Revolution Is a Dinner Party: Cultural Revolution Restaurants in Contemporary China*

Jennifer Hubbert

Abstract
The Cultural Revolution occupies a discomfited space in post-Mao collective memory. Ironically, some of the more intriguing attempts to remember and memorialize this era of high socialism have appeared during recent years in distinctively non-socialist ventures. In a variety of Chinese cities, Cultural Revolution theme restaurants deliver hungry patrons an opportunity to recapture the experience of the late Mao era, serving fare that reflects the “bitter, sweet and sour” of China’s past. This paper explores what happens when places of pleasure (restaurants) turn to an era noted for pain (the Cultural Revolution) to satisfy the demands of consumer capitalism. As places of culinary and consumer “pleasure,” such restaurants have the potential to embody the entirety of the epochal

Jennifer HUBBERT teaches anthropology at Lewis & Clark College, Portland, Oregon. She received her Ph.D. from Cornell University in 1999. Her research areas include issues of historical representation, collective memory, visual anthropology, and popular culture. She is currently writing a book on Chinese intellectuals and modernity.

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Association for Asian Studies Annual Meeting, San Diego, CA, 4–7 March 2004. Thanks are due to Guobin Yang and Ming-Bao Yue for organizing the panel on which this paper was presented. For editorial comments on this and earlier drafts, I thank Lisa Hoffman and Monica DeHart. In addition I would like to express gratitude to my research assistant for making necessary connections, Chih-Ching Chang for her help translating Beijing colloquialisms, and two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments.
event. However, they also act as mini-museums that refuse to accommodate an amnesiac nation, and as contemporary meeting grounds for those who, having shouldered the burden of misguided national policy on their adolescent bodies, reject official interpretations of the Cultural Revolution as entirely waste and chaos. These restaurants mark a place of national contradiction, working as a space through which class, authority and ideology come head to head over a plate of wild grass.

It is food that stirs the imagination of her thinkers,
Sharpens the wits of her scholars,
Enhances the talents of those who work by the hand,
And enlivens the spirit of the people.

F. T. Cheng

The Day the Fish Died

It was a late autumn evening, back in the mid-1980s, when I found myself in an expensive private restaurant in Kunming, seated at a round table that was draped in decorative linens. The late Chairman Mao, renowned for his anti-entrepreneurial inclinations, had died a decade earlier and private restaurants were cropping up in myriad forms throughout China. Kunming, located in the remote southwestern province of Yunnan, had experienced less of the rapid economic growth characteristic of China’s eastern seaboard, and upscale dining establishments remained a relative novelty. My host, a teacher and administrator at a technical university, had arranged this exceptional occasion, and I looked forward to tasting the local delicacies.

Situated near a large lake, Kunming is well known for its piscatorial delights, and this evening was to feature one of them, known as “twice-cooked fish.” This entrée was distinct both for its unique flavours and a preparation technique that involved the sequential cooking and consumption of different parts of the fish. After hearing the particulars of the feast, my colleagues and I gathered around the live fish tank. There we indicated our evening’s prey to the chef who extracted it and returned to the kitchen. According to protocol, the chef was to re-emerge with the fish on a platter, surrounded by assorted garnishes and steeped in a delicately flavoured sauce, but with only the back half cooked. Ideally, diners eat the cooked back half of the fish while the head, eyes peering at its predators, flops around on the plate. After this half is consumed, the chef takes the