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**EATING AND DRINKING IN CONTEMPORARY MIGRANT
LITERATURE: FOOD AS INDICATOR
OF A NEW TRANSCULTURAL IDENTITY
IN MR. MUO'S TRAVELLING COUCH AND BALZAC AND
LITTLE CHINESE SEAMSTRESS BY DAI SIJIE**

Migration is a subject that needs a complex and interdisciplinary approach. The phenomenon of migrant literature has been largely analyzed by literary critics, sociologists, geographers and psychiatrists in order to study a new transcultural identity that rises through the migrant writing. However, the food aspect seems to be neglected by contemporary studies of migrant literature. This work problematizes the concept of food in contemporary migrant literature, notably in «Mr. Muo's travelling couch» and «Balzac and Little Chinese Seamstress» by a French-Chinese author Dai Sijie. Thus, two major aspects of alimentation in literature are being treated: firstly we try to show Dai's approach in depicting the connection between sexual desires and eating habits. Secondly, the study shifts the analysis of food metaphors to the sphere of social interactions, showing how food metaphor functions as critical commentary on contemporary globalizing world and on the pros and cons of a new multicultural society. The methodological basis of the paper is a social-anthropological and phenomenological approach towards food as a complex system of signs. So studying these signs and the semantic fields associated to them are the purpose of this paper.

*In the **introduction** critical works concerning the announced problematic are overviewed. The methodological basis and key concepts are also explained in the introduction.*

*The **first part**, Eating, sexuality and gender: cooking an identity, dwells on food metaphors as representation of sexual behavior and/or erotic phantasms of characters. The imagery and semantic field of each metaphor is established in order to analyze the one of the aspects of gender conception in novels by Dai.*

*In the **second part**, Table relationships. Eating and social status, food is interpreted as a complex metaphor of social interaction. Thus, public restaurants are analyzed as representatives of a new scheme of socioeconomic relationship.*

*The **conclusion** sums up the results of the paper and gives some ideas for further studies.*

***Key words:** transcultural identity, imagery of food, literary gastronomy, food and social relations, eating and sexuality.*

Introduction

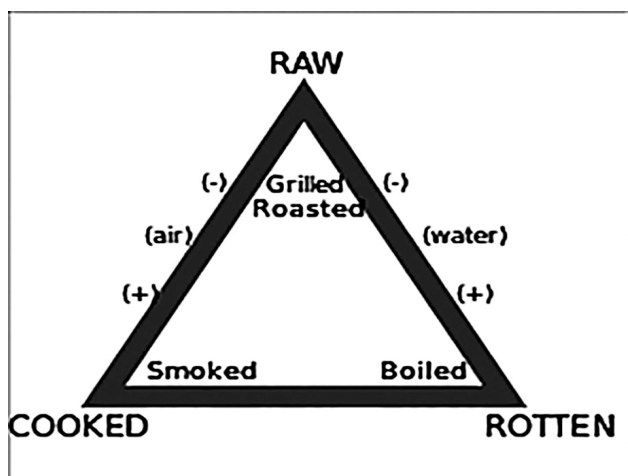
The metaphor of food has been largely analyzed by European literary and philosophic critics either as the expression of sexuality or as the reflection of a social status of the characters, or even as a narrative structure of some novels. The growing popularity of the migrant literature and its importance in the globalizing era encourage scientists to explore transformations in practice of preparing and sharing food. A cuisine can be an identity-shaping factor in letting someone identify to a nation, to a social or an age group. Stephen Menell mentions that: « what people eat is universally a potent ingredient of national and social stereotyping. It applies to both the formation of people's 'we-images' of outsider groups and it means that one has to be on guard against accepting the reciprocal stereotypes at face value. Anthropologists also used to argue that food habits are typically one aspect of any culture which is most resistant

to change» [8, p. 9]. Thus, the imagery of food and drinks in contemporary migrant literature tends to convey a complex psychological state of mind of a transcultural identity situated on the borders of two or more cultural traditions.

Despite its popularity with readers and art critics, the literary work of Dai Sijie, Chinese-French author and filmmaker, remains unknown to scholars. Among rare critics we can name Sophie Croiset and her analysis of the figure of an immigrant in Dai's novels, Hu Jing's interpretation of religious discourse of Dai's novels and Beatriz Mangada's analysis of Dai's exile writing and a comprehension of foreign languages. However, the food and drink imagery in Dai's novels has not been conceptualized yet, even though eating is an important aspect of social interactions and characters' development in «Mr. Muo's travelling couch» and «Balzac and Little Chinese Seamstress». Thus, this paper proposes an insight into the poetics of eat-

ing and drinking in two novels by Dai, «Mr. Muo's travelling couch» and «Balzac and Little Chinese Seamstress». The paper highlights two aspects of the imagery of food and its consumption: the first one dwells on the expression of sexuality through acts of preparing and consuming food and drinks. This first part examines food symbolism in contemporary migrant literature, noting the importance of gastronomic dichotomy as manifestation of a marginal identity. The second part shifts the perspective to a socioeconomic criticism in novels by Dai where we observe metaphors of food and drinks as incarnation of either capitalistic or communist social order.

We adapt the methodology of social anthropology (Lévi-Strauss) and phenomenology (Barthes) as both refer to cuisine as to a complex system of signs: «for what is food? It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior <...> the item of food sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies. That is to say that it is not just an indicator of a set of more or less conscious motivations, but that it is a real sign, perhaps the functional unit of a system of communication» [1]. Thus, the purpose of this study is to define the structural components of cuisine, as conceived by Dai, and their meanings.



We refer to the concept of the culinary triangle developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss [6], where three methods of cooking are assigned a particular imagery according to utensils and heat treatment. As seen on the scheme, raw food is associated with fire and natural elements, while boiled food is cultural and, obvi-

ously, watery, because its taste and aspect are similar to rotten food. Category of cooked is more complex, for it concerns the two of the above, and is defined by air and smoking as method of cooking. This paper examines these categories in novels by Dai in order to establish a poetics of food and symbolic meanings of eating and drinking in «Mr. Muo's travelling couch» and «Balzac and Little Chinese Seamstress».

Eating, sexuality and gender: cooking an identity

The association between food and sexual activity could be found in many cultures, for they both involve a passage of external substances across body, the organs of reproduction and copulation are the same as the ones responsible for eating and digesting: «one of the most significant domains of meaning embodied in food centers on the relation between the sexes, their gender definitions, and their sexuality. In many cultures, eating is a sexual and gender experience throughout life. Food and sex are metaphorically overlapping. Eating may represent copulation, and food may represent sexuality» [2, p. 9]. Sharing food implicate both sexual intimacy and kinship. Lévi-Strauss mentions a strong link between those two activities, that could be seen through the same vocabulary of eating and copulating in different languages. So, if eating can express one's sexuality and gender, how do transcultural authors articulate the imagery of food and affirmation of a migrant identity?

Both «Mr. Muo's travelling couch» and «Balzac and Little Chinese Seamstress» suggest a discourse of exploration of one's sexuality. In «Mr. Muo's travelling couch» it is Muo, the first Chinese psychoanalyst and a virgin, who comes back to China after having accomplished his PhD in France. In spite of a huge importance of sexual experience in Freudian theory, Muo knows nothing about sex or his sexuality. Even though he declares being in love with Volcano of an Old Moon, his ex-classmate, Muo doesn't seem to have much sexual interest in her. As a matter of fact, the only mention of sensual excitement is when Muo hardly touches Volcano's shoe in attempt to pick up a napkin. Volcano, his lover functions in the text as a symbol of an unachievable purpose – that is why she never appears in the story, but for Muo's memories. However, consider that Muo experience no sexual desire would be false: there are numerous chapters dedicated to Muo's erotic fantasies. Among one of them is a chapter where he loses virginity (II, 4) – not in search of sexual pleasure – but to assert himself of his aptitude as psychoanalyst as well as a

man: «Je ne suis pas impuissant, Dieu merci <...> Mais suis-je sûr de ma virilité? <...> C'est peut-être le jour ou jamais, l'occasion d'acquérir un savoir-faire qui se révélera un jour utile» [4, p. 237]¹. This memorable moment coincides with the preparation of raviolis, so that the whole scene reveals a multitude of comic elements: the sexual act lasts less than the cooking; Muo's partner seems to be more interested in seasoning the raviolis, than the intimate moment itself. Moreover, spilled flour suggests wintry and dull scenery that contrasts with Muo's fervent attitude. A reader familiar with Chinese cuisine would understand an extra-comic effect that consists in emphasizing feminine element over a masculine one: in Chinese culture the food imagery goes with yin and yang philosophy, where yin, that is more of a female energy, is associated with cooling and water, and yang, a masculine one, correspond to heat and fire, thereby depreciating any Muo's attempt to assert his virility.

Transition to sexual maturation and losing one's virginity is a recurrent motif of another novel by Dai, «Balzac and Little Chinese Seamstress», a story of two students that are due to live through cultural reeducation of 1960s. Young students have a romantic interest in Little Seamstress, spending much time together. When one of the students, Luo, develops more intimate relations with Little Seamstress and when they eventually have intercourse, the student keeps a leaf that was beside the tree the couple first experienced sexual pleasure. Significantly, this same student was given a leaf broth on the eve of the events by Little Seamstress. That was the first time Little Seamstress and Luo explicitly expressed romantic interest in each other. Raw or hardly cooked plants have role of sexual energy media; this kind of food notably amplifies feminine symbolism of the novel that could be traced in organization of space or the style itself.

This feminine dimension is present throughout all the book: not only Muo is qualified as womanly, but also the judge Di, one of the most powerful and influential men in the country. This is he who demands Muo to bring him a virgin, in exchange of Volcano's liberty from prison. However, judge nearly dies in an accident and since then his manly power has been decreasing, so that he follows a special diet consisting of nothing but sea cucumbers (III, 5), a

very suggestive product. As it has no taste, nor color, it is a perfect example of rotten apex of culinary triangle, and we can hereby associate sea cucumber with womanly aura. If we refer to Counihan's methodology of gender analysis through eating habits, Di consuming sea cucumbers could be read as latent desire of accumulating female energy and therefore, of performing female gender. One of the spheres of life where he can openly develop this womanly energy and where no one would judge him happens to be food and eating habits. Surprisingly, act of eating feminine food doesn't deprive the judge from its power, quite on the contrary – he feels more powerful than ever before.

The entire chapter is dedicated to this diet and to judge's nutritional habits that underline his avarice and cruelty: his mother had to hide food from judge in order to feed his little sister [4, p. 360]; his grip of the chopsticks was incredible, for he was able to grab all the noodles from a plate in one attempt – it is probably this eating practice that helped him to execute criminals so easily [4, p. 361]. In this chapter Dai compares Eastern and Asian culinary traditions, linking the European tradition to the concept of spectacular, of the «show», while Chinese eating practice is none of the show. It is necessary to observe that the discourse of sexuality is inevitably related to social criticism: the communist China is nothing but another capitalist country masking desperately its social inequalities. Nevertheless, those disparities are easily recognizable through social rites of food consumption and distribution.

In conclusion we can say food either expresses sexuality or can even be a means of gender identification. The quoted examples are not exhaustive, we didn't aim to analyze all of food recurrences, but to observe the similarities in functioning of food and drinks in the text and to highlight their distinctive characteristics.

Table relationships. Eating and social status

One of the most important functions of eating together is creation of social bonds as well as hierarchization of society. Production, cooking and consuming of food take part in the assigning each member of a community his or her role and social status, so that «if food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across boundaries» [5, p. 130]. In novels by Dai's food is more a representation of

¹ We translate: I'm not impotent, God bless me <...> But am I sure about my virility? <...> Today is probably is a unique opportunity to gain an experience that could be of some use one day.

changes in social climate of the country. All throughout «Mr. Muo's travelling couch» and «Balzac and Little Chinese Seamstress» the reader is faced with an implicit criticism of a contemporary Chinese society, where restaurants figure as microcosms of social and cultural reality.

Thus, as expatriate having returned back to his native, Muo is constantly comparing the before and the after of his absence, especially the changes in public restaurants. For instance, Muo is shocked to learn that an old tea house with its unique architecture – small tiled building with little wooden tables and bamboo chairs evoking Muo's infancy [4, 72-73 pp.] – is now replaced with a huge billiard bar where people in shadows drink European beverages like beer and whisky. This scene makes him think of Hollywood westerns of 1960s. The temporality of the place itself has changed: if earlier at teahouse the one consumed the tea prepared before them, nowadays the visitor of the billiard bar consumes a ready-made beverage – the synchrony of preparing and consuming food, that is characteristic of Asian cuisine, is now broken. It is the profound modification of ontological value of food that shocks Muo, and not simply the changes in the architecture of the building, even though the one implies another.

The last trope that needs to be studied is the imagery of being eaten. At one point of the story, the students of «Balzac and Little Chinese Seamstress» have to come to see an old mountain dweller in order to record some traditional songs he knows. The nutrition logic of this extract is impressive: the mountain dweller is famous of eating nothing but jade stones; moreover, when our students descend to his abode, they become a pray for the lice [3, 88-95 pp.]. The students are completely defenseless as they

are inflicted pain. The one can question the symbolic meaning of mountain dweller's diet: as he is the keeper of a dying cultural tradition – mountain songs – he is more than a human – but a demiurge who feeds on non-traditional meals, but on precious and rare stones. However, there might be another reasoning behind this image: we consider that this episode could be read as a reference of China's great famine of 1959-1961, when up to 20 million of citizens died because of the food politics. In this perspective, blood-sucking insects could be interpreted as cannibalistic reminiscences. Having that in mind, Dai could give another criticism of the communist China, where treasures are everywhere, but there is no means of feeding and surviving – so that bearers of great cultural traditions weaken until they finally fade.

Conclusion

We had an insight into two aspects of roles of food metaphors in novels by Dai. His approach is not revolutionary; the connection between food and sexual behavior is an old literary trope. Analysing food rituals as models of more complex social behaviors is not a fresh one either. However, Dai puts these tropes on another level, by adding symbols that are new to a European reader. This method of food representation contributes to create a more complex narrative with more possibilities of interpretations and understanding the text. This analysis is not exhaustive; in order to deepen the subject, a more complex analysis of social and economical conditions in contemporary China is required. Another aspect to develop is the intertextuality of Dai's novels, for they are usually inspired by both European and Chinese literary traditions where food and drinks played important roles.

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АНОТАЦІЯ

А. ЖУК

**ПОЕТИКА ЇЖИ В КОНТЕКСТІ СУЧАСНОЇ МІГРАЦІЙНОЇ ФРАНКОФОННОЇ
ЛІТЕРАТУРИ НА ПРИКЛАДІ РОМАНІВ ДАЙ СИЦЗЕ «КОМПЛЕКС ДІ»
ТА «БАЛЬЗАК І КРАВЧИНЯ-КИТАЯНКА»**

В сучасному соціо-політичному контексті міграційна література (*literature migrante*), або література меншинства (*literature mineure*), викликає інтерес не лише літературознавців, але й соціологів, культурологів та психологів. У даній роботі аналізується міграційна література Китаю на прикладі романів Дай Сицзе «Комплекс Ді» та «Бальзак і кравчиня-китайка». У романах Дай маркери мультикультурного дискурсу виражені зокрема в топосі їжі та особливостях її вживання. Їжа, смак та кухня функціонують як дзеркало соціокультурної категорії персонажів романів, культурних код яких відрізняється від культурного коду лектората Дай. Таким чином, смак стає універсальним референтом емоційних станів. Ми виділяємо 2 основних вектори дослідження в даній роботі: по-перше, дослідження поетики їжі та напоїв як вираження сексуальності персонажів. По-друге, аналіз системи їжі та напоїв як вираження нового мультикультурного соціуму з його особливою логікою функціонування. Таким чином основою дослідження є методи семіотичного та компаративного аналізів текстів. Дослідження також ґрунтується на антропологічному та феноменологічному підходах, що дозволяє розглядати їжу як комплексну систему із власними структурними рівнями.

У **вступі** описана актуальність даного дослідження та обґрунтований вибір методології дослідження. Також у вступі дається короткий перелік наукових робіт, що були виконані на дану чи суміжні теми.

У **першій частині** аналізуються метафори їжі та напоїв як вираз сексуальності героїв в контексті гендерних систем. Окремий статус має аналіз поетики їжі, що характеризує харчові еротизми в романах.

У **другій частині** досліджуються метафори їжі як вираз мікрокосму транскультурного соціуму персонажів романів та топоси їжі як критика комуністичного суспільства.

У **висновках** підбито підсумки дослідження та формулюються ідеї для подальшого розвитку даної проблематики, а саме дослідження соціо-економічної ситуації сучасного Китаю з метою глибшого розуміння дискурсу сучасного міграційного письма.

Ключові слова: транскультурна особистість, поетика їжі, літературна гастрономія, їжа та соціальний статус, їжа та сексуальність.