

Culinary Nostalgia and Fantasy:
Dipping the Post-socialist China in Hot Pot
by

Xinran Wang

Critical Asian Humanities
Duke University

Leo Ching, Advisor

Eileen Chow

Ralph Litzinger

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

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Approved:

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Committee Member: Eileen Chow

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Abstract

What is a hot pot? As a Chinese cooking method, prepared with a simmering pot of soup stock at the dining table, containing a variety of East Asian foodstuffs and ingredients, hot pot is not just one dish. This thesis is aimed at using the booming hot pot catering industry in over the last three decades as an entry point to examine the shift from the socialist asceticism to the capitalist abundance in contemporary urbanities in PRC and attempt to address the following questions: first, in which ways does a hot pot express the post-socialist Chinese society? Second, how does the transformation and increasing popularity of hot pot represent the modern middle-class lifestyle? Third, what can hot pot tell us about the spread of a food trend via mass media and popular culture? Combining the ethnographical engagement with the physical restaurant space exemplified by Dong Lai Shun and Hai Di Lao, and an anthropological approach towards the cultural and historical representations of hot pot, this thesis argues that hot pot represents the postmodern feature in the post-socialist China.

Dedication

For my chair, Leo Ching.

His brilliant guidance, kindness, help, and patience through the past two years is the lighthouse of my life at Duke.

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Introduction *Starter-Hot Pot Restaurants: Ideal Postmodern Institutions*

If there is anything we are serious about, it is neither religion nor learning, but food.

— —Lin Yutang, *My Country and My People*, 337

To begin with, we should understand what a hot pot is. As a Chinese cooking method, prepared with a simmering pot of soup stock on the dining table, containing a variety of raw or cooked ingredients, hot pot per se is not just one dish. Tracing its origin, as early as 5,000 years ago in the Han dynasty, hot pot was already served with separated soup bases with different tastes, with various raw materials dipped and boiled in it. Combined with the cooking machine and the eating container, hot pot contains at least three parts: the soup base boiling in the pot, raw or cooked ingredients set aside, and dipping sauce based on individual needs. The composition of hot pot is as simple as mentioned above: a pot with a constant stove underneath; ingredients for dipping into the pot; and a separate sauce. Such simplicity incurred hot pot some distains from gastronomists. For example, in the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), Yuan Mei, the first gastronomist who systematically wrote a whole book on Chinese cuisine, criticized in her “Hot Pot Withdrawal” that “different dishes require individualized duration and degree of heating (*huohou*) ... now we use the same heating underneath,

how could it be even edible?"¹ Yuan Mei's critique against hot pot as the panacea for all ingredients can also be found in more recent views. In 2018, the well-known Hong Kong gourmet, Cai Lan nominated "hot pot" when asked "which dish would you want to erase from the world" in the well-received TV program *Tian Tian Xiang Shang* (30:00-31:10). His comment immediately triggered strong rebound from the audience. Despite gourmets like Yuan Mei and Cai Lan's aversion to hot pot, it gradually evolved into an unstoppable momentum. According to *2019 Chinese Catering Industry White Paper*, hot pot as a restaurant type has gone mainstream, taking up more than 60% of the total industry.²

If we are what we eat, what we consume and how we prepare the food would be considered as a significant medium for articulating both our national, social and individual identities and the transformation of the contemporary socio-economic landscape. Perhaps the best example of the profound while seemingly contradictory change in the post-socialist Chinese society would be the boom of hot pot restaurants. Among those 400,000 restaurants in China, two brands Dong Lai Shun and Hai Di Lao are in the top 20. Established in the late Qing dynasty in 1903 at Dong'an Market,

¹ The Chinese title is "戒火锅" within the chapter "戒单," "A List of Withdrawals." The original text is: "冬日宴客, 惯用火锅, 对客喧腾, 已属可厌; 且各菜之味, 有一定火候, 宜文宜武, 宜撤宜添, 瞬息难差。今一例以火逼之, 其味尚可问哉? 近人用烧酒代炭, 以为得计, 而不知物经多滚总能变味。或问: 菜冷奈何? 曰: 以起锅滚热之菜, 不使客登时食尽, 而尚能留之以至于冷, 则其味之恶劣可知矣。" Translated by the author.

² Statistically speaking, according to *2018 China Restaurant Industry Survey Report*, there are approximately 400 thousand hot pot restaurants in mainland China, which accounts for more than 60% restaurant industry's overall income. Additionally, hot pot restaurants are the highest grossing and rapidly growing dining services which indicates its potentiality to reflect the future restaurant trend in China. See: <http://www.199it.com/archives/749737.html>

western Beijing, the name “Dong Lai Shun” embodies the great hope for a smooth development from the west. Dong Lai Shun, famous for its hot pot served over a charcoal fire, is a Muslim restaurant and one of Beijing's oldest eateries. Diners place thinly sliced pieces of mutton, frozen tofu, vermicelli and Chinese cabbage into the communal pot, and then dip the cooked pieces in a sesame-paste-based sauce. Tasty, roasted buns covered with sesame seeds can be eaten with the hotpot. This is one of China's *laozihao*, old brand-name businesses, which typically refer to brands over a hundred-year history. As for Hai Di Lao, the literal translation of the name “Hai Di Lao” is “fishing treasures from the bottom of the ocean,” which sounds like treasure-hunting in hot pot. Moreover, it is also a term used in Sichuan Mahjong, a popular tile-based gambling game in China. In Mahjong, the last character of “Hai Di Lao” refers to winning the game, and therefore represents the great fortune. The Hai Di Lao chain restaurant ranks first as hot pot chain in the world, with 593 restaurants in 118 cities around 10 countries.

The reasons why I describe hot pot as a “contradictory change” is: while enjoying its nation-wide popularity, hot pot remains highly regionalized, as will be discussed in the next part; when Mongolian hot pot steps down the class ladder from the royal family to the middle-class, Chongqing-Sichuan hot pot has transformed from the lowest status manual workers’ meal for survival to people’s delicacy (more detailed analysis, see the next part: *Small Plates*); with the almost unchangeable cooking method and three main

parts along the history, hot pot has many newly invented meanings; and even its dining process is contradictory to some extent - the quasi-cooked ingredients on the table provides certain autonomy for the consumers, whereas the autonomy is, and will always be, extremely limited - "the consumer has no choice whatsoever but whose selection is then rebaptized 'free choice'" (Jameson, 1991, 275). In terms of the material representation, on the one hand, Dong Lai Shun, as the oldest hot pot restaurant with over a hundred-year history, attracts consumers by playing with the sense of nostalgia, recalling people's attention to "maestro (skill, craftsmanship)". This emphasis on craftsmanship conflicts Cai Lan's comment that hot pot requires nothing from the chef and offers an alternative way to consider the food security issue. On the other hand, the top one hot pot chain in the world, Hai Di Lao, is an emergent Disneyland-like space, featuring the performative dining experience and appealing to the younger generation through mushrooming short video platforms. Hot pot restaurants as such could offer a fascinating lens for tracking the dramatic transformations across mainland China over the past decades.

This thesis is aimed at using the booming hot pot catering industry in over the last three decades as an entry point to examine the shift from the socialist asceticism to the capitalist abundance in contemporary urbanities in PRC. To probe into the world of the hot pot catering industry, the first goal of this thesis is to capture the historical moments at the level of hot pot consumption and provide a genealogical approach

towards hot pot's transformation in terms of socio-economic, power dynamics, and the class struggle within the larger historical conjuncture. The popularity of hot pot, like many other phenomena related to food in China, has not been considered as historically or culturally significant. However, as I articulate in this thesis, the intricate relationship between the specificity of post-socialist PRC context and the popularity of hot pot restaurants could unveil contemporary consumers' psychological change. The contingency of bodies and the materiality of discourse are is detailedly addressed by material materialists like Marx, Foucault, and Gramsci throughout history.³ According to the Foucauldian discourse, we can only comprehend the body through the language-engaged social life. Hence, when entering the material world of hot pot and reconsidering its interrelation with our mind, body, and society, it is necessary to understand the "use and meaning" in the world of discourse (Mintz, 1996). Sydney Mintz states that food consumption goes beyond the "purely biological" activity and thus has its contextual significance. The "uses and meanings" contained in hot-pot convey the "inside meaning," the subjective and individual experience related to hot-pot

³ The application of texts in cultural anthropological studies, especially food studies, can be seen in Farquhar, *Appetites: food and sex in post-socialist China*, in which she has based her study of Chinese "appetite" for food and sex in post-Mao era, engaging with three key theorists, Marx, Foucault, and Bourdieu. Marx in *The German Ideology* gives her the idea that human consciousness and the human body both arise from the concrete "sensuous activity" of "really existing active men" (6). Foucault gives her the theory to read the body as a discursive text "totally imprinted by history", and the senses as mediated by language (7). And Bourdieu gives her the concept of habitus, which she interprets as "a structure of dispositions" that is "a kind of placement in a world that was always already in a state of play, a tendency to act, and a limited series of potentials that might be realized in action" (9). Here, I mainly address my textual analysis on hot pot from the Foucaultian discourse.

which can elicit the sense of nostalgia, as well as the “outside meaning,” which highly depends on a broader context involving political and structural elements (20-24). Since hot-pot is always consumed in a scene where people sit around the table, dig their chopsticks into the same boiling pot, dip different raw ingredients in the same soup base (even though sometimes within one pot we have several different soup bases, the choices are extremely limited), and have similar dipping sauce, people can—indeed always do—have an intense feeling of intimacy.

Combining the ethnographical engagement with the physical restaurant space and an anthropological approach towards the cultural and historical representations of hot pot, methodological creativity is the second goal of this thesis. On one hand, my restaurant ethnography on Dong Lai Shun and Hai Di Lao situates the words and the world around hot pot within our shared social landscape, paying special attention to the inner and outer decoration, space arrangement, and multimedia advertisements. On the other hand, engaging with literary works and well-accepted documentaries, this thesis aims to enhance both the coverage and depth go transcend a personal perspective, highlighting “food as agency” in private and public spheres, in cultural identity and in community formation, which shed light on everyday power practices entangled at different levels in contemporary China (Farquhar, 2000). Who has access to what, who eats where, when, how, and with whom - all these aspects define groups relative to one another. When Feeley-Harnik asserts that “gastronomy is geography” because “foods

are intimately linked to the place-times of their growing, making, and eating” (1981, xvi), she also makes it clear that such gastronomies and geographies are never static because, as comparative, they are always political. In the *1st Mains: Dong Lai Shun*, I not only want to demonstrate how the PRC government plays an important while almost unnoticeable role in the discourse of “Mongolian hot pot as of craftsmanship, nostalgia, and safety”, more significantly, I would like to tell the story on how generations of literati and documentary producers have contributed to the discourse formation, and how consumers respond to it. As Foucault reminds us, the power relation is not a simple one-way-down direction; rather, it is always discursive. The *2nd Mains: Hai Di Lao* is complimentary to Dong Lai Shun, discussing the fantasy formation and identity construction through the Internet space.

Throughout the history, both the structure of the pot and the cooking method itself have almost remained unchanged, but the historical environment and social-economic condition of consumption have changed dramatically in terms of time and space. The political and economic significance of past events is closely tied to hot pot consumption. Multiple factors could cause dietary changes: war, migration, industrialization and labor, the quest for profit, urbanization and population change, the physiological desire for umami and special texture, and dozens of other reasons. Hot pot opens up a window to delve into these many factors. To study hot pot and its relationship with politics can avoid over-simplifying the notion of national cuisine. As

Kushner explains in his research on how Japan treats Ramen, how a nation conceives of itself through food is both fiction and fact, the contours of whom are worth exploring (2012, 257). Like ramen in Japan, the discourse of consuming hot pot and even how and what to consume is a new invention. For contemporary Chinese consumers, eating hot pot, under many circumstances, is not equal to an ordinary meal. Rather, it is more of a signifier of family or friend reunion (*tuanyuan*) expressed as “around the hot pot (*weilu*)”, bonding each other with a feeling of intimacy relevant to homeland and childhood. Since hot-pot is always consumed in a scene where people sit surrounding the table, dig their chopsticks into the same boiling pot, dip different raw ingredients in the same soup base (even though sometimes within one pot we have several different soup bases, the choices are extremely limited), and have similar dipping sauce, people can—indeed always do—have an intense feeling of intimacy about hot-pot. First, sharing the same pot can be seen as a symbol of the closest relationship. As Mary Douglas illustrates, unlike drinking together could be among people with less intimacy, having a meal together is more often between family members or close friends (Douglas, 1972, p.66). Secondly, hot-pot posits a special spot in our spectrum of sensory experience, reinforcing the sense of “imagined community”⁴because of its flavor shared by everyone around the dining table. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has eloquently stated

4 There are abundant works dealing with the construction of identity through food, such as Fisher, *The Gastronomical Me*; Anna, "Food as a Cultural Construction"; Dunlop, "Gastronomically Chinese: Culinary identities and Chinese modernity."

the reason behind the “secret of taste:” It is probably in tastes of food that one would find the strongest and most indelible mark in infant learning, the lessons which longest withstand the distancing or collapse of the native world and most durably maintain *nostalgia* for it. The native world is, above all, the maternal world, the world of primordial tastes and basic foods, of the archetypal cultural good’’ (Bourdieu, 1984, 79). Through consuming the same tastes repeatedly, people reaffirm their sense of community. Consumption of hot pot then becomes a form of self-identification as well as communication. Thirdly, the characteristics of consuming hot-pot is “hot-boisterous (*renao*)”, like the burning food that often contains strong-flavor ingredients like cilantro and guts, the inevitably twisting chopsticks, and the precise calculation of the boiling time based on the ingredients’ texture, all of which illuminate the ambiance of closeness. Hence, hot pot is not just the result of the intersection of history or economic development. It is also an “invented tradition” that serves as a tourist attraction and identity reinforcement for contemporary Chinese people. As a widely-used concept as early as in 1983, Hobsbawm argues that many “traditions” which “appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented” (1). Customs by which so-called traditional societies applied were not unchangeable or inherent. Hot pot, more specifically the Mongolian hot pot, is claiming its consistency as the “traditional ritual,” which is more of a higher degree of symbolic formalization rather than the actual conventions. The phenomenon is particularly self-evident in the modern development of

the nation and nationalism, creating a national identity, promoting national unity, and legitimizing certain institutions or cultural practices. Later in this thesis, the appeal to the Mongolian hot pot, exemplified by Dong Lai Shun as an emblem for nation-building and of Beijing's old glorious days, is played out in documentaries, proses, and contemporary fictions. Whether happens in the transition from Beiping to Beijing in Lao She's work, or the replacement from Beijing to Taiwan, these cultural representations cope with the sense of discontinuity and loss of community. Mongolian hot pot, thus, offers secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning (Anderson, 1983, 11). What follows is a postmodernist reading of the newly developed Hai Di Lao hot pot chain restaurant, a site of fantasy, a space constructed both in the restaurant's physical space and on virtual media platforms for the new-generation to form their middle-class identity.

The last goal of the thesis lies in blending theories of western cultural studies with contemporary Chinese social phenomena. Hot pot functions as one of the vital cultural signifiers of Chinese identity, socio-economic transformation, people's concept of love, happiness and many essential and commonly-applied notions in everyday life. Despite the seemingly contradictory character as highly regionalized and commonplace practices of daily life, consuming hot pot has far-reaching significance in our self-formation, no matter the national, regional or inner self. In sociologist Claude Fischler's words, "Food not only nourishes but also signifies" (1988, 276). Hot pot, in that sense, is

a perfect symbol of the dual process of traditions in heritage, food maestro, performance and transmission China from the socialist setting jumping into the post-socialist consumerism. The transformation from raw materials into safe, nourishing, pleasing dishes plays an essential role in subjectivity formation since it operates in “the register of the imagination” instead of just in the material (ibid, 284). Through the analysis of Dong Lai Shun and Hai Di Lao, this thesis argues that the massive popularization of hot pot reflects the postmodern cultural and psychological turn in the formation of the post-socialist Chinese urban middle-class identity.

Utilizing the term “post-socialist” to identify the contemporary Chinese society is nothing new, but the division between the socialist and post-socialist remains highly debated. Since the introduction of postmodernism as a concept to Chinese academia in the mid-eighties, Fredric Jameson has gained great influence after his speech at Peking University.⁵ He has characterized postmodernism in terms of both a new “depthlessness” and a decline in the felt authenticity of emotion in the highly industrialized and well developed late capitalist society. With the word “depthlessness”, Jameson refers to the lack of historical context, thus there was nothing beyond simulation and surface (1991, 1-54). More specifically, he further applied this concept to

⁵ Speaking of the heyday of postmodernism in China, Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang have indicates that Jameson has visited China in 1985 and taught at Beijing University during the fall semester. His lectures have been transcribed and translated into Chinese under the title *Houxiandai Wenyi Lilun (Postmodernist Cultural Studies Theory)*, published in 1986 in mainland China and 1989 in Taiwan, which remains the most widely read and quoted work in Chinese discussion of postmodernism. See, Dirlik, Arif & Xudong Zhang. “Introduction: Postmodernism and China,” p.16, note 1.

the discussion of the postmodernist film, suggesting that this kind of film evokes the “nostalgia for the present” (ibid, 279-296). Through these nostalgic films, we experience “historicity,” which distorts, distances, and defamiliarizes the present as history (ibid, 279-296). Moreover, in discussing the decline of emotion’s perceived authenticity, Jameson described it as “waning of affect” (1991, 1-54). These two characteristics are fundamental both in the discussion of postmodernism and the discourse of hot pot consumption. Later in this thesis, when I explore the physical restaurant space and their cultural representations, we could see the quasi-historical time, the displaced space, and the fantasy-like, simulated enjoyment interwoven within hot pot.

In academic and artistic creation, the application of postmodern theory to viewing Chinese cultural phenomenon and reproducing cultural works has been abundant and well-accepted. Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang justifies the use of “postmodernism” to address contemporary Chinese society, saying that we first need to “evaluate the historical notion of Chinese postmodernity” since the notion is originally grounded in late capitalist society in Fredric Jameson’s theory (2000, 2). Historically speaking, the postmodernity in the PRC context is not an outcome solely determined by the industrialized modernization following the Soviet-style development; instead, it is also the result of post-revolution and post-socialism. From the 50s till late 80s, there were less restaurants open to the public, and before the “opening and reform” in 1978, all restaurants were state-owned (the first private restaurant opened at October 1980),

indicating it is closer to an industry, a shopping mall or a governmental administration. Restaurants should be considered as a “work unit (*danwei*)” rather than a public space for communication, social gathering, and entertainment.⁶ Even decades ago, taking food as enjoyment was still regarded as a sign of “bourgeoisie lifestyle”. The 1978 “reform and opening up” marks China’s entrance into the post-socialist era, and the “giddy and aggressively rapid urbanization of the 1990s” leaves a dramatic lingering influence on today’s society (Dai, 2000, 208). Let us consider the hot pot catering industry from a broader historical perspective: breaking with the tradition of socialist quota arrangement, our society has equipped itself with the capitalist market with Chinese characters, to be more precise, the increasing income, more abundant choice, and the sense of subjectivity. To analyze the characteristics of this changing period requires us to not only give credit to 1978, as well as the official abolishment of coupon system (*Liang Piao*) in 1993.⁷ Under the consideration of everyday life, those landmarks play an even more significant role in post-socialist China. In terms of the restaurant space, post-socialist coincides with the postmodern arrangement.

Postmodernism involves people’s sensorial activities. The place for production is replaced by the one for consumption, which becomes the symbol of postmodern cities.

⁶ For more comprehensive study on the system of “work unit (*danwei*),” see: Andrew Walder, *Communist Neo-Traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry*.

⁷ This systematical change can be seen in: *Beijing Annals: Commerce Volume-Non-staple Food Trade Annals*. Different foods varied, like non-staple food used to only for the foreigners were open to the public early in 90s, mutton and beef were released into free market at December 1992, and etc., while the final official abolishment of all food coupon was in act at the very beginning of 1993.

Factory and chimneys have disappeared from our sight, and mall, hotel, bank, restaurant and other spaces for entertainment become major components of the urban landscape. Dong Lai Shun, covering its mechanical production whilst advertising the quasi-craftsmanship, is a complicate place to recall consumers' nostalgia towards the imagined past and an alternative response to the rising concern for food safety. The consuming experience in Hai Di Lao is performative and entertaining, and even its sellers hide their commercial nature behind the curtain of entertainment. All these prove that commercial aspects have been reduced to an inner feeling rather than an outspoken fact. In other words, Hai Di Lao is an anti-consuming consumption, which transforms the dishes into gimmicks, changes eating into playing, and the restaurant space, as a result, is turned into a wonderland. Weaving the desire, pleasure, consuming and fantasy together, as these two restaurants have done, we construct a multi-sensory place that transcends temporal-spatial limits,, constantly yearning for a revisit to the past, imagined history as if we were visiting the historical site. Entering the Internet age, our consumption is more discursive, because even hot pot could be consumed in a virtual form.

Using these two well-known hot pot restaurants as examples in the later parts of my thesis, I would like to argue that the "hot pot fever" is an accurate and interesting reflection of the post-modern cultural turn in post-socialist PRC: it is the desire for the return to the local, the nostalgia towards the pseudo-history or never-existing

wonderland; as an alternative dining choice to the traditional restaurants of stir-fried dishes (*chaocai*), hot pot functions as a resistance against the problems generated by the modern, highly industrialized, urban cooking and eating manners, both materially (i.e.: Dong Lai Shun's attempt to relieve the public concern for food safety) and mentally (i.e.: the relief of the feeling of isolation caused by migration and displacement alongside the urbanization process). The tension between the desire for the integration into the global market and the nostalgic attachment towards the local echoes what Ernest Gellner describes as a "fatalistic" sense of belonging, for which he suggests that a prosperous modern nation relies both on a prevailing "universal high culture (such as industrialization and rationalization)" and on the social, cultural, and geographical barriers that are hard to overcome (1983, 61-62). Inevitably, the postmodernist symptoms in Chinese culture mirror the contradictory suffering: the modernist pursuit of cosmopolitan, global achievements, with the persistent "epidemic of nostalgia, an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world" (Boym, 2001, XIV). One of the most transparent response would be the rapidly expanding catering industry in contemporary China. With the opening of the first KFC in 1987 in Beijing and the first McDonald's appearance in Shenzhen three years later, American fast-food chains and restaurants marketed as an "international" fashion and western flavor become omnipresent.⁸ Consumers' passion for these places

⁸ The opening of first KCF in Beijing, see: <https://kknews.cc/history/6em2b33.html> since it represents Chinese

even though they are not cheap at all in Chinese historical context.⁹ After decades of closing, people are eager to embrace the “western modernity” and curious about what the rest of the world eats. The pursuit for the sense of globalization is not limited to consumers’ preference towards food chains from the foreign countries, local restaurants like Hai Di Lao also embrace the standardized, industrialized, and entertaining features used to only belong to global food chains in China (Yan, 2000). Meanwhile, this urgent desire to sustain China’s entrance into the global market has encountered the “culinary nostalgia”: the “time-honored Chinese tradition” and the longing for returning to the local (Swislocki, 2008, 1). And “the local,” as Prasenjit Duara defines, represents “as a site of authentic values of a larger formation, such as the nation or civilization” (2000, 13). He builds on Fei Xiaotong’s idea that the production of the local is “determined discursively, and most specifically, through writing” (22). Borrowing Duara’s perspective of “local”, I focus on the discursive formation through literary works on the Mongolian hot pot and the formation of ambiguous identity as local Beijing-er (*Beijing ren*) or as a broader national identity as Chinese-ness. In addition, the construction of

opening market after decades of socialist economy, all major newspapers have covered the opening.

⁹ According to the report in footnote 3, from the opening years, KFC only provides Original Recipe combo at 7.3 yuan, including two pieces of fried chicken, mashed potato, salad and buns, while the average annual income per person with urban household registration (*chengshi hukou*) in Beijing was still less than 5,000 yuan. Further comments on the popularity of KFC in Beijing as a phenomenon in late 80s and 90s, see “What Do We Eat in KFC? (*kendeji chishenme*)” in 1989.3.16 *People’s Daily*. A more comprehensive reading on the psychological reasons behind the success of international fast-food chain can be seen from: Yunxiang Yan, “Of Hamburger and Social Space: Consuming McDonald’s in Beijing.”

“glocal-ness”, a compound word of “global” and “local”, conceals itself from our everyday consumption, and the multi-sensory pleasure resides in the food we continuously consume - hot pot. Through consumption, hot pot has constructed part of ourselves, becoming an inseparable portion of our body and mind.

Small Plates-Regionalized History: Towards the Middle-class

How does Chinese learn to consume hot pot differently: to use different pot, to put different food with different preparation, in different contexts; to revise or reflect the political and social condition of the consumption itself? This part has two aims. I want to trace through the situations where people choose or are forced to change their food habits. Then, I want to illustrate how people cope with the changes by creating new consumption situations, embodied with new meanings. It is highly debated over the division of region in terms of Chinese cuisine¹ like Anderson points out in his *Food of China*. Hot pot shows different pathway politically and economically in various regions accordingly. Due to the limitation of space, here, I will discuss the different transformation in Mongolian hot pot and Chongqing-Sichuan hot pot as two completely different while similar attracting examples to shed light on the connection between hot pot and politics in Chinese history. Additionally, it also illuminates the two most important soup base when people consume hot pot. Contemporary Chinese consumers tend to order two-flavor pot, *yuanyanguo*, which is named after mandarin duck, referring the half white half red soup base. The white soup base, which is featured by Mongolian hot pot, and the red one, which is from the spicy chili Chongqing-Sichuan. Hot pot, varies from region to region and changing from time to time, the object itself is

¹ Whether there is national cuisine is highly debated, but just like Mintz has concluded in his *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom*, without any doubts there is regional cuisine.

dynamic. Like any ongoing experience, the experience of consuming hot pot is continually formed and renegotiated at micro-, meso-, and macro-political levels. Certain textures and tastes are only consumed by a limited group of people temporally and spatially. It is useless and impossible to trace the origin of hot pot or to state the authenticity of a certain taste, since it was mixed up with regional custom, transformed by native flavor, combined with local ingredients, formed by distinguished characteristics, and ended up with dozens of variations.² Hence, when it comes to power analysis, it is necessary to split hot pot based on region.



Figure 1: Mongolian hot pot

It is generally believed that Mongolian hot pot is originated and dispersed from the northern Chinese nomadic dietary, most probably within Mongolian military and is invented by Hubilie, the founding emperor of Yuan Dynasty, to keep warming up meat

² Whether it makes sense to speak of a national cuisine at all is questionable, as Jean-Francois Revel indicates that for him the only real cuisines are regional because of the enduring distinctiveness of local ingredients (Revel, 1982). Similar statement can also be seen in Mintz, "Cuisine: High, Low, and not at all" in *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom* and his discussion of Freeman's work.

in harshly cold environment. It is identified by its copper pot with clear and light soup base flavored simply by ginger and green onion, heated by charcoal, serving with hand-cut mutton as thin as paper dipping in sesame butter and Chinese chive flower, is famous for its tenderness. From the Chinese character 鲜, a combination of fish and lamb (which means “umami” in English), and almost all characters with “lamb (羊)” have positive meanings, such as 祥(auspicious), 善(kindness), 美(beautiful), we could see the significance of mutton in Chinese culture. Mutton is a luxury food that gradually went its way down the Chinese class ladders through history. And the consumption of mutton is intertwined with Mongolian hot pot.

Starting as the animal sacrificial ritual recorded in *The Book of Rites* before Qing Dynasty, mutton was used in animal sacrifice for ancestors and held in Ding, only by the emperor and the elite.³ In the Spring and Autumn period (770-221 AD), *The Book of Songs* has already recorded the application of Chinese chive flower with boiled mutton as “sacrifice Chinese chive flower with mutton to gods and ancestors.” Since the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589 BC), sheep has reached the top of all livestock, “the

³ Ding, made by bronze, is an ancient cooking vessel with two loop handles and three or four legs. The difference in terms of animal sacrifice could be seen in the chapter “The System of Emperor (王制)” in *The Book of Rites* (《礼记》 “诸侯无故不杀牛，大夫无故不杀羊，士无故不杀犬豕，庶人无故不食珍。”). Only the emperor would sacrifice and consume beef and mutton. Since China was an agriculture-centered society from the very beginning, killing cows was prohibited for thousands of years besides sacrificial rituals. Hence, lamb is considered the highest level of meat in everyday consumption. More detailed analysis can be found in *The Food of China*.

most in all animals on land.”⁴ And in Five Dynasties (907-960 BC), the calligrapher Yang Ningshi also writes down the application of Chinese chive flower with boiled mutton.⁵ Song Dynasty (960-1279 BC) reached the peak of consuming mutton in the royal family, with ten eaten in one day. In addition, we could have a glance through literati’s works to see mutton’s symbolic meaning of higher social status as it had always been. Su Shi, one of the most well-known literati back then, records the preference of mutton and contempt for pork among the elite as “The best pork in Huangzhou is as degraded and cheap as mud. The rich refuse to eat it, while the poor have no idea how to cook.”⁶ When Lu You praises Su Shi’s works, he said “people who know well Su Shi’s works can have mutton; those don’t know can only have vegetable soup.”⁷ Even though it is hard to ensure that the emperor applied hot pot for cooking mutton in the Song, there was hare hot pot recorded in Lin Hong’s recipe as “stirring the twilight,” which indicates the wide-spread of hot pot yet.⁸ According to history records, in earlier Song Dynasty (960-1127 BC), there were restaurants offering mutton hot pot during winter in the capital

⁴ See A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luo-yang (《洛阳伽蓝记》) as “sheep surpasses all other animals on land” (“羊者是陆产之最”). Translated by the author.

⁵ The original text in *The Book of Songs* is recorded in “July (《诗经·七月》)” as “献羔祭韭,” translated by the author. And Yang Ningshi’s *Chinese Chive Flower Calligraphy* (Jiu Hua Tie): “when leaves start falling, the Chinese chive flower gain its strong smell and become mature, which would add flavor to fatty mutton. That is what we call a delicacy.” (当一叶报秋之初, 乃韭花逞味之始。助其肥羜, 实谓珍羞。) Translated by the author.

⁶ The original text is “黄州好猪肉, 价贱如泥土。贵者不肯吃, 贫者不解煮。” translated by the author.

⁷ Lu You and Su Shi are two most well-known poets in Song dynasty. The original text from Lu You is “苏文熟, 吃羊肉; 苏文生, 吃菜羹。” Translated by the author.

⁸ See Lin Hong’s *The Recipe of Song* (*Shanjia Qinggong* 《山家清供》). The original name for hare hot pot is “拨霞拱,” translated by the author. The original text is “游武夷六曲, 访至止师, 遇雪天, 得一兔, 无庖人可制。师云: “山间只用薄批, 酒酱椒料沃之, 以风炉安座上, 用水少半铤。侯汤响一杯后, 各分一筋, 令自筴入汤、摆熟、啖之, 及随宜各以汁供。”

city Bianliang already.⁹ The increasing popularity of hot pot and the mushrooming of regional cuisine perfectly matched the appearance of “citizen class (*shimin jieji*).” Even though the price was far more than ordinary people’s daily consumption,¹⁰ the increasing citizen class along with government officials built up a decent market for hot pot restaurants.

Through Yuan and Qing Dynasty, hot pot became one of the favorite dishes in the Forbidden City. The Emperor Qianlong even used 1,650 hot pots to hold a party of 5,000 guests for his 86 birthday, inviting all people around China who was over 70 years old, known as “The Feast of Thousands Seniors” in 1796 BC.¹¹ After the first officially recorded hot pot restaurant Zhengyang Restaurant opened in 1854, Mongolian hot pot, with its characteristic copper body, mutton-centered ingredients and sesame dipping sauce, finally entered into common people’s (*baixing*) view. In late Qing dynasty, the top one percent of the richest people held over nine tenth wealth of the nation. The mushrooming “citizen class” of 4 million population boosted the further development of hot pot restaurants (Anderson, 1988, 86). However, it is too ideal to equal the appearance of hot pot restaurants to common people’s consumption. Due to population boom, the average grain production per person was 390 kg/year, the lowest compared with other

⁹ See Meng Yuanlao’s *The Dreamlike Glory of the East Capital* (《东京梦华录》). And Bianliang is Kaifeng in Henan province at present.

¹⁰ 《白银资本》

¹¹ See: <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E6%B6%AE%E7%BE%8A%E8%82%89>

dynasty.¹² It was also an era the emperor attempted to expand the cultivation of sweet potato and corn, which are much more productive than other staple food. Pasture was transformed into farmland to support the booming population.¹³ Until opening up (1978), there were only Chinese cabbage, frozen tofu and vermicelli besides different parts of mutton on the menu of Mongolian hot pot restaurants. Although the menu was limited, dining in hot pot restaurants during the era of planned economy symbolizes wealth and status. Hence, Mongolian hot pot, whether as its application in the military, its preference by the emperor, or its popularity among the newly emerged middle class, steps down from the royal family to middle-class consumption after 1980s.

In terms of class transition among consumers, Chongqing-Sichuan hot pot is the opposite. Boiling with strongly seasoned soup base such as Sichuan pepper, chili, ginger, anise, bay leaf in beef tallow, it becomes dominant in the hot pot market for its hot and numbing feeling when entering into the 21 century. Being widely consumed by the world, breaking the boundary of regional preference and class limitation, chili hot pot has even become the embodiment of national cuisine at present. Unlike the long application of hot pot cooking mutton in northern China, the prototype of Chongqing-Sichuan hot pot could only be traced back in late Qing dynasty or even afterwards.

Though chili was transported into China quite late, almost at the end of Ming. Sichuan

¹² See Zhang Hong-jie's *The Heyday of Hunger: Pros and Cons in Qianlong Era* (《饥饿的盛世：乾隆时代的得与失》).

¹³ Ibid. Zhang illustrates the doubled population in 54 years during Qianlong's

cuisine has been known as numbing and hot flavor based on the generous application of Sichuan chili, ginger and dogwood (*zhuyyu*) at least as early as Song dynasty (Anderson, E.N. 1988, 70).



Figure 2: Left: The Multi-flavored hot-pot discovered in the tomb of Liu Fei back to Han Dynasty

Right: Chongqing-Sichuan hot pot

The origin and the accurate time of the appearance of Chongqing-Sichuan hot pot is highly debated.¹⁴ The most well-accepted version indicates it originated from the waterman (*qianfu*) dish only a century before and used to feature the lowest manual workers' cuisine. Chongqing, situated at the convergence of Yangtze River and Jialing River, is a water transportation center for thousands of years. In 1891 (during the Daoguang period in Qing dynasty), Britain found Chongqing custom both as transportation hub and commercial center. The huge body of manual workers such as

¹⁴ See: <http://news.163.com/18/0305/00/DC31977T00018M4D.html> or <http://cq.sina.com.cn/news/b/2013-04-10/070548624.html> (The second link suggests that guts were disposed into the river, which need further check during my summer research in Chongqing's hot pot museum).

waterman and Bang-bang¹⁵ provided a large market for hot pot, which was hot, energy-condensed, convenient and cheap. The prosperous slaughter industry in Rongchang district in Chongqing could also trace back to Ming and Qing dynasty,¹⁶ which provided fresh meat and guts for the city. While beef and pork were too expensive for lower class workers, the characteristic ingredients guts, special for beef stripe, duck intestine, blood curd, red lane, and pork brain served as a cheap compromise for energy and comfort. Guts as the cheap fatty meats offer the poor a possibility to consume the highly caloric ingredients. The strong-flavored soup base is seen as a transformation of trash to treasure, covering funky smell, replenishing enough sodium for daily work and highlighting the special crispy or oily soft texture from different guts. More wisely, the design of pot in this area also illuminates consumers' poverty. In order to maximize the energy and soup base, Chongqing-Sichuan hot pot was designed as a huge pot separated into nine grids, with the same soup base connected underneath. It looks like the pot demonstrated on the left, but reflects completely different values. If we say the separated pot found in Liu Fei's tomb conveys royal family's need for different flavors, the separation in Chongqing-Sichuan pot is out of concern for price. When waterman and bang-bang sat down to eat, each of them could occupy one grid of the soup base to

¹⁵ Due to the hilly geographical nature, in Chongqing, there's such a group of people, who climb and descend the city's steep hills, with a one-meter long bamboo stick on their shoulders, and there are two indigo nylon cords on the stick. They usually wander along the street to solicit business. They come from countryside, acting as the temporary porter in the streets of Chongqing, also called "Bang-bang" by Chongqing citizens.

¹⁶ See: <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E8%8D%A3%E6%98%8C%E7%8C%AA>

dip their own ingredients. Just like that, a table of strangers could share the pot and soup base.

The first popularity of Chongqing-Sichuan hot pot is directly bounded with Chinese civil war (1927-49). As Minz suggests, large-scale structural change like war and migration, due to its mobility and displacement, is often coincident with the changing preference of food (1996). During anti-Japanese war, Chongqing, used to be an unimpressive city at southeast Sichuan, became auxiliary capital when Nanjing, the capital city was occupied by the Japanese army. There has never been another city in China like Chongqing, gaining its fame and status within a decade. Over ten million people from coastal area were relocated at Chongqing-Sichuan, including officials, entrepreneurs, workers, teachers and students. To feed those diasporic groups became the essential problem during wartime. Dense population and large demanding required newly-emerging hot pot restaurants to cope with different statuses among those in-migrants. Among in-migrants, the love from military and political dignitaries further boosted the popularity of Chongqing-Sichuan hot pot. For instance, KMT Lieutenant General Dai Li was fond of hot pot, who made a record of 500 pots to fete the officials. As Chinese idiom goes, “what the superior like, the inferior would like more.”¹⁷ Hot pot has gradually become a fancy feast for officials and literati in Chongqing. In these years,

¹⁷ This is an idiom from *The Book of Rites* (《礼记》). The original text is “上有所好，下必甚焉。” translated by the author.

it was transformed from the cheapest cuisine for the manual workers into a class-flexible cuisine for everyone. Besides the freshly developed high-end restaurant, those tiny stalls remained close to the port for working class consumers. Even after the war, those who lived in Chongqing and later exceled to Taiwan (*waishenren*) have created their unforgettable hot pot memories into poem, “Chaotian Gate, Pipa Hill, hot pot stalls and snack bars, accompany me those eight tough years; hot, numbing and yummy dishes, the ‘frog capital’ will leave the traces!”¹⁸ Later in my essay, I would analyze the combination of Mongolian hot pot and Chongqing-Sichuan hot pot’s representation in contemporary Taiwan culture, using Pai Hsien Yung’s piece as a site to generate nostalgia.

¹⁸ Chaotian Gate and Pipa Hill are two landmarks in Chongqing. The original poem is “朝天门、枇杷山，火锅小吃店，伴我八年度磨难，饭菜麻辣香，雾都印记难消散！” translated by the author.

1st Mains-Mongolian Hot Pot: Consuming Maestro, Nostalgia and Cleanness in a Pot

In 1995, the Japanese well-known television program producer NHK produced a documentary on Chinese cuisine named *Chinese Culinary Culture (Zhongguo de Shiwenhua)* to record the early 90s China via the alimentary experience to explore the dramatic transformation from the socialist to post-socialist China. The first episode captures the immediate reaction from the post-socialist Beijing, after complete abolishment of the ration coupon system in 1993 after 35 years.¹ From the name of this episode, “Proletarian Flavor and Imperial Food,” there is already the binary division between the proletarian everydayness and the haute cuisine originally prepared for the emperor. Dong Lai Shun hot pot restaurant appears as the comfort food when the autumn comes and the temperature drops. In Chinese, Mongolian hot pot like Dong Lai Shun is not called “hot pot (*huoguo*),” but named after the gesture of dipping the raw mutton into the boiling broth and taking out immediately before getting over-cooked, that is “*shuan yangrou*.”²

The narration goes on as “Consumers line up out of the restaurant even early in the morning, since Dong Lai Shun is well-accepted as the provider of the most delicious Mongolian, halal hot pot.” Halal cuisine in Beijing is predominantly prepared by Hui

¹ See “Chapter 2. Beef and Mutton” in *Beijing Annals: Commerce Volume-Non-staple Food Trade Annals*, p41-59.

² Even the Chinese name for Mongolian hot pot is *shuan yangrou*, I still use the more commonly applied English translation-“Mongolian hot pot” to address Dong Lai Shun in later part of this essay, because it is well accepted and demonstrates the origin as from the Mongolian military which has been articulated in the introduction part. It is said that the first appearance of the western translation of Mongolian hot pot is in *Travels of Marco Polo* back in the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), built by the Mongolian. In addition, this name serves better for the illustration of “hot pot” as a category in general.

Muslim minority,³ which has a long and abundant history. From Ming dynasty (AD 1368-1644) till nowadays, Hui people in Beijing area have been heavenly relied on the ox and sheep trade and catering industry (Zhou & Ma, 2009, 68-71). Tang Lusun, one of the most well-established Taiwanese gastronomists born in Beijing, also suggests that “eating Mongolian hot pot in Beijing (the old name for Beijing from 1928 in the Republic China till the establishment of PRC in 1949), the one with good taste should go to halal restaurants.”⁴ Dong Lai Shun, back in 1990s, was a state-owned Mongolian hot pot restaurant is a well-known halal restaurant chain featured by Mongolian hot pot based in Beijing.

With the camera zooms in, plates of freshly sliced mutton show up. “Dong Lai Shun only uses castrated ram as meat source, to maintain a tender and less oily texture,” and the camera catches the scene where three chefs stood behind the preparation table, using the forearm-length knife to thinly slice the mutton. In 2008, Dong Lai Shun’s hand-cutting skill of fresh mutton has been recognized by the State Council and the Ministry of Culture as national “Intangible Cultural Heritage,” and later on it also gains titles such as “China Time-honored Brand (*Zhonghua Laozihao*)” and “Top One Halal Hot Pot

³ Hui in mainland China refers to predominantly ethnically Han Chinese adherents of Islam, mainly in the northwestern provinces of the country and the northern China in general. According to the 2011 census, China is home to approximately 10.5 million Hui people, which is the second largest ethnic minority group in China.

⁴ He uses “religious restaurant (教门馆子 *jiaomen guanzi*)” to refer to halal restaurants. In old Beijing, restaurants used to be divided into “Big Religious (*dajiao*),” which provided Man and Han cuisine, and “Small Religious (*xiaojiao*)” which offered halal food. Since the Hui acclaim that they have religious belief, halal restaurants are also called as “religious restaurant (教门馆子 *jiaomen guanzi*).”

(*Qingzhen Diyi Shuan*).”⁵ Ironically, at present, Dong Lai Shun is also known as the inventor of the meat slicing machine, which has been widely applied in all the hot pot restaurants at present, including itself. Currently on the menu, there is only one kind of meat is cut by hand, namely “hand-cut mutton (*shouqie yangrou*),” with more than a dozen done by the machine.⁶ Then, when it turns to the dipping sauce, the enamel cylindrical containers holding seven basic sauces: sesame paste, soy sauce, Chinese chive flower sauce, fermented tofu, yellow rice wine, chili oil, and shrimp sauce. Plus, chopped cilantro and green onion can be added on based on individual need. Scenes repeatedly appear in the documentary evoke the socialist period in China: hand-written signs on street; grey, dark blue, standardized Chinese tunic suits; the halal brand plate; deep blue and pearl white porcelain bowls; highly treasured meat; enamel cylindrical containers; sesame paste; Chinese cabbage and vermicelli; narrow space for eating, even strangers were sharing a table for consumption (NHK documentary: 15:15-17:50). Absent from the restaurant were the propaganda posters, decorations of any kind, excluding political clues and so on. Thus the list is not a list of historical realities (although these items are not invented and to some extent have “authentic”), but rather a list of simulations, of ideas of the historical realities. It suggests *three* particular insightful aspects of Dong Lai Shun: the competition and the showcase of cutting-skills

⁵ Those titles can be seen on the main entrance of Dong Lai Shun’s official website: <https://www.donglaishun.com/> and currently hang on the wall in the Wang Fu Jin street Dong Lai Shun.

⁶ According to my ethnographic research done in 2019 summer in Beijing.

from chefs/craftsmen; the emphasis on consuming Mongolian hot pot as a “tradition” in winter and as a form of nostalgia; and eating Dong Lai Shun as eating *halal* as a response to raising food safety concern.

Before the establishment of PRC, according to Chinese anthropologist Yan Yunxiang, there were three levels of restaurants in Beijing. The top, luxurious restaurants and hotels were not accessible to the public. The decent ones provided one specific cuisine, and many of them had quite a long history. These restaurants were open to the public, serving as the public space for groups of elite to hold conference or social gathering, and for general citizens to hold wedding banquet or family reunion feast. As for the lowest level diners, people called them as “canteen (*shitang*),” which almost only for people paid visit to Beijing or the local having to dine out due to work requirement (2000). The majority of the local were supposed to eat in their work unit’s canteen, as the direct response to the national agricultural reform and the socialist infrastructure of food production and supply (Party Literature Research Center, 1993, 115-133). Restaurants, especially the private owned, were seen as wasteful and vestiges of the bourgeois society. Dong Lai Shun was among the second-level restaurant, and became a joint state-private owned hot pot restaurant in 1955. Although it remained open even during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), Dong Lai Shun changed its name into “Ethnic Restaurant (*minzu fandian*)” and also became a standardized canteen in order to get the official support to survive. It shared the features with all other *shitang* during that era: the

requirement for food coupon, simple and even bad eating environment, rare choices among food, highly restricted open time, and waiters without service.

On the contrary, when Dong Lai Shun changed back to its original name and change back to the first wave of market-originated restaurants, its advocate as an exhibition of culinary maestro, the embracement of “food as an art” presents as the production of culinary ideal, national proud and, more importantly, individual cultural experience. It not only demonstrates the material abundance, more essentially, as Schectman discusses about the booming culinary competition in post-socialist Russia, it is “privileging the technical standards and formal aesthetics of cuisine and its production over the subjective, sensual experience or primal urgency of its consumption” (2009, 155). The resurgence of the craftsmanship serves as a direct response to the deprivation of material enjoyment and individual difference under the decades of socialism. Twenty five years from the NHK documentary, most recently, documentary directed by Chen Xiaoqing on hot pot still reinforces the notion of “maestro” represented by the cutting technique of the mutton for Mongolian hot pot, even in a more direct way. Chen Xiaoqing, the director of the famous documentary on Chinese culinary culture *A Bite of China*, applies more than five minutes on the introduction of “The First Knife in Beijing (*jingcheng yibadao*)” to demonstrate the different cutting techniques for various parts of mutton, out of this eleven-minute short documentary video. Additionally, the documentary directly records the comment by a

Mongolian hot pot restaurant owner on the “ritual” of eating it: “Mongolian hot pot (*shuanyangrou*) used to be the feast only accessible by the royal family in the Qing dynasty” “water is the best way to distinguish (whether) the ingredients (are fresh enough)” “we need to put the sliced sheep tail (*waixin*) into the soup base to add some oil to the water” “dip the meat gently into the boiling soup down and up for several times, no more than ten seconds” “use the high rib as example, let me put a bit of minced chive flower upon it; taste, you will feel the aromatic meat, a tip of sweetness and the freshness from chive flower” (2:00-3:50). Although the average diners might be hard to recognize the difference from the mutton cut by Dong Lai Shun’s chef, or even not notice the moment almost all the hand-cut meat has replaced by the machine-sliced, they are willing to pay for the experience of dining in the food used to only access by the imperial or the elite class.

Nationalist sentiments play a role in the success of Dong Lai Shun, which are often linked to nostalgic reminiscences of the socialist and pre-socialist food traditions. The embracement of the local as well as the nation, has its abiding values to construct consumers’ identity: the reinforcement of “Chinese-ness,” or triggering the sense of belonging to Beijing. Modern and contemporary literati and gastronomists have contributed to the nostalgic discourse around the Mongolian hot pot consumption. In 1933, Lao She (1899-1966), one of the principal Beijing style writer bridging from the Republic era to the PRC, published one of his well-known novel *The Quest for Love of Lao*

Lee. With a center on the lowest status of government officials' life in Beiping, the book depicts several couples in their different ages to unveil the core of the so-called middle-age crisis and the fast-changing, problematic society. The story opens up with a situation where the main characters Lao Lee and Big Brother Chang, came together around a bubbling traditional Beijing mutton hot pot⁷ in Big Brother Chang's house to talk about Lao Lee's problematic marriage. When Lao Lee was there, he thought about the relation between food and time, saying that "there was no need to eat steaming *ho-kuo* at this time of year. It was not cold enough, although to eat and dress according to the season was one of the pleasures of life" (Lao She, 1948, p.14). Aware that at that time, even consuming hot pot earlier in wintertime was quite an abnormal experience, Lao She plays with Big Brother Chang's "ahead" of time consumption to praise him as an attracting person. Via Lao Lee's thinking, we know that Big Brother Chang was someone who knew how to enjoy life since "'Pleasure' was more interesting than 'necessity'" (ibid.). Hot pot, without its debut, has played the role to bring us back to the middle-class Beiping family setting: the four-section courtyard (*siheyuan*), the early winter time, not frozen but pleasant cool, and the bobbling brass hot pot. Later on during eating hot pot, Big Brother Chang showed his picking on shrimp sauce,⁸ and was proud of he could

⁷ Hot pot, *huo-guo* (火鍋), was translated as *ho-kuo* according to its pronunciation in the first English edition published in 1948.

⁸ Shrimp sauce, *Xiatou You*, literally should be translated into "shrimp's head oil." It could add another layer of umami to sesame paste, which is widely used as the typical dipping sauce accompanied Beijing mutton hot pot. Also see its representation in the NHK documentary as mentioned above.

find the best sauce in Beiping. They did not talk about Lao Lee's problem at all during eating hot pot, busy to fill up their empty stomach with sliced mutton. According to Big Brother Chang's life philosophy, "happiness is simple, life is meaningful, when there was good food in the stomach (ibid. p.16-17)." Few words on eating hot pot conjure up the image of a middle-age Beiping man who cared nothing about the outside world but his own enjoyment.

There is no political turbulence or concern in *The Quest for Love of Lao Lee*, although 1933's Beiping was already in the prelude for the anti-Japanese war, which was finally burst out in 1937. Having Mongolian hot pot is the panacea to heal all the pain from daily life and solve all the problems. And as we say that nostalgia is the pain of temporal distance and displacement, diasporic writers share a stronger attachment on the Mongolian hot pot, as a nostalgic referent. When David Wang demonstrates in his "Reminiscences of the Northern Capital (*Beijing Menghualu*)," there are bunches of Taiwanese writers who were originally from Beiping/Beijing recording the flavor of Beijing as "a witness for the imagined Modernity" (2005, 362). Whether it is Tang Lusun's detailed depiction on how picky the gourmets were for Dong Lai Shun's meat origin, technique for slicing and the dipping sauce, or in Liang Shiqiu's prose about the childhood winter in Beiping, which was full of the smell of mutton and sesame paste, those Beiping-Taiwan writers have dreamed back to the past motherland, not as a gesture of concerning the political transformation, but an interchange of the past,

present and the future: “before the establishment of PRC at 1949, Beijing was the spatial coordinate of the past; the regime change is nothing but dragging the past to the present, proving that the past never easily passed by, while the present is not just about the present time” (ibid, 363). The Mongolian hot pot in those writers’ depiction, along with other traditional Beijing cuisines, is crystalized into the poetic language yearning for returning to the never-existed, glorious and dream-like old Beijing. Classical nostalgic longing is articulated as generated by the loss of the original desired object, and by spatial or temporal displacement,⁹ alongside, the “‘postmodern’ one as nostalgia for nostalgia itself” (Jameson, 1998, 189).¹⁰ Elucidated in those cultural representations, our impression of the past happiness life around Mongolian hot pot lacked personal historical background. The nostalgia without experience has reinforced its “real-ness” through cultural representations.

From the local Beijing writer Lao She, to the first generation diasporic writers from Beijing to Taiwan, Mongolian hot pot If we view the hot pot in Lao She’s novel as somehow a reflection of the middle-class Beijing people’s simple life pleasure, the copper Mongolian hot pot with Sichuan ingredients in Pai’s “New Year’s Eve” for the

⁹ This has been well-articulated in academic study on “nostalgia.” See: Stewart, 1999, *On Longing*, in which she articulates how nostalgia is conceptualized with Freudian and Marx’ discourse on fetish; Boym, 2001, 38, where she analyzes the application of dinosaur in American popular culture as a referent to the un-happened past.

¹⁰ The original text is “在 1949 年之前，北京已经是座代表 ‘过去’ 的空间坐标，政权更迭，无非又把这 ‘过去’ 拉回到现在，又一次坐实 ‘过去’ 是不会轻易地过去的，现在也不尽然仅系于当下。” Translated by the author.

main character, Lai Ming-sheng, is more than a hometown specialty—it is a nostalgic bridge arching between the “glorious” past as the young company commander during the Chinese civil war and the poor present as an old, low-status veteran. Pai depicts a hot pot feast for a diasporic group wandered from the mainland after the default of KMT in Chinese civil war back in 1949. New Year eve in Taipei. The hero Lai Ming-sheng came from Tainan on New Year eve to reunite with the family of Major Liu was back then the senior officer of Major Liu, while now just “a purchasing agent for the kitchen (Mess Sergeant) at the Veterans Hospital (*huofutou*)” (Pai, 2000, 90).

The opening line of “New Year Eve” is “On New Year’s Eve a cold front suddenly invaded Taipei, and by twilight the sky was already dark,” which sets a familiar environment of the cold and dark night, old friends sit together eating hot pot over a cup of wine for Chinese readers (*ibid*, 82). It can be seen in works back to Tang Dynasty, as in Bai Ju-yi’s poem: “The newly brewed rice wine ripples light green, the laterite tiny stove set ready to heat. By twilight the sky seems to snow, so could we drink a cup of wine or no?” The contrast between the frozen-dark outside and the hot-boisterous (*renao*) inside and the combination of hot pot and Chinese liquor set the lively tone of their reunion.

The debut of the hot pot in Major Liu’s house is described as “Mrs. Liu came into the room, carrying a copper Mongolian hot pot with burning charcoals crackling and jumping underneath,” conveying the hospitality and the “burning” emotion of the

reunion (id). Pai specifically picks the plates of food for hot pot to trigger the characters recalling the past experience in Szechwan, mainland China: "a plate of stripe, one of kidneys, two plates of sliced mutton, and five or six dishes of assorted Sichuan pickled vegetables in red pepper sauce" (ibid, 88). It is obvious that this hot pot is a combination of Mongolian hot pot's pot and mutton as well as the spicy soup base and main ingredients, guts, from Chongqing-Sichuan hotpot. "Sichuan pickled vegetables in red pepper sauce" is like the tip of iceberg of a vast array of trans-regional odorific and gustatory traveling companions. Through eating it, Lai revisits his glory youth and boasts when he used to "carrying cooking-pots for the Revolutionary Army on the Northern Expedition to fight Sun Chuan-fang" and "the Battle of Taierzhuang" now and then to find his meaning of life. Even though he is not indulgent into self-pity, clearly noticing his age and social status, his heart swells with pride in retrospect, feeling his destiny bonds with the nation's, his blood runs in the national vein. Hence, following Lai's self-image as a hero, his forthright behavior and bragging words on the dining table are self-explained: persuading the son of Major Liu who is allergic to alcohol to drink with him, he "downed his cup of Quemoy *kao-liang*" sat down, smacked his lips, poached himself some tripe in the hot pot, and swallowed it as a chaser" (ibid, 90), speaking about cuckolding his former major, he "leaped up and banged his fist on the table," "his banging made the coals under the hot pot jump" (ibid, 98).

There are three types of people depicted in *Taipei People*: the one who completely lives in the past; the one who embraces the present while revisits the past by chance; the one who deserts the past or has no past, totally symbolizes the present. In “New Year Eve,” Lai belongs to the first type, Major Liu and Mrs. Liu are the second one, while the son and his girlfriend are the third one, the new generation. The object twisted them together is hot pot. For the old generation (as *waishenren*), they feel bereft of material representation of mainland culture that are embodied in familiar environment (like architecture) and in linguistic forms (like hometown accent, familiar signs, advertisement). Stuart Hall wrote that diasporic peoples while away are yearning for the “return to the beginning” that can “neither be fulfilled nor requited, and hence is the beginning of the symbolic, of representation, the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, discovery—in short, the reservoir of our cinematic narratives.” (Hall, 236). In the new environment of alienation, object like hot pot could carry a displaced sense of culture to “take on additional potential power” (Minz, 1996, 27). It provides the same Sichuan taste back to Lai and Liu’s youth in the troop, arching from the mainland to Taiwan, compensating the poor present with delicious past, and hence, triggering the sense of nostalgia. “Nostalgia,” a Greek word as a combination of “nostos-homecoming” and “algos-pain and longing,” is a “longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed” (Boym, 2001, XIII). The Mongolian hot pot, as the embodiment of nostalgia pushes us to realize the natural paradox: if the nostalgic person

like Lai is true to the past, he would also recall the imperfect aspect of the history, builds up a fantasy to store up the distant memory, sentiment of loss and replacement.

Hot pot, as an object related to the past dream-like shared sensory experiences, turns on the synesthetic feeling—"hearing, seeing, touching, tasting—in primary groups, families, ethnic groups, fraternal or sororal associations, etc. If we don't have these things to begin with we have to somehow recreate them by an argument of images of some kind in which primary perceptions are evoked" (Fernandez 1986:193). Lai, like those Taiwanese writers coming from Beijing, eagers to revisit the past time just as his desire to going back home, and via this magic pot, he finally revisits the past time as going back to the hometown. For the new generation, they even have no opportunity to pay a visit to their hometown, while hot pot opens a door for them to taste the hometown, as well as take a glance of both the heroic youth of their older generation, and the fierce battle back then.

The third aspect I would like to point out is the Mongolian hot pot as an alternative way for people to deal with the food safety issue. Entering in to the post-socialist era, when Chinese consumers dine out more frequently, they tend to pay more and more attention to the catering industry, which also sheds light on essential concerns about food safety and hygiene issues. Halal (*Qingzhen*), in Chinese is composed of two characters literally stand for "pure" and "true." Halal, meaning "permitted" and "lawful" according to the Islamic law, is used as the standardized "protocol for the

production, preparation, and consumption of food” (Erie, 2018, 397), while being chiefly understood as a taboo against pork. Certainly Mary Douglas’s classificatory schema between “danger” and “pure” enables us to understand the different food restrictions among different groups of people. Yet, the popularity of Dong Lai Shun as a halal hot pot restaurant chain, as I would like to suggest, represents far beyond simply a referent of respect towards the muslim food culture by Han consumers, it is a complicated realm weaved by political agenda and individual choice. More specifically, it is the kind of cultural politics involved in the post-socialist ethnic minority policies and non-muslim consumers’ concern over food safety problems. *Qingzhen* has been a mainstay in the study of Islam in China, while current researches focus on the heated discussion of Islam-phobia and the anxiety of being “Islamized” (Erie, 2018). The increasing popularity of the halal hot pot restaurant Dong Lai Shun seems to respond to this issue with an ambiguous standpoint: on the one hand, it is a nation-owned restaurant since 1955, echoing the government’s propaganda on “harmonizing ethnic minorities” (*Shaoshuminzu Hexie*) in the secular level. On the other hand, halal restaurants indeed serve as an alternative choice out of both muslim (mainly *Hui* in Beijing) and non-muslim consumers’ concern over the repeatedly occurred food safety issue-known as the “fake mutton” or “fake meat” used in some restaurant, replacing mutton with pork, duck or even a mixture of different kinds of cheap meat.¹¹ Despite strict laws governing food

¹¹ There are bunches of reports on the “fake meat” issue. For example, the “fake mutton” in hot pot

production and supply in China, one still finds severe compromises in food safety due to the pursuit for greater profits. Thus, like Saroja Dorairajoo and Ma Jianfu's advocate on Islamic food production practices which indicates that "religion can legislate morality" and build confidence for Chinese consumers,¹² many Chinese consumers consider dining in the halal restaurant as a safer choice.

restaurant, see: <http://finance.people.com.cn/n/2013/0506/c153180-21372340.html>;

ten cases on "fake meat": <http://scitech.people.com.cn/n/2013/0503/c1007-21351195-2.html>

¹²The report "Does Islam have the answers to China's food safety problems?":

<https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1996452/does-islam-have-answers-chinas-food-safety-problems>

2nd Mains-Hai Di Lao Wonderland: Consuming Performance in Chinese Middle-class

Let us consider this waiter in the café. His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid... All his behavior seems to us a game...He is playing, he is amusing himself. But what is he playing? We need not watch long before we can explain it: he is playing at being a waiter in a café. There is nothing there to surprise us.

— — Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*

Almost every person has their favorite restaurant. If asked what place would you go with your friends or colleagues after an exhausting day, many Chinese youngsters would say Hai Di Lao hot pot without hesitation, if their city has one.¹ The literal translation of the name “Hai Di Lao” is “fishing treasures from the bottom of the ocean,” which sounds like treasure-hunting in hot pot. It is also a term used in Sichuan Mahjong, a tile-based gambling game popular in China. In Mahjong, “Hai Di Lao” refers to winning the game with the last tile, therefore, it stands for great fortune. Hai Di Lao hot pot restaurant chain is the number one hot pot chain in the world, with 593 restaurants in 118 cities around 10 countries. And hot pot as a restaurant category has accounted for more than 60% of the total cattery industry in mainland China. The average price of Hai

¹ Statistically speaking, according to *2018 China Restaurant Industry Survey Report*, there are approximately 400 thousand hot pot restaurants in mainland China, which accounts for more than 60% restaurant industry's overall income. Additionally, hot pot restaurants are the highest grossing and rapidly growing dining services which indicates its potentiality to reflect the future restaurant trend in China. See: <http://www.199it.com/archives/749737.html>

Di Lao in mainland China per consumer is over 100 to 150 yuan, directly targeting the younger generation middle-class from teenagers to the thirty-something. So, with 400,000 hot pot restaurants in mainland China, why does Hai Di Lao stand out? Why does it so appealing to its targeting consumers, who are also the mainstream of the dining-out groups?²

Hai Di Lao is not so much about the food. It is about the performative dining experience and it is about experiencing the “wonderland.” Although established in Sichuan province, Hai Di Lao is not known for its “authentic” Sichuan hot pot.³ The soup base in Hai Di Lao’s menu is, in the main, a collage of various flavors all around China: from the strongest Sichuan vegetable oil chili soup, Chongqing beef tallow spicy base, to the light, refreshing tomato soup, mushroom clear soup, and even develops regional choice-pork stripe stew chicken, which only served in Guangdong province and Taiwan. In order to attract more consumers, it erases all the extremisms in Sichuan hot pot-no extreme spicy, no pork brain, and you can order as many as four flavors soup within one pot. Similar to Disneyland, Hai Di Lao customizes to various regions, leads the food trend in contemporary China by advocating the feeling of “wonderland” via

² In *2018 China Restaurant Industry Survey Report*, over 74% dining-out behaviors are conducted by people born after 1980, which indicates that the major body of the restaurant consumers are younger than 40. And on Da Zhong Dian Ping, a Chinese Yelp-like platform, has indicates the trendy preference by 80s, 90s and 00s consumers’ towards Hai Di Lao. It would also be explained in the later part of this chapter that how the Internet foodie movement and the booming popularity of Hai Di Lao twist together. In later part of this essay, I would also show the overlapping costumers between the catering industry and newly emerged short-video platforms.

³ Even though the “authenticity” of a certain dish or a regional flavor is highly debated. Sichuan hot pot is famous for its spicy, numbing soup base boiling in vegetable oil.

multi-sensory “performance” as its most significant selling point. “Everything should get to a ‘Wow!’” being asked the reason to stably choose Hai Di Lao, one of my best friends and also a regular goer has reiterated the word “Wow.” “I want to bring my friends and my family to a place full of ‘Wows’ and indeed Hai Di Lao can fulfill it.” When waiting in line, the snacks and impeccable consumer services from shoe-cleaning to nail salon would bring the “Wow” factor. The noodle performance is a “Wow;” the enormous D.I.Y. dipping sauce and snacks presentation is a “Wow;” and Sichuan Opera face-changing (*bianlian*) performance, without doubts, is a “Wow.”⁴ And those individual experience of “wow” is not the end of Hai Di Lao experience. More strikingly, we tend to continue posting and catching sight of the images or short videos about Hai Di Lao in the tiny screen of our smartphones.

With a rhythmic background music, a young man, carrying a thick chunk of noodle dough in his hand, comes to the table and gently asks, “are you ready for the flying noodle?” Then, the noodle chef starts to soften the dough with his hands and stretch the dough a bit longer repeatedly. After about five times of pulling, when the noodle reaches a meter long, he begins to “dance” with the noodle, flying it left and right here and there. With music rhythm, sometimes he suddenly throws the noodle in front of your face as closely as almost touching you, and sometimes slightly moves arms

⁴ According to their official website, *bianlian* performance is not available in all branches, while in most oversea restaurants, they provide this service. I would further discuss this performance in later part of this chapter.

up and down to create a waving noodle. The performance usually lasts for about a minute. This noodle is ordered by almost every table. It is the top star product in Hai Di Lao.⁵ Furthermore, the flying noodle performance short videos go viral in all the video-sharing platforms both in China and overseas. In the top video platform *Douyin* (known as Tik Tok overseas), there are more than a million videos under the hashtag Hai Di Lao. Within the first page, there are three videos on the noodle performance, with more than five million likes for each of them.⁶ In Bilibili, where users can submit, view, and add commentary subtitles on videos, there are more than a hundred videos theme on Hai Di Lao noodle dance with more than 100,000 viewers. On Youtube, the largest video website in the world which is banned in mainland China, when typed Hai Di Lao, there are still more than a thousand videos recording the dining experience, showing the international influence of Hai Di Lao.

⁵ For further information on the No.1 ranking for Haidilao, see *2018-2019 White Paper on Hot Pot Development* addressed in: https://www.xianjichina.com/news/details_134900.html For the specific number of Haidilao, and more information on the star dish Haidilao-styled Noodle, see their official website: <https://www.haidilao.com/en/>

⁶ From December 2017 till now, *Douyin* remains the top one short video platform in China, both with the most downloads and the largest daily active users. For further report, see: <https://walkthechat.com/douyin-became-chinas-top-short-video-app-500-days/> And the number of videos under the hashtag Haidilao is from November 1st 2019 *Douyin* app.



Figure 3: Flying noodle performance taken in a Hai Di Lao hot pot restaurant in Beijing

Behind Hai Di Lao's popularity, interesting enough, it has never had commercial advertisements on traditional media such as newspapers, magazines, or television. In the era of ubiquitous cellphones and social media, Hai Di Lao's marketing strategy is conducted through the simulation of hot pot represented on the screen, whether it is the top short-video platforms *Douyin*, *Kuaishou*, and *Bilibili*, or food comment sharing platform like Yelp and Dazhongdianping. What attracts consumers is not the real food itself, it is the virtual food from those new media platforms; it is the performance and the representation which play an essential role in the restaurant promoting. In this chapter, I focus on the analysis of Hai Di Lao's interrelationship with *Douyin* as a window to poke into the postmodernist turn in dining preference among Chinese middle-class and to see how *Douyin* reinforces consumers' middle-class identity as a group reflexively.

Who belongs to the middle-class and what accounts for the middle-class identity have always been highly debated in China, as Mao Zedong once identified that the middle-class is not limited to the economic status, but a compound of cultural background, social status, and economic foundation (1991, 4). Compared with their counterpart in the US or other western developed countries, the Chinese middle-class is both smaller in size and shorter in history. According to the Chinese historian Chen Xulu, middle-class, emerging from the early 20th century, includes the national bourgeoisie, intelligentsia, and people who can live a life of abundance on a specific skill (2016, 260-275). Contemporary Chinese middle-class shares similar compositions featured as: a. unlike the top class, the middle-class gains money based on their struggle rather than the old money. Whether they are the college students or the white-collar workers, everyone has a clock-like tight schedule from Monday to Friday. They need entertainment when out of work, from dining out to watching Tik Tok. Besides, due to lack of entertaining time, the middle-class is more into “multi-tasking” and multi-sensory experience: if they can combine eating, chatting with friends, watching a performance, creating dishes, and making videos at one time, what else should they ask for? They are the regular goers of Hai Di Lao, just like they are also the targeted goers for Disneyland and active users of social media platforms. b. lack of rich family background, growing up with less wealth, when the middle-class have a decent salary, they become eager to prove that they belong to a higher class. When dining out, they

care more about how elegant or how cultural richness the environment is, rather than the taste of the food per se. The decoration in the restaurant, the background music, the arrangement of food, etc. is more significant than the chef. They are the group into the ritualization of life and the celebration of all sorts of festivals and dates, so the nostalgic sentiments are born to be their cup of tea. Entering into the age of the Internet, the new-generation consumers are more likely to have desirable consumption, which is the construction and enhancement of identity: the lives and possessions of these compelling people become the focus of emulation through consumption: others want to be like them and therefore buy what they think such people possess. As Fussell ironically points out that the American middle-class is fond of "dinner theater," which provides the modest dishes as well as an average performance, which copes with the psychology that the middle-class are afraid of challenging (1983, 271). c. the middle-class are the workers, not the boss. Hai Di Lao provides an opportunity for them to cosplay the king of the world: the consumers can ask for everything, but more importantly, in most cases the waiters at Hai Di Lao would provide detailed care, from services such as pouring water, adding soup, to providing things like hair band, apron, lens cloth, plastic bag for phone protection, and so on. Contradictorily, those middle-class consumers also require some autonomy over the food they eat and have a clear awareness of the so-called "free-choice."

While the significance of food across the cultural landscape has a long and rich history, over the last decade, with renewed media attention, we have witnessed a remarkable extension of food's influence as it has enmeshed with various facets of cultural products. As mentioned before, Hai Di Lao has never had commercial advertisements on traditional media platforms such as television or film. Zhang Yong, the founder of Hai Di Lao, repeatedly emphasizes on the significance of "out-of-wonder" service provided to the consumers: "the secret is to provide long-term satisfying service out of consumers' expectation, so that they would come back and bring new consumers in" (Zhang, 2015, 17). What he does not anticipate is the "interface value" as we are moving toward the substituted representational reality instead of the real. Here I have borrowed the useful term "interface value" from Sherry Turkle's book *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. She interprets our postmodernist interrelationship with the computer with four main characteristics: "we have become accustomed to opaque technology," "we have learned to take things at interface value," "we have used our relationships with technology to reflect on the human," and "we have sought out the subjective computer" (Turkle, 1995, 19-26). While going into the age of more portable devices, not limited to computer, her definition could be useful for analyzing multiple screens, especially the mobile phone here. Indeed, the "interface value" produced via our "communication" with the virtual community members we recognize both online and offline is the concrete essence to understand our desire for the

fantasy-fulfilment through screens. In other word, in the culture of simulation of screen, what attracts consumers is not the real food itself, it is the virtual food from new media platforms--whether it is the top short video platforms *Douyin*, *Kuaishou*, and *Bilibili*, or *Meituan-Dianping*, a Yelp-like food comment sharing platform, it is the performance and the representation which play an essential role in the restaurant promoting. In this chapter, I will focus on the analysis of Hai Di Lao performance on *Douyin* as a case study since it has the most users in mainland China to analyze the middle-class postmodernist dining preference in China.

Why *Douyin* rather than any other platforms? In January 2019, *Douyin* announced that their daily active user had reached 250 million within mainland China and more than 500 million monthly active user, which indicates that more than one in three Chinese opens *Douyin* at least once in a month.⁷ And the hashtag Hai Di Lao is the top one creators and viewers under the food category, with over a million videos and billions of viewers. Inevitably we need to consider the demographic question that whether the age group of the *Douyin* users and Hai Di Lao goers are the same.

⁷ For the report on Tik Tok's daily active user, see: <http://news.mydrivers.com/1/611/611345.htm> According to the report, its monthly active user could reach 500 million in mainland China. While the oversea monthly active user had reached 200 million in 2018, the new report does not mention the newly collected data for the oversea market.

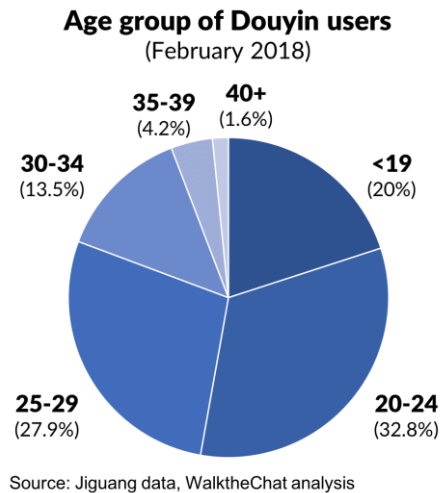


Figure 4: Age group of Douyin users

Based on figure 4, 94% of *Douyin* users are under 34-year-old, quite similar to Hai Di Lao's targeting group. In addition to age, another essential feature for the main body of consumers for Hai Di Lao and *Douyin* is their social identity as the middle class—the modern force with cultural imperatives and a great power to drive market, as written by several scholars.⁸ Deng Xiaoping's 1992 Southern Tour effectively legitimized private wealth and pushed his economic reforms toward the free market, the impact on people's real life was not felt until the late 1990s. Found in 1994, Hai Di Lao hot pot restaurant has witnessed its success along with the emergence of a prosperous booming middle class. The middle class as a sociological category in China only came about at the turn of twenty-first century, and yet nobody has really come up with a suitable

⁸ The discussion on the relation middle class, catering industry and social media, see Doctoroff Tom 2012, 97-102.

definition. Under the consideration of household earnings, based on Credit Suisse Research Institute, middle class belongs to the two middle segments in wealth pyramid, from USD 10,000 to 1 million with a sheer scale in China, measured over 10% of the whole population, which is about 109 million adults, marks a spectacular transformation for Chinese consuming pattern.⁹ The interesting overlapping consumers between Hai Di Lao and *Douyin* as well as the viral spread of Hai Di Lao's short video on such new media platforms push us to think about the following: What can Hai Di Lao's success reflect about the transformation of Chinese new middle-class dining experience in the past decade? How can it tell us about the spread of food trends via new media platforms? And what does it say about the psychological changes in contemporary Chinese society? Through the engagement with Fredric Jameson's postmodernism in the Starter part, I argue that we have stepped into the era of postmodernist dining. Although the first impression of Hai Di Lao and Dong Lai Shun is quite different, I would like to peel down the superficial representations and suggest that they are, in essence, both an expression of postmodern psychological transformation. And borrowing Slavoj Žižek's articulation of Lacanian notion of *Mirror* to consider identity formation, I attempt to

⁹ The range of household income for middle class, see the 2019 Credit Suisse's report "China: This century's champion in wealth creation": <https://www.credit-suisse.com/about-us-news/en/articles/news-and-expertise/chinas-growing-prosperity-201912.html>
The percentage and the total number of Chinese middle class in 2015, see another report in 2015: <https://www.credit-suisse.com/about-us-news/en/articles/news-and-expertise/global-wealth-in-2015-underlying-trends-remain-positive-201510.html>

think about how smartphone screen serves as the mediator of forming consumers' group identity and transfer the sense of *Enjoyment*.

When the transformation in cultural and social relations from person-to-person articulation to its virtual counterpart occurs underneath technological development, the exploration on the social phenomenon could reveal the transformation of the society. From the beginning of this century, Judith Farquhar's exploration of Chinese food across the media landscape, particularly its consideration of popular culture as an example of "agency in everyday life", provides a useful framework through which to examine how media influences the relationship between people and food in contemporary mainland China. Limited by the time she conducted research, the media landscape she focuses on includes popular novels, plays, advertisement flyers, posters on street as well as restaurant menus (Farquhar 2002). With the development of technology, admittedly for some people written texts still play a role in their lives, we are more and more addicted to the Internet. When the Internet veritably becomes the extension of our "offline" real life, we should reconsider food and restaurant in this newly-emerged media platform. Many scholars have approached the Internet function from various perspectives, one of the most reflective way is to consider it as a means for ideology, identity and community formation.¹⁰ In *Virtual Communities*, Felicia Wu Song uses the metaphor "iceberg" to

¹⁰ Some of the most influential academic discussion in terms of the Internet's social role regarding food, see avant-garde researches, see *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Food and Popular Culture* section 2-3.

illustrate that studying virtual communities should not only pay attention to the “tip of the iceberg,” the social phenomenon in general, but also find out the underneath entire iceberg as well as the water temperature changes (the environmental and contextual shifts), the socio-economic landscape of transformation. Even those who have chosen not to stand on the “tip,” those who “do not regularly engage in the new realities that the Internet presents,” are still profoundly influenced by the water below (Song 2009, xvi-xvii). However, less attention has been paid to explore the inner dynamics of the interrelation between food consumption and the new media landscape, which has significance to better understand contemporary Chinese society.

When lens and the Internet become new organs for the younger generation to consume, eating without posting pictures on social media or recording short videos on such platforms, for more and more people, becomes a “vague gesture”-on one hand, people still feel empty even though they have a full stomach after eating while posting food online seems to substitute the significant role of food itself. On the other hand, millions of people engage in viewing others’ eating, whether overeating or trying new things. So not only is Hai Di Lao a physical place where people fill up their stomachs, it serves as an online sphere where people construct, reinforce multiple identities and generate new relation with screen (or, we may say, machine in general). In such ways, Hai Di Lao is an evocative place for evaluate identity and, more generally, about the set of notions that are known as “postmodernism.” The displaced desire for food into the

visual society, the overemphasis on online posting and the preference towards performative dining, embodies the postmodernist consuming trend in contemporary world. Fredric Jameson characterized postmodernism in terms of both a new “depthlessness” and a decline in the felt authenticity of emotion. With the word “depthlessness,” he refers to the lack of historical context, thus there was nothing beyond simulation and surface. To refer to the decline of emotion’s perceived authenticity he described as “waning of affect” (1991, 1-54).

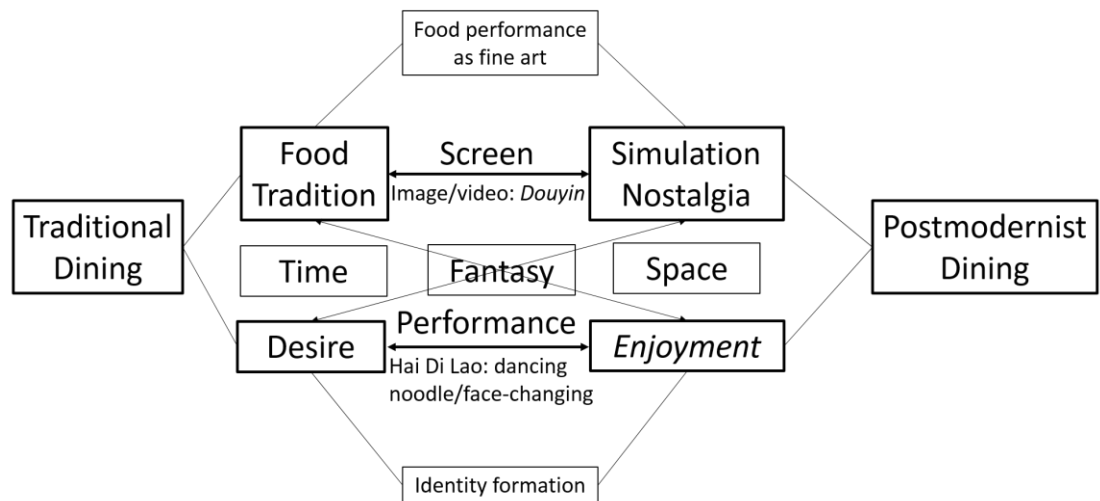


Figure 5: The fantasy creation in the postmodernist dining

When drawing the figure 5, I have borrowed a similar structure from Jameson’s analysis towards realism, modern and postmodern, as well as his later discussion on nostalgic films (ibid, 10; 293). Here, the traditional dining way sets the center around the food itself. Due to food scarcity and the long-time suffering of hunger, dining tradition

in China inevitably focuses on the celebration of good harvest, or at least food on hand. The true happiness rises from the dining process reflects the function as a fulfillment of human basic desire both physical needs and social need as communication. One closer instance represents the traditional dining way would be what the anthropologist Ray Oldenberg writes about the “great good place,” the place suitable for a group of people gather together, communicate, and as a result, raises a sense of belonging. He considers the local bar, bistro, and café at the heart of individual social integration and community formation (1989). Thirty years later, with the emergence of the Internet and the decreasing coherency as well as intimacy within our neighborhood, our younger generation tends to fill this gap with a virtual dining experience and the formation of online community. Entering into the age of postmodernist dining, the screen serves as the mediator to reform our way to evaluate food. The simulation of the authentic version would serve this purpose, just like we like the Disney cute fluffy crocodile rather than the real one. Hai Di Lao’s noodle dance is a simulation of the Lanzhou noodle pulling process in that sense. Indeed, food presentation stands out as something more essential even than the taste or the flavor of the food itself. Simply to see the pictures with the hashtag foodie could provide a basic understanding of the emphasis on food aesthetics. Besides the appearance of the food, Hai Di Lao’s performance also embodies the sense of nostalgia. In the later part of my essay, I also illustrate how face-changing performance in Hai Di Lao, as a pastiche of traditional Sichuan opera, triggers consumers’ nostalgic

feeling to the pseudohistorical past and how it fulfills general people's imagination of Sichuan, or for those foreign consumers, their imagination of China. As Zizek points out, "The element which holds together a given community cannot be reduced to the point of *symbolic identification*: the bond linking together its members always implies a shared relationship toward a Thing, toward *Enjoyment incarnated*... If we are asked how we can recognize the presence of the Thing, the only consistent answer is that the thing is present in that elusive entity called "our way of life." Few people would dispute that, of all the forms of communal enjoyment, alimentary pleasure is the most significant and visible one. And through the *enjoyment incarnated* both of the food performance taken in place of Hai Di Lao and *Douyin*, the shared experience, and shared enjoyment reinforce consumers' middle-class persona.



Figure 6: The official logo for Lanzhou Beef Ramen association

Interestingly to see the similar gesture between the flying noodle performance as shown at the very beginning of this chapter and figure 3, the official logo for Lanzhou beef ramen association, Hai Di Lao noodle performance serves the same basic function as pulling the noodle. Lanzhou beef ramen, found in 1905 in late Qing Dynasty, plays its role as the staple food and one of the symbols for northwest diet in China since then. Like other symbols and logos, this one remains an inert image and requires our effort to project referent to it: a man pulling noodles in his hand, a bull head, or a rosy sunrise from the horizon. On the contrary, Hai Di Lao's performance is depthless and fantasy-driven. I want to propose two ways of reading this performance, both of which illustrate the reason behind our enjoyment of performance dining at Hai Di Lao.

Firstly, *performative dining is a postmodernist dining way, a virtual dining experience.* As performance, the attention in Hai Di Lao surely has not paid to the noodle itself-only pulling one noodle is not a traditional way for making ramen, and surely not enough for people who used to treat noodle as a meal. I would begin my narrative of performance medium by exploring some of the significant historical influences that left a lasting mark on today's Chinese dining preference. Some of these avant-garde art movements have shed light on our idea of the relationship between food and art as they integrate art into everyday practice. To begin with, we should make clear a key terminology repeatedly used in the domain of food studies-"food performance." What is the definition of "food performance?" To adequately answer that question, genealogical tracing back to the end

of last century, when people's idea between food and art has been overturned. Before 1930s, before the raise of futurism, in western academia, food and art were considered unrelated in any sense (LeBesco & Naccarato 2018, 199). As Delville sums up the features of the futurist food-centered work-not only the interest in everyday life as material of art, but also the hybridization of various genres, the emphasis on chemical senses such as taste and smell, the body as present and participant in the artwork-the futurism plays the role of pioneer in thinking food as an art form (Delville, 2008). In 1999, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, in her essay on food as a performance medium, points out the significance of food in the exploration between art and everyday life. She reveals that the disassociation of food from eating and eating from nourishment is the key to its transformation into an art form (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1999, 3). When it comes to the interaction between aesthetic experience and everyday life, John Dewey is an essential figure who has argued that the traditional classification of "art" from everyday experience hinders our appreciation and understanding of the new forms (Dewey, 2005). Following Dewey, Kuehn says, "all food has the potential to be art because its production, presentation, and matter of appreciation (for example, eating) necessarily involve one in an interactive engagement with the qualitative tensions that underlie experience," affirming that culinary creation is a performance art (Kuehn 2005, 195). Since Kuehn mainly focuses on his experience consuming high cuisine, the following decade in western academia seems to pay more attention to the high-end French cuisine,

technological cuisine, or in postmodern art exhibition, considering them as the medium of performance. However, in "Performing with (in) Food," David Szsanto sums up that the common elements of food performance are the "articulation of matter, meaning, and movement; spatial boundaries and the unfurling of time; and the processes of perception and interpretation, themselves a type of 'actor' in what transpires" (LeBesco & Naccarato 2018, 226), which opens up more possible interpretation for food performance: from the growing of an apple tree, to the boisterous street food truck, everything can be a food performance.

This raises the question about the uniqueness of Hai Di Lao hot pot performance, in terms of how might we understand the relationship between food materials, human performers and audiences in the other end of screen? Since postmodernist culture has this depthless inner feature, performance in Hai Di Lao, as the nostalgic reconstruction for the "pseudohistorical depth" as Jameson designates to be a feature of postmodernism, is the pastiche for the never-happened tradition, as well as serves as the condensed superficial moment of enjoyment (Jameson 1991, 21). When the pastiche of pulling noodle and the online substitution put the real on the run, we could decode the inner logic behind middle-class consumers' preference towards "performative dining." By the same token, how does Hai Di Lao become a representation of Sichuan cuisine almost without "Sichuan-ness"? And how does it perform the "simulated China" without Chinese-ness to the foreigners through *bianlian* performance? First, we should

look closely to the *bianlian* performance happening in major cities' Hai Di Lao. Advertised as adapted from traditional Sichuan opera while only requires less than a month of training, the performance needs only to push the tiny bottom right in the middle of the hat. During the ten to fifteen minutes performance, one performer would dress up with a long robe with Chinese style embroidery pattern like dragon pattern, auspicious cloud pattern with a black cloak used as a cover for face changing. Starting with a modern Chinese song recorded for this performance only, talking about "changing face into various traditional Chinese figure" such as Guan Yu, the Chinese god of war, or the Monkey King from Chinese fantasy story, the performer

From "Everything is for a show. . . . Everything is for display. . . . Nothing is what you think it is." Slavoj Žižek's point concerning the logic of commodification in the global market economy. In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Žižek (2002) notes that, in today's postmodern, market-oriented economy, many consumer commodities are presented in a manner that deprives them of their malignant properties. For example, we can buy coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, and beer without alcohol. Žižek's list is not exhaustive and can extend to the consumption of virtual sex (sex without sex), politics (defined as expert administration) without politics, liberal multiculturalism (the experience of the Other without Otherness), and so on (10–11). Building on Žižek's interesting characterization, we can claim that Hai Di Lao is like a decaffeinated China: it is Lanzhou pulling noodle without Lanzhou flavor; it is Sichuan hot pot without

Sichuanness; and it advertises itself as an authentic China to the international world, but without Chinese-ness. It is China lite, but quite alike (at least, in stereotypical terms). Hai Di Lao is the visual and spatial materialization of the foreign imagination within which the “traditional” Sichuan flavor of extreme spicy or numbing that does not exist at all. Hence, if we comes to *The Cultural Turn*, Jameson sums up the two most essential features of postmodernism as “the transformation of reality into images” and “the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents,” he indicates that in this era, time exists under the regime of space and represents itself as fantasy-like images (Jameson 1998, 20). Flying noodle performance is in the moment, with both uniqueness and reproductive possibility at the same time; it is about a combined cooking and eating process as well as an immersed experience rather than about a lasting product. However, viewing the performance indeed bring the consumer to the nostalgic imagination of the never-livable past. So under the surface of this dining preference, how does Hai Di Lao successfully construct the postmodernist dining fantasy? And how does the fantasy relate to our identity formation or reinforcement?

These questions lead us to the second way, the psychoanalysis way to examine the performance in Hai Di Lao: *to focus on the medium of noodle and screen, to evaluate how food performance through screen could create a fantasy*. To be more specific, in our daily consumption of dining performance via mobile phone, screens have become a powerful metaphor for thinking about our identity as a multiple layered system rather than a firm

one. I would argue that the consumption of enjoyment generated by performative dining and the middle-class identity occupy the same psychosocial space as the semiotic. Lacan philosophicalizes the dual relation of ego-body or subject-object inherited from Freud, and turned it into a three-phase "mirror stage." When Lacan observed how infants from six months to eighteen months identify themselves through the mirror, he developed the structure of ego based on subject, object and most significant the third idea: ego. Ego or subjectivity does not equal to subject the same as the translated literature does not equal to the original text, since the former is the product of ego construction. The process of ego construction is to misrecognize oneself as the Other and to misinterpret the Other as oneself, which after "inversion, isolation, reduplication, cancelation and displacement" has become the "unthinkable of an absolute subject" (Lacan, p.5). As shown in figure 5, the moment the internal self (Ego) gazes at the mirror, it identifies itself with the misrecognized ideal Imago at the other side of the mirror. The feedback projected by the mirror, on the other hand, creates an aura of alienating identity as a result. The subjectivity the infant has gained, in this sense, is twisted by the mirror. Infancy is as well the period of language-gaining. The ability of speech, from Lacan's perspective, symbolizes the exit from mirror stage and the entrance into the semiotic. The appearance of first-person demonstrative pronoun "I" instead of "it" marks the complete construction of ego. In infancy, the infant is unable to feel and recognize its body as a whole. The only bridge connected its body and the outside is the

vision. In light of media study, Lacan's mirror stage's extension of the theory of "gaze" would be more accessible. For Lacan, eyes embrace desire, based on which we could gain libido (not just sexual libido as Freud stated), or simply put libido as *Jouissance*, translated as enjoyment in English. The process of gazing the portable screen and the process of looking at the mirror share a similar mediator of "vision": both the reader and the infant construct its ego through "gaze." "Gaze" is not "look/see" in a general sense; it carries and projects our own desire. In a certain sense, through "gaze," we run away from the symbolic order and enter into imaginary relation and identification; though "gaze," we are back into mirror stage. Unlike any other stable theories, the Lacanian idea of mirror-stage is changeable over time, which constantly evolved through his career. The initial concept limited to infants was developed as a representation of permanent structure of subjectivity thirty years later, in the well-known Seminar XI in 1964. In Seminar XI, Lacan poses the notion of "Screen" instead of "Mirror," which suggests the projection of subjectivity on the "screen" influences the formation of ego far out of the short period of mirror stage. Additionally, social relations and cultural influence construct the "imaginary order," which extends through life time instead of only in infancy. Hence, the subject misrecognizes itself at the locus of alienated identification under the "gaze" of social order.

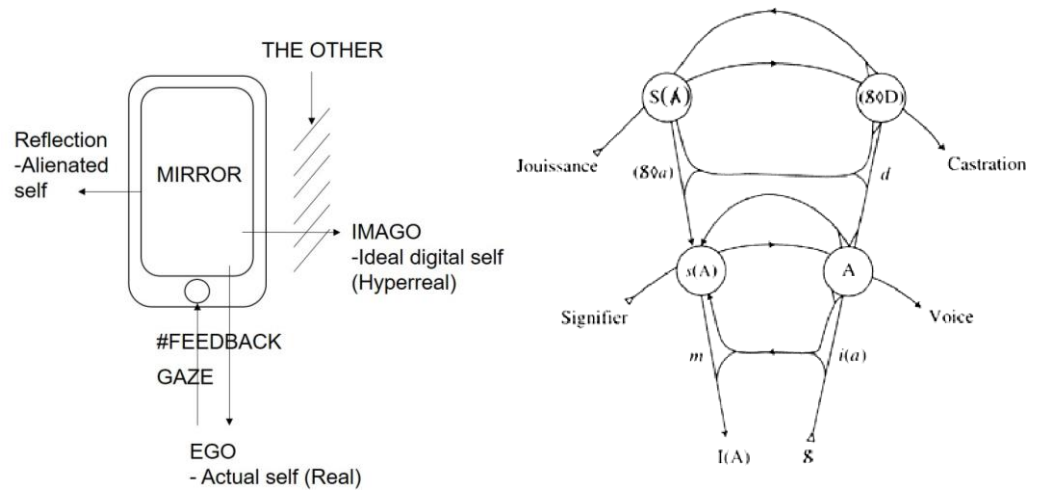


Figure 7: Left: Mirror Stage used in mobile phone; Right: Lacanian desire circle

To be more accurate to comprehend the *Jouissance* generated by gazing the Hai Di Lao performance, we would better apply Žižek's interpretation towards Lacan:

The element which holds together a given community cannot be reduced to the point of *symbolic identification*: the bond linking together its members always implies a shared relationship toward a Thing, toward *Enjoyment incarnated*... If we are asked how we can recognize the presence of the Thing, the only consistent answer is that the thing is present in that elusive entity called "our way of life." All we can do is enumerate disconnected fragments of the way our community organizes its feasts, its rituals of mating, its initiation ceremonies, in short, all the details by which is made visible the unique way a community organizes enjoyment. (*Tarrying with the Negative*, 201)

He rejects the symbolic order would guide our conduct. However, it is not saying that we could run away from the control of ideology; we are surrounded by *Enjoyment*

incarnated. Few people would dispute that, of all the forms of communal enjoyment, alimentary pleasure is the most significant and visible one. The famous twentieth-century Chinese poet and scholar Lin Yutang remarks that food is a “keen sensual pleasures of our childhood” in *My Country and My People*, accumulating the past detailed experience in every corner of Chinese people’s daily routine, teasing on the inevitable changes made through the concussion and transformation in Republic of China (Lin 1935, 339). His work *The Importance of Living* also attempts to unveil the cultural aesthetics and the *Jouissance* in Chinese philosophy via everyday practices such as planting flower or eating food, such pleasure is generated from “the semantic void,” a term Žižek applies to describe a psychic space where the Lacanian Real lurks, a place of enjoyment. Žižek illustrates that to form the identity, the symbolic identification is not enough. We should take into account the “shared relationship” among the given community, as middle-class Chinese consumers, toward “Enjoyment incarnated,” which is structured by means of fantasies.¹¹ Besides the consideration of enjoyment, since Žižek also applies Lacanian notion of “decentered subject,” which indicates that all the most inner emotion could be externalized and replaced by the other. For instance, the paid laughter in TV show could generate our sense of happy due to its replacement of subject:

¹¹ Žižek suggests that the Real is never an amorphous thing exists independent of the incarnate manner of living, even desires, social rules or ideologies could never completely control it. Though fantasies can we fill the resistant hole in the social that enjoyment remains open. Certain community fantasizes about a utopian life in which social chaos and individual alienation are absent. Although individual is always unaware of the role of fantasies when they desire for unity and peace, they play an essential role in our behavior pattern.

someone substitute our obligation of laugh while the subject utilizes the “interpassivity” to transfer the enjoyment to the other (Žižek 1998, 235). Watching people’s short videos around eating could serve as a replacement of the obligation, while what does Hai Di Lao could tell us in terms of its vast amount of reproduction videos?



Figure 8: A meal in Hai Di Lao hot pot in New York City

Besides hot pot restaurants, all dishes come to your table as finished works. The D.I.Y. nature of hot pot, as a combination of cooking and eating process on the table, leaves certain autonomy for the consumers and creatively produce fun. Restaurant, as the opposite of kitchen, used to be the place for people running away from cooking, now becomes the wonderland of creation. Since hot pot has three essential elements: the boiling pot which hold different soup base, the raw or half-cooked ingredients ready to put into the pot, and dipping sauce, which would be highly individualized in Hai Di

Lao. Before Hai Di Lao, hot pot restaurants in China usually offer several different dipping sauces, which are highly regionalized based on different soup base: for Beijing mutton hot pot the restaurant offers sesame paste; for Chongqing-Sichuan chili pot, the dipping sauce is sesame oil and minced garlic; for Chaoshan beef hot pot, it becomes satay sauce. But if you go to Hai Di Lao, one of the most eye-catching characters would be their huge DIY table with more than twenty different ingredients for making dipping sauce, as well as providing appetizers and fruits. It incorporates different regional preference for dipping sauce, for instance, on the one hand, they offer old-fashioned omnipresent sauce in northern hot pot restaurants such as sesame paste, chopped pickled chives, fermented bean curd, chopped green onion, and chopped cilantro, and in Chongqing-Sichuan chili hot pot as sesame oil, minced garlic, soy sauce, oyster sauce, chopped fresh chili, and chili oil; on the other hand, they also have several new sauces for people who want to try new flavors such as satay sauce, mushroom sauce, ox sauce, minced beef, chopped celery, white sesame, chopped peanut, and baked yellow bean. Those ingredients, plus thirteen different soup bases, can arbitrarily combine into infinite dipping sauces, because people could also mix up a spoon of soup base with their dipping sauce. As a result, every consumer could DIY his/her own sauce. When this DIY table catches attention for creative consumers, people attempt to advocate various individualized sauces sharing on *Douyin*. Besides, consumers are also crazy about the creation for new dishes. Unlike other restaurant where you simply eat what

you have ordered, hot pot has more space for One of the hottest creations is gluten balls with shrimp and egg, which refers to put smashed shrimp paste into gluten balls, and use savory smooth egg to seal the ball.¹² And earlier in 2018, Hai Di Lao became one of hashtags with most participants on *Douyin*. In April only, more than 30 thousand people created their own dish, soup base or dipping sauce via short videos, and many of them got millions of likes.¹³ These behaviors completely overturn our traditional conception of restaurant as the alternative option of eating things provided by the companies themselves. Breaking the law could generates sense of enjoyment, as illustrated by figure 4 already, while another layer of *Enjoyment* comes out of watching people doing so.

In conclusion, this chapter attempts to characterize the relationship between consumers and the cultural products produced by Hai Di Lao. Through depicting Hai Di Lao, it serves as a hot pot restaurant, a stage for performance, as well as a kitchen for creative reproduction. The performative dining could build up a wonderland, another world for consumers' excel from the reality, serving as an alternative fantasy with pastiches and moments of joy for the newly immersing middle-class consumers.

¹² For the creation of this dish, I have ordered the dish and consulted the waiter in New York City Haidilao for detailed information. Since it becomes an official dish in Haidilao, more information could be seen on their official website: <https://www.haidilao.com/en/hdlms/sc/dmzpl/index.html>

¹³ Since the history records for *Douyin* cannot be access, the number of participants and hashtags, see: <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/36200195>

Conclusion *Desert*-Eating Hot Pot, Eating Identity

China, as the site of rich historic culinary culture, has been constructed the social life and individual identity centered around the hot pot restaurants: the relation between global/national/local, socialist/post-socialist, and market/non-market. They define the urban landscapes, shaping the characteristics of the consumers, and creating a thoroughly postmodern performance. As I articulate in this thesis, when paired with the notion of “identity,” eating takes a richer connotation than the hot pot.

Under the guise of nostalgia for fine craft and culinary maestro, Dong Lai Shun has become a source of machine-cutting, highly industrialized place, with far-reaching implications for the rapidly growing market. Through mass media and popular culture, we build up a bourgeoisie-style nostalgia towards the quasi-history and the longing towards the non-existed old, glorious Beijing. Hai Di Lao, as the fantasy-maker, successfully surpasses the clockwise contemporary middle-class boredom. It not only creates the enjoyment and the expression of “autonomy,” but also reinforces the middle-class identity, and constructs the post-socialist marketing discourse.

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- 周作人：《知堂談吃》

Tian Tian Xiang Shang (20181209)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qQpOVpTCu0&t=3244s>

NHK documentary: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7c4P7Rqs>

Feitengba Huoguo: Beijing Shuan Yangrou :

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ClJhLE2kZGY>