

# Appetites: Food and Sex in Post-Socialist China

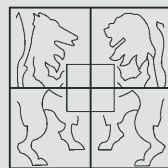
Review >  
China

Starting in the 1980s, socio-economic changes in China induced an ideological shift from Maoist Puritanism to market-oriented individualism. The originality of *Appetites* lies in Farquhar's theoretical and epistemological approach to her subject: the politics of food and sex, bodies and medicine, desire and pleasure in a modernizing and globalizing China. Accessible to non-specialists, the book offers a rich overview of post-Socialist Chinese popular culture as presented in various media.



Ji Wenyu, Learning Fashion, Making Beautiful, Oil on Canvas, 114x164 cm, 2003

[ advertisement ]



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By Evelyne Micollier

*Appetites: Food and Sex in Post-Socialist China* blurs the boundaries between many sources: popular fiction, television broadcasts, movies, popular health manuals, sex survey reports, classical erotic novels, advertisements, and observations of medical practices and daily life in urban China. All can be used, the author claims, as ethnographic text (p.5). For China specialists and medical anthropologists, Farquhar's cultural studies approach is theoretically and methodologically very interesting.

Farquhar's 'creative' methodology utilizes tools from various disciplines: postmodern rhetorical and narrative tools from literary criticism and critical anthropology, alongside more conventional fieldwork ethnography making use of Chinese textual materials. Her extensive field studies in China have already resulted in, among other works, a reference book on medical knowledge in the context of Chinese culture (1994); her ethnographic experience and anthropological knowledge of medicine now appear as 'red threads' informing her textual analysis.

*Appetites* is divided into two parts. Part one includes three chapters on food: 'Medicinal Meals', 'A Feast for the Mind', which is an analysis of Lu's novel *The Gourmet*, and 'Excess and Deficiency', Mo Yan's contribution on food and history. Part two is composed of three chapters discussing sex: 'Writing the Self: The Romance of the Personal', 'Sexual Science: The Representation of Behaviour', and 'Ars Erotica'. These chapters include discussions of Zhang's famous novel *Love Must Not Be Forgotten* and Zhou's film *Ermo*.<sup>1</sup>

According to Farquhar, the all-pervading nationalism of the reform period insured continuity from Maoist state-promoted culture to contemporary popular culture: 'One of the principal arguments of this book is that everyday life in reform China is still inhabited by the nation's Maoist past' (p.10). Economic reforms do not necessarily imply changes in the manner the state instrumentalizes science and the authority of experts. Farquhar uses the example of a research survey on sexual behaviour and sex education pedagogy (chapter 5) to highlight that, as in the past, and within the broader context a 'civilizing project of national modernization and bourgeois normalization' (p.219), the authority of science is used to legitimize a state project.

In a number of less convincing examples, Farquhar tends to overestimate the impact of the 'nationalistic trend' and 'national character' within narratives of Chinese modernity. What, for instance, do bedchamber arts texts such as *Rouputuan* (Qing period) or the classical meanings of *xing* (sex) found in the *Huainanzi* (second century BCE) tell us about sexuality in China today (chapter 6)? Arguing that research methods show strong biases, and that an ethnography of sexuality is almost impossible to conduct, Farquhar draws the attention of readers to the 'official' sex of the fore-mentioned state ordered sociological survey, and its so-called 'scientific' methods embedded in naturalized and normalized representations of sexuality.

Although the author sometimes focuses too much on the discontinuities of 'discourses and embodied practices', *Appetites*, with its innovative approach, addresses a large readership and stands as a valuable work for specialists and non-specialists alike. <

- Farquhar, Judith, *Appetites: Food and Sex in Post-Socialist China*, Durham and London: Duke University Press (2002), pp. 341, ISBN 0-8223-2921-2 (paperback)

### References

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### Notes >

- 1 Film director ZHOU Xiaowen, novelist MO Yan, writer ZHANG Jie, and novelist LU Wenfu are among Farquhar's best-known 'ethnographic partners' (p.18). Their works are available to Western readers in English translation.