Foodscapes and the Resurgence of Sinologism: Chinese Dietary and Medicinal Practices in Peter Hessler's Works

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ABSTRACT

When the consumption of food items emerges from perspectival constructs, they become foodscapes, and not merely food, transported by and through historical, linguistic, and political contexts. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Western media scapegoated Chinese dietary practices, reinforcing entrenched Orientalist perspectival constructs as an inner logic. This paper argues that such predispositions towards Chinese foodscapes can best be understood through a framework of Sinologism and the cultural unconscious as proposed by Mingdong Gu. To illustrate this, we use selected samples on Chinese dietary and medicinal practices in the works of Peter Hessler, an American writer widely acknowledged for countering American Orientalist biases in his narratives on China. How did Hessler respond to the central role that was accorded to China, the Chinese people and Chinese foodscapes? In what ways did the historically embedded stereotypes travel back from an Orientalist past to the globalised present? What implications does this have for balanced cross-cultural American engagements with China and its people? Our findings reveal that there is a strong tension between his effort to challenge Western media depictions of China and his own Orientalist bias, especially considering the prominent role of foodscapes and discussions about China and the Chinese in shaping narratives around the cause of the 2020 pandemic. We conclude that the inner logic of Sinologism is so strong that even a writer like Hessler is not immune to its influence, then balanced cross-cultural engagement in the Anglophone American context remains a persistent challenge.

Keywords: Peter Hessler; Sinologism; Cultural unconscious; Chinese foodscapes; Chinese dietary and medicinal practices

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INTRODUCTION

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, a video of a Chinese girl eating a bat in a travel vlog went viral, triggering widespread outrage. While the footage was later revealed to have been filmed out of China in 2016, misconceptions persisted, portraying the Chinese as having dirty eating habits. Fox News anchor Jesse Watters perpetuated this narrative, stating: "Let me tell you why it happened in China: they have these markets where they were eating raw bats and snakes. They are very hungry people. The Chinese communist government cannot feed the people, and they are desperate. This food is uncooked, it is unsafe, and that is why scientists believe that's where it originated from" (Garcia, 2020). Despite investigations confirming that such depictions were unfounded. The France 24 team found that five of the six most-shared videos of Asians eating bats were filmed outside China (Mas, 2020), but the damage was done. These portrayals, coupled with racist slurs and articles such as "China is the Real Sick Man of Asia" (Mead, 2020) on *Wall Street Journal,* exacerbated Sinophobic attitudes, scapegoating Chinese food and its culture for the pandemic, while the origin of COVID-19 remains a subject of scientific investigation and debate.

This denigration reflects broader issues of stereotyping and cultural bias, especially in how Chinese food is represented in the West. Food, far from being mere sustenance, serves as a powerful cultural symbol. As Jamaluddin and Fuzirah (2021, p. 255) note, "Food is not seen as mere gastronomy; it carries symbolic freight." In other words, ideas, values, or meanings are carried through or transported through food as symbolic objects, pointing to a deeper significance. Such symbolic transportations can also be interpreted as foodscapes, aligning with Appadurai's use of the suffix 'scape' to denote the varying perspectives or 'perspectival constructs' shaped by diverse historical, linguistic, and political contexts that permeate everyday life (Appadurai, 1996, p. 33). When dietary practices as well as certain medicinal practices that involve the consumption of food items emerge from the angle of Anglophone perspectival constructs, they become foodscapes, and not merely food, transported by and through Western or in the context of this study, American historical, linguistic, and political contexts. Chinese foodscapes, with its own regional diversity, rich historical and cultural significance, often imbued and substantially overshadowed by stereotypes and misconceptions, leading to and perpetuating a limited and distorted understanding of Chinese foodscapes.

Chinese foodscapes are deeply rooted in the nation's way of life. More than mere sustenance, food in China reflects values, traditions, and social structures. Its evolution has been shaped by agricultural innovations, diverse natural resources, and cultural philosophies such as Confucianism and traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). Regional cuisines, such as Sichuan's bold flavours and Cantonese cuisine's emphasis on freshness, showcase the country's vast culinary diversity, each possessing its own distinct flavours, ingredients, and cooking techniques. Food holds both cultural and spiritual significance in China. Philosophies such as the principle of "food as medicine" and Confucian values emphasize balance, respect for nature, and moderation. Since the 1990s, globalization and urbanization have propelled Chinese cuisine onto the global stage while raising concerns about preserving traditional practices. Figures like Ziqi Li and the documentary *A Bite of China* highlight the harmony between food, culture, and identity, presenting a nuanced image of Chinese food. Chinese food remains a vibrant expression of history and resilience, tradition and modernity. Understanding its depth and diversity is essential to appreciating its global significance and moving beyond reductive representations. However, this complex reality is often misunderstood in Western narratives, which tend to focus on stereotypes or exoticism.

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Admittedly, the subject of Western biases toward Chinese food is not something new. These have persisted for centuries, manifesting in narratives that either exoticize or vilify Chinese dietary practices, deeming them foreign, different and unusual. Yet, these biases have travelled through the centuries, far into the millennium. Chinese food has become a large part of Western life in the early 21st century, with widespread restaurant presence and supermarket offerings, yet the stereotypes have persisted. For instance, Chinese cuisine was denounced as "the dodgiest in the world" in the *Daily Mail* in 2002, associating it with stigmatized ingredients like bats and snakes (Dunlop, 2008, p. 7). This rhetoric saw the resurgence of historical fears of unfamiliar food, perpetuating cultural biases that emerged as foodscapes. These biases made their way back into the American cultural consciousness during the pandemic of 2020, as misinformation and outdated stereotypes dogged the heels of Chinese foodscapes. Misconceptions-such as the unfounded association of bat consumption with Chinese dietary habits in particular-highlight how distorted representations obscure the reality of Chinese foodscapes and perpetuate cultural misunderstandings.

According to the Pew Research (2020), unfavorable perceptions of China among Americans reached historic highs in many countries during the pandemic (Silver et al., 2020). Recent geopolitical tensions, such as the mutual expulsions of journalists and the closures of consulates in Houston and Chengdu between China and the U.S. in 2020, have further strained cultural communication and diminished opportunities for intercultural dialogue. Nair (2023) critiques the relentless negative portrayal of China in the West, stating, "A key feature of following the news and reporting from mainstream Western media today is the relentless China bashing. It is off the charts, tiring, and often regurgitated trivia or fabricated stories with no evidence to support callous statements about the country, demonstrating a deep lack of understanding. But it continues to be churned out with no end in sight." This climate of restricted information underscores the need for in-depth, balanced cultural exchanges.

Contemporary Anglophone literature on China can play a crucial role in bridging gaps and fostering nuanced insights into the complexities of China's image in the West. This is where American writer Peter Hessler occupies a vital position. Hessler has been widely recognized for his deep engagement with the country. Having previously visited China in 1994 after graduating from the University of Oxford, Hessler volunteered to serve in the Peace Corps in Sichuan, China, from 1996 to 1998. As Hessler expressed in one of his memoirs, he wanted not only to teach in China but also to learn Chinese. Having grown attached to the country, he chose to return to China as a freelance writer and staff journalist at *The New Yorker* in 1999 and remained there until 2007. Hessler has noted that part of his intent to return and write about China was due to his own discontent with the stories and reports about China that appeared in foreign media during the late 1990s, as he felt that they did not accurately represent the country (Hessler, 2012, p. 7). Hessler's long-term immersion and grassroots-level engagement from the mid-1990s to the millennium distinguish him from other Western commentators. Over more than a decade, he documented China's transformation through works such as *River Town* (2001), *Oracle Bones* (2006), *Country Driving* (2010) and *Strange Stones* (2013) which mainly drew from his experience as a result of his sojourn in the country.

In 2019, Hessler returned to China, this time to serve as a teacher at Sichuan University-Pittsburgh Institute, where he was based until 2021. His presence during a time of increasing geopolitical tensions was particularly noteworthy, occurring against the backdrop of trade wars, the closure of the Peace Corps' China program, and the mutual expulsions of journalists between China and the U.S. Of particular importance too were his pandemic-era reports from Wuhan in

The New Yorker in 2020, as well as his latest work, *Other River* (2024), which provide timely reflections on China during a critical period.

Hessler often provides a nuanced and personal perspective on the country's rapid transformation during the late 20th and early 21st centuries. His works revolve primarily around the stories of people from diverse backgrounds: factory workers, rural farmers, migrant laborers, intellectuals and students. As he constructs their personal narratives, he highlights how macroeconomic and political changes impact ordinary people. Hessler (2001) has maintained that his intention is to present an authentic portrayal of China, critiquing the "overwhelmingly negative and Beijing-centered" accounts in Western media (p. 118). Existing scholarly conversations on Hessler's works highlight both his contributions and the controversies surrounding his narratives. On one hand, scholars such as Spence (2006), Revzin (2006), Johnson (2015), and Li (2007) praise his nuanced observations, immersive storytelling, and ability to challenge traditional Western portrayals of China. On the other hand, critics such as Fewston (2015), He (2019), and Gu (2014) argue that his works subtly reinforce Western superiority and Orientalist perspectives, presenting a selectively distorted image of China. Most of these studies present an often-limited angle of binary divisions: either positive or negative portrayals of China. However, there is an ambivalent angle to Hessler's writings that remains underexplored. This, we argue, arises from what can be seen as an inner tension that sees Hessler both challenging mainstream Western narratives and yet simultaneously reinforcing deeply engrained Western biases, revealing a profound ambivalence in his portrayal of China in an increasingly polarized world. His challenge stems largely from his deep attachment to the country, as evidenced by his repeated returns to China and his self-professed recognition of the inaccuracies in American media coverage of the nation. Yet, as we show, Hessler is not immune to the gravitational pull toward lingering Western biases and Orientalist undertones.

In the following discussion, we focus on Chinese foodscapes as a central theme to explore this paradox. While Hessler's narratives have been celebrated for their empathetic and detailed portrayals of China and its people, his writings implicitly reinforce Western stereotypes and biases. This contradiction can be best analyzed through Mingdong Gu's conceptualization of Sinologism and the cultural unconscious, which permeate Hessler's works. These, ultimately point to the tenuous foundations in fostering sustainable cross-cultural communication and engagement in the anglophone American cultural unconscious, even in a writer who had aspired to dismantle misrepresentations of China. Given the centrality of foodscapes and discourses on the role of China and the Chinese in the construction of narratives on the cause of the pandemic of 2020, we use Hessler's representations of Chinese dietary and medicinal practices in a selection of his works: *River Town* (2001)*, Country Driving* (2010)*, Strange Stones* (2013)*,* as well as his report, "The Sealed City", published in *The New Yorker* in 2020. Together, these illustrate the tensions between his aim to counter Western media portrayals of China and his own Orientalist bias that reveal the deep-seated cultural unconscious or Sinologism that circulated within his own American consciousness. To grasp the significance of foodscapes and the revival of Sinologism on Hessler, as well as within the wider Anglophone cultural consciousness, it is crucial to consider the historical context of American perceptions of Chinese dietary practices, along with American political consciousness deeply intertwined in these perspectival constructs.

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CHINESE FOODSCAPES IN THE AMERICAN IMAGINARY

The perception of Chinese food in the West has undergone significant changes, reflecting broader ideological and political attitudes toward China. Roberts J. A. G. (2002) traces these shifts, showing how Western views evolved from initial curiosity to outright hostility and contempt in the late 18th century, eventually becoming more nuanced in the 20th century. These attitudes have shaped how Chinese food is perceived, turning it into a symbol of cultural exchange and conflict. This discussion explores American perspectives on Chinese foodscapes, which have profoundly influenced Western, and even global perceptions of Chinese cuisine.

During the late 18th and 19th centuries, American views on Chinese food were shaped by political tensions, as China's declining global influence clashed with America's industrial ascent. Such American disdain for Chinese food can be traced to the influential writings of missionaries who had travelled to the country under the guise of colonial civilisational endeavours and habitually wrote of their disdain for Chinese food. Smith A. Henderson (1890) described Chinese food as "poor, coarse, and even repulsive," asserting that the Chinese lacked the "fastidiousness" of Western dietary standards. Such narratives reflected broader American attitudes, such as the enactment of the *Chinese Exclusion Act* of 1882, which codified cultural scepticism and reinforced perceptions of incompatibility between Chinese culture and Western ideals.

In the early 20th century, American perceptions of Chinese food grew more complex but remained heavily stereotyped. Observations from Americans living in semi-colonial treaty ports highlighted poverty and political upheaval in China, reinforcing the image of Chinese food as unsanitary or exotic. For instance, foreign travellers in the 1920s often brought their own tinned food, distrusting local offerings (Roberts, 2002). However, some writers countered these stereotypes. Nobel laureate Buck Pearl S. portrayed Chinese resilience in her novel *The Good Earth* (1931), describing how peasants survived famine by eating roots, seeds and even a kind of clay, called "goddess of mercy earth" (p. 12). Such accounts introduced a degree of empathy but often framed Chinese food within a narrative of survival and hardship rather than cultural sophistication.

In the latter half of the 20th century, American perceptions of Chinese food began to shift as China opened its doors to the world. Increased exposure through travel and cultural exchange fostered a growing appreciation for Chinese cuisine, but this was often filtered through Western tastes and biases. Kaplan (1983) noted the Western fascination with Chinese delicacies like sea slugs and bird's nest soup, which were often framed as strange or repugnant. Meanwhile, anxieties about China's global influence persisted, as seen in publications like Lester Brown's *Who Will Feed China?* (1994), which framed Chinese food consumption as a global threat. These narratives highlighted the intersection of political concerns and perceptions of dietary practices, illustrating how American attitudes toward Chinese food were deeply intertwined with ideological biases.

By the 21st century, globalization and the rise of fusion cuisine challenged some of the stereotypes surrounding Chinese food. Western audiences began to gain more authentic insights into Chinese dietary practices, but biases inherently lingered. Concerns about hygiene, food safety, and unfamiliar ingredients continued to shape American attitudes. For example, the myth of "Chinese Restaurant Syndrome" perpetuated fears about MSG and framed Chinese food as unhealthy or exotic. Lieu (2024) observes that such stereotypes cast Chinese cuisine as a marker of cultural otherness, despite its growing acceptance as a mainstream part of the American culinary landscape.

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The COVID-19 pandemic reignited negative perceptions of Chinese food, as narratives linking the virus to Chinese wet markets reinforced outdated stereotypes. King et al., (2021) noted a rise in fear and mistrust of Chinese food during the pandemic, accompanied by racist memes and rhetoric. These misrepresentations reflected deeper ideological divides, echoing Cold War-era tropes that portrayed China as both a cultural and biological threat. Such attitudes underscored the enduring power of historical biases in shaping contemporary views of Chinese food.

Thus, over the past two centuries, American perceptions of Chinese food have been deeply influenced by political and cultural narratives that frame China as the "other." These attitudes, rooted in misunderstandings and biases, reflect broader geopolitical contexts. Stereotypes about Chinese food not only perpetuate cultural misunderstandings but also reinforce a West-centric worldview that ultimately resurface even in the writings of Hessler, despite his clarion call to resist such ideological predispositions. We argue that the resurgence of deeply embedded ideological patterns of historical biases that continue to shape global narratives about Chinese foodscapes can best be analysed through the theoretical lens of Sinologism and the concept of the cultural unconscious.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SINOLOGISM AND CULTURAL UNCONSCIOUS

Sinologism, as conceptualized by Mingdong Gu, is a comprehensive knowledge system developed to examine the West's production of knowledge about China and its civilization. It is inspired by Orientalism but differs from it by emphasizing that knowledge production about China is not only a Western endeavour but also involves the participation of Chinese intellectuals, creating a bilateral construction of perceptions about China. Gu (2013, p. 6) defines Sinologism as "an implicit system of ideas, notions, theories, and paradigms," shaped by Western-centric ideologies, epistemologies, and methodologies, and reinforced by Chinese acceptance of these perspectives.

The "cultural unconscious" is the underlying mechanism driving Sinologism. Borrowing from Jung's concept of the collective unconscious, Gu (2013) redefines it as a historico-psychological mechanism specific to people of a shared culture. It acts as an internal logic, influencing desires, biases, and prejudices, which collectively shape knowledge production (2013, p. 41). It is shared by a particular class, race, ethnic group, nation, and culture. In content, it is a reservoir of desires, fears, predilections, preferences, biases, and prejudices. The cultural unconscious is intangible, but it acts as the inner logic for its owner to map out the outer world. This unconscious framework provides the epistemological and methodological underpinnings of Sinologism and guides the West's (and sometimes China's) perception of Chinese civilization.

Sinologism critiques how Western epistemological frameworks impose their standards on Chinese materials, disregarding the historical and cultural specificity of the civilization. It highlights the dual distortions in knowledge production: (1) the West's imposition of its values, and (2) Chinese people's acceptance and reproduction of these biases, often resulting in "self-otherization". The cultural unconscious, as the theoretical backbone of Sinologism, reveals how deeply ingrained biases manifest in the representation of China. These biases often remain hidden, functioning as implicit assumptions about Chinese inferiority or Western superiority, which are taken for granted in scholarship and portrayals of literature.

To understand the resurgence of Sinologism and the cultural unconscious in Hessler's works, the methodology of analysis firstly examines how he adheres to his core principle of countering the overwhelmingly negative narratives that dominate mainstream American media. The discussion then proceeds to highlight the presence of the cultural unconscious in Hessler's

construction of Chinese foodscapes, particularly through his depictions of rats, bats, and traditional Chinese medicinal beliefs. Additionally, the analysis examines the self-otherization of Chinese representations of their own food. These discussions collectively contribute to uncovering the underlying logic of Western narratives on Chinese foodscapes. This includes how historical narratives, cultural stereotypes, and political discourse have shaped American perceptions of Chinese foodscapes and how these perspectives are reflected in Hessler's works. This study complements the argument that "Hessler still views China through a Western ideological lens" (Ming et al., 2024) by demonstrating how his perspectives extend beyond ideology to a biological framing, interpreting the consumption of food as a particular human reaction, within the framework of Sinologism and the cultural unconscious.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

APPRECIATION FOR CHINESE FOOD IN HESSLER'S WORKS

Living and working in China intermittently over nearly three decades, from 1996 to 2021, Hessler offers a rich and varied portrayal of Chinese food, encompassing banquets, street food, daily meals, festive dishes, and the cultural beliefs associated with food. His writings reveal a kaleidoscope of Chinese food and its cultural significance in the reform-era China, given that Hessler positions himself as a writer committed to portraying the truth about China, and his assertion that his reportage differs from other Western journalists, emphasizing his unique perspective (Johnson, 2015; Hessler, 2012, p. 6).

Within this context, Hessler has undoubtedly expressed an appreciation for Chinese food in his writings on the country. This is vividly depicted in his memoir *River Town* (2001), where he reflects on his time as a volunteer English teacher in Fuling, a small city in southwest China. He recalls spending most of his salary on dining out, describing the restaurants as some of the most pleasant places in the city, with excellent Sichuanese cuisine and friendships formed with restaurant owners. His enthusiasm extends to festive traditions, particularly during the Spring Festival, when he captures the lively street food culture, with barbecue grills, tofu vendors, and hotpot stands lining the streets and sidewalks. Invited to a local family's celebration, Hessler highlights the cultural importance of the festival meal as a time for family reunions, describing the abundance of dishes, including spicy pork, tofu, bean sprouts, and fish, enough to last for days.

Additionally, in his latest book, *Other Rivers* (2024), Hessler observes a significant improvement in nutrition in China, comparing the height of young people from the 1990s to the 2020s. While he does not explicitly link this change to Chinese food, its role is undeniable. Citing a 2020 study in *The Lancet*, Hessler (2024, p. 35) notes that China experienced the largest increase in boys' height and the third largest for girls among 200 countries since 1985, attributing this growth to improved nutrition. This observation underscores the critical connection between dietary improvements and physical development, reflecting broader social and economic progress in modern China.

While Hessler's writings convey his appreciation for Chinese food, a closer reading reveals subtle misunderstandings of Chinese food and its culture. These instances suggest the resurgence of Sinologism, with all the sinews of its deeply embedded cultural unconscious circulating at its core, travelling to the fore, influencing his perceptions and interpretations. The following analysis focuses on how unconscious biases are manifested in Hessler's depictions of Chinese dietary practices as well as selected traditional Chinese medicinal practices related to the consumption of specific food items.

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SIONLOGISM IN HESSLER'S REPRESENTATION OF CHINESE DIETARY PRACTICES

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE FOODSCAPE OF THE RAT

In *Strange Stones* (2013), Hessler devotes an entire chapter to his experience of eating rats in China, a story that was originally published in *The New Yorker* on July 24, 2000, under the title "A Rat in My Soup." The events take place in a small village in Guangdong, the region in South China known for its unusual cuisine, as Hessler points out the universal stereotype associated with this province: "folks in Guangdong will eat anything" (2013, p. 12). Despite explanations in the text that the mountain rats consumed in the restaurant were clean and fed on fruits such as oranges, plums, and jackfruit, rat consumption is rare, not only to Westerners but also for most Chinese.

Hessler highlights the variety of exotic options available in the restaurant. This portrayal reinforces the long-standing Western stereotype of the Chinese as omnivorous eaters who consume everything. Such stereotypes have deep historical roots, reflected in accounts by early European travellers like Marco Polo, who described an abundant quantity of games of all kinds for the rich and powerful, while "as to people of the lower classes, they do not scruple to eat every other kind of flesh, however unclean, without any discrimination. (Polo, 1953, p. 134)". This perception persisted in popular Western literature, as demonstrated by an 1858 poem, *A Chanson for Canton*, published in the British satire magazine *Punch*: "With their little gig-eyes and their large pig-tails, And their diet of rats, dogs, slugs, and snails, All seems to be game in the frying pan of that nasty feeder, John Chinaman. (Yan, 2020)" Satirical in tone, such writings exemplify Sinologism, a framework of distorted perceptions about Chinese foodscapes perpetuated by Western observers. This distorted knowledge develops a cultural unconscious in the West, which views Chinese culture, especially food practices, as exotic, uncivilized, and inferior.

Hessler's narrative resurrects this ingrained bias in the 21st century by focusing on rare rat consumption. Rat meat is far from a common food in China. As Wells Williams S. (1900) points out: "The uncouth or unsavory viands form only an infinitesimal portion of their (Chinese) food, and ceremonious feasts are not one-thousandth of their repasts" (p. 771). He further clarifies that rats and mice are not commonly eaten: "Rats and mice are, no doubt, eaten now and then, and so are many other undesirable things, by those whom want compels to take what they can get; but to put these and other strange eatables in the front of the list gives a distorted idea of the everyday food of the people" (p. 778). More recently, Thornberry (2023) asserts that while there are historical accounts of rat consumption in certain regions of China, particularly in rural areas and among specific communities, eating rats or mice is not a widespread practice in contemporary Chinese cuisine. Most Chinese restaurants and households do not include rat meat in their dishes, as evidenced by the absence of such items in health inspections and food safety regulations.

Thus, in an era when numerous other aspects of Chinese food culture could be discussed, one might wonder why Hessler chose to highlight rat consumption in his writing. While Hessler claims that the visit to the rat restaurant happened "on a whim" (2013, p. 11) and that the story was merely a humorous anecdote recommended to *The New Yorker* by his mentor John McPhee (Johnson, 2015), it should be noted that the Hessler's story of eating rat caters to preexisting Western prejudices against Chinese food, perpetuating the notion of Chinese people as indiscriminate eaters. Western readers may unconsciously reaffirm their sense of cultural superiority by reading about the "barbaric" and "uncivilized" dietary habits of the Chinese.

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Yet such assumptions are fallacious. Firstly, food choices are culturally arbitrary. What one culture finds acceptable may be viewed as repugnant in another. For example, the Western preference for rare, undercooked meat can be shocking to some Asians as well. Secondly, China's cuisine is highly regionalized, consisting of eight distinct culinary traditions: Sichuan, Hunan, Guangdong, Fujian, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Anhui, and Shandong. Each with unique ingredients and cooking techniques. A dish considered a delicacy in one region may be unheard of or undesirable in another. Thirdly, China's large population, limited resources, and history of famines have necessitated the use of all available food sources for survival. While this pragmatic approach may explain the consumption of certain uncommon foodstuffs, it does not imply indiscriminate eating habits. In the new era, wild flavours are limited to the rich and adventurous dinners. As Wells (1900, p. 778) asserts long time ago, rat consumption in China is rare and should not define the nation's food culture.

Hessler's portrayal aligns with old Western narratives that sensationalize unusual aspects of Chinese dietary practices while neglecting more mainstream practices. Sinologism, with its alienated knowledge of Chinese culture, focuses disproportionately on the bizarre and exotic, perpetuating misconceptions. In terms of food consumption primarily serving the purpose of sustenance and energy, Chinese people are not inferior to any other group biologically in the world, even if their dietary customs differ from Western norms. By emphasizing rare and extreme examples, such as rat consumption, Hessler reinforces stereotypes of Chinese foodscapes through his selective writing. Hessler's writing reflects a cultural unconscious rooted in Orientalist traditions, where Chinese dietary practices are viewed through a distorted, alienating lens. Recognizing this bias is essential to fostering a more balanced and accurate understanding of Chinese food culture and dispelling outdated notions of cultural inferiority. The following discussion of Hessler's construction of the foodscape of the bat in Chinese dietary practices further explicates how Sinologism makes a resurgence in Hessler's imaginary.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE FOODSCAPE OF THE BAT

In October 2020, Hessler published the article "The Sealed City" in *The New Yorker*. Three months after the lockdown of Wuhan was lifted in May 2020, Hessler visited the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, considered the apparent epicentre of the virus outbreak. In the article, Hessler initially disputes the association of bats with the pandemic's presumed origins in Wuhan, noting: "The animal-market connection is unclear. There weren't many wildlife dealers in the market—about a dozen stalls, according to most published reports—and Wuhan natives have little appetite for exotic animals" (2020, p. 38). Yet there is a certain ambiguity in the discourse, for he does not dispute the association entirely, and there is also the insinuation that the presence of wildlife dealers is not unusual in parts of Chinese wet markets. This then continues on this thread and proceeds to shift his focus to Guangdong, drawing an association between wildlife consumption and the region: "Such fare is much more popular in Guangdong, in the far South. It's possible that the disease arrived from somewhere else and then spread in the wet, cool conditions of the fish stalls" (2020, p. 38). Hessler thus builds on and strengthens the plausibility of the narrative of the purported Chinese dietary practice of eating bats. To further explain the widespread association between bat consumption and Chinese food, Hessler cites British zoologist Peter Daszak, stating: "His research has indicated that, across Southeast Asia, more than a million people each year are infected by bat coronavirus. Daszak said that he had always thought that such an outbreak was most likely to occur in Kunming or Guangzhou, southern cities that are close to many bat caves and that also have an

intensive wildlife trade" (2020, p. 38). At each stage, he perpetuates the narrative without questioning or disproving its accuracy, thus continuing to uphold the cultural unconscious of Sinologism and its establishment of difference. As much as one might argue that Hessler's construction of the narrative, with his tracing of origins and ascertaining veracity is a reflection of investigative journalism, it does ultimately reflect the persistent Western reporting and reading of the origins of the pandemic and the resurgence of Sinologism. His construction of his time in Wuhan in the end is merely speculation, constructing his nuanced knowledge of China, which emerges with tinges of Sinologism, presenting that internalized Orientalist logic (Gu, 2013, p. 122) that perpetuates distorted understandings of Chinese culture through his own Western lens. This is clinched by the following statement that emerges in the article, that "there had never been any logic to the Huanan combo: fish downstairs, eyeglasses upstairs. Locals told me that, more than fifteen years ago, some eyeglass merchants had been attracted by the low rent. Since then, fish and eyeglasses had coexisted peacefully" (Hessler, 2020, p. 38), constructing a narrative that at once disputes logic as much as it presents an Other logic, strange to the Western imagination. At no point does he interview locals and instead chooses to present an excerpt from an online diary by a Wuhan resident: "On March 4th, she considered the future of the Huanan market. 'Some people have suggested turning it into a memorial hall dedicated to this calamity,' she wrote, before making a transition, perhaps with the censors in mind: 'Today I'll just talk about shopping.' (Hessler, 2020, p. 36)"

Sinologism surges up to surface with much fervour in Hessler's selection of the excerpt. Having spent so many years in China, it is interesting that Hessler does not draw on cultural narratives that could deconstruct and dismantle the story told of bat eating Chinese and instead perpetuates the inner logic of the illogical Orient. For instance, bats are auspicious symbols in Chinese culture associated with happiness and good fortune. This positive symbolism stems from the Mandarin pronunciation of "bat" (蝠), which is homophonous with "happiness" (福). As a result, bats frequently appear in Chinese art and decorations, signifying blessings and prosperity. Furthermore, according to a study conducted by Xiao et al., (2021), no bats were sold at the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market between May 2017 and November 2019. Wuhan native, Lu Haitao, underscores that bat consumption is an alien concept: "I have never seen bat meat for sale in markets or restaurants in Wuhan or elsewhere in China. I've also never heard anyone talk about eating it. For me, eating bat meat is both inconceivable and disgusting" (Mas, 2020). Similarly, Guansheng Ma, the director of the Department of Nutrition and Food Hygiene at Peking University, asserts: "According to our research, eating bat meat is more than rare in China. It is unacceptable in Chinese culture" (Mas, 2020).

Hessler's narrative construction serves to emphasize the endurance of the Western imagination of Chinese dietary practices as peculiar or problematic, reinforcing the logic of Sinologism. By speculating that the virus might have originated in Guangdong, Hessler echoes a broader Orientalist framework, which V.S. Naipaul also exemplifies in *The Masque of Africa* (2010). Naipaul describes the consumption of bats in the Ivory Coast, linking it to the Ebola virus: "No one knew for sure how the virus jumped from bat to man; but a good guess was that the virus was transmitted by the eating of the bat. So, the darkening of the Abidjan sky at dusk was not only part of the visual drama of West Africa: it was like a plague waiting to fall on the men below (2010, p. 138)". At the end, as with Hessler, it was merely a guess, and not science.

Hessler's accounts demonstrate how the cultural unconscious of Western observers informs an Orientalist perspective of that often devalues non-Western culinary and dietary practices. This cultural unconscious, with its embedded biases, frames the dietary habits of the Chinese as inferior

or dangerous. During the COVID-19 pandemic, such narratives fuelled widespread "China-bashing". Palmer (2020) argues: "At a time of heightened fear over a viral pandemic, the Palau video (eating bats) has been deployed in the United States and Europe to renew an old narrative about the supposedly disgusting eating habits of foreigners, especially Asians. Images of Chinese people or other Asians eating insects, snakes, or mice frequently circulate on social media or in click-bait news stories. This time, that was mixed with another old racist idea: that the dirty Chinese are carriers of disease."

The construction of the foodscape of the bat in Hessler's work not only exposes the deep-seated cultural unconscious shaping his writing but also illustrates the enduring influence of Sinologism in Western narratives about China. This misrepresentation of Chinese dietary practices is one of many examples where the ingrained Sinologism perpetuates Orientalist perceptions of China, even when one has spent many years, like Hessler had, in China as part of the Peace Corps, staff journalist and freelance writer.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF CHINESE MEDICINAL PRACTICES

According to *Yellow Emperor's Canon: Internal Medicine* (Bing, 2002), human health is seen as a balance of heat, cold, wetness, and dryness. Chinese dietary practices classify foods based on their properties: some increase body heat, others are neutral, and some cool the body. "This theory, first recorded in *Shennong Bencao Jing* (200–300 AD), has been used by traditional Chinese practitioners to treat diseases for thousands of years" (Liu, et al., 2021). The choice of food plays an important role in a patient's recovery, as "the right food at any particular time must also be dependent upon one's health condition at that time" (Chang, 1977, p. 9). Consequently, avoiding raw and cooling foods, such as oranges, during winter is a common practice for individuals with stomach issues, while cooked and warm foods, such as soups, roasted vegetables, ginger, and warm tea, are recommended. Fruits and vegetables are integral to Chinese cuisine, yet traditional beliefs emphasize the importance of consumption timing and the consumer's physical condition in determining proper dietary practices. The principle the Chinese parents observed is applied widely in China, but as the following discussion shows, Hessler ultimately finds such practices unfathomable and odd as Sinologism rears its head as an embedded cultural unconscious.

In *Country Driving* (2010), Hessler relates what he deemed as puzzling dietary practices related to Chinese medicinal beliefs that he observed during the time he spent in a village north of Beijing as a foreign correspondent for *The New Yorker*. This excerpt discusses a Chinese family's approach to their child's health and well-being, guided by traditional Chinese medicinal beliefs on dietary practices: "Their respect for education was admirable, but the boy never got any exercise, and certain traditional ideas about health were counterproductive. Given Wei Jia's chronic colds, I recommended that he eat oranges, but his mother believed that a person should avoid too much fruit during winter—it is bad for qi, she said. Like most people in China, Wei Jia rarely drank water. The Chinese have countless obscure beliefs about which times of day are bad for fluids, and the end result is that most people simply do not drink much." (2010, p. 193) Hessler's interpretation simplifies and misconstrues traditional Chinese dietary beliefs and their medicinal propensities, rendering them incomprehensible or even absurd.

Hessler's outsider perspective prevents him from appreciating these principles, and his portrayal exemplifies the unconscious "othering" central to Sinologism. For instance, he seems unable to come to terms with the Chinese preference for boiled water. Hessler acknowledges its ready availability in public spaces such as hotels, restaurants, trains, and boats (2006, p. 201). However, he treats the habit of drinking hot water as baffling and preposterous, ridiculing a teacher

in Chengdu who drank hot tea in the summer, writing that "she clutched a bottle of tea in both hands as if for warmth" (2001, p. 12). Traditionally, warm beverages are believed to warm the stomach, aid digestion, and promote overall health. Such dismissals reveal his unconscious bias, shaped by Sinologism, in which traditional Chinese practices are perceived as irrational compared to Western norms.

Traditional Chinese medicine behind the Chinese dietary practices, deeply rooted in history, emphasizes the homology of food and medicine, an idea practiced as early as *The Yellow Emperor's Canon of Internal Medicine* (500 BC). Sun Simiao, a renowned TCM practitioner in the 7th century, expanded this principle, stating, "Food is for everyday life care, and medicine for acute disease" (Hua et al., 2011, p. 2). TCM asserts that health depends on balancing Yin and Yang, with foods categorized as hot, warm, neutral, cool, or cold to maintain equilibrium. While these practices may seem foreign to outsiders, they are grounded in centuries of observation and experience and stood the test of time. Anderson (1990) notes that "the system fitted observation and cured many more people than it killed" (p. 191). Moreover, contemporary research supports these principles. For example, Xie et al. (2020) found that vitamin content significantly influences the classification of foods as Yin or Yang, while TCM represents a unique paradigm that goes beyond the framework of Western medicine.

Hessler's portrayal of Chinese dietary practices and beliefs derives from the Westerner's ignorance and distrust on the traditional Chinese medicine. Ultimately, Hessler's representation of Chinese dietary beliefs reveals and perpetuates a cultural unconscious that frames traditional practices as primitive and irrational. Yet these beliefs, rooted in a holistic understanding of health and balance, continue to prove effective and relevant. As Anderson (1990, p. 192) observes, "The whole logic of the system is beautifully Chinese; it stressed balance, order, and harmony, the greatest of all virtues in the Confucian worldview". Bridging this cultural gap requires an appreciation of the unique paradigm underlying traditional Chinese dietary practices rather than dismissing them through the lens of Western cultural superiority.

SELF-OTHERIZATION IN CHINESE REPRESENTATIONS OF THEIR OWN FOODSCAPES AND MEDICINAL PRACTICES

Hessler's representations of Chinese food exemplify how his cultural unconscious distorts Chinese food culture by emphasizing the bizarre and ignoring the rich diversity and rationale of traditional dietary practices. However, the acceptance and reproduction of these biases by some Chinese individuals, termed self-otherization, also contribute to the perpetuation of Sinologism. As Gu (2013, p. 56) states, "In Said's observation of Orientalism, the Orientals are not Europe's interlocutor, but its 'silent other.' In the Chinese situation, we often find the Chinese as the Westerners' 'echoing other.'" Shen (2012, p. 128) similarly notes, "For a long time, the Western interpretation of China's image not only shaped the perception of China by the rest of the world but also defined the self-consciousness of Chinese people."

From the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, China experienced significant socio-political turmoil due to military defeats, unequal treaties, foreign invasions, and internal uprisings. These events deeply affected Chinese self-perception, leading some individuals to internalize a Western gaze that framed their own culture as inferior, resulting in a phenomenon known as Chinese self-otherization. Gu (2020, p. 5) explains that the cultural unconscious, shaped by these shared colonial experiences, operates as two sides of the same coin: one side for the colonized and the other for the colonizers. For the colonized, this manifests as an inferiority complex characterized by repressed memories of trauma, pain, and frustration, often evolving into a "mentality of

fetishizing the West". For the colonizers, it results in a superiority complex, built on repressed memories of conquest and dominance.

In *Country Driving* (2010), this phenomenon is evident in the remarks of Chinese villager Wei Ziqi, who reflects on foreign dietary habits. When describing Hessler's diet to other villagers, Wei Ziqi states, "He won't eat intestines or any other organs. He doesn't like meat on the bone. He does not like bean paste. He likes fish, and he likes vegetables" (2010, p. 166). By emphasizing Hessler's avoidance of "intestines", "organs", and "meat on the bones", Wei Ziqi unconsciously others Chinese dietary culture, implying that Westerners possess a more refined palate. This form of self-otherization reinforces the perception of Chinese food as unsophisticated or inferior.

A striking example of self-otherization appears in Wei Ziqi's attempt to prepare medicinal wine. Hessler recounts an incident where Wei Ziqi trapped a feral pig and used its foetus to create "medicinal wine." Hessler describes his reaction: "The first time I saw the thing; I was so shocked I could not take my eyes off it. Finally, I said, 'Why did you do that?' 'It is for medicine,' Wei Ziqi said. 'It is good for the qi,' he said vaguely—qi means 'energy.' But I noticed that he never touched the stuff, and neither did anyone else. It was the first time I saw an animal product that was too gruesome for the villagers" (2010, p. 176).

Wei Ziqi's creation of medicinal wine, lacking knowledge of traditional techniques, was neither edible nor credible. His ignorance of tradition and misguided attempt undermine the legitimacy of traditional Chinese medicinal wine and feed into Western stereotypes that portray Chinese dietary customs as barbaric or unscientific. Throughout Chinese history, such ignorance and misuse of tradition have led to occasions where even Chinese people considered breaking with their past.

Authentic medicinal wine, however, has specific preparation methods based on traditional Chinese medicine. These wines typically combine herbs with alcohol to improve blood circulation, promote absorption, and enhance organ function. The *Compendium of Materia Medica*, compiled by Li Shizhen in 1578 after 27 years of research and writing, provides detailed information on the ingredients, preparation, and therapeutic benefits of medicinal wines, including their potential to strengthen bones, prevent heart disease, and improve lung function (Rathi, 2018, p. 2).

Wei Ziqi's fabrication of the medicinal wine deviates from this tradition in two ways. First, his use of a pregnant animal violates Confucian principles outlined in the *Book of Rites*, which prohibits harming pregnant animals or young offspring: "They did not take fawns nor eggs. They did not kill pregnant animals, nor those which had not attained to their full growth" (Legge, trans. 1885, p. 221). Second, his vague explanation of the wine's function reflects a lack of understanding of TCM principles, diminishing its credibility in the eyes of both locals and foreigners.

It should be noted that before missionaries introduced Western medicine into China in the 19th century, TCM was the only medical practice in the country, playing an essential role in Chinese people's lives. Its principles were deeply embedded in daily life and dietary practices. While there is increasing recognition of TCM, including Tu Youyou's Nobel Prize in 2015 for discovering artemisinin to treat malaria, and its inclusion in the World Health Organization's framework in 2019, misunderstandings persist. Dietary beliefs rooted in TCM deserve respect and study as they offer a holistic approach to health, distinct from but complementary to Western medicine. When individuals misuse or misrepresent these traditions, they risk not only creating harmful practices but also reinforcing Western prejudices through self-otherization.

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CONCLUSION

This paper has explored how Sinologism and the cultural unconscious shape representations of Chinese foodscapes in Anglophone American literature, with a focus on Hessler's works. While Hessler's narratives are often celebrated for their rich and empathetic portrayals of Chinese culture, closer analysis reveals that they are not free from unconscious biases rooted in Western-centric perspectives. As our discussion has shown, the gravitational pull of Sinologism is so strong that even a writer like Hessler, widely acknowledged for countering American Orientalist biases in his narratives on China for nearly three decades, is not immune to its resurgence. As such, as much as Hessler attempts to provide a positive and progressive portrayal of China and Chinese food, and his intention to understand them, his emphasis on tracing and emphasizing dietary practices such as rat and bat consumption ultimately reveals a perpetuation of exoticized and reductive depictions of Chinese food culture, reinforcing longstanding Orientalist stereotypes.

In this way, as much as Hessler has challenged negative narrative constructions of China by highlighting its progress and transformation, Chinese foodscapes in his works still reflect lingering Western biases embedded in his cultural unconscious. These biases reveal the influence of a knowledge production system deeply embedded in a West-centric geopolitical environment that inevitably transports a cultural unconscious through Chinese foodscapes, colouring most dietary and medicinal practices with the brush of a deep-seated cultural unconscious or Sinologism. These effectively accentuate the tension between his effort to challenge Western media depictions of China and his own orientalist bias, especially considering the prominent role of foodscapes and discussions about China and the Chinese in shaping narratives around the cause of the 2020 pandemic.

Hessler's observations of dietary and medicinal practices involving food articles emerge tinged with the exotic and peculiar, ever incomprehensible or absurd, emphasising their constructions as foodscapes. His choice of including in his narratives, Chinese individuals who echo Orientalist averseness to their own traditional dietary and medicinal practices serve to bolster the cultural unconscious rather than mitigate its influence. Together, external misinterpretations and internal self-otherization contribute to the persistent stereotypes surrounding Chinese food culture, reinforcing the skewed images that travel through Chinese foodscapes in Western contexts. These considerations prompt us to reflect on the magnitude of American perspectival constructs, which arise from the cauldron of a cultural unconscious shaped by both contemporary socio-political influences and deeply ingrained narratives of foodscapes. When these are served as the main course to the anglophone reading public, practices rooted in traditional Chinese medicinal sciences, including food therapy, which have not only endured over time but have also gained recognition in contemporary healthcare contexts, are often relegated to the periphery and excluded from primary consideration as they sit on the sideboards. The reductive and sensationalized Chinese foodscapes that we have shown in Hessler's writings above emphasise that balanced and nuanced approaches to cross-cultural engagement in the Anglophone American imaginary still have miles to go.

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