

*Food, Power, and Immigrants in Timothy Mo's Sour Sweet*

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**Abstract**

This paper attempts to explore food and foodways in Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet* in order to comprehend how the power of food can shape immigrant experiences. With rich allusion to food and foodways, *Sour Sweet* depicts the Chinese diaspora in London in the 1960s. When illustrating ambivalent emotions, the Chinese use words that describe the tastes of food: *sour*, *sweet*, *bitter*, and *spicy*. On the other hand, "sour" and "sweet" refer to the taste of a typical ethnic dish in Chinatown: *sour and sweet pork*. The Chinese restaurant and takeaway counter in Mo's *Sour Sweet* provide good settings for eating, cooking, and a lot of activities associated with food. Critics have noticed the connection between Chinese culture and food. What will this preoccupation bring about in foreign soil, where the "foreign devils" consume quite diverse food cooked in various ways? From a diaspora perspective, the culinary language in *Sour Sweet* carries both the metaphorical and the metonymical significance. Food and eating, as the fundamental level in culture, are a sign and a battlefield for competing ideologies. Cooking and eating constitute power relations between the feeder and the fed. Moreover, the distinction between the eatable and the uneatable constructs the border between self and other, the tension between belonging and exclusion. Food and foodways are representations of power relations in terms of gender, class, and race. As *Sour Sweet* shows, power permeates in a social system where there is no permanent division between self and other, where the economic level always matters.

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## Introduction

This paper attempts to explore food and foodways in Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet* in order to comprehend how the power of food can shape immigrant experiences. With rich allusion to food and foodways, *Sour Sweet* depicts the Chinese diaspora in London in the 1960s. When illustrating ambivalent emotions, the Chinese use words that describe the tastes of food: *sour*, *sweet*, *bitter*, and *spicy*. "Sour" and "sweet" on the other hand refer to the taste of a typical ethnic dish in Chinatown: *sour and sweet pork*. The Ho Ho restaurant on Chinese Street where Chen works as a waiter and the takeaway counter he later runs with his wife Lily and sister-in-law Mui provide a good setting for eating, cooking, and a lot of activities associated with food. Critics have noticed the connection between Chinese culture and food. Chang (1977), for instance, remarks that "the Chinese people are especially preoccupied with food" (p. 15). What will this preoccupation bring about in foreign soil, where the "foreign devils" consume quite different food cooked in different ways? From a diaspora perspective, the culinary language in *Sour Sweet* carries both metaphorical and metonymical significance. Drawing on Foucauldian and Althusserian theories, this paper argues that food and foodways in *Sour Sweet* are representations of power relations in gender, class, and race.

Although food is commonly seen in literature, critics point out its importance in cultural imagination. Léve-Strauss (1978) emphasizes the cultural significance in cooking when he asserts that "the cooked being a cultural transformation of the raw" (p. 478). Keeling and Pollard (2009) further observe, "If food is fundamental to life and a substance upon which civilizations and cultures have built themselves, then food is also fundamental to the imagination and the imaginary arts" (pp. 5-6). Food and eating are not neutral; they function as a sign deserving semiotic analysis (Keeling and Pollard, 1999, p. 132; 2009, p. 8). Sceats (1996) indicates that "feeding, feasting, cooking and starving [are used by writers] for more than simple mimetic effect" (p. 118). In a foreign country, the immigrants' food carries much more hidden meaning because it is also an "ethnic sign" (Wong, 1993, p. 65), signifying the confrontation and negotiation between cultures.

Louis Althusser asserts that the social structure consists of levels which are relatively autonomic but contradictory to one another. What ultimately determines and dominates the structure is the economical level (Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, 2005, p. 97). In *Reading Asian American Literature*, Wong (1993) highlights the theme of necessity, an important theme she reads in the story of Maxine Hong Kingston's mother "who burns the most unlikely creatures into food and allows absolutely no waste in her household" (p. 24). Accordingly, the immigrants' treatment of food parallels their struggle for survival in their host country, the economical level being a dominant factor.

Cooking and eating constitute a "materialist economy" which entails power relations between "who is the feeder and what—or who—is the food" (Fung, 1999, p. 259). Sceats (1996) points out "the relations between food and power" and explores "a whole gamut of hierarchical relations" (p. 117). Keeling and Pollard (1999) consider food and eating "compact metaphors for the power struggle inherent to family dynamics" (p. 132). Roth (2005) calls attention to the use of food to "punish, cajole, or otherwise negotiate power relations" (p. 163). Judging from Foucauldian theory,

feeding and cooking demonstrate the exercise of power in the family. As Foucault (1984) explains, “power is exercised rather than possessed” (p. 174). The combination of “the everyday” with “the discipline of the minute” (p. 184) creates a “useful body,” or a “manipulable body” (p. 180). Such a body is economically beneficial to the family structure.

## **Food and Power**

Culinary activities distinguish self from other. Foucault indicates “normalizing judgment” as one simple instrument for the success of disciplinary power. Normalization entails exclusion because “within a homogeneity that is the rule, the norm introduces, as a useful imperative and as a result of measurement, all the shading of individual differences” (Foucault, 1984, p. 197). Lucy Long (2004) gives an enlightening remark about self and other in terms of food and eating: “The eater of the ‘not eatable’ is perceived as strange, perhaps dangerous, definitely not one of us, whereas the eater of the unpalatable is seen as having different tastes” (as cited in Roth, 2005, p. 175). Considered by the dominant culture as the other, ethnic food struggles between belonging and exclusion.

Adolph (2009) notices in literature “the connections between food and women . . . through representations of serving and providing” (p. 10). In *Sour Sweet*, it is supposedly feminine of Lily and Mui to take up preparing food and feeding. Visiting Chen’s ill colleague Lo with sponge cakes and herbal drought, for instance, highlights the role of Lily and Mui as a comfort provider. Roth (2005), however, reasons that there are more food functions beyond the function “to foster a heightened sense of group cohesion” (p. 163). Food and eating show Lily’s relationship with her family: Chen, Man Kee, and Mui. One scene in the kitchen alerts Lily to the influence Mui is likely to have on her son. Lily admits “trying to curry favour with Son” and decides to “avoid Mui influencing him with some of the increasingly peculiar ideas she had” (Mo, 1999, p. 180). When Man Kee refuses to eat a special dish Lily prepares for him, Mui speaks to him “in a tone . . . amazingly obsequious from a grown woman” (p. 181). Lily believes that it is Mui who triggers off Man Kee’s “unfilial behaviour” (p. 181). Culinary activities consequently involve what Sceats (1996) calls “the built-in power hierarchy of parent and child” (p. 119). Lily demands control over Man Kee through her special dish, whereas Man Kee refuses the food as an act of resistance. Keeling and Pollard (1999) observe in children’s literature a prevailing fantasy to “reject parental food” (p. 131), which actually denotes the rejection of social code imposed on kids. When Man Kee declines the biscuit Lily offers because he has eaten some English food in school, Lily feels excluded from “something she [can] give no name to; something which separate[s] her from Son” (Mo, 1999, p. 178).

According to Julia Kristeva (1982), “food loathing” is “a means of deconstructing cultural signifying regime” (as cited in Keeling and Pollard, 2009, p. 8). Man Kee’s refusal to eat indicates not only his rebellion against parental law, but also his perplexity in face of a culture foreign to him. The impact of food on Man Kee is conspicuous in the hilarious turkey-killing scene which lays bare the Chens’ ambivalent attitude toward what Lily terms as “alien cooking” (Mo, 1999, p. 184). Judging from the economical principle, Lily decides the best way to deal with a huge, living turkey is to eat it, instead of keeping it alive as Man Kee’s (or even Mui’s) pet. Confronting the huge turkey with elaborately portrayed *siu lum* kung fu, Lily chops

off the bird's head. The running decapitated turkey, however, frightens Man Kee. Even though Lily cooks the turkey in the same way the Chinese cook Beggar's Chicken, Man Kee rejects his portion and consumes only winter greens, which he used to spit out "as a colourless little ball of fibrous matter" (Mo, 1999, p. 181). Man Kee stays hungry until Lily gives him a "Buddhist dish" (p. 186), or a vegetarian dish. Man Kee's oscillation between love and hatred for "Mar-mar's cooking" (p. 186) implies his growing independence from Lily's control and from Chinese culture. Although Lily attributes the mystery of the Buddhist dish to MSG, which is ironically associated with Chinese Restaurant Syndromes, she takes pride in her triumph over Mui when Man Kee spurs the beef mince Mui makes.

### **Food and Gender**

In *Sour Sweet*, Chen, Lily, and Mui display a noticeable reversal of gender roles, a reversal contradictory to traditional Chinese values but constructive to their family and business. Because her husband is only a quarter of an inch taller than she, Lily wears flat slippers at home to practice "domestic inferiority" (Mo, 1999, p.20). But this physical submission does not prevent her from exercising her feminine power in the household. In order to fulfill her "wifely duties" (p. 6), Lily prepares broth for Chen every night in spite of the employee's dinner Chen has had in the restaurant he works. Under the surveillance of Lily's gaze, the "reproachful eyes [that are] intolerable" (p. 6), Chen does nothing but swallow the "unwanted soup" (p. 23). After Mui becomes adapted to life in London, she also helps in preparing the soup. Lily and Mui's frugal lunch and Chen's enforced soup consumption come from the two women's desire to invest in Chen's body, for the sake of the family's sustainability. As Foucault insists, power has positive effects. It seems Chen is not reluctant to be the victim of Lily's power when he determines to "give Lily enough room to manoeuvre in the future—for both their sakes" (p. 90). Even though "irritated by [Lily's] casual assumption of superiority" (p. 128), Chen actually sees and consequently takes good advantage of the usefulness of Lily's power.

The division of labor in Chen's take away also shows the reversal of gender roles. In spite of his experience as a waiter and his lack of experience in cooking, Chen insists on doing kitchen-work and delegates Lily and Mui to the face-to-face work at the counter. In her criticism of Frank Chin's *Donald Duk*, Fung (1999) deems the unequal labor division between Donald's parents in the kitchen to be the father's attempt to "[valorize] his Master position in the hierarchical economy" (p. 261). Donald's father, a Chinese cook, is portrayed as a prototype of Chinese American men, who elaborate in the kitchen nationalism and masculinity, while Donald's mother, absent from the kitchen, or from "the social networks of economic systems," is a prototype of Chinese American women, who "become commodities that can be desired and consumed" (Fung, 1999, p. 257). The division of labor in *Sour Sweet*, however, brings about a different landscape. In the first place, Chen is perfectly aware that Lily is attractive to Westerners, so it is economically advisable to have Lily work on the counter. Lily and Mui, unlike Donald's mother, are not absent from the economic system. On the contrary, Lily's flexibility in management and Mui's proficiency in language expand the take away business in ways beyond Chen's imagination. Like Donald's father, Chen cares about his son's masculine development; he keeps Man Kee from being "subjected to all this female influence" (Mo, 1999, p. 115). Different from Donald's

father, Chen teaches Man Kee to explore in their back garden instead of in their kitchen.

### **Food and Class**

According to Shang (1984), although members of the Chinese community are actually diverse “in the occupational sense,” Chinese immigrants in the UK are generally stereotyped as people in the “catering business” (p. 3). Mrs. Law in *Sour Sweet* does not fit into that stereotype, but her financial status as a rich widow makes her a provider of food in a much wider scale. The first present she gives Man Kee is a chocolate mouse, which carries rich culinary connotations. Lily and Mui are invited to her big flat for “tea drinking,” which is actually a display of “a sumptuous affair of delicacies” (Mo, 1999, p. 48). Mrs. Law and Lily are playing the role of the Sultan and Scheherazade in *Arabian Nights* when the former, “with a variety of emotions that would have enhanced the repertoire of an actor” (p. 52), inquires into the latter’s visit to Lo, the ill barbecue chef, and the latter makes herself a theatrical narrator. Mo provides a very interesting description: “Lily didn’t invent anything nor did she embroider her story but her tone changed as she began to enjoy talking about it, and this was the greater falsification” (p. 52). On the other hand, Lo’s plight is amusing: “The fact that he [Lo] was the central protagonist in a drama of absorbing human interest to others unknown to him did not by itself help him” (pp. 52-53). Mrs. Law and Lily thus verbally consume Lo in his plight. Gender and class are closely interwoven with the question of Mrs. Law meeting Lo. Despite her curiosity and sympathy, it is by no means advisable for Mrs. Law to visit Lo’s room as Lily and Mui do. A lady like her is not likely to stoop so low. It is equally impractical to meet in Ho Ho because Chen might have to wait on them. Though it is his job, Chen would lose face waiting on his wife and her friend. It is not until Lo gets a new job in a larger restaurant, where such embarrassment is nonexistent, does Mrs. Law take up her role as Lo’s patron.

Food connects Mrs. Law and Lo, but only to enhance the class division, or “artificial social obstacles” (Mo, 1999, p. 55), so much so that their relationship remains a “warm and almost entirely sexless attachment” (p. 57). Claiming Lo as a friend, Mrs. Law exercises power in Lo’s workplace by talking money and ordering more than enough food. The outcome is “a culinary as well as social success” (p. 56). The power relation intensifies in every detail after Mrs. Law becomes a regular customer. She always takes with Ah Jik the servant since a lady is not supposed to eat alone. Lo also exerts power by impressing Mrs. Law with his “culinary masterpieces” (p. 130), which also pleases his boss and ensures his job security. However, Lo shows Mrs. Law only a combination of “loyalty” and “gallantry” (p. 57). Lo neither sits when invited, nor drinks the cup of tea poured for him. As a chef, Lo does not consume the food he prepares as he is low in the hierarchical relationship. Although Mrs. Law and Lo practice “a marriage of convenience” in Chinese New Year’s celebration, the class barrier still remains. “Social considerations,” Mo (1999) reminds the reader, “made romance unthinkable” (p. 57). Judging from this perspective, Mui’s marriage with Lo, though unexpected to Lily, turns out more utilitarian. The two parties involved are equal in the sense of class. Lo and Mui can start up their own restaurant business. Mui’s illegitimate daughter Jik Mui and Man Kee, after Chen’s death, can possess fatherly love because Lo can give them “the man’s example” (p. 285).

## Food and Race

Fung (1999) sees the tension between ethnic food and colonization when she comments that “the eroticization and mythification of ethnic food and the cultural enclave (i.e. Chinatown) where the food is produced all appear exotic to the white gaze” (p. 256). Roth (2005) terms the experience of going ethnic as “culinary tourism” and “adventure eating” (p. 180). There appears in *Sour Sweet* very scant white gaze as Mo refrains from depicting in the English perspective. One scene in *Ho Ho*, however, demonstrates this state of mind. When Fatty Koo is unable to deal with the English customers in English, he “look[s] blank, inspect[s] the ceiling, rolling his eyes”, but the customers “thrive on this abrupt treatment” (Mo, 1999, p. 33). Thus, Koo’s lack of power ironically has a very powerful effect on foreign customers.

Chinese restaurant owners internalize the white gaze and show the state of colonization in their treatment of food. They call the food sold to the Westerners garbage: “the food [Chen serves] from the ‘tourist’ menu [is] rubbish, total *lupsup*, fit only for foreign devils” (Mo, 1999, p. 21). Chen draws a fine line between the food for his family and that for their customers. The fried rice they sell is not the same as the *chowfaan* they fry for themselves. Chen also discourages Lily from cooking their home-grown produce to the customers because they are grown “for their own nourishment” (p. 175). The “unforgiving” recipes for the customers, on the other hand, are “constructed along cynical economic lines,” with only “the last elements of authenticity” (p. 144). Roth reasons that the goal of the ethnic restaurant is “to combine exotic details of the foreign culture with the dominant local culture, making the customer feel more secure” (p. 161). Wang explains Frank Chin’s term “food pornography” in cultural terms as “reifying perceived cultural differences and exaggerating one’s otherness in order to gain a food hold in a white-dominated social system” (p. 55). Wang deems this to be a strategy for the immigrants to survive in their host country. Drawing on their “stereotyped menu” (p. 111) with sweet and sour pork as the staple, Lily develops chips with sweet and sour source, the most profitable dish they cook.

Fung (1999) makes keen observations when she remarks, “Domesticating foreignness through the mouth is a way to fabricate multiculturalism; it is an act which emphasizes the polarity of otherness and sameness” (p. 266). Sweet and sour chips highlight the erotic features of Chinese food but at the same time intensify Lily’s stereotypical concept that “English tastebuds must be as degraded as their care of their parents” (Mo, 1999, p. 111). Grandpa’s feast to his new friends in England helps Lily move beyond the division between self and other. A food-oriented person, Grandpa wears two watches which tell him Hong Kong time and England time respectively. By looking at Hong Kong time Grandpa is able to imagine synchronically the foods his friends are having from morning till night. Grandpa makes his own coffin so that he can go back to his roots after he passed away. Different from him, Lily, Man Kee and Mui have to put down roots like the mango tree they plant in the garden. When Mui suggests mince, jam tart and custard as the suitable menu for the old people, Lily realizes it would be to their advantage to prepare and eat them. Mui and Lo’s decision to open a fish and chip restaurant signals their resolution to cross the line that characterizes them as the other. As Mui asserts to Lily, “I am taking out citizenship. Naturalisation. This is my home now” (Mo, 1999, p. 284).

## **Conclusion**

Food and eating, as the fundamental level in culture, are a sign and a battlefield for ideologies to compete. Cooking and eating constitute power relations between the feeder and the fed. The feeder can exert power over the fed, but the latter can reject the food to show his/her desire to break free. Food and foodways also illuminate class distinction between those who are served and those who serve. Moreover, the distinction between the eatable and the uneatable constructs the border between self and other, the tension between belonging and exclusion. As *Sour Sweet* shows, power permeates in the social system where there is no permanent division between self and other, where the economical level always matters.

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