

Consuming Counterrevolution: The Ritual and Culture of Cannibalism in Wuxuan, Guangxi, China, May to July 1968

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People are eating each other, came the message from southern Guangxi to Peking in the early summer of 1968, as the violent phase of the Cultural Revolution was drawing to a close. When militia reinforcements arrived in Wuxuan, parts of decomposing corpses still festooned the town center (Zheng 1993:2–3). No proper investigation was conducted, however, for this was a county in which order had already been imposed and the rebels had been crushed. Only in 1981–83, long after the Gang of Four had collapsed, was an investigation team sent into the county. It compiled a list of those eaten and a number of the ringleaders in cannibalism. Fifteen were jailed, and 130 Party members and cadres were disciplined. The Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region announced the expulsion from the Party of all who had eaten human flesh.¹ But the regulations were withdrawn quickly for fear that the document would be slipped out to Hong Kong and reveal this episode of cannibalism to the world (Zheng 1993:52).

The local and national authorities wanted to forget about these events, and no Western work mentions them. However, the well-known writer, Zheng Yi,² heard of the cannibalism and decided that he would investigate it for himself. He visited Wuxuan and other parts of southern Guangxi in 1986 and

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¹ In theory, punishments were still to be carried out according to its prescriptions. Several former officials in the county who had pressed for a full investigation later described it as incomplete, even a coverup, arguing that the numbers were far greater and the punishments too light (Zheng 1993:95).

² Zheng Yi, born in 1947, is best known for his novels, *A Distant Village* (1983) and *The Old Well* (1985).

1988 and left China after the Tiananmen incident in June 1989 to publish the evidence. His persistence at the risk of his own safety and the tone of his account put into proportion the terrible events he describes. His analysis, to simplify, blames the policies of the Communist Party for a recrudescence of earlier local customs and is particularly caustic of the government's failure to make former officials accountable for the violence of 1968. I shall rely heavily on his materials for Guangxi in 1968, but in trying to shed light on this incident I pursue here a different and more comparative line of analysis.

GUANGXI IN 1968 AND THE EVIDENCE OF CANNIBALISM

The Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region was notorious for its violence in the Cultural Revolution. The cause of this lay in the province's remoteness, its internal political relations, the extended factional conflict, and the character of its ruler, Wei Guoqing. A sinicized member of the Zhuang minority and former high Communist military officer, Wei had ruled almost single-handed since 1954. A political rival, Wu Chinnan, had on April 22, 1967, mobilized 40,000 Red Guards to overthrow Wei on Nanning (Karnow 1972:433–6). Wei was initially hounded down by rebels and red guards and paraded in a huge duncecap in the streets of Guilin (Hua 1987:143) but within a few months recovered power, joined by most but not all military units, along with much of the militia. Months of inconclusive skirmishing followed. Guangxi borders on Vietnam, and as the rebellion of Wuhan and turmoil elsewhere began to subside, Beijing grew concerned with the security of the railway and with new airfields constructed to help North Vietnam in its war with the United States. Late in 1967 Wei and Wu were summoned to the capital to negotiate a settlement. On their return, however, tension intensified in Guilin and Wuzhou. Wei despatched loyal militia to strategic counties throughout the region and set up revolutionary committees in the great majority of counties. Proclaiming his adversaries counterrevolutionaries, his Alliance Command attacked with heavy weapons in both Wuzhou and Liuzhou. On April 26 he vowed not to rest until victory was complete. It took a month of heavy fighting and heavy destruction and loss of life before Wei's forces controlled the two cities. Outgunned and outnumbered, desperate Grand Army activists then derailed and pillaged trains carrying military supplies to Vietnam. Alarmed, Beijing sided decisively with Wei Guoqing, who was summoned again to the capital and photographed with Mao Zedong on July 3 (Karnow 1972:439). On the same day a proclamation in the name of all the main central government departments warned that further resistance in Guangxi would be "severely punished" (Zheng 1993:8). Wei steadily established his authority in the various counties. What followed can only be called a reign of terror in which between 90,000 and 300,000 "counterrevolutionaries" and other "bad elements" (the official figure for all deaths in the Autonomous Region was 30,000) may have been killed. It is clear that Wei Guoqing's uncompromising

policies (he is said to have ordered peasants to kill with their hoes any rebels taking refuge) (Hua 1987:10), and the emotions aroused by a protracted and violently concluded conflict directly led to the widespread violence in many Guangxi counties in the summer of 1968, including the cannibalism of Wuxuan.

Wuxuan in 1966 was a fairly remote county reporting a population of 221,786, situated on the Qian River slightly closer to Liuzhou than Wuzhou. The Cultural Revolution was declared by the county head in January 1967, six months later than the rest of the country. Parades ensued, attacking several county officials along with a large number of people accused of "going the capitalist road." The local rebel faction seized power on January 26. In June, as tension grew between Wu Chinnan and Wei Guoqing, the masses divided into two irreconcilable factions, the ins and the outs, dubbed respectively the Big Faction ("Alliance Command") and the Small Faction ("April 22"). For six months there was only verbal conflict, but in January 1968 the two sides armed themselves and within a month twice attacked each other's strongpoints. The militia took the side of the Big Faction. The first deaths occurred on February 18, when two middle school students were shot as they came out to surrender. Significantly, says Zheng Yi, the Armed Forces Department did not pursue the matter, sticking to its hands-off policy. The standoff continued in the county capital until the Revolutionary Committee was set up on April 15. In theory, this ought to have calmed things down, for its membership combined the two factions, but the plum jobs were taken by the Big Faction members, who made no secret of their determination to smash their rivals and protect what they called the New Red Political Power. Five Small Faction strongpoints were simultaneously attacked on May 11, using methods of bombardment learned in Vietnam. On May 12 reinforcements arrived from Liuzhou for the Big Faction. The Small Faction, its supplies and ammunition almost exhausted, was forced to break out across the Qian river. On May 13 the remaining Small Faction fighters were rounded up and executed (Zheng 1993:58–60).

The figure of ninety-seven killed made this one of the more costly battles in the province. What was most significant for the worse deeds that followed was the depth of feeling the conflict at Wuxuan had produced. The Big Faction drove out a motorboat and shot the fleeing swimmers. The majority of the dead, who were chiefly on the Small Faction side, Zheng Yi was told, were killed after being taken captive.

In the ensuing six weeks the frenzy of cannibalism erupted. From May to July, struggles were held in all or the great majority of the 114 brigades (villages and streets [*jie*]), and no fewer than 90 had one or more struggle meetings that terminated with on-the-spot execution. Of a total of 524 executed, 64 (later amended to 75 or 76) were eaten throughout the county's municipality and nine communes, according to the official investigation (Zheng 1993:58, 96).

Considerable encouragement for violence came from Wuxuan leaders. Killing without trial had been tolerated from March 19. At the start of June the Liuzhu branch military district summoned a “Blow the typhoon meeting” which three military and civil officials from Wuxuan county attended. On June 14 the Wuxuan revolutionary committee convened a meeting of cadres from the county, district, *dadui* [or village], and production brigade, at which Armed Forces Department head Wen Longjuan declared: “The struggle against the enemy requires a Force Twelve typhoon. The methods are: Mobilize (*fadong*) the masses fully, depend on the dictatorship of the masses, hand over policy to the masses. In making class struggle you cannot be gentle (*shouroan*)” (Zheng 1993:66). On June 26, after some 120 had been killed in the various districts and some people were calling for an end to the struggle parades (*jieshang youdou*), Sun Ruizhang, the Armed Forces Department’s political representative and concurrent first deputy of the county revolutionary committee, said, “What are you afraid of! . . . If we don’t suppress the class enemies in this way, we cannot strengthen the will of the people!” (Zheng 1993:73). This was a guarantee that murder in the right political framework would go unpunished.

Did cannibalism actually take place in Wuxuan? In other societies reliable eyewitness accounts of the consumption of human flesh are almost non-existent. Reports originate from sources other than the groups described, usually neighboring enemies. Missionaries and colonial conquerors seized on such reports as evidence of the savagery of the people they were about to civilize or enslave (Arens 1979).³ Yet neither logical consistency or dietary and mortuary practices lend cultural support for eating human flesh. As so often in the case of witchcraft, cannibalistic accusations tell us much less about those accused than about the accusers. Even our own culture, writes one anthropologist, “like many others, finds comfort in the idea of barbarians beyond the gates” (Arens 1979). So some scepticism is in order.

As an ethnography, Zheng’s book, *Red Memorial* (1993),⁴ is not everything

³ W. Arens (1979) has questioned not only the early reports of the Spaniards about the Caribs (whose name corrupted to Canib, was given to the practice) but also reports about cannibalism in Africa, the American mainland, and New Guinea, some of them by reputable anthropologists. Arens is “dubious about the actual existence of this act as an accepted practice for any time or place” (Arens 1979:184, 9). But for evidence of actual cannibalism in New Guinea set within various frameworks, see Gillison and Poole’s articles in Brown and Tuzin (1983) and Stürzenhofecker (in press).

⁴ I am grateful to Mr. Zheng for letting me see a copy of the corrected text before publication. The work has already been discussed by Liu Binyan in the *New York Review of Books* (April 8, 1993). The first five chapters deal with Guangxi. Chapter 1 deals with the Cultural Revolution in four counties, where there was considerable violence; chapter 2, with the cannibalism in Wuxuan; chapter 3, with the career of Wang Zujian, who served two spells in labor camp, the second for blowing the whistle on the cannibalism. Chapter 4 deals with the starvation of 40,000 people in Huanjiang (Yibei) county after the Great Leap Forward (1958); chapter 5, with Zhuang culture through ethnography and the historical record, with special reference to cannibalism; six more chapters consist of a scathing indictment of Marxist and Maoist practices in China. I use here

that would be desired. Not being a witness to the events he relates, he can only tour a few locations and visualize the horrors of 1968. Fearing for his own safety and for the security of the materials he had already collected in other counties, he does not venture outside the town of Wuxuan and its environs (Zheng 1994). In only a few cases, discussed below, can he illuminate the personal relationships and conflicts behind the choice of victims. But Zheng does describe in convincing detail his own partly unsuccessful effort to breach the barriers of official secrecy and evasiveness. As the writer of an exposé, he can be more revealing about the identity and character of obstructive officials and helpful informants than a conscientious ethnographer could be. His Wuxuan evidence, copiously footnoted, is often drawn verbatim from the investigators' secret official chronicle, which he took pains to check with informants; and he also makes footnoted references to the diaries kept by himself and his future wife, Bei Ming, who accompanied him on the 1988 trip to Guangxi. Although some of his extrapolations are unconvincing, for example, that as many as 10,000 in Wuxuan ate human flesh, it seems plausible, in view of the incomplete coverage of the investigation, that cannibal victims may have numbered almost twice as many as those named in the official chronicle.⁵ On this and other matters, his evidence and analysis are easy to separate. That the incident truly occurred was independently confirmed by a recent visitor to Wuxuan, the scholar and journalist, John Gittings. An off-duty local clerk spoke airily of the killings and the cannibalism—obligingly writing down his name and address when asked—and added with a touch of pride, "In Wuxuan . . . we ate more people than anywhere else in China" (*The Guardian*, November 27, 1993).

Zheng's book is of a very different quality from the dubious cannibal reports that Arens criticized. His second chapter is closely based on the official report of what happened, dated May 1987, and a separate list of 64 victims, dated July 4, 1983. Fifty-six had their heart and liver cut out; 18 were completely consumed (down to the soles of their feet), 13 had their genitals eaten, one was decapitated after being eaten, and 7 were actually cut up while they were still alive (Zheng 1993:96). The locations of the struggle meetings leading to cannibalism are listed in the report (see Figures 1 and 2).

Names are also supplied of those punished for eating people. Fifteen were prosecuted, receiving terms of imprisonment up to fourteen years; 27 Party

chiefly the first two chapters, in all about 67,000 characters in length. A partial translation is slated for publication by Westview Press in 1995.

⁵ He estimates 100 and several tens in Wuxuan, which may be correct, though I am assuming only the official figure of 64. Less plausibly, he suggests that 100,000 people ate human flesh in Guangxi in the early summer of 1968 because there were probably 1,200 victims. Both figures seem too high. Few people were eaten in their entirety, and there is credible evidence outside Wuxuan only for the Qinzhou region to the south, where a tea center and four communes in four different counties (Qinzhou, Lingshun, Hepu, and Pubei) were, in an official report sampling "typical" communes, acknowledged to have had 62 cases.

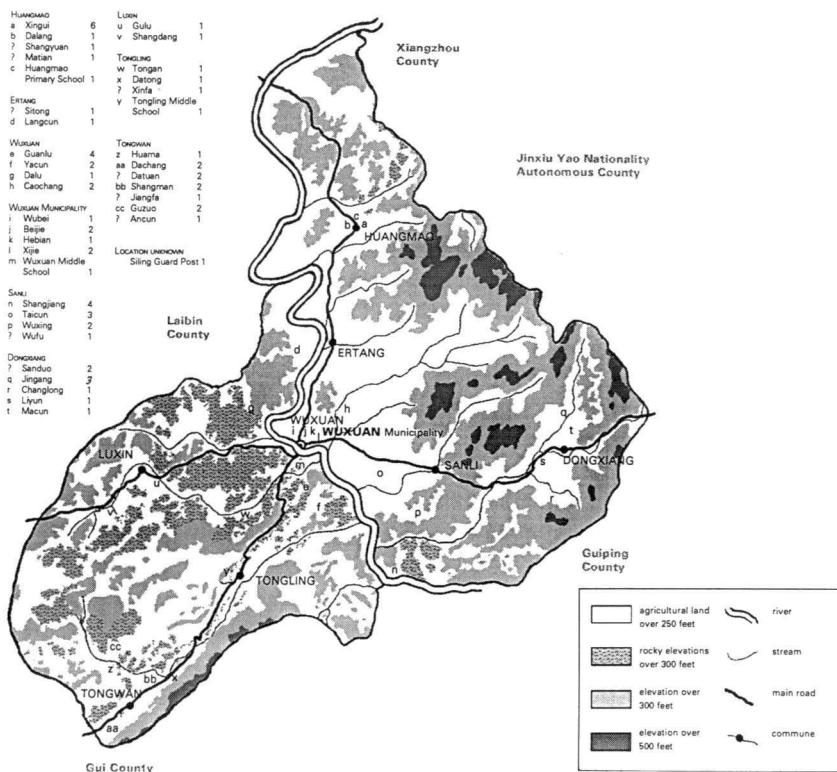


FIGURE 1. Map of political cannibalism in Wuxuan County, May to July 1968.

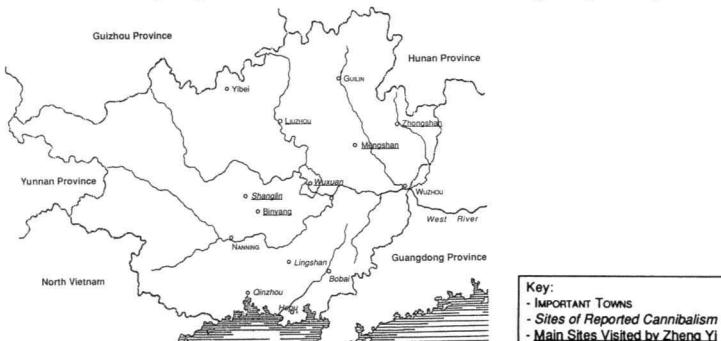


FIGURE 2. Map of Guangxi Province (technically, the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region).

cadres, 5 worker Party members, and 59 peasant Party members were expelled from the Party; 18 non-Party cadres were dismissed; and 21 workers had their work points reduced (Zheng 1993:100).⁶

⁶ The extent of cannibalism in this country is suggested by the 400 names of flesh eaters on an initial list.

Moreover, Zheng tracked down some of the victims' families—his interviews with them are harrowing—and spoke to several people who admitted eating human flesh. There are numerous photographs of those interviewed as well as of the original documents he uses. Finally, as I shall argue at length, there were cultural resonances that rendered cannibalism highly plausible.

Wuxuan's cannibalism was not an isolated act of spontaneous vengeance but a custom that briefly flourished and had its own political and cultural logic. Clearly, there was no breakdown of social order, no outbreak of chaos. The incidents of cannibalism spread all over the county over a six-week period (see Figure 1). Those who took the lead were not the crazed nor idealistic teenagers well known from accounts of the Cultural Revolution (Bennett and Montaperto 1972; Ling 1972; Liang and Shapiro 1983; Gao 1987; Thurston 1987), but Communist Party members and other cadres trained to be moral exemplars as well as followers of central authority. The forces of law and order, not the revolutionary rebels, were the killers and eaters. Moreover, the forms of cannibalistic consumption varied within a narrow range. People agreed on the best body parts and insisted on them being cooked; and the selection, killing, and consuming of victims were relatively systematized. Cannibalism evidently made sense to and had its own meanings for the participants. It was in fact ritualized. Besides being rich in symbolic meaning, it was carried out by people as a group, demarcated from ordinary life, in a fully predictable sequence of events.⁷ The human flesh banquets (*renrou yanxi*), as they were called, were integrated with the ritual of struggle (*pidou*) (see Table 1) and suggest a fresh interpretation of that well-known feature of Maoist China.

This article explores the logic of political cannibalism in three ways. First, it analyses the various aspects of Chinese culture that facilitated this particular form of violence. Second, it synthetically explores the shape and order taken by collective rituals of struggle including cannibalism. Finally, it examines the specific case of Wuxuan, in which local features gave support to what were very exceptional circumstances, even in the period of the Cultural Revolution.

THE RESONANCE OF CULTURE

In spite of the impression that the Cultural Revolution represented a collapse of all cultural norms, people from all sectors of society—not just fiery youth, but old women lining up with baskets (Zheng 1993:74), local state functionaries, and even some teachers—participated in Wuxuan cannibalism. Such a

⁷ The certainty of death once struggle began may be contrasted with the relatively unpredictable witchcraft accusations and trials in early modern Europe. See especially Larner (1981:114). The tendency to ritualization even in beatings to death is exemplified in Binyang county. "The victims in general were not tied up, because they had nowhere to escape, and no hope of life. As soon as they heard the cry of command, more obediently than sheep they stepped forward on the path to death. They didn't seek nourishment, shout curses, try to argue, their expressions were cold, without any consciousness of resistance; they knelt silently on the ground and let people batter them to death. If they were knocked over on the ground, they were made to kneel properly; knocked over, they would again kneel properly, until they lost consciousness (Zheng 1993:14).

TABLE I
Details of Select Cases in Wuxuan County Province from May through July 1968

Date	Place	Victims	Type	How Killed		Parts Cut for Eating	How Disposed
				Method	How Killed		
May 4	Tongwan	2 Tans	Struggled	Shotgun	All flesh		Distributed
May 10, 12	Wuxuan	Tan, Wei	Captive	Cut up alive	Heart, liver, flesh		Shared, eaten with pork
May 13	Wuxuan	Zhou brothers	Captive	Cut up	Heart, liver, flesh		Shared
May 14	Tongwan	Chen	Waylaid	Knifed	Liver		Night snack (for 20)
June 18	Sanli	3 Chens	Struggled	Knifed	Liver		Villagers cook, eat
June 18	Huangamo	Zhang	Struggled	Knifed	Heart, liver, flesh		Flesh banquet
June 18	Wuxuan	Wu	Struggled	Beaten	Heart, liver, thigh		School banquets
June 21	Dongxiang	Zhang	Struggled	Cut up alive	Genitals, Heart, liver		Not known
June 22	Wuxuan	3 Lis	Struggled	Beaten	Liver, genitals		Banquet, River
July 1	Tonglin	Huang	Struggled	Beaten	Flesh stripped		Eaten in school
July 10	Mashan	Diao	Fugitive	Shot	Heart, liver		Hot pot by Militia
July 17	Sanli	2 Liao, 2 Zhongs	Struggled	Clubbed	All flesh		Eaten by 20–30 at Brigade HQ
July ??	Tongwan	Gan	Struggled	Cut up alive	Genitals, thigh, liver, all		Not known

wide participation indicates the presence of powerful cultural resonances and rationales that need to be explored in the full setting of local historical experience. There has been some scholarly resistance to the application of cultural interpretations to the People's Republic (White 1989:315–7),⁸ even to the idea that culture matters at all. The anthropologist, Myron Cohen, has argued that “political relationships in modern China have no shared cultural framework. . . Hegemony in modern China receives no commonly accepted legitimization through culture, rather it represents the culture of the barracks, a culture of compliance, of slogans, posters, and mobilizations conveying messages and commands rather than meaning.” The notion of “flat cultureless culture” which Cohen sees as particularly characteristic of the campaigns (*yundong*) of the Maoist period (Cohen 1991:130) seems overstated, in spite of Mao Zedong's famous description of the peasants as a blank sheet of paper.⁹ Even the forms standardized by the mass media of the People's Republic had to seem persuasive in terms of Chinese culture. In the case of the struggle movements, a Communist invention with no earlier Chinese model, the oxshed made sense because it referred to ox ghosts, a term for one of the well-known servitors in purgatory that was widely applied to class enemies in the Cultural Revolution; the reference was to someone rather menacing but in the permanently liminal state that purgatory represents. The iconic display of street struggle parades, complete with drums and cymbals, recalled the traditional religious procession, with its implications of local order and authority. The scalp crosses and placards bearing the labels designating outcasts recalled the public shaming formerly imposed by the tattoos and cangues worn by traditional criminals. The revolutionary dances that outcast groups were forced to perform were reminders of the comic troupes at local festivals that satirized bad behavior among neighbors. Thus, as actually practiced, the struggle campaign was put together out of miscellaneous elements of Chinese

⁸ After asking, “How much was tradition to blame?,” Lynn White III notes that “if the Cultural Revolution were crucially a result of Chinese habits, then China would have cultural revolutions all the time” (1989:315–6). The question I ask is not why the Cultural Revolution took place, but what forms it took, a question with a partly local and certainly partly cultural answer. He also asserts, “Any ‘culture,’ framing enough of the environment of those who use it to deserve that name, is probably too various to determine specific behavior” (1989:47). I would grant that culture may not determine specific behavior, but behavior occurs in a cultural context which may help to shape it, especially as one moves away from official ideology and the political center to explain local events. In a recent collective work representing a “neo-culturalist” viewpoint, Elizabeth Perry (Wasserstrom and Perry 1991:45), distancing herself from earlier static and monochromatic portraits of Chinese society in the political culture vein, writes of a “multiplicity of available cultural repertoires.” Such a formulation makes culture not fixed and determining but accessible to particular adaptations, and is compatible with the approach of this essay. For an early comparative treatment of thought reform consistent with a cultural interpretation, see Clark (1976).

⁹ Temporizing with local culture was a feature of the early Communist movement. One early leader, Peng Zhimin, would light incense and candles and sign blood oaths when he first organized a local peasant movement (Ristaino 1987:190); on local religious belief supplying a framework for Communist activity in the Taihang area, see also Thaxton 1983:140–59.

culture—a process Lévi-Strauss has called *bricolage*. At the same time some elements of the struggles have long been central to Chinese culture, notably the sense of collective family guilt and the diminution of the individual. It is no accident that the struggle campaign is unique to Chinese socialism.

Local adaptations remain to be explored.¹⁰ One example not far from Wuxuan may be mentioned (Figure 2). Binyang county in July 1968 was swept by a movement to “make gods [images]” (*zaoshen yundong*), images that represented the slogan, “Seek instructions in the morning, report in the evening” or the “Loyalty character dance” and what was called the “Three Loyalties to the Four Unlimiteds.” Within several weeks, no fewer than 3,883 people were to be killed in the county. The god’s images, Zheng Yi notes, had helped to break down the usual taboos against killing people (Zheng 1993:8). In understanding Wuxuan-style cannibalism as another local adaptation of the struggle movement, one made out of widely diffused Chinese cultural material, we should look closely at, first, particular ideas about proper punishment; second, unsuitable food; third, folk traditions of actual cannibalism; and fourth, polarities and metaphors surrounding death.

Imagery: Courts of Empire and Purgatory

The violence of spring 1968 in Wuxuan resonates with traditional ideas of punishment. In courts of the past, long a feature of local opera in China, the means of execution were graduated according to the severity of the crime. Worst of all was the archaic death by slicing and other mutilations (McKnight 1992:329–30). Such a death in China violated the filial obligation to parents and ancestors to keep the physical body in one piece, even in death.

After the last great battle between the Big and Small Factions in Wuxuan, body parts were displayed on trees (Zheng 1993:60). This was a clear echo of the practice of exposing criminals guilty of treason in the marketplace, reducing them to meat. A variant was the parade of body parts. Thus, after the military defeat of the Small Faction, Zhou Weian, its captured leader, was executed and his head and legs taken first to Luxin village as a sacrificial offering at the memorial meeting for two of the Big Faction members and then to the county seat for theatrical use in a cruel catechism with his pregnant widow (Are these your husband’s head and legs? Was he a bad person? Is this your husband’s thigh bone?) (Zheng 1993:61–62). Here Zhou Weian’s body signified the hard-earned victory of the Big Faction. It was as powerful an icon as the god’s images that in living memory had paraded proudly before rival communities.

The popular sense of justice required that the punishment fit the crime and

¹⁰ Cases besides the struggle campaigns could be mentioned. Endicott (1988) has an example of a Sichuan ritual spontaneously devised in response to the news that Mao had handed mangoes to militia groups in Peking, signalling unmistakably that the Red Guards were on their way out. The commune organized processions reminiscent of gods’ processions in the past in which mangoes decorated with ribbons were formally passed from one production brigade to the next.

that no punishment was severe enough for an old feud. Zhou Weian's brother and two students killed earlier may all have been eviscerated alive, though testimony is conflicting (Zheng 1993:61–62). Cannibal consumption was an extension of the same idea. To chop up, cook, and masticate was a still more complete way of offending bodily integrity, depriving the enemy of humanity by reducing him to the status of a comestible. At Huangmao Street, the center of the county's northernmost commune, a primary school teacher, Zhang Boxun (a poor peasant but with a Small Faction viewpoint), tried to escape during a street struggle on June 18 by jumping into the river. His heart and liver were cut out by the militiaman, Guo Lixiang, who used a 5-inch knife and who, with another man, cooked them in an earthenware pot. Others cut away the rest of Zhang's flesh and intestines. Everywhere there were people eating human flesh. In one place a 1.8-foot stewpot served enough to banquet (*jucan*) over ten people. At the Huangmao Foodstuffs Depot and the Distribution Office, over 80 percent of the units' members ate, some under duress. The official report commented that "the masses called it, 'A human flesh banquet'" (Zheng 1993:68–69).

On the same day, a geography teacher of the Wuxuan Middle School, Wu Shufang, was beaten and killed after a series of struggle meetings directed at the faculty. Student leaders forced four of the other teachers, identified as a black gang, to carry the body to the river and made one of them cut out the heart and liver and slice off the thigh flesh. The flesh, packed into plastic bags or slung from rifle muzzles, was carried back to the school grounds. A woman from the kitchen staff was roused to open up the main kitchen, and seventy or eighty students partook of the teacher's flesh; other parts were cooked in an earthenware pot in the campus lodging of the vice head of the Revolutionary Committee and eaten by four students in his presence. A third group of students barbecued on a walkway outside classrooms number 31 and 32 (Zheng 1993:69–70).

Visiting and photographing the sites of these horrors almost three decades later, Zheng Yi repeatedly is reminded of hell's paintings (Zheng 1993:11, 92), and in fact the images of hell may have been their inspiration. In these graphic visions of hell's punishments, still to be seen in popular religious books and many Taiwan City God temples, demonic half-human figures tore apart, boiled, and dismembered their live victims for the crimes they had perpetrated on others during their lifetimes (Teiser 1988). Observers were supposed to be cautioned by such pictures, but it is just as likely that they imagined their enemies in torment, not themselves. In castrations dead or alive, in frying or roasting of body parts, people empowered themselves to actualize such punishments in the real world. Torture and cannibalism created a sort of secularized hell, offering immediate sadistic satisfactions and serving as a warning to one's local enemies.

These public punishments thus combined the imperial courtroom with the

tortments of purgatory. The eviscerating and eating of human flesh fitted the traditional sense that punishment should vary in form and degree according to the turpitude of the offender. Cutting up alive was fully suitable for one's worst enemy. But unlike the Qing legal system, in which the sentence had to fit the motivation, status, and circumstances of the crime precisely (Bodde and Morris 1971:30–32), here it needed only to match the already demonized criminal. Fearful punishments could be justified in the absence of any proven wrongdoing.

Flesh, Bones, and Pork

Beliefs about the dead also play a key role in cannibalism, reflecting the south Chinese polarity between bones and flesh. Once again, there is little that is random and arbitrary in the practices of consumption and disposal extemporized in the spring of 1968. Bones, an important focus of ancestral worship, are treated with caution. There is one touching case in which the father of a victim (Deputy Principal and ex-guerrilla Huang) refuses to tell where his son's remains are kept, even when his former commanders come to pay their respects. He fears that the bones will be destroyed in some future turn of the political winds (Zheng 1993:87). In south China the bones represent the perduring part of the dead man's power: his authority as the recipient of ritual and symbolic obeisance—and bestower of misfortune if such filial duties are forgotten (Ahern 1973). The bones are of no use to others and might indeed bring harm. Thus, when the disposal of bones is mentioned, they are invariably cast into the river (Zheng 1993:62, 70, 72).

Carving people up when they were still alive must be explained in terms of the power attributed to the flesh. One case within the Gan surname group, presumably a single lineage, in Datuan village in the far south Tongwan commune was described in the official report as "too horrible to contemplate" and later confirmed for Zheng Yi by a number of witnesses. Gan Dazuo, after his struggle session, was castrated and disemboweled alive by other men surnamed Gan, who ignored his cry, "Wait 'til I'm dead, then cut." Gan Ziyang, who had shouted, "The Seven-Inch *Qicun* [that is, penis] is mine, no one else can cut it off!," was the first to move, ignoring Dazuo's terrible screams. Others swarmed up and cut the flesh clean. Gan Ziyang eventually received the light sentence of a seven-year incarceration (Zheng 1993:73). Even this horrifying act makes cultural sense. Human flesh is yin, as distinct from the yang of bones. It is supposed to rot under the ground after burial.¹¹ Yet human flesh possesses beneficent transforming power which immediate consumption would make available (compare Thompson 1988:100–2) before the yin element had become dangerous in the state of putrefaction (J. Watson

¹¹ "Just as the flesh of the deceased disappears through decay, so certain parts of his authority are lost when he dies" (Ahern 1973:209). The sons must allow the flesh to decay and must wait patiently for the patrimony to be conveyed to them in due course.

1988:155–86). Male genitals are particularly coveted for their link with *yang* fertility.

Women's flesh, presumably being too *yin*, does not offer the same source of power. When the two Small Faction women, one of them the pregnant widow of its leader, are hauled to the stage, they resist the humiliation of taking off their blouses. One of the organizers cuts the material from the back but scoffs “Old women's flesh! Inedible!” (Zheng 1993:61). On the list of those eaten in Wuxuan only one name obviously belongs to a woman (Zheng 1993:65). When a teacher was discovered to have eaten a “beautiful” girl student for medicinal purposes, he was not copied but stigmatized as deranged (Zheng 1993:44).

There is a tendency to hierarchize consumption. In the several examples given, governmental units appropriate the flesh and share it around a table, denying ordinary people; a militiaman takes off with the prized liver and heart; an unnamed youth is left to lift up and shake the intestines, the least desirable portion (Zheng 1993:68–69). This may be an echo of the ritual distribution of pork widely found in South China lineages after the offering at the ancestral grave, when the cooked pigs are divided among the branches according to their status. As at Cantonese graves, open conflict could ensue (R. Watson, in J. Watson and Rawski 1988). But the distribution of raw parts was never ritualized in Wuxuan, where the crowd's mad scramble is more common (see Zheng 1993:71, 74).¹²

The only meat mentioned as being mixed with human flesh is pork (Zheng 1993:61), perhaps to make it more palatable or perhaps because human flesh actually tastes like pork (Camporesi 1989 [1980]). The association may have a deeper resonance. The symbolic logic of funerals in China is to transform a corpse into an ancestor by manipulating symbols of regeneration and fertility. One important way this is done in central Taiwan is by means of the prestation of pork, which is associated with the flesh of the deceased and in a sense replaces it in clothing the bones (Thompson, in J. Watson and Rawski 1988:95–102). In the period before the funeral, the descendants of the deceased (except women who are married out to other families) are supposed to abstain from pork. According to villagers, to eat it would be unfilial: “It would be like eating the dead person's flesh.”

Whether or not ancestors were ever eaten—as origin myths for pork sacrifice assert in southeast China (Ahern 1973:205–12) and in Oceania¹³—the

¹² Zheng describes a day in July (given as July 17 in the official report but corrected by him to July 10) when in Sanli commune at Upper River Production Brigade, there was a brief struggle meeting and four men, two each surnamed Liao and Zhong, were beaten to death with clubs. The scene as people swarmed about cutting off flesh was “extraordinarily exciting [*renao*.]” Someone remembered seeing an old white-haired woman brazenly grab a piece of human liver and contentedly carry it home in the rain, the drops of blood staining the road. The four corpses were cut up and taken back to the headquarters of the Production Brigade and cooked in two large pots, and then were eaten by some twenty to thirty people (Zheng 1993:73–74).

¹³ Like the thoroughly “un-Chinese” Guangdong and Minnan custom of chewing *binglang* (betel nut), it may be an imported custom.

symbolic equation of the two may have subconsciously facilitated cannibalism by means of a literalistic inversion, explicit or unconscious, of substances already metaphorically linked.¹⁴ Instead of being metaphorically consumed as pork by ancestors, flesh was directly consumed by the survivors, regenerating them, just as pork was believed to regenerate ancestors. In this light the human flesh banquets are no less horrifying, but become culturally meaningful.

Past Cannibalisms of Necessity, Hatred, and Devotion

Chinese local histories repeatedly mention cannibalism in desperate times (Chong 1990:56–62).¹⁵ The term “so hungry that they ate each other” was no doubt often figurative, and works that take such expressions at face value should be treated with suspicion. But when people are chewing bark from trees, digging insects from the ground, and mixing mud with chaff, as in numerous historical famines, the prospect of human meat amid pains and hallucinations of extreme hunger may be hard to resist; and there is ample evidence of resorting to cannibalism in Europe in similar conditions (Campsorei 1989:44–55).¹⁶ It is impossible to know how often such “survival cannibalism,” to use Chong’s phrase, was done in repugnance and how often it was done in response to the indirect cultural supports of cannibal practice. In any case the cannibalism as the result of need may have established a precedent for symbolic forms of cannibalism.

Symbolic cannibalism is also not uncommon: A political or personal enemy would be eaten to seal his defeat. The preferred method was pickling in late Zhou times, serving in stew during the Warring States period (Lewis 1990:28, 148; Chang 1977:34; Chong 1990:153–6). Chong (1990:79–92, see also Schafer in Chang 1977:135) assembles numerous references to learned canni-

¹⁴ The powerful set of associations of flesh and pork, and their links with death and continuity may be compared with the Christian Eucharist (Bynum 1987:ch. 4). In Europe the orthodox pattern is that Christ sacrifices himself literally, to save humanity, and is consumed metaphorically in Communion, conceived as equal under the priest’s guidance. In China the conventional pattern of funeral sacrifice just noted is *metaphoric* consumption of whole cooked pig as *flesh* for the dead to become ancestors, followed by *actual* consumption of pieces of *pork* by the hierarchized members of the community. In both cases substitutions and inversions might transform these most powerful symbols in the interest of particular social groups. Women mystics could survive on the eucharistic bread alone, have visions of sucking Christ’s lactating wounds, could bleed like Christ, give their own bodily suppurations to feed others as Christ had sacrificed himself for humanity. In modern times, young Catholics justified the consumption of relatives and others in the Andean air crash by taking a literal interpretation of the Eucharist (Gzowski 1980).

¹⁵ Chong (1990:55–62) lists a number in dynastic records by place from 205 B.C. to 1639 A.D. With very few exceptions cannibal incidents were reported in the northwest or the north China plain. The most common cause given was drought. The question of the actual incidence of all kinds of cannibalism needs to be examined with a great deal of caution. Chong’s work is mainly useful in showing how widely people believed it to be and what forms and motivations were associated with it.

¹⁶ Camporei quotes Lévi-Strauss: “No society is proof, morally speaking, against the demands of hunger” and notes that “the horror for anthropophagy and patrophy becomes ever more consistent the more Western European society is spared the pangs of hunger (1989:52–53).

balism from Han to Ming times and points to officialdom's political exploitation of hatred. The most famous case in late Imperial China, though not attested in official records, was the cutting up of the powerful late Ming eunuch, Liu Jin, into innumerable pieces for distribution among the people who detested him. The dramatic act of consumption involved bravado and must often have been intended to intimidate other potential challengers.

Such practices were more than acts of revenge. Rather, they were sacrificial in meaning and reflected well-known stories of early dynastic crises of legitimization. The Yellow Emperor, said to be the founder of civilized warfare and even Chinese civilization itself, had first to defeat the half-monster warrior, Chi You, who was cut apart and shared in a meat stew among the victorious soldiers. The Xia could only be reestablished after the defeat of the usurper, the archer Yi, fed to his own son by a treacherous minister, who was overthrown in turn. The Shang could only replace the Xia when the founder offered himself up as a sacrifice. The Zhou could only replace the Shang, according to some texts, when the dead king was offered up in a sacrifice, and according to others, when its founder had personally killed King Zhou by eating him raw or lapping up the blood (Lewis 1990:165–6, 206–10). It is notable that these stories are recounted not disapprovingly but from the point of view of the victors, that is to say, that of the cannibals, and as moral acts.

For these mythic events, numerous conflicting accounts survive, some offering alternative versions of legitimization. It is likely that some figures have been euhemered from earlier culture heroes or portrayed in acts they did not commit. But that does not affect the argument here: Widely believed stories underlined the necessity of sacrifice (the offering of oneself or of one's enemies) and represented cannibalism as not only emotionally satisfying but also ritually appropriate. The sacrifice that sealed victory (compare with the fate of Zhou, leader of the Small Faction) confirmed the covenant that traditionally began battle and at the same time cleansed the pollution incurred by regicide. Cannibal sacrifice, in its full form, was a ritualized political act. It legitimized the group's ascendancy over those defeated and fortified the cohesion of the group and its leaders' ascendancy over his followers. It drew its power from the afterlife, for sacrifice was offered to the ancestors or in some cases the leader just fallen in battle; and the sacrificial victims were punished in death. Such stories, spread in regional opera and storytelling traditions, kept the idea of revenge cannibalism alive and sustained acts of cannibalistic revenge, both individual and collective.¹⁷ People will still say today of a bitter enemy, "I hate him so much that I could eat him," an idea that can be found as early as the *Zuozhuan* (Chong 1990:48–49). In the recent historical novel, *Red Sorghum*, set in Shandong province during the war against Japan, a bandit leader

¹⁷ Luo Guanzhong's *Sanguo yanyi* has examples of actual cannibalism, and enmity for the villain, Sun Quan, the King of Wu, is expressed both by Guan Yu's ghost and Liu Bei in terms of a desire to eat his flesh (Luo 1976:244, 258, cited by Chong 1990:131–3).

orders the decapitation of a suspected spy: “rip out his heart and liver and cook them to go with the wine!” (Mo Yan 1993:243). He is countermanded, but a recent memoir notes an actual case, during land reform, of a Communist team leader eating the heart of a bandit leader (Chang 1991:167).

Metaphorically, to “eat” someone in China has long meant an extreme use of power, both to uphold and to overthrow unjust authority. An oppressor ever since Zhou times has been one who “treats the people as fish and meat” (*yu rou xiaomin*). In the same spirit, Lu Xun’s modern short story in the vein of Gogol describes a Chinese madman who sees a truth missed by the sane: Cannibals are on every page of the history books (Lu Hsun 1980 [1918]). What better revenge, one might suppose, than an inversion—to eat the oppressor? This logic of eating the villains, but in a metaphorical sense, was present very early in Chinese Communist practice. Instead of “eating bitterness,” the standard term for suffering, peasants were urged publicly to “speak bitterness,” blaming local villains for their sufferings. In his writings on the Hunan peasant movement in 1926, Mao Zedong described how peasants would “eat up powerful families” (Schram 1968:249; cf. Solomon 1971:165). They would demonstrate at the house of a “local bully” or rich landlord hostile to the association, “tak[ing] their meals at his house, slaughtering his pigs and consuming his grain” (Schram 1968:256). The bullies and landlords were not actually eaten, of course, but in the carnivalesque atmosphere of Wuxuan in 1968 the same logic made the figurative literal.¹⁸ The conversion of the oppressor into food for the former victims must have seemed a fitting revenge.¹⁹

A cannibalism of devotion is also to be found very early: A man would knowingly eat his son out of loyalty for his lord or would give up his own life to be consumed. In Late Imperial times this becomes something of a cult assimilated to Confucian family values, though it was often criticized by Neo-Confucian writers. A filial daughter or son would cure a sick parent by cutting out his or her liver or a piece of thigh and cooking and feeding it to the patient.²⁰ Significantly this act—which may often have been faked or purely symbolic—was generally attributed to a woman, married or not (Chong 1990:93–103, 115–23), specifically on behalf of a mother or mother-in-law.²¹ Structurally a woman was a true member of neither her natal nor her marital family and therefore was detached emotionally from both. The desperate and widely admired act of flesh cutting may have been intended to strengthen

¹⁸ See for example the killing of the Peartree Lis, below.

¹⁹ Conversely Nancy Munn (1986:220–8, 271) wrote of the Gawa witches, whose necrophagy stood for the greed of their victims.

²⁰ The story of Guanyin, who sacrificed her arms and eyes for the sake of her father, was a popular example of filiality widely known through popular drama and ritual in China (Dudbridge 1978). The violation of filial duty is justifiable *in extremis* in this form of ritualized contravention. Solomon (1971) deserves credit for pointing to the Chinese theme of eating as aggression.

²¹ Chong (1990:97) suggests that this is because women have more attachment to their mothers in early childhood, but that does not explain mothers-in-law.

these weak bonds in one household or the other. Here we have a surprising conjunction with political or hate cannibalism. Though opposites, giving or taking a life and using one's own or another's body as food are both ritual acts giving intense emotional meaning to relationships conceived in moral terms. Whereas cannibalism severs all social and human attachment between two people, thigh cutting underscores filial ties between mother(-in-law) and daughter(-in-law). What made both rituals meaningful, very much in the spirit of approved Confucian rituals, was the emotion and intention on the part of the donor and eater respectively. As earlier noted in connection with taboo foods in general, context was what counted. Love or filial cannibalism is, then, to be seen as a sort of structural reversal of revenge or political cannibalism, gaining its meaning from cultural assumptions about ritual in human relations.

The preference for liver among filial self-mutilators was echoed in the Cultural Revolution. In one Guangxi county, Shanglin, activists ate only the livers of their victims (Zheng 1993:20, 23). While the liver is associated with anger, it is also linked with intimate affection in the compound term, "heart liver" (*xin'gan*), and the two organs seem to be identified with life itself. In early Chinese political theory, the heart signified power; it was a metaphor for the sovereign, his ministers being the limbs. Cutting out a powerful enemy's heart may be regarded as the Chinese equivalent of the royal decapitation in Europe, where the king symbolized the head of state. Thus, the political cannibal of folklore and history often ate both the heart and liver, a cultural precedent followed in Wuxuan in 1968. When Wuxuan Middle School colleagues of the geography teacher, as noted earlier, were forced to use a knife on him, armed students warned them, "We just want the heart and liver!" (Zheng 1993:70, cf. 74–75). As we have seen, fifty-six, or 87.5 percent, of the known Wuxuan victims initially had their heart and liver gouged out (Zheng 1993:96).

Taboo: Classificatory or Humanistic?

Almost all societies oppose cannibalism, but in a variety of ways besides direct prohibition. In Europe people are presumed to differ from beasts at creation, and dietary prescriptions distinguish not only between domestic and wild animals but among different kinds of domestic animals, setting up in the process categories of edibility that by implication exclude cannibalism. Leach (1964) argued that the Western classification of animal edibility corresponds to distance from human society. We are revolted by the thought of eating dogs, "man's best friend," to whom we give names and give the run of our houses; we find the consumption of horses imaginable because they live further away, yet still distasteful because they work closely with people; we find pork quite acceptable because pigs are only scavengers not partners, and we regard beef as the superior food because cows are the farthest removed of all four animals. Sahlins (1976), who agrees with Leach, adds a further logical continuum: We prefer to eat the more external over the more internal of animal parts. The

inner logic in the two schemes, he claims, is to reject eating what resembles oneself, that is to reject cannibalism. Neither scheme is applicable in the Chinese case. While the Chinese find it good to think with food (the expression is that of Lévi-Strauss) they categorize it as cooked or uncooked, medicine as "hot" or "cold." Therefore we may conclude that the categorization of Chinese food did not give powerful support to repugnance for cannibalism.

The Chinese taboos on cannibalism are equally implicit and powerful but, rather than depending on logical categories, are above all social, that is to say, moral. Since classical times humanity was seen to be separated from animals not at creation but by the successive acts of the sages in inventing the arts of constructing houses, carts and boats, making clothes and cooking, and in perfecting the arts of humane government (Knoblock 1990 2:5–6, also vol. 1:188). Good rule, and for Confucians especially, education and proper social distinctions were what ensured appropriate behavior among people. Such morally based taboos could break down, I suggest, if powerful moral justifications could be made in favor of cannibalism. This is what happened in cases of love (filial) and hate (vengeance) cannibalism, in which general social rules gave way under the pressure of special moral obligations. Something similar seems to have happened in 1968, when national ideology combined with the local features of Wuxuan. In the atmosphere of the Cultural Revolution, a single set of political criteria was elevated above all others, polarizing good and bad under a special morality that could not be questioned and indeed had to be acted upon. The usual restraints on violence broke down, and the result in Wuxuan was the ritualized eating of men whose civilized humanity was denied, indeed negated in the act of eating. It is no accident that Wang Zujian, the man who did most to bring the episode to light and helped local society rediscover its moral bearings, reminded Zheng Yi of a Confucian scholar (Zheng 1993:ch.3).

Beyond the moral prohibition against beast-like behavior, Chinese culture did not encourage dietary taboos that might have inhibited cannibalism. Forbidden foods, such as wild dogs or black goats with white heads, seem to be rare in Chinese popular or educated circles and were in no case universally avoided. The extensive discussion of food taboos by Chia Ming (1368) outlaws almost nothing from the healthy diet. What he warns against is excess in eating and drinking, neglect of the consumer's state of health, the wrong time of the year, the wrong combination of foodstuffs. His advice, then, was conditional and contextual and was probably interpreted so flexibly that the word, taboo, seems out of place (Mote in Chang 1977:228–32). This is typical of Chinese attitudes towards food: discriminating as to context but catholic as to the nature and origin of food. People did not have to go against general assumptions about odd food in rationalizing what must have been instinctively repugnant. Of course Chinese food preparation by chopping into small and unrecognizable pieces, mixing many ingredients in the same dish, and adding strong sauces (Chang in Chang 1977:8) made unfamiliar food go down easily.

So much for some possible obstacles to cannibal practice. What of the positive cultural encouragement, however indirect? Chinese are accustomed to eating bitter tasting, even repulsive looking, food as medicine: the worse it tastes, the better its presumed effect. People have long taken human body products as medicine (Cooper and Sivin 1973). China's most famous modern writer wrote "Medicine," a short story about a couple who acquired a steamed bun dipped in the blood of an executed revolutionary to feed their ailing son (Lu Hsun 1980 [1919]). And in some parts of China, even in modern times, executioners are said to have done a lively trade, on the side, commonly using a large knife to cut out their victims' hearts and livers for curative purposes (Tong Enzheng, Personal Communication).

A belief held of both animal and cannibalistic consumption was that one could absorb the qualities of what one ate. Thus, eaters of the goshawk or tiger would become strong and brave (Schafer in Chang 1977:132; Mote in Chang 1977:243). The Chinese demand for the horn of the rhinoceros, identified as a locus of potent virility, is notorious among conservationists. In a similar vein, a recent historical novel set in Shandong describes a form of indirect cannibalism. After a Japanese massacre of villagers, dogs grow fat living off their flesh. The author describes his father and grandfather surviving on fatty dogmeat in the winter of 1940: "the same as eating a winter's supply of human flesh. Later [my father] would grow into a tall, husky man who could kill without batting an eye. I wonder if that had anything to do with the fact that, indirectly, he had cannibalized his own people?" (Mo Yan 1993:271). In this way of thinking, vigor and ruthlessness are enhanced by indirect cannibalism. Generally it did not matter if the eaten were friend or enemy. Perhaps because the Chinese thought that the spirit was separated from the body in death or unconsciousness, only the desired traits, not the malevolent ones, of an animal or human were absorbed.²²

The Culture of Cannibalism

If we summarize the various cultural resonances of cannibalism, most noticeable is the availability of moral underpinnings for the practice. There are the hellish torments designed for the wicked, the link of flesh consumption to sacrifice to the revered ancestors, a folklore of revenge culminating in justifiable cannibalism. On the other hand there were morally grounded taboos not tied to accepted systems of classification and liable to be overridden by larger sociopolitical claims.

²² Chinese notions of digestion, which use the term *hua*, to transform, or (colloquially today *xiaohua*, melt and transform); but the term *hua* is actually untranslatable with a single English word, for it usually means change into something good. It is used in various binomes for sinicization of the barbarians and for the conversion of paper money and other objects into a medium of exchange that can be utilized by the gods and (with the addition of paper household objects) by dead relatives. Here, embedded in the language, was protection against moral taint, insofar as the properties of what was eaten were selectively appropriated by the eater.

The extreme violence of cannibalism is not, then, above or below culture. A culture of cannibalism was rooted in Chinese written records and folk ways. Traditional tales, fictional or not, spread the belief that eating people was not just practiced by wild beasts and monsters but was justifiable in the right situation. This is not to say that the leap from cultural familiarity to practice, from imagery and metaphor to reality, was an easy one. There had to be an extraordinary political atmosphere and particular local reasons we shall return to. What occurred in Wuxuan was a sort of carnival²³—a moment of hyperbole, a time for Force Twelve typhoons. It was a time to transfer metaphor and simile into action, to make literal the possible. Some people in Wuxuan extemporized powerful metaphors based on the human body, always a rich store of meaning (Douglas 1970). Cannibalism constructed a sort of theatre of the body, embodying and disembodying Chinese cultural truths and local realities. We should now look more closely at the structure of the rites. What various motives explain who participated in them? How did they have the power, beyond the cultural resonances noted already, to draw together whole groups into collective acts normally unimaginable?

THE ORDER IN VIOLENCE

Perpetrators and Victims in the Struggles

We have seen what cultural resources could be drawn upon by those who eat human flesh but not how the process could be institutionalized. Although there were instances of unritualized consumption, the usual method was to append a human flesh banquet to the standard ritual of struggle.²⁴ In the course of being struggled, a person was transformed into a ritual object; and the rest of the group, into performers of a ritual act full of meaning.

Like other campaigns, the start of a struggle was a series of press and radio announcements repeating certain slogans and targeting people bearing particular labels. Through a public ritual of humiliation, labelling came to transcend the human character of the victim. In the most extreme form, labelling made it conceivable that a ritual act could culminate in killing the victim as a metonym of what the label designated.

But while the labels were supplied by higher authorities, the choice of victims is very much part of local history, the history of face-to-face communities settled for generations by the same families. The violence of land reform and other episodes, Madsen has argued, had left “the social landscape . . . littered with dangerous memories of arbitrary injustices endured and inflicted” (Lipman and Harrell 1990:187). Seeing the PRC under Mao as a

²³ A carnival may be described as a festive, no-holds-barred event outside the rules of ordinary life. Bakhtin (1968) pointed out that carnival removes hierarchy, reducing people of power to ordinary mortals, in this case literally to flesh and blood.

²⁴ For accounts of struggle campaigns, see Whyte (1974), Cell (1977:34–41, 130–2), Madsen (1984:80–95), Chen (1986:181–201), and the case studies cited below.

state of vengeance, he makes the case for the importance of personal grudges in Long Bow village (Hinton 1966, 1983) in Shensi.²⁵ Supporting evidence of local grudges in selecting the victim can also be found in accounts from the Sichuan plain,²⁶ the Guangxi/Hunan border,²⁷ and Hebei south of Beijing, though all were far milder than Wuxuan. That a terrible sense of grudge contributed to some of the worst violence in Wuxuan is readily apparent.²⁸ The live castration in the Gan lineage cited already is certainly a case in point.

Another incident of vengeance singled out by the official report involved the extinction of a whole family, though in this case the family's property, rather than its members, was consumed. The conflict came to a head with a gang rape by Li (Plumtree), a brigade head, and others of a woman of the Li (Pearltree) family. The men of the latter were roped together, taken across the

²⁵ Madsen notes that the same case could be made in Chen Village, the community on the edge of the Canton delta plain that he examined along with two colleagues (Chan, Madsen, and Unger 1984, 1992).

²⁶ In the No. 5 Production Team of Maguoqiao, Endicott was told, "Feelings between some of the families were already quite tense as a result of the previous political movements" (Endicott 1988:118). The team's vice leader and former village head, Jiang Tenglin, not a party member, had been an activist in the Four Clean-ups (directed at party members), and his son had been the leading rebel in the local movement in Shufang in February 1967, when a cadre in the county seat was beaten to death. After the Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Team in early 1968 came to reorganize the commune, Jiang was accused before the local work team. He was charged with taking part in a robbery gang at the time of Liberation, with once threatening a peasant with a gun, with stealing and selling a few public items for food during the famine years of the Great Leap Forward, with turning a blind eye to theft by his son, and with cutting down three of the collective's trees. The woman who brought these charges to the work team, writes Endicott, deeply resented the fact that her husband's career as Armed Forces Department head had been cut short a few years after Liberation. She had "watched and remembered everything" through almost twenty years as a fellow villager and finally saw her chance for revenge. Jiang decided to make a self-criticism, seeing all of the offenses as minor and largely explicable under the circumstances in which they had occurred. He was denounced by his fellow villagers at a mass meeting and not given a chance to put forward a defense. Soon after, he hanged himself. When Endicott interviewed the woman in the 1980s, she "remained vengeful. 'He committed suicide to escape punishment,' she said without any sense of pity" (Endicott 1988:120).

²⁷ The account of Hibiscus village set in the same period also underlines the role of longstanding grudges in the village setting. The main female character, a winsome and hardworking bean-curd seller, earns such success with her husband that they build a new, modern-style house in this remote area. Her main accuser was an unmarried woman who had once managed a state-run restaurant that had lost customers to the woman. She further envied her platonic relationship for two local men she had set her own eye upon. In the Cultural Revolution, her career blossomed, and when sent down from the county seat at the head of a three-person work team she singles out her main enemy along with those closest to her. The husband is spuriously reclassified as a rich peasant, and she is accused of illegal use of public grain because she had been given grain leavings by one of her platonic friends in charge of the grain store. After the husband commits suicide, she joins the stigmatized Five Categories as the widow of a rich peasant; and her house is confiscated for public use. As in the Sichuan case, the sins are minor, and a private grudge sets in motion denunciations and struggle meetings. Local opinion is easily mobilized, there is no legal procedure and no chance of appeal to higher authority.

²⁸ In an excerpt included in Liu's review (1993), an unrepentant cannibal, Yi Wansheng, who still lives in the native village of his victim, Deng Jifang, describes in detail his animosity for Deng's father, a landlord turned bandit, who once burned up straw saved for the lime kiln (Zheng 1993:39).

river on the county market day by the Plumtree Lis and marched through a gauntlet of brigade members bearing clubs and rods. At the vegetable market Plumtree Li gave a short speech denouncing their crimes and threw the usual question to the crowd, "Should they die?," with its invariable answer, "*Gaisi* [They should die!]." The victims were beaten to death on the spot, their bodies taken to the riverside, abdomens cut open, liver and genitals removed, and the remains cast into the river. Afterwards the party returned to the Peartree Lis house; four of them again gang raped his widow, confiscated and destroyed house and outhouses, stole all the belongings, killed the family pigs, cut down the vegetables, and had a great banquet, celebrating the mighty victory of mass dictatorship. The men had all been killed, and the women had to remarry. Henceforth there was no Peartree Li family in the village (Zheng 1993:72).

The continued victimization of surviving family members through the 1970s seems to underline the importance of vengeance, at least as one of the motives.²⁹ After Huang, the deputy principal of the Tongling Middle School, was killed in a struggle session and cannibalized by his students in the incident already noted, his widow and children moved back to their native village. Because they were undesirable elements, they were forced to subsist by receiving only half work points under the then current Dazhai method, which gave heavy weight to political standpoint. The son, Huang Qiwen, then ten years old, was excluded from the brigade school and herded cows for four years. One day, he was assigned to scrub off old political slogans from a wall. Some cadre children equipped thirty or forty primary school pupils with cow whips to attack him. He might have died, he told Zheng Yi later, had not his mother got wind of the attack, thrown herself furiously into the mêlée and dragged him to safety. A cousin took him to Hainan, and he did not return to Wuxuan for almost ten years. His sister, Huang Qiling (five years old in 1968), had to stay in the county. As she walked home from primary school, groups of children would taunt her with cries of "Rebel's daughter! Rebel's daughter!" and hit her, seize her book bag, rip up her books, and bend her pens. Although she was too frail to manage the machine work which in the 1970s took up the bulk of school time, the teachers scolded her, calling her an idler (Zheng 1993:78–80). It was not until the early 1980s with the belated investigation of the cannibalistic incidents that the stigma of being a rebel's child was officially removed. Even then many of Zheng's informants still exude a sense of fear and shame.

Actually what is notable here is the breadth of participation by people who knew nothing of what her father was said to have done. Even where people had been angry about acts committed by victims, there is a disproportion between the crime and the punishment. When the Small Faction leader had

²⁹ Noted by Madsen and related to the *youxia* tradition, in Lipman and Harrell (1990).

been captured, the mob went to find his brother, who had evidently not been active in the fighting. This man had been convicted, in the famine year after the Great Leap, for stealing a bag of public rice and had served seven years of labor reform. Yet feelings were still so strong that he was summarily tied to a telephone pole and cut to death (Zheng 1993:62). Deputy Principal Huang had given even less cause for vendetta. Faced with a difficult decision, he had earned the disapproval of his wartime superiors by surrendering hundreds of anti-Japanese guerrillas hiding in a cave, thus saving their lives (Zheng 1993:82f). It was not what he had done, but the sense of stigma, that people seemed to act on.

The politics of vengeance seem, then, insufficient to explain acts of violence culminating in cannibalism. Besides those bearing bitter grudges, other kinds of participants must be accounted for. A report in the Binyang county archives in the Nanning region of Guangxi, where there was staged mass killing unlike that in Wuxuan but only a few reported cases of liver eating, indicates a diversity of motives in the deadly struggles:

Most people took part in the beatings, but always it was those not yet old enough to know right from wrong and even those harboring grudges who struck several blows and kept on hitting. The crudest were mostly ruffians ("bare sticks"), poor quality (*pi*) ex-soldiers, idlers, members of those "going the capitalist path" trying to exonerate themselves, former opponents turning on their own, also there were various slackers afraid their turn would come next. The leaders in the crowd were mostly youths on either side of twenty, not a few 14 or 15 sui. If the crowd could not bring itself to act, they forced the Four Categories to move first. After they had finished killing them, these would then be beaten to death (Zheng 1993:14).

For youths without a position, violent acts in the turmoil of 1968 could prove revolutionary mettle.³⁰ When the struggles got out of hand, as a Force Twelve typhoon almost required, they could seize the stage and attack a target they might not know. One man, Wang Chunrong, was sentenced to thirteen years for killing unconnected victims, indicating vengeance was probably not at issue (Zheng 1993:62, 66). An unmarried woman only eighteen years old, Wang Wenliu, became famous as a result of her bravado at the conclusions of struggle sessions, for reputedly she had a preference for cutting off male genitalia, which she cooked at home and shared with her sick mother. She won repeated promotions and soon served as deputy head of the Cultural Revolutionary Committee of the entire county (Zheng 1993:52, 74–75).

In spite of the Maoist rationale of giving power to the powerless, in practice one group the local work teams and revolutionary committees who led the campaigns benefited even more than local thugs and bullies. There were numerous prosecutions on flimsy evidence because there was pressure to create a "high tide" and generate enthusiasm among the masses.³¹ In Wuxuan,

³⁰ Cf. Madsen (1984:91–92).

³¹ For example, a former work team member in Fujian during the Four Clean-ups (*siqing*) in

cannibalism enabled the ringleaders in these obscene acts to distribute the blame among fellow participants and thereby protect themselves. Those who had joined in consuming the victim's flesh would scarcely be likely, at some later settling of accounts, to accuse those who had initiated the execution.

So vengeance, ambition, and bravado explain only the acts of a minority. For the rest, self-preservation almost required that you join in; tomorrow you could be the target.³² In some cases presence at a struggle might be compelled by the authority of an immediate superior. In the mass slaughters of Binyang county every family was required to send a member (Zheng 1993:13). In the village outside Wuxuan Plumtree Li, the brigade head, had mobilized his entire brigade to struggle the Peartree Li men or face losing a day's work points (Zheng 1993:72). In another unit during a human flesh banquet, two young girls whose political standpoint was suspect were forced to eat the flesh to prove they were on the right side (Zheng 1993:68). Thus, more or less direct pressure could enforce the participation of the reluctant majority.

Physical force was often not necessary to compel participation. Zheng Yi, who himself had been a Red Guard at Qinghua University in the Cultural Revolution, tries to imagine himself present at a human flesh banquet and reluctantly admits that in the atmosphere of 1968 he might have been a flesh eater himself.

"See that row of ox-ghosts and snake-spirits kneeling? Over there are the deadly enemies of us proletarian workers! Disregard their grazed and bleeding heads, their show of being pitiful and harmless; if they should one day get the upper hand (*de-cheng*), we revolutionary people may find our ten million heads rolling to the ground! What's this, you are not knocking them down, not eating them up? . . ."

"No, I can't bring myself to do it. I agree with your views, but I can't eat people."

"Well then, do you have the courage to slice off a piece of flesh from them? . . . Huh,

1964 recalled that a poor peasant brought in a fan painted by a member of a former landlord family, who was then classified as a rich peasant and therefore one of the potentially dangerous classes. The painting showed a bird flying back to an empty nest. This was taken as a protest against the misfortune that his family had suffered under Communism while he was away from the village. The man was denounced at a special struggle session and severely beaten by activists. The work team intervened to save his life. But the goal of arousing the poor peasants had been met, and by "killing the chicken to scare the monkeys," the work team had served notice that its authority was to be taken seriously. The young members of work teams, including the source of this account, often laid the groundwork for their own successful careers if such campaigns were regarded as successful (Huang 1989:77–78).

³² A member of a north China work team, commenting on struggle sessions against the target of the day, noted:

The general psychology of most peasants was that they must at all costs show their activism; they'd even walk up to give him one or two slaps in the face. . . . Whoever had problems, whomever the workteam had evidence on, had to go through [these accusations and grillings] as if going through a sieve. . . . Today you were being dealt with by others; tomorrow you'd be dealing with the others and you yourself would be very active. Especially those who had been falsely accused would think that by showing activism they could wash away their own problems. This formed the emotional underpinnings for struggle. That's why the Communist party used this method to divide and demoralize (Chan, Madsen and Unger 1992:55–56).

it seems you have no direct conflict with them, no hostility. All right, we grant that there are degrees of enlightenment, the revolution has people out in front and at the rear. But the bravest and most steadfast revolutionaries, their banners unambiguous, have exercised mass dictatorship over them without the slightest reservation; the flesh is cooked, your fellow classmates and fellow students, your fighting group's battle comrades, filled with deep hatred and hostility for the class enemies, have all eaten, what about you?"

"Me? Well, I'll eat a piece" (Zheng 1993:105).

Coming from a man whose long effort at exposing the cannibalism of 1968 exhibited moral conviction and independent judgment, this picture of irresistible moral and social pressure is persuasive. Among all the victims he investigated, Zheng reports only one case in which a man at risk was saved, in this case by a fellow Hunanese who imprisoned him on a lesser charge (Zheng 1993:74). Had personal grudges and ambitions been the moving force of this persecution, the persecuted would not have been so isolated.

It is clear that various motivations—national, local, and personal—joined to make the act of cannibalism meaningful through a variety of ways. What, then, did the ritual of murder and cannibalism do for the group as a whole in linking the violent toughs and those with a personal vendetta to the generally passive majority? Investigation of the victims indicates that they did not comprise an entire class of people or specific criminals but were merely representative, serving to concentrate the focused anger of the group. As scapegoats, they were indispensable in carrying out the successive campaigns ordered from above. Ku Hua's novel, *A Small Town Named Hibiscus*, notes the ironic perspective of one of the victims, the head of a song-and-dance troupe accused of spreading feudal ideas:

[Crazy Qin] knew that revolution needs a target. Unless each village and town kept a few "dead tigers", how could mass movements and struggles be mobilized? Each time the higher-ups urged them to grasp class struggle, the local cadres called meetings, paraded and denounced the Five Categories, then reported the number of class enemies struggled against and recalled their past bitterness to educate the masses. In teams where the Five Categories had died out, their children took their place.³³ Otherwise, how [could] people [be convinced] that in the historical period of socialism there would always be classes, class contradictions and struggles"? (Ku 1983:172)

In most cases, it was not so much a matter of revenge as political necessity. One or two enemies pointed fingers, but other members of the community exacted punishment impersonally.

This is not to say that the stigmas of official ideology were not generally convincing, for in the heat of the Cultural Revolution they were, as Madsen (1984) Dittmer (1987) and others have shown. The bad categories were more than ever an affront to the ideal of a pure society. Hostility might well have been felt by the villagers in cases in which there was no history of animosity.

³³ See also Madsen (1984:182–4) on the importance of kinship in the focus of struggle in Chen Village. See Friedman *et al.* (1991:106–7) for arbitrary classifications in land reform.

A city youth arriving in a Guangdong village later recalled his first impression of the former landlords and counterrevolutionaries. “I felt that deep in their hearts they still wanted to overthrow everything and kill all of us. In movies, they had awful faces. And in the village, when I saw them I feared them and thought they were repulsive to look at. I guess ugliness is a psychological thing” (Chan *et al.* 1984:16). There is plenty of evidence like this that the new classes of the PRC became the focus of the kind of antagonism associated in other societies with rival ethnic groups in times of crisis. When in the early 1980s the former deputy head of the Cultural Revolution in Wuxuan Middle School was expelled from the party, he was said to have declared impenitently, “Cannibalism[!] . . . it was the flesh of a landlord that was eaten, the flesh of a secret agent” (Zheng 1993:70). In his mind the teacher he had consumed had come to personify what the label referred to, so that to kill him was to remove a threat posed to society.

Such was the power of labelling that people one knew could be abruptly transformed into villains. One of the most remarkable illustrations from Zheng Yi’s book comes from Mengshan, another Guangxi county. A man classified as a landlord was picked out as a target. A sympathetic neighbor returning from a planning meeting knew this but did not dare to tell him directly. As he passed the man working his fields, he called out “Bad weather! Watch out!” The landlord looked up at the sky, taking him literally, demurred, and returned to his hoeing. When the militiamen arrived, one of them was recognized as an acquaintance who used to come and visit. But they killed the man and his sons on the spot, sparing only the wife. One of the two boys cried out as he was picked up, “Uncle Seven, don’t hurt me!,” thinking he was playing. But the militiaman tied a rope round the boy’s neck and hurled him to his death in a drainage ditch. None of the militiamen uttered a word (Zheng 1993:45–47).³⁴ As with similar deeds elsewhere, it was not a question of blindly obeying orders. Such men had internalized the official categories and saw the need to extirpate the evil. The sons had to be killed on the principle of “pulling weeds out by the roots.”

The very geography of ritual murder in Wuxuan county supports this scapegoat interpretation (Figure 1). Zheng Yi, in a summary passage suggesting three phases of development of the practice, gives the impression of a crescendo of violence to the point where people were picked off the street almost at random, one after another, to be killed and eaten (Zheng 1993:90–92; Liu 1993). This is not supported by his own evidence. The official report he cites, which enumerates all the admitted victims, leads to a different conclusion. Ninety of the county’s 108 brigades and 6 streets had killings, and in 36 of them some victims were eaten. In most cases only one victim was eaten in

³⁴ Zheng bases his account partly on interviews with the widow and the neighbor, whom she married. Mengshan, with a population of 30,000, saw 850 people killed, mostly by militiamen in the middle of June 1968 and mostly in one area of the county town (Zheng 1993:41).

each brigade or village. Where there were more than one, they often have the same surname. This means that several relatives were targeted, again in essence a singular victim. The breadth and thinness of violence suggests similar conditions in a great many communities. Only a few local victims were needed, both to arouse and focus hostility and to fulfill higher authorities' expectations for the campaign.

Ritual, it has often been noted, has the capacity to unite a variety of points of view. Since the scapegoats were almost invariably members of the community that killed them, their death and consumption could mobilize the group, redefine its internal relations, and reestablish its inner unity. Using one or two bad elements as scapegoats could enable groups of people with a variety of personal motives and interests to participate in cannibalistic sacrifice.

Struggles as Rites of Passage, and the Role of Cannibalism

The appeal of cannibalism (cognitive as much as emotional) must be examined in terms of the rituals of struggle (*pidou*) of which it is an extension. Struggle involves the staged humiliation of an individual under the verbal pressure of the group, using the slogans of the current campaign. It is in principle carefully orchestrated and impersonal but requires the angry involvement of the crowd to be properly effective (Whyte 1974; Hinton 1983; Chen 1975; Bao 1973; Chan *et al.* 1992; Madsen 1984). In Chinese Communist history there are actually two common versions of the struggle: the confession by a cadre which ends in the expression of contrition and rehabilitation and the casting out of bad elements, whose confession leads, instead, to classification or reclassification as part of a local outcast group.

Unprecedented though it is in China, the ritual of struggle is curiously Chinese, even Confucian, in form. This may seem offensive to admirers of Confucian humanism and is certainly at odds with the usual view of Confucianism and Maoist Communism as polar opposites.³⁵ Nothing seems more removed from the slow, orderly dances at Confucius' temple on the sage's birthday or the stately massed and costumed officials in the Court's annual rituals; yet the rites of struggle did share many characteristic features of the *li*—of Chinese ritual in its classical, Confucian form. Like *li*, as the physical realization of ideological labels, these rituals were not purely oral and performative but served to link written knowledge and instruction from above with individual behavior, the former being intoned and actually prescribing the

³⁵ The view here muddies Madsen's distinction between ceremonies of innocence and rituals of struggle (Madsen 1984:21–24). Past Confucian and official rituals tried to reduce local freedom of interpretation by imposing an orthodox text. So did Marxist struggle rituals. Madsen may be right to emphasize the divisive effect of rituals of struggle in long divided Chen Village, where there were suicides but no judicial murders. But the fatal struggles of Wuxuan were directed against the "outs" and a few school teachers and administrators—not, it seems, former cadres. In view of the variety of motives, the scapegoat element, and the final ousting of the outs, Wuxuan's rituals of struggle appear to have been strongly integrative. In Madsen's terms one could say that Wuxuan converted rituals of struggle into ceremonies of innocence, if that term is appropriate for murder and cannibalism. But I am anticipating my argument.

latter. Like the *li*, they have in principle an emotional basis. Like the *li*, the rites of struggle and human flesh banquet began with proper naming, names defining status in a sense at once moral and social. Like the *li*, they used bodily action to reinforce status hierarchy, in this case class status, and their performance contained implicitly its own justification, for it was conducted with a sense of unquestioned moral superiority. From struggle to execution, again like the *li*, these rituals filled a space that might have been occupied by law, including the possibility of impartial legal procedure. Most strangely of all, like the *li* these cruel and hideous rites, in the eyes of their organizers and participants, represented and produced order. Victim and victors were transformed in the process. Concluding with the human flesh banquet, the divisive black elements were destroyed to the point of molecular absorption, restoring the community to monochromatic red wholeness and reestablishing its safe conformity to the ideology and instructions of the heirarchy of superior authorities.

Besides being less formalized than we expect of the *li*, the struggle rituals depended heavily on the dangerous part of transition that Arnold van Gennep (1960) called marginal or liminal, which the *li* tended to avoid (see Hardy 1993). Since this difference may explain their appeal to the usually passive majority, it is worth examining closely.

Van Gennep wrote of a three-part rite of passage: separation, margin or liminality, and aggregation, a structure found in rituals world-wide (see Figure 3). The phase of separation detaches individuals from social position or cultural state and puts them in a liminal condition unlike any other, and the final phase aggregates or incorporates them into a new social status with definite day-to-day obligations. When they are tied up, dragged to the stage, or marched through the streets, the victims are separated from society. They then undergo an ordeal like that undergone by initiates in many rites of adulthood, and the labels of Maoist ideology, modified by the current campaign, are formally attached and related to past deeds or personal associations. When the victim confesses and leaves the stage, he is either reaggregated into society (Version 1) or assigned or reassigned to a category of local outcasts (Version 2). The Four or Five Bad Types still function in local society, but on the margin, working at menial jobs. They also wear placards around their necks, crosses are shaved on their scalps, or little statues are placed at their doors to denote their outcast status.

The correspondence with Victor Turner's understanding of the liminal state as illustrated in his study of the Ndembu is extraordinarily close.³⁶ He notes that the neophytes, in their state as "transitional beings," have nothing (in the Chinese case the victims' property is often confiscated). They lose their personal identity (they are labeled as the Four Categories, and a red cross is drawn through their names). No distinction is drawn among them (landlord

³⁶ Yet not so extraordinary if we suppose that the rites of passage are no more than the social appropriation of the natural process of birth.

COMMON FORMS USED BY CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY
(1926-1976)

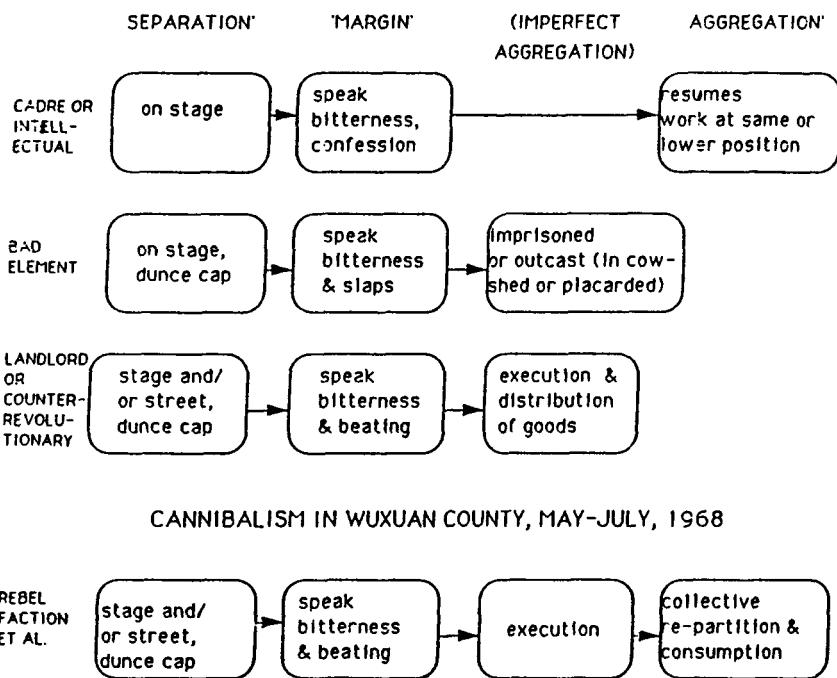


FIGURE 3. Struggle Meetings (Pidou) As Rites of Passage.

sons and errant party cadres are lumped together). Their instructors, who represent the axiomatic values of society, exercise complete authority (the victim is often tied up and usually denied the chance of self-defense). Torture or self-torture may be used to indicate that there is "no room for secular compromise . . . and maneuver in the field of custom" (victims bow at the waist or adopt the excruciating "airplane" position or are repeatedly slapped and struck). They may be allowed to go filthy, and symbolic use is made of "huts and tunnels that are at once tombs and wombs" (the victim languishes in what is called the oxshed), of snakes because they appear to die but are reborn with a new skin (a standard term for those under attack is snake spirits). The costumes used are monstrous and exaggerated to abstract them into an object of reflection about the values of society (the dunce caps may be as high as five or six feet and bear legends referring to the crimes of the victim). They are "forced and encouraged to think about their own society, the cosmos and the powers that generate and sustain them," yet there are "certain axiomatic principles that they are unable to question" (this fits well the standard confession required in milder forms of struggle). The entire process is supposed to "transform them from one kind of human being into another," certainly the

goal of the non-fatal struggle leading to confession (Turner 1967:93–111). Implicit too in Turner's analysis is the ritual's effect on the group, reintegrating it after a crisis and reinforcing its values.

One could plausibly argue that conformity to this humanly satisfying pattern largely accounted for the prevalence of the Chinese Communist practice of struggle in its various forms. All forms were not equally satisfying, however. A struggle ending in death, which I shall call Version 3, had often occurred as an unauthorized excess in the Communist-organized peasant struggles against landlords. It abandoned the healing confession and focused instead on the reintegration of society, absent the scapegoat; but it might simply perpetuate the cycle of revenge or might lead to ghostly persecution at the victim's hands.³⁷ On the other hand, banishment to the oxshed, while useful to the authorities in keeping handy a ready target of hostility—and warning others to toe the line—was not ritually more satisfactory to participants than the victim's murder, for it kept the scapegoat in virtually permanent liminality. Either way, true aggregation was elusive.

From this perspective, the local innovation of the human flesh banquet may be considered a logical extension of the struggle, for it brought to a satisfactory conclusion what exclusion or simple execution left unresolved. Note the successive actions of cooking, serving, and digesting. Cooking was a civilizing act that softened the previous acts of violence, echoing the term cooked (*shu*) applied to the docile and relatively sinicized minorities in the southwest frontier regions. Serving was at round tables where the work group or unit ate together, a form of commensality that terminates and completes most ritual events in Chinese society, and could restate community more satisfactorily than the mere disposal of a scapegoat. Digesting (*xiaohua*), like cooking, suggested the softening and civilizing of the previous acts of wildness and disorder. As noted, there is no sense that the evil intent of the enemy is retained in the flesh. In this light, there is a strong case for the ritual appropriateness of eating the scapegoat. It avoided casting out or destroying the victim (Versions 1 and 2) and restored the Version 1 pattern of integration. Those labeled class enemies, symbols of local disorder, were reincorporated in a community ceremony of reaggregation by physical consumption.

CONCLUSION

Why Wuxuan?

Mao Zedong insisted that the masses themselves discover the meaning of proletarian values through their own practice. Since only the most general policies were enunciated for campaigns from the center, local cultural differences or interpretations led to divergence in the form and degree of campaign

³⁷ Such fears are betrayed in one confessed cannibal's defiant cry, "Am I supposed to be afraid his ghost will get me? Ha, ha! I'm a revolutionary, my heart is red! Didn't Chairman Mao teach us, 'If we don't kill them, they will kill us'?" (Liu 1993).

violence.³⁸ Slogans like capitalist roader needed to have tangible local definition, and action had to assume a formal, ritualized character to have persuasive authority. Lacking the right language or ritual, rebel students trying to exhort Guangxi peasants to support the Cultural Revolution met a wall of incomprehension (Hua 1987:ch. 7). What the violent struggle meeting and street struggle parades did in many Guangxi counties was to give physical form to the humiliation of an enemy, expulsion of harm, reintegration of community, and obedience to the center.

Why did Wuxuan in particular develop the peculiar violence of ritual cannibalism? If Chinese culture had so many resonating elements, one should expect other occurrences elsewhere. Indeed, unknown to Zheng Yi, a senior official in a speech at a conference of writers in 1981 reportedly mentioned, along with Guangxi, two other places where cannibalism occurred in the Cultural Revolution but should not be written about. The other sites were southern Henan and western Hunan province (Daoxian) (Personal Communication). Information is lacking as to what form the cannibalism took, but all three locations are poor and remote. Poverty meant earlier folk memory of cannibalism of need. Isolation meant the absence of outside help or retribution, and may have pushed conflict beyond its normal bounds. Daoxian, like Wuxuan, was on the old ethnic frontier where Han and non-Han had lived in proximity, a point to which I return below.

Zheng notes an arresting scene hinting at specialist local knowledge of cannibalism. In one of the first Wuxuan murders in June 1968, when a man with a knife hesitates before the corpse wondering where to cut, an old man comes forward and explains, "Cut in the form of the *ren* (man) character" (Zheng 1993:68, note). Was this local wisdom acquired at the execution ground? Perhaps. There is at present no evidence that it had been put to local use in such times of famine as 1903, when people were obliged to "drown girls and sell boys" (Chu and Pang 1934:15, 2:30) or in the Great Leap Forward, when Wei Guoqing commandeered the entire harvest of 1959 on orders from Beijing (Zheng 1993:ch. 4).

There are stronger resonances with the endemic feuding in Wuxuan and with the local youths' reputation for violence, at least since the Taiping movement (1850–64), which had drawn many adherents from the county (Tian 1935:248). Arguably, too, the bloody Zhuang practice of ox sacrifice might be echoed in the bloody street struggles prevalent in 1968 throughout Guangxi.³⁹

³⁸ For a summary of peasant responses to the Cultural Revolution, see Liu (1976:151–6). For examples of countryside struggles that were mild or perfunctory, see Siu (1989) and Chen (1973), though their informants (as Siu at least makes clear) probably minimized the violence.

³⁹ I have noted that the Chinese generally lack the European aversion to eating household pets (see above). Wuxuan peasants actually loved to eat what was near and dear to them: The same traveller reported that the women's "affection (*aihu*) for their pigs was sometimes greater than for their own lives" (Tian 1935:248). If we add the symbolic interchangeability of human and pig flesh in South China, bringing oneself to eat people may have been a smaller step than elsewhere in the Guangxi turmoil of 1968.

As for the place of cannibalism in Zhuang culture, that is very uncertain.⁴⁰ In spite of many references in Chinese histories, one can doubt whether cannibalism was ever practiced by the Zhuang. In the absence of detailed accounts of cannibal practices, there is a strong case for the application of Arens' argument that people suspect rival neighboring groups of cannibalism without any foundation. Nor in 1968 were eaters of human flesh in Wuxuan identified specifically as Zhuang.

We have seen so much consistency with elements of the Chinese (in particular, South Chinese) cultural mainstream that it may be superfluous to look at the Zhuang. More plausible may be the theory that ideas of violence and cannibalism are somehow a by-product of interaction on the frontier. Frontier Han not only applied to other ethnic groups all the stereotypes of barbarians as cannibals and witches, but some also treated them not quite as human beings. The exemplary and unprovoked massacre of minority non-combatants by Han armies was a feature of the 1911 Revolution both in west Hunan and Guizhou (Shen 1981:19–25; Sutton 1980:130–1). The flesh of the aborigines of Taiwan was openly sold in pork baskets in one town during the nineteenth century (Sangren 1987:223), and an American Chinese working in Guangxi in the 1940s told me that it was common knowledge that human brains could be purchased there. A racist strain in Han frontier culture, then, may be at least as much at fault.

It is important here to know that people referred to as Zhuang were actually migrants from Fujian, Guandong, and elsewhere, who had been acculturated to Zhuang ways after settling in this remote country (Chu and Pang 1934:10, 25). What may have played a role was the local belief that the Zhuang had once eaten people. Knowing themselves to have Zhuang blood, could not locals have turned to the human flesh banquets, as these caught on in village after village, in a sort of self-conscious atavism, turning Han myth into reality?

If the available information on local Wuxuan culture seems not quite sufficient to account for the wave of cannibalism, it may be because of the way cultural change is normally viewed. I have assumed that in some ways culture governs us and in others we consciously manipulate it (Ortner 1990). What I would also underline is that a culture, Chinese culture for instance, is not to be taken as a universally recognized, mutually consistent set of traits, but of polarities or implied polarities, associations or sets of associations, which at their simplest are embedded in the language itself, like raw and cooked, and at their most developed become Turner's "root metaphors" or Ortner's "cultural schemata." (An example of an enduring Chinese schemata might be the "rejected loyal minister" replayed by so many idealistic Red Guards who fought on in 1968, refusing to believe that Mao Zedong had withdrawn his support.)

⁴⁰ Zheng Yi (1993:ch. 5) sees a cannibalism of need as a universal early stage of human development, suggests that the Zhuang ritual ox sacrifice replaces human sacrifice, and stresses evidence of revenge cannibalism in Chinese culture which may have influenced the Zhuang.

People choose or are brought unconsciously to choose within a repertoire of such cultural elements.⁴¹ In times of political tension, mass participation, and a degree of local isolation, new forms of political behavior may appear, drawing from less familiar elements in the cultural repertoire, augmenting and reassembling them. The trend to innovate is widely evident in Guangxi, where the pressures I have described made killing alone seem insufficient. Focused on a central town with special local conditions, each county reached a crescendo of violence in its own time and found its own method of mass killing—a method ritualized and institutionalized to varying degrees, from spontaneous to controlled by county or military authorities. In Mengshan, some of those called “enemies of the people” were buried alive. In Zhongshan and Binyang, they were slowly beaten to death in mass meetings, and in street struggles elsewhere. In Lingshan, over 520 entire families were wiped out, while in parts of Rongan and Mengshan, fathers and sons were murdered but not wives. In Shanglin, only the victims’ livers were eaten (Zheng 1993:13–14, 20, 23, 35, 43, 48). The street struggle terminated by the human flesh banquet was the distinctive solution of Wuxuan.

Discussions of causation in social and political change often seem to depend on implicit chemical reaction or machine models. A more suitable analogy here might be drawn from genetics, in which what is passed down is not seen as a bundle (like “tradition”) but, rather, as mutations (or “sports,” to use a botanical metaphor) that appear but are not fully explicable in terms of the political machinery or cultural ingredients at hand. I would suggest an explanation distinguishing a mutation from what follows. The very first human flesh banquet actually occurred on May 4, ten days before the climax of the factional warfare in the county seat, in Tongwan commune in the heavily Zhuang southwest, when two people surnamed Tan, one evidently a woman, were struggled, killed with a shotgun, and their flesh cut up, shared, and eaten (*gerou fenshi*). On May 14, in another village in the commune, a man from a neighboring county was waylaid as he passed through the region, in an unexplained event, and was similarly eaten (Zheng 1993:65–66). Here Zhuang-speaking people may have been conscious of recreating in this time of disorder what they believed to be a Zhuang tradition of eating enemies. Word of these remarkable events spread to the rest of the county, and in the second stage the practice was grafted onto the standard street struggles. Other counties found different solutions because things started differently. This particular cultural mutation was cut short in July, and perhaps self-disgust was already causing it to fade. But it was no less cultural, no less Chinese, than other contemporary experiments.

Cannibalism, ritualized or not, is as rare in China as elsewhere, yet even

⁴¹ There is a problem of recognizing culture in crisis situations where there may be inversions of usual behavior and resorting to unusual parts of the cultural repertoire. Few would deny the Americanness of American radicals of 1968, even though they contravened mainstream American values.

fringe behavior in an aberrant event like Wuxuan's human flesh banquets can be fruitfully placed in cultural contexts (*cf.* Simpson 1984). Event and culture, in fact, can illuminate each other. Just as a historian of France (Darnton 1984) has explained a massacre of cats in a Parisian quarter in terms of local culture and society and thereby shed light on eighteenth-century France, so in explaining the bout of cannibalism in Wuxuan I have tried to shed light on cultural traditions as well as local circumstances in 1968. Explanation invariably widens into the most diverse factors, pan-Chinese and local, Communist and popular, political and cultural. Among cultural factors I have enumerated predisposing medicinal and food habits that Wuxuan people shared with other Chinese, the customary sacrifice and banquet that drew communities together in the face of enemies, the folk belief in hell's just punishments, the historical-mythical tales of justified cannibalism. I have noted persistent metaphors and symbols in south Chinese death practices. I have pointed to a Han belief throughout the Southwest that Zhuang had been eaters of human flesh, a tradition that could be self-consciously rehearsed in the events of 1968, and within the county, to the pugnacious reputation of local male youths. Mine should not be mistaken for the kind of cultural or "culturalogical" (Fox, in Ortner 1990) interpretation criticized by White and other political scientists (1989:315–7). I have acknowledged that politics was the cause of violence: Virtual civil war in Guangxi and constant encouragement from Beijing to root out unflinchingly those regarded as enemies of the people combined to make the most extreme acts seem appropriate. Killing and eating scapegoats fulfilled the interests of a variety of participants from local bullies and good-for-nothings to those harboring grudges or ambitions for personal advancement. But the form that political violence took was decisively influenced by culture.

If Wuxuan cannibalism had been "cultureless" as a political act or ritual, it could not have caught up so many participants from all levels of society; nor would the survivors continue to feel shame, and the former cannibals continue to feel self-righteous. Writers on the Cultural Revolution usually juxtapose Maoist ideology with traditional culture in the sense of values articulated by elites or expressed in religion. Only in this sense can the Cultural Revolution be taken at face value and assumed to be somehow beyond culture. But if Chinese culture is seen, rather, as a repertoire of ingrained but not unchanging habits and preferences, linguistic and symbolic associations, folk and elite images—if culture is seen not as an organic or even holistic entity transcending time and place but as subject to contingent elaboration, reinterpretation, and even inversion, then the Maoist Cultural Revolution and its local adaptations were also cultural, with resonances beyond ideology that need to be explored. Struggle meetings, street struggles, and even cannibalizations were grounded in familiar cultural symbols and associations. Taking the reassuring form of the rite of passage, they were felt by many as expressions, however alienated from Chinese humanist values, of a kind of order, not as mere chaos. That is how more than seventy people, mostly unconnected with the

recently ended factional conflict, were eaten by thousands of fellow villagers and townspeople at the close of Wuxuan's Cultural Revolution.

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