

Ecocriticism and National Image in ?????? (A Bite of China)

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Recommended Citation

Xiao, Mingwen. "Ecocriticism and National Image in ?????? (A Bite of China)." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 16.4 (2014): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2417>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

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Volume 16 Issue 4 (December 2014) Article 11**Mingwen Xiao,****"Ecocriticism and National Image in 舌尖上的中国 (A Bite of China)"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss4/11>>Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 16.4 (2014)**Thematic Issue **New Work in Ecocriticism**. Ed. **Simon C. Estok and Murali Sivaramakrishnan**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss4/>>

Abstract: In his article "Ecocriticism and National Image in 舌尖上的中国 (A Bite of China)" Mingwen Xiao examines the multi-faceted contents of the popular 2012 television series. Instead of exhibiting delicacies made by professional chefs in luxury restaurants, *A Bite of China* displays local food and dishes made by ordinary people. By focusing on every-day food preparation, the show constructs a performance where class, ethnicity, gender, age, and other social markers are blurred and the geographically and ethnically diverse ways of food preparation and consumption appear as a cohesive Chinese culinary identity. Xiao argues that *A Bite of China* plays a role in restoring Chinese citizens' confidence in domestic cuisine and thus aspects of the television show can be understood as an ecocritical perspective of current China.

Mingwen XIAO

Ecocriticism and National Image in 舌尖上的中国 (A Bite of China)

In Chinese the proverb "民以食为天" ("food comes first to people") reveals the priority of food in Chinese culture. The adage "Ruling a great nation just like cooking a small delicacy," originally from 老子 (*The Book of the Way*), points to the parallel between ruling a nation and cooking a delicacy, both requiring the observance of Dao and law (see Sun 76). While this perspective suggests that cooking can be understood as a metaphor of ruling a nation, eating and its practices contribute to the construction of national cohesion. Further, cooking and the consumption of food can be understood as located in the context of ecocriticism (see, e.g., Estok; Phillips and Sullivan). In "Steak and Chips" Roland Barthes discusses the relationship between food and national identity and he notes that steak is a nationalized food in France, a central dish on French people's dinner table. It is a metaphor for the national family appearing "in all the surroundings of alimentary life: flat, edged with yellow, like the sole of a shoe, in cheap restaurants; thick and juicy in bistros; cubic, with the core all moist throughout beneath a lightly charred crust, in haute cuisine" (Barthes 62). This symbol of the "national family" has been constructed through many generations especially through the difficult times in French history. During the military period, the French steak "follows the index of patriotic values: it helps them to rise in wartime, it is the very flesh of the French soldier, the inalienable property which cannot go over to the enemy except by treason" (Barthes 62). It seems that people's sense of belonging is often expressed through the love of their food. For example, President of France Nicolas Sarkozy proposed in 2008 that French food be listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List (see Brones <<http://gadling.com/2008/03/21/sarkozy-wants-french-cuisine-on-unesco-world-heritage-list/>>; on food and national character see, e.g., Fiskio). In a similar manner, Chinese leaders often speak highly of the culinary culture of China on international occasions. To publicize and instill national pride by singing "我的中国心" ("My Chinese Heart"), a Chinese patriotic song popular in the early 1980s, is not necessarily considered apt today and it appears that today it is more appropriate to arouse people's national spirit by resorting to their stomach. Promulgating mainstream ideology is often compared to "润物细无声" ("spring rain moistening everything silently"), a line from the poem "Happy Rain on a Spring Night" by the poet Du Fu (see Ge 189).

A good example of constructing a positive national image through food and practices of food preparation in an ecologically responsive manner is 舌尖上的中国 (A Bite of China), a Chinese television series started in 2012 on the history of food, eating, and cooking in China. The combination of a mass medium and food accounts for its commercial success and its constructive role in building Chinese people's confidence in domestic cuisine (see, e.g., Ye). In parts a sort of reality show, but also with a narrative of a "patriotism education program," it "integrates food with Chinese national spirit" (Anonymous 35). Further, the show can be understood as representing a constructive role mass media can play in the formation of Chinese national identity in the context of what Xiaonong Long writes: "we often say that Chinese people are diligent, brave, wise, and persevering, and our country is an ancient civilized nation with a long history, a vast territory, and a brilliant culture ... All these impressions are constructed when we are exposed to the information conveyed in institutional education and mass media" (24; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine) and this perspective underlines what A Bite of China intends to do and succeeds in. In Western reports about A Bite of China, for example Oliver Thring argues that "It's not, strictly speaking, a cookery program, though we see a lot of people cooking and there's a recipe book tie-in. Instead it's educational in a more traditional ... sense" and then Thring compares A Bite of China with television programs about food in the United Kingdom referring to Chinese food being better than British food: "British food TV has had its moments, but has never attempted anything like this. And it's impossible, having watched a couple of episodes of A Bite of China, not to feel a little humbled or even ashamed when you turn to your own country's food TV output" (<<http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/wordofmouth/2012/sep/12/bite-of-china-finest-food-tv-ever>>; for similarly positive reports see, e.g., Ford <<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2012/0626/Chinese-food-like-you-ve-never-seen-it-before>>; Ye).

A Bite of China begins with words of pride: "China has a large population and abundant natural scenery; there are plateaus, forest-covered mountains, lakes, and long coastline. This diversified geographical environment along with its various climatic zones provides conditions for the reproduction and survival of many different species. No other country in the world has as many food potential sources as China" (Episode 1) and "The geography in China is very diverse, so the people in different areas enjoy different staples of food. They not only provide calories, but also have a great impact on people's feeling towards the seasons enabling them to have a happy, healthy, and interesting life" (Episode 2). The narrator often uses phrases to stress the long history of Chinese cuisine and employs superlatives to describe striking features of Chinese food. For example, "China has the world's longest history of rice cultivation. People living in the Yangtze River Base began to grow rice 7000 years ago" (Episode 2). There are many ways to cook and use rice and each area of the country has its own methods. In the account of alcoholic beverages, the audience is informed that Chinese people learned how to use these microorganisms "very long time ago," that rice wine is "one the oldest" alcoholic beverages in the world" (Episode 3), and that the Chinese have been enjoying cured meat "for many centuries" (Episode 4). Viewers are told that China is in fact "the world's first nation to cook with steam" (Episode 4). As one of the earliest cooking methods in China, steaming is used in countless dishes, the best known among which could be steamed crabs and eating crabs has "a history of 4000 years in China" and for the Chinese people "steaming is the best way to preserve the taste of the crab" (Episode 7). Another example of the "best" and "unique" is that eating fish heads is "uniquely Chinese" and good fish heads cost more than the rest of the fish (Episode 1).

Other examples in A Bite of China include frequent references to the Chinese principle of "five flavors": sweet, bitter, salty, sour, and spicy (on this see, e.g., Höllmann). The word "sweet" in Chinese can mean many things. It refers primarily to the taste and smell of food and drink, but its meaning is not restricted to this context. Chinese people can also appreciate the flavor with their hearts, so in their understanding the word for "sweet" can mean "joy and happiness" (幸福). Sweet is most commonly associated with sugar, but to sweet food makers, sugar is much more than the reference to sweetness and brown sugar is often regarded as fine nourishment, maybe because the supply of brown sugar was insufficient in the past and poor people could not afford it. After discussing the major flavors one by one, "the creators of the show transform the sensual feelings of food flavors into rational thinking, reaching the levels both of the personal life with ups and downs and the profound wisdom of ruling a country" (Qi 77; see also Chang and Yue). They introduce a famous local dish to illustrate the intimate link between food and people. Chongqing hotpot mirrors the character of the natives, i.e. frank, bold, and fiery. From ingredients to cooking, Chongqing hotpot is "a perfect blend of meat and vegetables, raw and cooked ingredients, spicy and sweet taste, and light and heavy flavors" (Episode 6). This reflects Chinese people's understanding of the blend of above referred to five basic flavors and it is suggested that Chinese believe that a successful life must include the five basic flavors and thus they are constantly experimenting with the five basic flavors to create new dishes which reflect the lives and character of Chinese people. However, while the five basic flavors are balanced in Chinese cuisine, none of the five dominates. This suggests that the ideal balance is pursued in relation to cooking and food consumption in cultivating the moral self, regulating the family, and ruling the state.

Phrases connoting "wisdom" with food run throughout the show. For example, the narrator contends that although without modern freezing technology, forest people "know well how to preserve winter bamboo shoots" (Episode 1): covered with earth, the harvested bamboo shoots can be preserved for two weeks in a natural way. When it comes to the staple foods in the north, the audience is told that the diversified flour-based delicacies demonstrate "the wisdom, imagination and hard-working spirit of the local women" (Episode 2) and Xinghua people are amply rewarded for "wisely making use of local conditions" (Episode 7). The narrator recounts several "miraculous" food stories to demonstrate Chinese people's wisdom in preserving food under unfavorable weather conditions while enhancing the flavors of the original ingredients. For example, soy sauce is a unique fermented product in human history and it has been an important element in cooking and flavoring food in China. And tofu occupies a vital position in Chinese food history and represents the Chinese virtue of flexibility and adaptability. Another example used in the show includes reference to Mountain inhabitants, who have much less land to cultivate crops and have to make best use of their rice paddies in order to

grow more than just rice (where chemical pesticide and fertilizer are rare). Mountain dwellers have managed to increase the yield of production considerably and in a similar vein people living on the farmland are able to maintain health by means different from grassland nomads. Importantly, as in all cultures Chinese people sought to add new flavors to their cuisine while enhancing its contents of nutrition. With advanced techniques of cuisine, food production, and transportation, salt is made easily available today and salt is listed as the most important seasoning in all Chinese cuisines.

For most foreigners and even for many young Chinese nowadays, Chinese dishes are mysteriously tasty and full of fascinating stories and the narratives attached to particular types of food and dishes demonstrate the relationship of food, food production, cuisine and their ecocritical perspectives. In response to the audience's eagerness to explore the stories behind food, *A Bite of China* proffers a metaphysical answer: "The secrets of the kitchen are superficially all about fire and water. But when it comes right down to it, it is all about harmony between people and all other living things. The earth provides selfless for us and everyone loves good food. Thus, the ultimate secret of the kitchen is that there are no secrets" (Episode 5). This answer is puzzling, but for those who have some knowledge of Chinese, 太极 (taiji: the diagram of *yin* and *yang*), it makes sense. In the context of ecology and cuisine, the idea of hardship in obtaining ingredients or preparing dishes is prevailing throughout the show. For example, Episode 1 begins with people of Jidi Village setting out to collect pine mushrooms at three o'clock in the morning. The Tibetan girl Zhuoma and her mother have to walk twenty kilometers to reach the jungle. Her mother persists in collecting mushrooms in spite of her old age and poor health. The show does not romanticize the work of picking pine mushrooms; instead, they emphasize the intense competition among villagers. When asked why she gets up so early, she replies honestly, "If we are late, others won't give us a chance. We won't find any pine mushrooms because others would have picked them all" (Episode 1). During the two-month mushroom season, Zhuoma and her mother earned 5000 yuan and the narrator comments that their hard work pays off. Digging lotus roots is even more laborious than collecting pine mushrooms, but the relatively high income makes people willing to do the job. In addition to showing how they dig out the lotus roots from the deep muds in the lake, the show presents also their complaints: "My back and arms ache, my legs are sore and my stomach is upset. My wife always tells me to take care out there" (Episode 1). In spite of the fact that cold weather makes their work painful, lotus root diggers love it, because lotus roots sell well when it is harvested cold and one participant in the show says that "Because I dig the lotus roots out with my own hands, it gives me a good feeling when I see them in the market. I get a definite feeling of intimacy" (Episode 1).

Sausage is a favorite dish for Hong Kong people, but making it requires much physical input. An owner of a cured meat store remarks that "Making sausages in summer is the hardest because of the heat. Many young people are unwilling to do this job. But fully understanding the job and putting your heart in it can give you a real sense of achievement. My grandfather, my father, and my uncle are all dedicated to this trade, which is my motivation to keep working at it" (Episode 4). On hot summer days, Chinese people like to eat seaweed soup that is said to help relieve the heat. However, this ingredient is not easily come by. In Episode 6 we see an old man collecting sea weeds when the tide is out and although it is dangerous when the tide is coming in, he has to accept some risks to get a good harvest. It is even more challenging to obtain food sources from the deep sea and while they are exhausted, the divers presented in the show take pride in their profession: "we feel very proud when we see abalone, scallops, and sea cucumbers served in Dalian restaurants, because we know we gathered them one by one from the bottom of the sea" (Episode 7). After narrating the painful process of gathering ingredients from nature, the narrator inserts occasionally didactic comments such as "when we enjoy delicacies, we should appreciate the people who make it happen through their hard work and their wisdom ... we enjoy these gifts from nature, we should be grateful to those who work to obtain these ingredients for us" (Episode 1). In other cases, especially at the end of each episode, the audience does not hear such words, but see a group of people with rough hands and wrinkled smiling faces, an enduring symbol of the working class who take pleasure and pride in their hard work.

Perhaps against the well-known problem of pollution in China thus suggesting that there are large sections of the population who do not buy into the idea of development no matter what the environmental damage, throughout the series nature appears often and there are many instances demonstrating Chinese people's love for nature and their eco-friendly worldview. *A Bite of China* encourages

people to engage in the preservation of the environment and the series connects this effort to behavior: "people in different parts of China have their own wisdom for obtaining food from nature. They do it out of their respect for heaven and their love of the earth. One Chinese author has said that, Chinese people, whether they are working in the fields or just having a meal never forget to occasionally look up at heaven" (Episode 7). And the series often features elderly people practicing traditional crafts which adhere to the preservation of the environment instead of harmful exploitation. An example is the participant of mushroom digging who conceals the pit with pine needles after digging out the pine mushrooms because only this way can the hyphae be preserved. Many Chinese people who live in their bamboo grove understand bamboo shoots well and hence they look for four-year old bamboo plants before locating bamboo shoots and thus by digging along the root and taking the shoots gently, the farmer is able to prevent the bamboo plants from being damaged. Not just forest inhabitants, fishermen also cherish the value of natural preservation. In Episode 7, young fishermen follow closely the practice that the fishing net should have the width of twenty centimeters because this kind of net entraps fish five years old or older only and underage fish escape. And viewers are told that the sea cucumbers which two divers are catching were released by them three years ago. Baby abalones, scallops, and sea urchins were also released for later harvest.

In his book *The Food of China*, E.N. Anderson argues that "Chinese food has never remained static, and it is currently changing as fast as ever in history—yet without losing any of its essential characteristics" (204). Several instances in Episode 2 testify to his contention. For example, in order to produce a healthier product, the amount of salt put on the Jinghua ham is less than in the past. The salt is made more evenly distributed on the ham by machines. The arrival of industrial revolution means that the production of traditional food is no longer limited by regions and seasons. But many people feel that making them by hand is a way of preserving part of the traditional lifestyle and thus preserves not only said tradition, but is more environment friendly. While many traditional foods are now manufactured in factories, year after year Chinese families still make dumplings by hand on New Year's Eve. Other activities, however, survive only because of tourist demand. In Episode 1, people of the Jing ethnic group used to catch fish and shrimps by standing on stilts. Today people only do this to entertain tourists and five men from Wanwei village presented in the episode are the last ones who have this skill. In Northeast China, the fishermen in Shi Baozhu's village hold a traditional ritual for the Chinese New Year, but the ceremony has been made more elaborate owing to growing tourist demand and commercial concerns.

A repeated scene in the series is that most countryside adults have moved to industrial zones and thus lost contact with the soil, while the elderly stick to self-sufficient rural life. With the impact of urbanization, the space of traditional agricultural civilization is shrinking. What is more worrisome is that "in the face of the economic growth pattern dominated by industrialization, some traditional handicrafts will meet more challenges in passing down to the next generation" (Lu 87). For example, in Episode 6 a middle-aged man who lives off the sea by making salt from its water, earns a low income from salt, so he has to work in his spare time as an electrician. Most people have left the village and large tracts of salt field have been abandoned. However, he has decided to stay, for he believes that "salt is part of our history, so in a way, we're preserving history" (Episode 6). In the following episode, the narrator sighs that Liu is probably the last farmer working on family fields passed down for generations. But that does not bother him. Nothing can stop him from enjoying his special field and his home" (Episode 7). Similar phenomena also exist in places where people of live in concentrated communities: Wang is 58 years old and people of his age grew up by consuming sticky rice. In the 1960s, the local government promulgated high-yield non-sticky rice that then has been subsequently preferred by the younger generation. But Wang believes only sticky rice can "build muscles." To his dismay, with less and less area set aside for the growing of rice that can be used for sticky rice and the younger generation migrating to cities, people are abandoning this agricultural tradition (Episode 7).

If one doubts the narrator's assertion that "Chinese place more attention to family than in any other national" (Episode 2), we only need to take a glimpse of the overcrowded airports, railway stations, and long-distance bus stations where passengers with swollen luggage manage to squeeze forward for family reunion and this suggests the adherence to the importance of family even in today's expansion of the country towards heavy urbanization. Although many young people leave their

hometowns to work in metropolises, their tie to home is often not weakened because of the distance. Every Spring Festival, family members from different parts of the country would come back and enjoy traditional festive foods together. Apart from family dinner, people in many places also hold community banquets on special days to show respect, express gratitude, and enhance fellowship. And *A Bite of China* presents different practices such as said family reunions and banquets many of which—importantly—are arranged to express appreciation and reverence for the elderly. For instance, in Episode 2 farmers at Ding village in central China are participating in a longevity banquet. Before people begin eating, everybody picks out the longest noodle from his/her bowl and places it to the bowl of the elderly person whose birthday is being celebrated. He/she must eat these noodles so that the party can be considered a success. In Jun'an town in South China there are customarily village banquets on the Double Ninth Festival, a national festival for senior citizens. Instead of going to restaurants, people prefer to sit together to enjoy the dishes prepared by one of the village banquet chefs. Several days of boisterous parties remind the young people of caring for seniors (Episode 5). Chinese people are respectful not only to the elderly, but also to their ancestors. Almost every village around China has the ancestor's temple where people present offerings to their ancestors and pray for fortune and happiness.

Apart from enjoying banquets together, helping each other to prepare food is also popular in rural areas and this happens as a rule in a communal spirit. For example, in the coastal city of Ningbo, old people have not been making New Year cakes often since the young children left home, but when they do, they still use traditional methods. Making New Year cakes is serious business and neighbors all help each other. Locals also call them "get together cakes" (Episode 2). Just as New Year cakes for the Ningbo people, soy sauce has long been important in the lives of people in northeastern China where the weather is cold. Local people make preparations for new soy sauce three months before it is available. In Episode 3, a daughter who just married comes back to her mother's house to help her prepare new soy sauce. They crush boiled soybeans, the only raw material, directly in the pot. The women sit on a heated bed making soybean paste into brick-shape and then they tie them and hang them on the wall (Episode 4) and villagers in Jing's hometown help each other to make kimchi, a specialty of the Korean ethnic group in China. During the season of kimchi preparation, courtyards are filled with the fragrance of chili and more importantly, with the sense of communal fellowship (Episode 3).

A common way of appreciating others' help in China is serving the food prepared. In Episode 5, a Tibetan named Zaxi is preparing lunch for his neighbors. Every November all people in Nixi township go out to fertilize the bailey fields. In order not to miss the best season, the villagers help each other and they share a meal after the farming work. Like Tibetans, other ethnic groups in China as is shown in Episode 2 and 7, also cherish many customs in which food plays a vital role. For example, when a baby of Dong ethnic group is one month old, the mother receives visitors from her extended family who bring congratulatory gifts including delicacies. Other women in the clan send newly harvested rice and eggs as a token of best wishes for the newborn. The new rice occupies an equally significant position for the Zhuang people of Xiayao village who have a special harvest festival called New Rice Festival in October. On that day, all women prepare traditional meals normally comprising sticky rice as a staple food and dishes such as fish and duck. At noon when all food from each household are brought to the village center, the countryside banquet kicks off. The Street Banquet brings people together and its spirit of sharing. Overall, important to note is that *A Bite of China* and its stories are attesting to the multicultural nature of China and its people who despite economic and industrial advances and these advances' too often negative environmental impact are conscious of ecological perspectives and practices and we can assume that, in turn, the show impacts positively on people's appreciation of nature and how we ought to use nature in an ecologically responsive manner for the better. By focusing on every-day food preparation, *A Bite of China* constructs a performance where class, ethnicity, gender, age, and other social markers are blurred and the geographically and ethnically diverse ways of food preparation and consumption appear as a cohesive Chinese culinary identity and thus aspects of the television show can be understood as an ecocritical perspective of current China.

Note: "Ecocriticism and National Image in 舌尖上的中国 (A Bite of China)" is part of a research project funded by 国家社科基金 (Chinese Fund for the Humanities and Social Sciences) No. 14CWW023 (2014).

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