

# The New Development of Contemporary Food Writing and the Value of Chinese Courses

QiuHong Zhu\*

School of Teacher Education of Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, Jiangsu, 210000, China

**Abstract:** Delicacy is one significant theme of literary and artistic creation. Since the 1980s, excellent delicacy writing industry has become an important part of Chinese teaching in middle schools. Since the beginning of the new century, the carrier of food writing has changed from the literal one to full-view video, audio-visual television documentaries. The essence of new form of contemporary food writing does not change; it still implies the meticulous and warm humanistic care. The value of it in Chinese courses still has much room to expand.

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**\*Corresponding author:** QiuHong Zhu, zhq0890@sian.com

## 1 The writing of food in the 20th century and the significance of Chinese education

Since the 1980s, there have been numerous literary works themed on food, among which Wang Zengqi, Lu Wenfu, A.Cheng, Qijun, Fei Xiaotong and other works on food have their own “flavor”.

Wang Zengqi was praised as “a lyrical humanist and the last scholar-official of China”. He studied under the school of Shen Congwen and focused on the creation of lyrical novels. However, compared with the articles of his predecessors, he “has a richer traditional cultural quality, and consciously or unconsciously integrates culture into his novels, making his works are full of a strong cultural flavor”<sup>[1]</sup>. When Wang Zengqi studied the Song dynasty people eat and drink, he needed to read Du Fu of the “beauty” in the column of his Syrian,

and “Han Xizai evening banquet” painted by Gu Hong in its cup bowl to get inspiration. Also, he wanted to check again “Tokyo Wei Menghua record”, “Capital Jisheng”, “the west lake old man numerous wins record”, “dream Liang Lu” and “wulin old things”<sup>[2]</sup>. In Wang Zengqi’s food prose, he is persistent in tracing the origin of food and exploring its historical background. In order to introduce the cutting enjoys a dish, all the relevant statements, which are written in “the analects of Confucius, Jia Sixie’s Qiminyaoshu, the Tokyo recorded” Wei Menghua, works, “cut photographs resort Mid-Autumn festival enjoys” and Du Fu “Wen township ginger seven fewer government set Kuai play a gift long song, twang-ching-shih” him, unitary Yang impurity leather, should be displayed one by one. These can solve the situation that this dish does not exist in the modern society to be tested.

For those who could not be verified in the end, we should also add: “wait until other days”<sup>[3]</sup>. When Mr. Wang Zengqi talks about eating, he wants to express his attitude towards culture and life. Food beauty contained in the customs, congregating the author’s good thoughts, especially the article called “Dragon Boat Festival duck eggs” has become a classic of literary works themed on food. It recorded different food folk customs, such as eating duck eggs and hanging “duck egg complex” in the Dragon Boat Festival, expressing the author’s deep memories of his childhood and hometown.

The world is so big, in all his works, he only wrote about Suzhou...Lu Wenfu belongs to Suzhou, and so does Suzhou. Lu Wenfu could be known as ‘Lu Suzhou’ literarily at an academic seminar based on Lu Wenfu’s works, Ai Xuan praised him in this way<sup>[4]</sup>. It could be said that Lu Wenfu lost his heart to Gusu. When he first came to Suzhou at the age of 16, as what he wrote in his book called ‘The love of Gusu’, “Suzhou is nothing

but a history book and a fascinated painting of natural landscape”. Then, he lived in this city for 51 years long. What attracted Lu Wenfu most was Suzhou people’s views of food, don’t eat food is not in season, don’t eat food is not fresh, don’t eat foods is not in this area, don’t eat food is not exquisite, don’t eat food is not familiar with’. Based on these sentences, the three main characteristics of Sue cuisine ‘seasonal, fresh, delicate’ has been formed.

*“Hard noodles, rotten noodles, wide soup, tight soup, mix noodles; More green garlic, no green gralic, heavy oil, light point, more noodles less topping, more toppings less noodles, more soup and extra toppings (guoqiao) - toppings cannot cover the bowl, it should be put into another plate”.*<sup>[5]</sup>

Soup toppings, garlic leaves, noodles and oil have their own particular places in Sue cuisine, reflecting Suzhou people’s high demand for food. The main character Zhu ziye who firstly appeared in this Zhu Hongxing Noodle Store and ate the noodles, this picture left the readers’ a great image of a hero who was willing to “get up and wash himself in a hurry” only in order to eat one bowl of noodles.

*“The second half of the curtain opened, hot dishes, big dishes, dim sum are coming: sweet and sour mandarin fish, honey ham, ‘the first dish in the world’, jade steamed stuffed bun, crystal Shaomai..... A ‘three sets of ducks’ pushed the plot to its climax”.*<sup>[6]</sup>

A table of banquet flowing light and color, all food from the type of dishes to food tasting, strictly followed the tradition of Suzhou cuisine and the stable sequence from the first dish to the last course. Using elegant and exquisite words to express this culture is a good method of highly integration of food literature and cultural expression.

The constant changes of the era facilitate Acheng’s spirit of Confucianism and Taoism. Under the influence of Cultural Revolution, he was sent to Shanxi province to live and work in a production team before finishing his study in middle school. His hard life did not give him so much time to pay attention to “eating”, while “living” was the greatest desire of people at that time. However, the scarce food condition did not destroy Acheng’s faith; he still kept his open-minded optimism and aesthetic enjoyment of food in his writings:

*“Not a moment later, the snake meat was finished and only two pairs of snake bones were left in the bowl. I served the steamed eggplant with garlic and salt. Pour the hot water into the pot, add more water, and put the*

*snake bones into the soup”.*<sup>[7]</sup>

In the age of scarcity, food was precious. Three or four people gathered around the pot to enjoy this small serve of food; and this delicious dish still could be given a great praise. These characters’ spiritual pursuit of food did not fade because of poverty. “Eating” is the basic requirement for survival, while “Chess” is the spiritual need to recognize the intrinsic value of ‘self’. The moderation in Confucian culture and clam and contentment in Taoist culture are perfectly integrated together. The ideal state of life advocated by the author is that people should be satisfied with what they could have.

Qi Jun, formerly known as Pan Xizhen, “a wave of tenderness coming from her pen, mingled with endless homesickness”<sup>[8]</sup>. She has been living abroad for a long time, the thing she spent all day and night thinking about was mainly a taste of her hometown.

*“Babao wine, just as its name implies is one type of wine made by eight different things - black jujube, litchi, longan, almond, tangerine peel, medlar, myotonin, and two more olives. After one-month soak, aroma of wine and herbal fragrance came out immediately, that made you would like to have 3 whole cups it at once”.*<sup>[9]</sup>

Every family invited each other to drink spring wine is one of the New Year essential program in author’s hometown; the author understood “eight treasure wine” well - this wine contains author’s strong feelings of his hometown, childhood, and his beloved mother. On the table of the “drinking party”, the glass of the gas lamp was shining, the neighbors who enjoyed wine were particularly cheerful; the author was eating and drinking, meanwhile, watching his mother sharing the fresh and unique things she made with others. Now the author recalls memory of the past; he attempts to find the ‘spring wine’ and the noisy scene where people drunk and played finger-guessing games in the middle of the flower hall. Unfortunately, the mother is not here anymore, the hometown where the author cannot go back. Eventually, the time contains all the innocence of the childhood which across the mountains and rivers has ended. When he gave his son “Fensui wine”, Qi-Jun sighed “this no long has the authentic flavor of the food in my hometown.”

Fei Xiaotong, a sociologist who tasted every typically local dish, refreshment, wine of every town he visited when he tried to explore the people’s life process. He was into delicacies of Xuhai Huaiyin, Longsheng, Wujiang, Yancheng, Nanjing and other places. He has

been concerned about the economic development of China's rural areas and ethnic minority areas. In Fei's words, we can see the strong and sincere feelings from the senior Chinese scholars.

*"This unique treasure of Yancheng –litchi which is shaped like a small ball, is light purple and is about two centimeters in diameter. Once it is immersed into the clear soup, it flies delicately and looks like a fresh litchi without shell. It tastes soft and plump, sweet but not greasy, thick but not solid, even not broken, not greasy oil and crispy".<sup>[10]</sup>*

Chinese cuisine contains strong local color; hence, there are plenty of tags you could see like "only for here", "no other places". Through the introduction of the taste, production process and characteristics of Yancheng lotus root noodle ball, the author had a better understanding of this exceptionally sweet food with an easy cooking way. Due to this reason, more people could know more about this unique dish in Yancheng.

Above all, we have reviewed the food writings of famous writers in the second half of the 20th century, many of which have become the memory of a generation's hometown through various Chinese textbooks, and become literary classics with long tastes and rich connotations.

## **2 The new changes of gastro writing in the new century and the value of Chinese courses**

Entering the 21st century, new-generation food writers such as Ding Fan, Zhao Heng, Lu Yaodong, Wang Dunhuang and Shen Hongfei have formed their own unique style on the basis of inheriting the fine food description of their predecessors. Ding Fan wrote about wine, regarding wine and food as "a pair of inseparably conjoined twins"<sup>[11]</sup>. Lu Yaodong wrote about the people's real coarse vegetables and food - "the taste of food cannot be distinguished whether it comes from the north or south, and it did not matter what they ate"<sup>[12]</sup>. Zhao Heng wrote about eating at restaurants; Wang Dunhuang wrote about home cooking. "Gourmands" have published a series of elaborately writings, such as "world food", "gourmands", "big belly" and "eating foodies". In addition, with the development of era, TV documentaries have appeared. It has been regarded as one of main way which "works with other means of expression on TV to jointly complete the creation of TV programs, in order to convey their creative intention and help audiences understand the contents

of TV programs"<sup>[13]</sup>. According to Stuart Hall's theory called "Coding and Decoding", when audience decoded the codes which encoded by the producers, the commentary, as the original interpretation of the media text, greatly affects the information communication in the four stages of production, circulation, distribution and reproduction.

"A Bite of China", as the most popular food feature in recent years, relies on the true characteristics of documentary, exquisite film and television production, as well as its plain and insipid but rich commentary, to meet the cultural and aesthetic needs of the audience, and showing a unique artistic appeal to the public.

*"Ningbo shuimo rice cake is made from the stem rice that was newly produced in that year. After soaking, grinding, steaming and pushing and pounding... pushing and pounding the rice flour ball, rubbing and pressing it hard on the pavement, and then kneading a long strip, and the most common rice cake is formed"(season 1 episode 2 "the story of staple food")*

Rice cake, as a traditional diet custom, it contains a full-bodied local flavor and the emotion of 'Family-country'. Television feature films rapidly bridge the differences in social class and urban and rural cultural gap by using mass communication to and build a strong atmosphere called "NianWeiEr", this leads to the potential writing from completing family reunion to national identity among an atmosphere of sharing food.

Compared with the previous book texts, the TV feature shows a three-dimensional way of communication. Through the combination of sound and painting, commentary and narration, the production process of local delicacies and local customs are visually displayed, which is in line with the aesthetic reception of contemporary people and more in line with the pulse of The Times. The description of food in the commentary of 'A Bite of China' not only sticks to the food's making process, but behind each dish, there is the love of simple and hard-working ordinary people for life.

*"The most traditional way of oyster bakery was deeply hidden in Shantou's old town alley. Using the sweet potato powder to wrap the oyster meat can slow down the rapid shrinkage in the high temperature. Baking it until browned on both sides, in this way, it could the tender of keep oysters and it would be juicy and tasty. Dipping it into the fish sauce; and the fish will be tender inside but crispy outside"(season 2, episode 3, "heart")*

The concise and explanatory commentary with some close-up shots of food cooking tasting would have a greater presentation. The dubbings and actual sound were used at the same time. By using this method, the crispy and tender taste of oyster has been presented in a well-round way. From *Interpersonal Influence: the Role of the Individual in Mass Communication*, Elihu Katz et al believe that audiences expect media to meet the following five needs: cognition, emotion, personal integration, social integration and stress relief. “A Bite of China” has been widely praised since its broadcast, which is directly related to its transmission mode, values and audience’s psychological resonance. It sets food, history, regional style, customs, and authentic stories into one episode. This inherits the tradition of food writing since the last century.

*“A piece of good pork belly with skin must have both fat and thin part... Firstly, burning the skin with great fire, then, the skin usually quickly shrinks in the high temperature, this would be helpful for keeping it for a long time and the meat would still maintain a tough taste..... Usually, this would be an unconscious instinct of mothers who put different tastes into their children’s memories deeply when they attempt to teach children their mother tongue. Once these seeds of children’s impression of various tastes take root and germinate, the familiar smell will remind the child of the direction of home no matter how far away they are.”(season 2, episode 5, “homestyle”)*

In the process of recording tasty food, the most common method is using ordinary stories. Ziyu, who came to Shanghai to study at the age of 16, lived in a small house of 15 square meters with her mother. All her mother can do for was to prepare the most home-cooked food for her. The most simple character image often can reflect people’s most real lifestyle. The taste in our memory is like the seed planted, which will finally grow into a towering tree in our heart one day. These touched and real stories in the world affect the audience and warm the lonely hearts in the urban cities

at the same time.

“A bite of China” appeals to all ages and social groups. It inherits the tradition of predecessors who used to write “the World” by “Eating”; it presents the real life in contemporary China in a more novel way of communication. The cross-text feature of the new century cuisine writing breaks through the limitation of the text; it can develop rich Chinese teaching resources and meanwhile can enrich Chinese teaching approached and methods. When traditional food writing used from traditional paper media to the screen and the Internet; its multiplex and adequate value of Chinese curriculum still has much space to be explored and developed.

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