dagong bao* report was not as futile as the author depicts it. It was because of the report and the subsequent suppression of the *Dagong bao* that White and Harrison Forman of the London *Times* decided to go to Henan (White and Jacoby 166).

The narrator occasionally ridicules Theodore H. White for being somewhat ignorant and complacent. In White's account, Jiang listens to him "with visible distaste"; White also assumes that Jiang "did not know what was going on" (Theodore H. White 1978, 155). The narrator argues that White "may have thought himself clever," but "had actually misunderstood" Jiang; the narrator asserts that Jiang must have already known the severity of the famine in Henan, yet did not care about it, and Jiang's expression of "distaste" was in fact caused by the absurd situation of having to put aside important affairs and listen to a foreign busybody talking about insignificant matters (488-90).¹² The narrator also finds White smug in concluding that "lives were

saved . . . by the power of the American press” (Theodore H. White 1978, 155). The narrator comments satirically that in fact Generalissimo Chiang was the true savior—“as soon as he started action, many lives were saved”—yet because “White did not know the situation in China, he claimed all the credit for himself” (490). The narrator is clearly using his ridicule of White to underscore his condemnation of Chiang.

The occasional ambivalent criticism notwithstanding, the author describes White as a positive figure on the whole. White is righteous, courageous, and chivalric in taking the initiative to expose the Chinese government’s corruption, confront Chiang, and demand immediate aid for the starving people. According to the narrator, White’s original motivation is to look for some news in the famine. Yet White is so “moved and shocked by the miserable reality” that his “sympathy and sense of justice” emerge, leading him to “call out” and eventually confront Chiang (476). In other words, White is by no means the imperialist with colonizing ambitions whom postcolonial theorists enjoy denouncing. At least at one level White appears to have shaken up the complacency of Chiang and some others who seemed to believe that cannibalism in China was impossible. To a certain extent, White thus belongs to the category of the foreigners praised by Lu Xun—namely, one who is repulsed by China (in this case, the Chinese government) and “unwilling to eat the flesh of Chinese people.”

In addition, the author reverses the paradigm that condemns the imperialists. Though potentially an American “Imperialist,” White contrasts sharply with the corrupt Chinese officials. These officials are shown to be the real “imperialists,” while White is depicted as a savior, saving the lives of numerous Chinese people and children. Reading White’s description, “Missionaries left their compounds only when necessary, for a white man walking in the street was the only agent of hope, and was assailed by wasted men, frail women, children, people, head-knocking on the ground, groveling, kneeling, begging for food, wailing, ‘*K’o lien, k’o lien*’ (‘Mercy, mercy’), but pleading really only for food” (Theodore H. White 1978, 147; cf. White 1988, 133), the narrator claims that he “does not feel ashamed at all for those people in his native place.” He admits, “Had I been in that situation, I would also

have rather kowtowed to the Westerners” (492-93). He elaborates on how the few Westerners in Henan were the only people trying to save the lives of famine victims, including the abandoned children (493-94). Reminding the reader that the Americans helped the Chinese greatly during that time, the narrator remarks satirically: “When later on we loudly shouted, ‘Overthrow American Imperialism!’, I don’t think we should have ignored history—at least we shouldn’t overthrow American Imperialism during the two years from 1942 to 1943” (486).

This narrative cites and summarizes many documents, enhancing the author’s re-creation of the suffering in 1942-43. However, the narrator’s account sometimes departs from what White originally reported. In the narrator’s retelling of what White reported, he writes that White “saw a mother boil her two-year-old child and eat it; for the sake of survival, a father strangled his two children, cut up and boiled their flesh, and ate it.” The narrator suggests that incidents of cannibalism were rampant (480).

When checking the narrator’s report against Theodore H. White’s original, we find that White never claimed to have personally witnessed cannibalism (White and Jacoby 171-72; Theodore H. White 148-49). White clearly indicates that the accounts of cannibalism were what he had heard from other people such as missionaries and doctors. He remarks in the co-authored *Thunder Out of China*: “How much of this was just gruesome legend and how much truth we could not judge. But we heard the same tales too frequently, in too widely scattered places, to ignore the fact that in Henan human beings were eating their own kind” (White and Jacoby 172). In *In Search of History*, White again mentions he only heard about cannibalism: “I never saw any man kill another person for meat, and never tasted human flesh.” Yet he was certain that there was cannibalism: “But it seemed irrefutably true that people were eating people’s meat. The usual defense was that the people meat was taken from the dead. Case after case which we tried to report presented this defense” (148). In stating that White “reported” that he “witnessed” cannibalism, the author clearly exaggerates the evidence of cannibalism.

Granted that the author may have overstated the situation for the

dramatic effect of his fiction, we should by no means jump to the conclusion that everything in the story is suspect. Judging from the historical context, some incidents of survival cannibalism may have indeed taken place in the afflicted area, though probably they were not as rampant as the author made them out to be. A crucial issue here, though, is that White claimed that he never personally witnessed cannibalism in Henan, while the author Liu Zhenyun claimed in his story that White reported having “witnessed” it. However, Liu Zhenyun’s “invention” of the “evidence” is not intended to portray White negatively as alleging cannibalism among the “primitives,” but rather to intensify the description of the miseries during the famine.

Stressing the extreme, the author repeats Lu Xun’s message: rebel against the exploiters. The narrator interviews the descendant of a landlord who tells him about a group of rebels. They seized the landlord’s house, “killing pigs and sheep,” planning to start a rebellion, but later died in a fire (457). When writing about how famine victims became cannibals, even “exchanging their children or wives for food,” the narrator becomes indignant and remarks ironically: “I feel that those people had indeed wasted their audacity in eating other people as well as their relatives and children, because they did not become bandits, form a band to murder people, form the Ku Klux Klan, or organize a terrorist group” (480). The narrator enthusiastically praises the rebels who seized the landlord’s house and food, eulogizing them as “the backbone and hope of our race” (480). To some extent the author thus resembles Lu Xun in expressing contempt for those who suffer passively or cannibalize their own people rather than rebel against the “exploiters.”

Although the courage to rebel against injustice is praiseworthy, we should not ignore the means and goals of such rebellion. Instead of rebelling against the corrupt officials and military officers who force them to pay onerous taxes, the group of rebels chose an easier target—a landlord without guards or even weapons. They killed livestock for their own transient personal enjoyment, rather than using the landlord’s supplies prudently, planning for the long-term, and setting up a relief center for the aid of the community. It is questionable how much as-

sistance such a group of lawless bandits could bring to the starving local populace.

While the abovementioned works by Mo Yan and Zheng Yi were published in Taiwan, Liu Zhenyun managed to have his story published in the PRC. Liu's severe condemnation of Generalissimo Jiang appears genuine and straightforward, rather than allegorical. Yet it may also well be a strategy of camouflaging. Liu may have intended to condemn the communist regime as well, yet restrained due to the government's censorship, he dares not openly criticize the regime.

In any case, Liu Zhenyun appears to use the past to criticize the present, and some of his criticism is hidden between the lines. For example, the bandits in some ways resemble the communist revolutionaries, killing the "victimizers," yet not saving the victims. Also, when the narrator questions his maternal grandmother about the famine, she answers, "There have been many years in which people were starving to death. Which year are you referring to?" (454). Indeed, in many parts of China, there were years of famine and starvation during 1959-62—the most deadly famine in world history—which were far worse than the 1942 famine. The old woman's question reveals that even after China was supposedly "liberated" in 1949, the people's livelihood had not improved nearly as much as the communist government claimed. It also reminds the reader indirectly that the communist government typically hid or suppressed reports of famine.

Another example of the author's implicit criticism of the present occurs when the narrator interviews his uncle. His uncle regrets not having stayed with the Nationalist Army and gone to Taiwan afterwards. Although his uncle only expresses envy of the economic prosperity enjoyed by the people in Taiwan, this may also imply that many people in China envy the level of freedom citizens enjoy in Taiwan. While his uncle complains about the present, the narrator tries to comfort him, assuring him that he has done very well already in his life, and he should be content with his life in China. In any case, the uncle's regret for not having gone to Taiwan, where Generalissimo Jiang fled after 1949, clearly reveals his dissatisfaction with living under the communist regime. Although Jiang was largely responsible for the

suffering of the people in Henan in 1942, at least some of the famine survivors would have preferred following him to Taiwan when they look back on their lives fifty years later.

Not only the American Imperialists but also the Japanese Imperialist invaders are depicted as the helpers of the starving people in Henan. In 1943, the Japanese went to the afflicted areas, and gave the victims grain, thereby saving many lives. Using White's report, the author relates how in the spring of 1944, the Japanese decided to clean out Henan. The Japanese had only about 60,000 men in their army. However, the Chinese army was weak and had been exploiting the peasants. The peasants eventually fought alongside the Japanese, instead of against them. The peasants disarmed about 50,000 Chinese soldiers, and within three weeks, the Japanese seized all their objectives, and about 300,000 Chinese soldiers were killed (503; White and Jacoby 178).

While following Theodore H. White's report on the peasants' helping the Japanese, Liu Zhenyun also seems very much influenced by White's words and reasoning: "Had I been a Henan peasant I would have acted as they did when, a year later, they went over to the Japanese and helped the Japanese defeat their own Chinese troops" (Theodore H. White 1978, 153). The narrator comments extensively and indignantly on this event, taking the side of those people in his native place. He claims that it was right for them to help the Japanese and thereby become "Chinese traitors" (*hanjian* 漢奸). Adopting the perspective of those people, he explains: the Japanese invaders had the motives of winning the war as well as furthering their political goals; they had an ulterior motive when saving us, yet they saved our lives. The narrator feels that in order to survive, it is natural for the people to help the invaders who save their lives, rather than help the government that ignores their plight. The narrator concludes defiantly that he and the people of his native place are "the descendants of the Chinese traitors" (502); when choosing between starving to death and becoming "slaves without a country," they chose the latter (504).

Such a view expressed by the author violates the usual standard of loyalty to one's country. The Chinese people have usually condemned

the Japanese invaders as well as the Chinese collaborating with the Japanese. Yet Liu Zhenyun voices an iconoclastic view, claiming that the Japanese invaders in Henan saved the starving people, and it was justified for the Chinese people in Henan to betray their own country.

Liu Zhenyun may have had cognitive and moral reasons for conveying such a message in his work. He may have indeed been interested in digging out the historical truth in Henan, and what he found was that the people of Henan were helping the Japanese invaders in 1942-43 because the Japanese saved them from starving. The discovery reveals a part of regional history that contradicts the standard historical accounts of China in 1942-43: what is commonly known is that all the Chinese people were fighting against the Japanese, resisting their invasion, yet Liu recounts that many peasants in Henan in fact helped the Japanese. Liu may have also wanted to rewrite and reinterpret that part of history so as to defend himself and the people of his native place: they were not traitors by nature, but were forced into becoming traitors by circumstances.

In addition, Liu may have political, artistic, and even commercial motives. Writing in post-Tian'anmen China, Liu may very well have used the history from 1942-43 to express many people's indignation with a tyrannical government. Moreover, Liu is decidedly taking an independent stance as an artist. By depicting the Japanese invaders as more "humane" than the Chinese government at that time, Liu's reportage-fiction contradicts the numerous official reports condemning Japanese and American imperialism. While similar to Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* (*Honggaoliang jiazu*, 紅高粱家族 1988) in its root-seeking aspect, Liu's work reverses the strong anti-Japanese sentiment found in *Red Sorghum* and a number of other literary works. Liu's work thus appears original, unorthodox, and can be sensational. It is controversial in reversing the common, mainstream understanding of the Sino-Japanese relationship in 1942-43. Yet it appeals to the public because it offers a fresh and unconventional interpretation of history, as well as criticism of the government.

Ostensibly, Liu Zhenyun is adopting a minority subject position in antagonizing the mainstream ideology. Yet the minority position

may be less uncommon than it appears. Liu may very well be expressing the desires of a number of ordinary people, which have been hitherto suppressed by state ideology. The favorable view of the American and Japanese "Imperialists" expressed in Liu's work may also be humanly understandable, and probably not so unusual these days in China. It may imply the hidden view of many young Chinese who are discontented with the communist regime: instead of being controlled by their erratic authoritarian government, they would rather be colonized by Western or Japanese "imperialists" as long as the latter would care for them and give them freedom, more say over their affairs, and affluence.

In 1918, Lu Xun was already warning that if the Chinese did not stop enslavement and people-eating among themselves, they would be exterminated by the "real people," or enslaved by outsiders. For Lu Xun, the young people are the country's hope, the agents who can change China into a better country. Yet despite the revolution in 1949, the communist regime has perpetuated the pattern of enslavement and "cannibalism," even, in 1989, shooting its young people. For young authors, such as Liu Zhenyun, who are writing about cannibalism, their government probably has become the incurable people-eating beast, while the foreign "imperialists" more likely to be the "real people" who offer help to the Chinese people. In the age of postcolonialism, a number of the Chinese people may find their own government to be playing the role of an atrocious colonizer, and would sometimes prefer to be colonized by the "real people."

NOTES

¹ This paper is based on part of my book manuscript on the portrayals of cannibalism in modern Chinese literature. The writing of this article was supported by the University of California President's Research Fellowship in the Humanities and by funding from the University of California, Riverside.

² I discussed these problems in a paper entitled "Pitfalls of the Postcolonialist Rubric in the Study of Modern Chinese Fiction Featuring Cannibalism: From Lu Xun's 'Diary of a Madman' to Mo Yan's

Boozeland.”

³ Yue Gang discussed some of the types of cannibalism in his dissertation. See also my “Morality and Cannibalism,” “Her Hide for Barter,” and “From History to Allegory.” I have discussed the various types of cannibalism in my book manuscript, *Of Body and Boundary: Portrayals of Cannibalism in Premodern Chinese Literature*.

⁴ Lu Xun may be implying that Chinese revolutionaries, the Chinese yet to be born or even some foreigners are the “real people.”

⁵ Wang Der-wei (310) mentioned this story. I thank Wang Der-wei for giving me a copy of this story.

⁶ “Gudian aiqing” first appeared in *Beijing wenxue* 北京文學 12 (1988). See “Editor’s Note” in Jones’s translation of Yu Hua’s stories (Yu 1996, 275).

⁷ This story was probably influenced by some premodern anecdotal and fictional accounts of cannibalism. For example, an anecdote in the *New Tang History* (*Xin Tang shu* 新唐書) relates a woman’s sale of her body for food so that her husband could use the proceeds as travel expenses to return home. This anecdote was cited in *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 and *The Anatomy of Love* (*Qingshi leilüe* 情史類略, ca. 1626-31), and greatly elaborated in the short story “In Jiangdu, A Filial Daughter-in-Law Offers Her Body To Be Butchered” (“Jiangdu shi xiaofu tushen” 江都市孝婦屠身) in Langxian’s 浪仙 story collection *The Rocks Nod Their Heads* (*Shi dian tou* 石點頭, late 1620s). See my discussion of these sources in “Her Hide for Barter.” Yu Hua’s immediate source of inspiration is probably Ji Yun’s 紀昀 (1724-1805) anecdote about a woman being butchered for food (*Yuewei caotang biji* 閱微草堂筆記 2: 68).

⁸ See also Williams 1991.

⁹ I have discussed the modern and contemporary Chinese works mentioned in this paper in greater detail in my book manuscript on the portrayals of cannibalism in modern Chinese literature.

¹⁰ See also Williams 1997.

¹¹ The account of the famine in Theodore H. White’s *In Search of History* is based on the chapter “The Honan Famine” in *Thunder Out of China*. The author Liu Zhenyun mentions Theodore H. White’s *In*

Search of History, translating the title as *Tansuo lishi* 探索歷史 (477), which differs from the title of the Chinese translation—*Zhongguo kangzhan miwen—Bai Xiude huiyilu* 中國抗戰秘聞——白修德回憶錄. Although Liu Zhenyun does not mention *Thunder Out of China* (translated into Chinese under the title of *Zhongguo baofengyu* 中國暴風雨), he has certainly used the book's narration of the famine, the report of the newspaper *Dagong bao*, and so forth. Liu apparently has also borrowed from the Chinese translations of these two books.

¹²Theodore H. White's original is: "Chiang . . . listening to me with visible distaste because his meddling sister-in-law insisted he had to" (1978, 155). Yet the narrator insists that White interprets Jiang's expression of "distaste" as "being unwilling to believe it [i.e., severe famine in Henan]," thereby faulting White for having only a "superficial" understanding of Jiang (488).

WORKS CITED

- Anderson, E. N. *The Food of China*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1988.
- Arens, William. *The Man-Eating Myth, Anthropology and Anthropophagy*. New York: Oxford UP, 1979.
- Barker, Francis, et al., eds. *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.
- Chang, Kwang-chih. *The Archaeology of Ancient China*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1977.
- Cunningham, Richard. *The Place Where the World Ends: A Modern Story of Cannibalism and Human Courage*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1973.
- Hulme, Peter. "Introduction: The Cannibal Scene." In Francis Barker, et al., eds. *Cannibalism and the Colonial World* (q.v.). 1-38.
- Ji Yun. *Yuwei caotang biji zhushi* 閱微草堂筆記. Ann. Bei Yuan 北原, et al. Beijing: Zhongguo huaqiao chubanshe, 1994.
- Kilgour, Maggie. "The Function of Cannibalism at the Present Time." In Francis Barker, et al., eds. *Cannibalism and the Colonial World* (q.v.). 238-59.

- Kuwabara Jitsuzo. "Shina ningen ni okeru shokujinniku no fushu." 支那人間に於ける食人肉の風習. *Toyo Gakuh* 東洋學報, 14.1 (1924): 1-62.
- Liu Zhenyun. "Wengu yijiu sier." In *Zuojia* 作家 3 (1993). Collected in Chen Sihe 陳思和, ed., *Bijin shijimo xiaoshuo xuan 1990-1993* 逼近世末小說選 1990-1993. 3 vols. 1995; rpt. Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1996. 1: 451-505.
- Lu Xun. "Dengxia manbi." In *Lu Xun, Fen* 墳. In *Lu Xun, sanshinian ji* 魯迅三十年集. Hong Kong: Xinyi chubanshe, 1974. 1: 191-200.
- . "Kuangren riji." In *Nahan* 吶喊. Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1973.
- Mo Yan. *Jiuguo*. Taipei: Hongfan shudian, 1992.
- Montaigne, Michel de. *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*. Trans. Donald M. Frame. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1958.
- Osborne, Lawrence. "Does Man Eat Man?: Inside the Great Cannibalism Controversy." *Lingua Franca* 7.4 (1997): 28-38.
- Pusey, James Reeve. *Lu Xun and Evolution*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998.
- Sanday, Peggy Reeves. *Divine Hunger: Cannibalism as a Cultural System*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986.
- Wang Der-wei 王德威. "Sange ji'e de nüren" 三個饑餓的女人. In Yenna Wu with Philip F. Williams, eds., *Zhongguo funü yu wenxue lunji, diyi ji* 中國婦女與文學論集, 第一集 (Critical Essays on Chinese Women and Literature, Volume 1). Taipei: Daw Shiang Publishing Co., 1999. 307-57.
- Wang Jingzhi. 汪靜之 "Renrou" 人肉. In *Xiandai Zhongguo xiaoshuo xuan* 現代中國小說選. Shanghai: Baixin shuju, n.d.
- White, Theodore H. and Annalee Jacoby. *Thunder Out of China*. New York: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1946.
- . *Zhongguo baofengyu* 中國暴風雨. Trans. Duan Na 端納. 1947; rpt. Hong Kong: Guangjiaojing chubanshe, 1976.
- White, Theodore H. *In Search of History: A Personal Adventure*. New York: Harper & Row, 1978.
- . *Zhongguo kangzhan miwen—Bai Xiude huiyilu* 中國抗戰秘聞——白佟德回憶錄. Trans. Cui Chen 崔陳. Henan: Henan

- 白修德回憶錄. Trans. Cui Chen 崔陳. Henan: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1988.
- White, Tim D. *Prehistoric Cannibalism at Mancos SMTUMR-2346*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992.
- Williams, Philip F. "Some Provincial Precursors of Popular Dissent Movements in Beijing." *China Information* [Leiden] 6.1 (1991): 1-9.
- . "Chinese Cannibalism's Literary Portrayal: From Cultural Myth to Investigative Reportage." *Tamkang Review: A Quarterly of Comparative Studies Between Chinese and Foreign Literatures* 27.4 (1997): 421-42.
- Wu, Yenna. "From History to Allegory: Surviving Famine in the *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan*." *Chinese Culture* 38.4 (1997): 87-120.
- . "Her Hide for Barter: Xi Langxian's Model of Self-Sacrifice in *The Rocks Nod Their Heads (Shi dian tou)*." *Tamkang Review: A Quarterly of Comparative Studies Between Chinese and Foreign Literatures* 27.2 (1996): 127-82.
- . "Morality and Cannibalism in Ming-Qing Fiction." *Tamkang Review: A Quarterly of Comparative Studies Between Chinese and Foreign Literatures* 27.1 (1996): 23-46.
- Yu Hua. "Gudian aiqing." In Yu Hua, *Shishi ruyan* 世事如煙. Taipei: Yuanliu chuban gongsi, 1991.
- . *The Past and the Punishments*. Trans. Andrew F. Jones. Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 1996.
- Yue Gang. "Hunger, Cannibalism, and the Politics of Eating: Alimentary Discourse and Chinese-American Literature." Ph.D. diss., U of Oregon, 1993.
- Zheng Yi. *Hongse jinianbei*. Taipei: Huashi wenhua gongsi, 1993.
- . *Scarlet Memorial: Tales of Cannibalism in Modern China*. Trans. & ed. T. P. Sym (pseud.). Boulder, CO: Westview P, 1996.

