

Chicken Feet: A Culinary Window into Cultural Dominance and Otherness in Contemporary America

Mary Lihong Peng

Introduction

Often labeled as an exotic ethnic cuisine from a Western perspective, chicken feet are a popular dish in South Africa and many Latin American and Asian countries. Before I moved to the United States, I spent a fair share of my childhood in Qingdao, a beautiful coastal city in China famous for its hospitality and culinary exuberance. Flavored with black fermented beans, simmered with soy sauce, peppercorn and chili flakes, chicken feet were one of my family's favorite dishes. Cooking chicken feet was a quite laborious and delicate task. Messaging raw chicken feet to ensure the right tender yet firm texture, marinating, boiling, deep frying, soaking, braising and steaming can easily take up hours, that eventually come to fruition in a hot, peppery, and savory bite. I still remember the salty and spicy aroma coming from the kitchen where my grandmother spent hours cooking pots of chicken feet. I miss that saturated tangy fragrance, one that seems to have been fading from my memory since I moved to the United States.

I still remember the first time I brought up chicken feet in a casual conversation with my friends where I mentioned many people in Asia loved eating chicken feet. "Ewww, that sounds disgusting" was the immediate reaction I received. It felt like someone punched me in the heart, yet I could not fight back because somehow I did not think it was fair to blame them for hurting my feeling since, after all, I told myself it was just a "cultural thing". Meanwhile, I was afraid to be called "disgusting" if I told them I also loved eating chicken feet. Years later, I stumbled upon *the Late Late Show with James Corden*, where James and selected celebrities took turns asking each other personal questions and were given a choice: answer truthfully or eat whatever food that was in front of them as a punishment, including chicken feet among many other ethnic foods such as bird saliva, cow tongue, and pig blood jelly. While it was intended for humorous effect, the horrific, disgusted, and tormented looks on the host's and celebrities' faces only made me feel belittled and ashamed as many of the "punishments" were the culinary pride and joy of my childhood.

Not only are chicken feet, like many other ethnic cuisines, constantly swept under the gaze of Western culture and ridicule, they also symbolize an insidious phenomenon of demonizing non-norms in Western society under

the disguise of harmless cultural appropriation. However, when the adoption of elements of another culture, such as food and cuisines, is imbued with moral emotions that demean the adopted culture, the psychological burden that befalls the individuals belonging to that culture is far from harmless. Specifically, emotions such as disgust, fear, repulsion towards food, a cultural emblem, could facilitate the formation and communication of moral judgments and decisions, consequently motivating negative responses towards the perception of a culture. In simpler words, disgust leads to the affirmation of one's own righteousness that simultaneously justifies the superiority of their own culture that is perceived to embody the opposite of disgust, such as humanity, civilization, and sophistication. As a result, the perception of inferiority of the cultural others is given legitimacy and further culturally-based discriminations are rendered possible.

Indeed, it is a "cultural thing" that many find unfamiliar non-Western ethnic cuisines revolting, however the cultural hierarchy embedded in this "cultural thing", where the dominant culture of white, middle-class, Protestant people of northern European descent wield substantially more power than groups of African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, or Native Americans, which could enlist emotional and psychological marginalization of what is deemed as subordinate cultural others, must be critiqued, examined, and reconstituted. We cannot blindly accept cultural differences as a pretext for morally charged attitudes towards another culture simply in the name of liberal relativism and individual freedom of expressions when the cultural framework that creates the blanket colonial cultural narrative of Western-over-non-Western hierarchy constantly promotes the unjustified superiority of one culture and the inferiority of another.

This paper will thus start by exploring the question of how contemporary Americans' attitudes towards chicken feet illuminate an underlying colonial cultural hierarchy, and demonstrate how the cultural construct that grounds the current discourse of ethnic cuisines is fundamentally alienating and serves as a dangerous petri dish for cultural stereotypes and misunderstanding. Lastly, I will discuss a tripartite model inspired by this investigation to account for the mechanism of cultural marginalization and the maintenance of cultural power dynamics in the US.

Methodology

To set the ground for this paper, I utilize powerism as an underlying theoretical lens through which cultural hierarchy and alienation are examined. Throughout my previous anthropological research, I developed the

concept of “powersim” as a meaning creation framework that explains the morally charged attribution of value to otherwise morally irrelevant notions, that ultimately serves to create and perpetuate the power dynamics of dominance and subordination.

I employ Michel Foucault’s definition of power, that power is a "certain type of relation between individuals" that has to do with complex strategic social positions that relate to the subject's ability to control its environment and influence those around itself.¹ Powersim, as I define it, is the unequal and unjust attribution of value and power, which could manifest in all social, economic, political, cultural, and emotional realms, to morally irrelevant categories, such as cultural practices and identity markers. This idea is derived from my attempt to understand the central tenet that underlies alienation. All sorts of “isms”, be racism, sexism, religious oppression/ anti- Semitism, heterosexism, classism, ageism, or ableism, could essentially be understood in terms of powerism. Since food is also imbued with cultural significance, here I want to integrate the mechanism of powersim and cuisines as a new socio-cultural perspective on the study of gastronomy.

Humans’ embodied experiences and innate cognitive propensity towards sense making inevitably appropriate and create meanings for all our experiences, perceptions, and conceptions. Values and meanings might be ubiquitous, but the connotation and moral salience of such are far from black-and-white and absolute. Positive, neutral, and negative connotations of meanings and values could be easily transposed and engineered through social, cultural, ideological, and economic institutions. A simple example is where the number six carries demonic symbolism according to biblical teaching but are given meanings of prosperity and fortune by Chinese mythology and numerology. Indeed, while meanings and values are rendered inevitable by the nature of human cognition and sense making, the nature of meaning is subject to great manipulation. Through powerism, where supposedly value-neutral categorization unduly becomes positively or negatively value-laden stratification through deliberate endowment and allocation of power by the powerful, which often operates as an invisible process entrenched in daily social habits, such as talking, eating, working, and learning, morally irrelevant categories become morally charged words used to justify and perpetuate the unequal

¹ Foucault, Michel. (1979). "Omnes et Singulatim: Towards a Criticism of Political Reason" in Faubion, James D. (ed.) *Essential Works of Foucault, Volume 3: Power* New York: The New Press

distribution of power, and become colored with debasement or extolment. For example, race itself is morally irrelevant, but the dominant class throughout history has given it socio-cultural and moral meanings that legitimize racial inequality. The ingredients of control and discrimination might change over time and across cultures, but the recipe---bigoted and unfair ascription of power by the dominants to maintain status quo advantageous to themselves---remains. In the context of food discourse, ethnic foods in America undoubtedly comprise of culturally distinct meanings and are easily elevated to morally charged notions of barbarism versus civilization and inferiority versus superiority. Thus, using this concept of “powerism” as a theoretical departure point, I propose that in the United States, people’s attitudes towards unfamiliar ethnic cuisines, such as chicken feet, embody unequal power dynamics that create value judgement on the cultural “others” and the “non-norms” relative to the dominant Western culture based on a colonial mentality of western cultural superiority. Projecting from Americans’ attitudes towards the consumption of chicken feet, I hypothesize a media-driven tri-partite process, entailing individuals’ moral emotions, public spectacle of cultural hierarchy, and alienation, that demonstrates the self-perpetuating mechanism of powerism in contemporary America.

Following my hypothesis, I conducted a survey among 80 American students aged between 18-22 years old, all born and raised in America, asking them how they feel about chicken feet as a dish and how mass media has affected their perceptions of chicken feet. By interviewing my respondents and looking at their cultural backgrounds, the positive and negative connotations related to their descriptions of and reasons for reactions to the consumption of chicken feet, I examine how the results inform, corroborate, or challenge my hypothesis that the mechanism of powerism circulates through the individual-spectacle-alienation process and perpetuates the colonial discourse of Western cultural superiority that grounds American people’s attitudes towards chicken feet.

Discussion

“How do you find chicken feet as a dish?” I asked this simple question among my 80 respondents. Unsurprisingly only 1 person described chicken feet as “delicious”, where the rest responded “disgusting” or “gross”. The reasons can be summarized into the following categories: a) eating chicken feet is weird, b) eating chicken feet is barbaric, c) chicken feet look gross.

The follow-up question asked the respondents whether mass media had impacted their perception of chicken feet, and, if so, how they would rate the impact on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being very negative and 5 being very positive. 12 people responded that they had seen chicken feet being portrayed on mass media, and the average number of media's impact rate on their perception of chicken feet yielded 1.5, which indicated a range between "very negative" to "negative". To the best of my respondents' ability to recall, here is a list of videos they had seen about chicken feet: "*Mutant Chicken Feet for Dinner!! Most Bizarre Food of Asia!!*",² "*High Schoolers Tried CHICKEN FEET | TASTE TEST*",³ "*KIDS vs. FOOD - CHICKEN FEET*",⁴ "*Gordon Ramsay Feeds A Young James Corden Chicken Feet & Duck Tongues | The F Word*",⁵ and "*Spill Your Guts or Fill Your Guts w/ Khloe Kardashian*".⁶ As I canvassed through all the videos, where chicken feet were consumed as a form of dare, humorous punishment, or experimentation of exotic cultures, the emotional undertone of all was homogenous---fear and disgust. Chicken feet are blatantly described as disgusting foods, the subject of countless swear words, and the trigger of discomfort. Footages of chicken feet sold in outdoor Asian food markets create a contrasting image to the alleged sophistication of French cuisines consumed in a classy indoor environment; bland, grayish, and badly cooked chicken feet are used to represent an otherwise flavorful and delicate culinary treat; people's reactions to chicken feet are dramatized, satirized, and commercialized to create entertainment. The media portrait of chicken feet as an exotic ethnic cuisine neatly coincides with how my respondents described them---"weird", "barbaric", and "gross".

As mentioned earlier, powerism refers to the attribution of value to neutral concepts that ultimately serves to perpetuate relationships of superiority and inferiority. Sense making and value making derive from our embodied experiences, of which emotions are an integral part. As argued by Haidt, emotions could serve as moral apparatus

² Channel Best Ever Food Review Show. "Mutant Chicken Feet for Dinner!! Most Bizarre Food of Asia!!". YouTube video, Jul 5, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvJXpMijmwE>

³ Channel Food Network. "High Schoolers Tried CHICKEN FEET | TASTE TEST". YouTube video, Jun 21, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=52XkVJLeRC0>

⁴ Channel REACT. "KIDS vs. FOOD - CHICKEN FEET". YouTube video, August 2, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xBSzlvQOvfk&t=130s>

⁵ Channel The F Word. "Gordon Ramsay Feeds A Young James Corden Chicken Feet & Duck Tongues". YouTube video, Sep 13, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ej7hKQdiZfg>

⁶ Channel The Late Late Show with James Corden. "Spill Your Guts or Fill Your Guts w/ Khloe Kardashian". YouTube video, Jan 12, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3NC5Yt3PBLk&t=13s>

and create moral judgments⁷. Disgust and fear as moral emotions, according to Brady, Wills, Jost, Tucker, and Van Bavel, could easily amplify the extent to which moral and political ideals are disseminated in society.⁸ In the aggregate multi-cultural landscape of the United States, portraying chicken feet as a disgusting and horrific alien product, while sometimes claimed as individuals' free expressions and predilections, inevitably belittles and demeans the cultures that take chicken feet as a prized and enjoyable dish, which insidiously contributes to the base of reasoning for the cultural hierarchy where the Western culture that entails well-recognized and enjoyable habits gains legitimacy and power over others entailing habits deemed as "disgusting".

The disseminated connotation of disgust and barbarism enforces the essence of cultural colonialism in the public sphere, which Schiller defines as "the sum of the processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating center of the system".⁹ Mass media, where entertainment outlets, such as *the Late Late James Cordon Show*, satirize and demonize unfamiliar non-Western cuisines like chicken feet, which in turn serves as an operating enterprise that promotes Western cultural hegemony and legitimacy. As Schiller comments, "for penetration (of cultural hierarchy) on a significant scale, the media themselves must be captured by the dominating/penetrating power."¹⁰ In short, as individuals' disgust and fear, moral emotions towards unfamiliarity derived from a West-centric culture, towards the ethnic dish of chicken feet are legitimized as a collective and even humorous phenomenon through mass media, a public spectacle of cultural hierarchy emerges and becomes normalized. Even when people do not directly encounter such videos, the negative cultural connotations still circulate in society. Like my survey has shown, even only 12 people have seen videos that talk about chicken feet, the majority of 80 people still find

⁷ Haidt, Jonathan (2003). "The Moral Emotions" (PDF). In Davidson, Richard; Scherer, Klaus; Goldsmith, H. (eds.). *Handbook of Affective Sciences*. Oxford University Press. pp. 855. ISBN 978-0-19-512601-3

⁸ Brady, William J.; Wills, Julian A.; Jost, John T.; Tucker, Joshua A.; Bavel, Jay J. Van (2017-07-11). "Emotion shapes the diffusion of moralized content in social networks". *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. 114 (28): 7313–7318. doi:10.1073/pnas.1618923114. ISSN 0027-8424. PMC 5514704. PMID 28652356

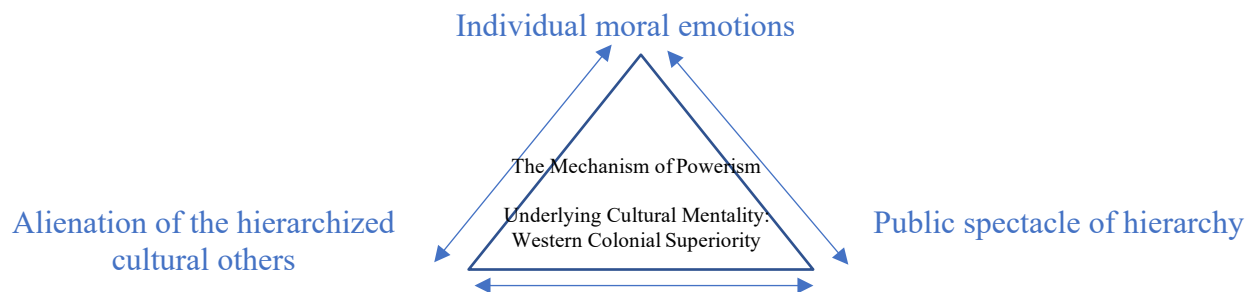
⁹ Schiller, Herbert I. (1976). *Communication and cultural domination*. International Arts and Sciences Press, 901 North Broadway, White Plains, New York 10603. pp. 9–10. ISBN 978-0-87332-079-5.

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the idea of chicken feet disgusting. This public spectacle of hierarchy further allows the dominating culture to promote its own values and diminish its subordinate counterparts as means to maintain its own cultural structure.

The perpetuation of the public spectacle could further create alienation. I later interviewed the one respondent who described chicken feet as “delicious”. He was born in Fairfax, Virginia and his parents were immigrants from China. He said whenever he went back to Hong Kong to visit his grandparents, they would always eat chicken feet. When I asked him how he felt about others describing his family tradition and cultural heritage as “disgusting”, he said “well it is what it is.” When I asked him if he was bothered by it, he shrugged and commented in a frustrated voice, “I’m honestly used to it, and sometimes being defensive just makes it worse.” There was

something profoundly saddening about his comment. The emotional resignation that he experiences only accentuates the normalization of his compromise and alienation, which is concisely articulated in Beverly Tatum’s essay *The Complexity of Identity: Who Am I*. As Tatum suggests, “whether one succumbs to the devaluing pressures of the dominant culture or successfully resists them, dealing with oppressive systems from the underside, regardless of the strategy, is physically and psychologically taxing”.¹¹ The perpetuation of American people’s general repulsion towards chicken feet, like many other cultural emblems unfamiliar to the American mainstream culture, symbolize the process whereby Western culture assumes dominance over and alienates other ethnic cultures as mass media creates a public spectacle of cultural hierarchy through the manipulation and amplification of individual moral emotions. Thus far, a tripartite process that operates within the framework of Western colonial mentality and manifests as a mechanism of powerism and alienation has emerged.



As visualized above, the double arrows represent a dialectical process. Clockwise, individual moral emotions, such as disgust and fear towards the consumption of chicken feet, are amplified and legitimized by the mass media,

¹¹ Tatum, Beverly. (2000). "The Complexity of Identity: 'Who am I?'" _Readings for diversity and social justice: An anthology on racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, heterosexism, classism, and ableism_. Eds. M. Adams, W.J. Blumenfeld, H.W. Hackman, X Zuniga, and M.L. Peters,. Eds. Routledge.

and turned into a public spectacle of Western (dominant) cultural superiority and the debasement of unfamiliar cultural otherness. As Henri Lefebvre argues, public spectacles and spaces are “socially and historically produced, and the key component of power and politics, imbued with ideology, and always in a process of becoming the means of domination”.¹² The public spectacle of cultural hierarchy further contributes to the alienation of ethnic cultures deemed subordinate to the dominant Western culture. Alienation further breeds unfamiliarity and distance that ultimately hinders the debunking of unwarranted individual moral emotions towards ethnic cultural practices. The cycle self-perpetuates. Anticlockwise, individual moral emotions exacerbate alienation of cultural others, which in turn confirms and cements the public spectacle of cultural hierarchy. The public spectacle further provides individuals with excuses and reasoning to legitimize their individual moral emotions and loaded value judgement of perceived culture otherness. Mass media, as the public means of information dissemination and value confirmation, acts as the means of enforcement and legitimization that connects every part of this tripartite process. Mass media, as the public means of information dissemination and value confirmation, acts as the means of enforcement and legitimization that connects every part of this tripartite process. I also want to point out that mass media is both a manifestation of existing cultural phenomenon and a tool of acceleration and reinforcement. My research intends to explain how it functions as a driving force of cultural phenomenon, rather than define it as the underlying cause for social division nor to speculate whether in the absence of mass media cultural colonialism and hierarchy would not exist.

Reflection

This paper has attempted to devise an analytical framework that could apply to the understanding of alienation of cultural otherness, symbolized by diverse cultural habits such as the consumption of food. I must admit that, given the restraint of small sample size and limited space, the development and substantiation of this framework are a massive undertake, one that is far from complete and perfect. I unequivocally acknowledge the risk of over-generalization given the limited investigation in this research, and hope to expand on this preliminary inquiry in the future by developing it into a holistic model of powerism pertaining to diverse socio-cultural phenomenon. The above limitations notwithstanding, I do believe that this inchoate tripartite model could be useful in analyzing

¹² Lefebvre, Henri. (1991). *The Production of Space*. Blackwell.

the mechanism underlying the maintenance of cultural superstructures of society. While culture is a remarkably complex concept, how power operates and penetrates cultures to construct power dynamics of dominance and subordination, I believe, has universal relevance and implication.

Conclusion

This paper starts with the hypothesis that Americans' general attitudes towards chicken feet as an exotic ethnic dish reflect a colonial mentality of Western cultural superiority. Through the analysis of interviews where responses corroborate the expected disgust and fear towards chicken feet and through further inquiry into the reasons behind, this paper has formulated a tripartite model to account for the mechanism of powerism that perpetuates the power dynamics between dominant and subordinate cultures in contemporary America, where the consumption of chicken feet is studied as a symbol of cultural otherness and people's attitudes towards the consumption of chicken feet as indication of the alienating mechanism that dominant Western culture utilizes to enforce cultural status quo. Mass media has been proposed as the driving force that connects and perpetuates individual moral emotions, the public spectacle of cultural hierarchy, and alienation. Within the mechanism of powerism, mass media plays a critical role in transposing social meanings and powers upon morally irrelevant and intrinsically neutral cultural practices, that ultimately creates alienation. It is a means of power maintenance.

When cultures are commodified as resources for pleasure, they become what Bell Hooks describes as "alternative playgrounds" where privileged groups affirm their access to, and power over others.¹³ Food is an important part of this playground and a profoundly cultural and even political practice, and can illuminate broader implications for the ways we understand and engage with colonialism and its legacies. Ultimately, I hope this paper can raise awareness of how our seemingly individual attitudes and emotions towards food inform the collective cultural climate of contemporary America, where colonial mentality of cultural superiority still operates within and affects our thoughts and experiences of reality.

¹³ Hooks, Bell. (1992). *Black Looks*. Toronto: Between the Lines. 22

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