

Food as Hidden Resistance: Traumatic Memory and Food Criticism from a Revolutionary's Prison Diary in Colonial Taiwan

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyze the critical writings and traumatic memories recorded in a diary kept by Jian Ji (1903-1951) while in prison. As a first-generation leader of the peasant movement in colonial Taiwan in the 1920s, Jian Ji knew more about the types of grain and the fundamental interaction between food and the human body. However, he was imprisoned for his social activism and continued to write a journal, expressing his feelings and grievances. He showed his concern about the agricultural policy in Taiwan. Most notably, he commented on eating in prison. Through these food criticisms, Jian Ji wrote his review or commentary on prison human rights, plus suggested cooking ways for a certain food or to reduce wastage. We can see the colonial administration of the prisons and how they fed the prisoners in 1930 of Taiwan.

Keywords

Prison food; food criticism; traumatic memory; peasant movement; physical ailments

This paper analyses traumatic memory and food criticism through the diary texts of Jianji 簡吉 (1903-1951), who had been imprisoned for social activism in Taiwan for one year since December 1929. As a prisoner, his daily meals became his most direct link to the authority of the Japanese colonial government. His mode of resistance was not a hunger strike but having food and writing about it. Although he was not physically free, he was allowed to comment on agricultural policy, healthy eating and cooking through his diary.

Born in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, Jianji graduated from Tainan Normal School in 1921 and taught in public schools. In 1925, he resigned from his post to campaign for land reform and founded the Fengshan Peasants' Organisation, which he led. In 1928, the Communist Party of Taiwan (CPC) was founded, and the Peasants' Organisation became an offshoot of the CPC. His active participation in social movements was the main reason for his arrest by the Japanese colonial government.

Dominick La Capra (2014, 18) mentioned that narrative is a way to alleviate and heal trauma. Dialogue with the subject/object that caused the trauma can be compared to what Freud thought of as the 'talking cure' and can be called the 'writing cure'. However, in La Capra's account of the history of trauma, the traumatic experience of food remains unexplored. The public or individual psychological trauma caused by food experiences has received increasing attention in the contemporary world since the twentieth century (Booth 2016). In line with this academic context, our focus will be on traumatic texts that are linked to everyday experiences of food in diary writings.

Jianji's diary covered nearly a year, was written in Japanese but not written daily. Interruptions may have been due to poor health or lack of paper and pencil. There remain 139 items in his diary, totalling 90,000 words. They generally concern his daily life, notes on his reading and letters to his family. This record not only complements the official prison archives, but also provides a deeper reflection on human rights during his incarceration. The ancient practice of punishing people by withholding food and serving disgusting or inedible food still exists in many prisons today. And while Jianji was in prison, the treatment of prisoners in Japan, including colonial Taiwan, was undergoing a period of transition. Through his discourse, we can see the internal differences and details of prison life. As a result of his dietary disorders, Jianji's body changed drastically within six months, not only losing weight but also suffering from a variety of ailments. These traumatic experiences, reflected in his writing, also reveal the colonized people's yearning for equal human rights in the 1930s.

This paper explores the material and symbolic significance of food through a holistic culinary approach, an analytical paradigm that emphasises that the integral connection between food and people is never static, but constantly changing (Abarca and Colby 2016, 2). There are clear links between food and authority / food and the human body / food and individual willpower and sense in Jianji's personal narratives.

Implicit memory, processes due to the aftereffects of experience as expressed in behaviour (Roediger 2002, 15), is not limited to the body. Somehow it extends to the spaces or situations in which we stay. In this case, food is an essential material and spiritual connection. This paper examines these connections from Jianji's incarcerated experience. Interestingly, his defiant nature has not changed prison seems to have become another field of experimentation for him, and considering food as a possible resistance, we explore theoretical evidence for the potential of food to shape the memory of the body and even the identity of the individual.

Food provision in the prisons of colonial Taiwan

Japan's prison system made significant progress during the Meiji period (1868-1912). It is certainly worth noting that 1895, the year in which the new Sugamo prison in Tokyo was completed, was also the year in which Japan defeated Qing China in its first modern war (Botsman 2004, 204). Thus, after the Japanese occupation began in 1895, a Western prison system was introduced to Taiwan, and the form of punishment was transformed from traditional to modern methods.

The provision of food carries an unspoken message. Especially in prisons, three meals became the most direct and continuous means of control in the authoritarian system, whether for economic or disciplinary reasons. The difference in food provision and treatment was evident in the two prisons in Taipei and Taichung where Jianji was held. There seemed to be a huge gap in the size and quality of the prisons between the capital and the countryside.

At first, his food experience was very pleasant. At the beginning of his official incarceration, he had enjoyed three delicious and healthy meals every day in Taipei prison. Prisoners were given their own tableware: beautiful small tables, plates, lacquered chopsticks, pots and bowls. The quality of the food was excellent, and the portions were quite sufficient. The overall feeling of Jianji's eating experience in Taipei prison was superior. He used the word "finest" not once to emphasize the quality of the food and the rice. Sometimes he would describe the items on the plate and the way they were prepared in detail. In his diary entry of January 25, 1930, he summarised an opinion of the food during his imprisonment in Taipei:

Spring onions are the best, green onions (with the white part in the middle), Chinese cabbage, Shandong cabbage, leafy greens, eggplant, pumpkin, cabbage, radish, carrots, burdock, taro, all a mixture of two or three kinds of vegetables. There was soup for breakfast and almost no soup for lunch and dinner, and the containers were full, and there were often side dishes for breakfast, lunch and dinner that were quite greasy. Especially on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays, the lunch and dinner offerings are delicious and tasty, with good ingredients and lots of oil, and occasionally taro, cabbage and pumpkin.

オカズ……蔥（上等な）、玉菜（真白い中の部分も入れる）、白菜、山東白菜、葉菜（加末菜）、茄子、南瓜、キャベツ、大根、人蔘、牛蒡、里芋等々を二色、或は三色の混合煮。朝は汁があるが晝、晩は殆ど汁がなく、容器に一杯下れる。朝、晝、晩共に二度配ることが屢々ある。油（脂肪）をよほど入れてゐる。殊に水、土、日の晝、晩は御馳走の出る時であり、材料も良く、油（脂肪）も多く入ってゐる。里芋、キャベツ、南瓜等の喰へるのがこんな時である。¹

¹ See Jian Ji, *Jian Ji's Prison Diary* 簡吉獄中日記 *Jian Ji yu zhong ri ji*. (Taipei: Institute of Taiwan History, Academia Sinica, 2005), 175.

In Jianji's records, we learn the general content and timing of meals in the prisons of colonial Taiwan. Regime practices have been shown to intensify food as a site of meaning for prisoners, for whom the institutional regime dictates most dietary matters: breakfast, lunch and dinner are served from 07.30 to 08.00, from 12.00 to 12.30 and from 16.30 to 17.00 respectively, thus implicating the strict management of time, in addition to food preparation and consumption practices, in the disciplinary and control processes that operate in carceral institutions (Graaf & Kilty, 2016, 29). By contrast, in Jianji's record, the mealtimes in Taipei prison - breakfast before 7am, lunch before 11.30am and dinner before 4pm - are well thought out, but there are still 15 hours between the end of dinner and breakfast the next day. Assuming adequate food supply, a long fast from dinner to the next morning's breakfast would not cause hunger pangs. However, the amount of food in Taichung was only half that of Taipei, and the interval was even longer. This was the most unbearable arrangement in prison for Jianji.

With a background in agriculture, Jianji was concerned with the quality of rice. Penglai rice, a variety unique to Taiwan, was particularly tasty. Taipei Prison offered small, medium, and large portion options, occasionally mixed with sweet potatoes. The rest of the menu was varied and tasty, with fish and pork occasionally available.

In Jianji's account, there seemed to be no communal meals in the prison and few other prisoners were seen. Most of time in prison, he had meals alone. According to Strand's study, from a fighter's perspective, the terrible hunger experienced during the war and the camaraderie associated with finally having the opportunity to eat with one's comrades may be intertwined in the memory (2023, 476). Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing the complexity of these emotions and other interpersonal interactions from his diary. What is noteworthy is his conversation with the prison governor. It's safe to assume that the contents of his diary would be seen by the prison governor. From time to time, the governor would also speak to him directly and ask about his needs. In contrast to the inhumanity of the criminal justice system, Jianji's experience of imprisonment had not been one of brutality. He suffered no direct physical injury, but the lack of food was painful for him. We propose that Jianji's experience is much more than a "punishment" as food in prison symbolized (Maes et al 2017).

The relationship between practices of power and resistance is fluid and shifting, even in an environment such as a prison, which may appear monolithic. Refusal, exposure, mastery: this triangle of practices of everyday resistance is key to alleviating and counteracting the pain of imprisonment; it contributes to the production of a sense of agency by prisoners (Ugelvik 2011, 54). Food is also a meaningful expression for prisoners who wish to exercise agency, express identity and resist systems of power. Nevertheless, Jianji did not choose to fight in a way that would attract attention. Writing the diary was a civilised channel of communication, effective or not, between him and the prison administration.

Trauma and bodily experience from dietary disorders

The good times changed dramatically when Jianji was transferred to Taichung. On January 26, 1930, he was officially transferred to a cell in Taichung. From then on, food became an integral part of his experience of physical pain. He experienced profound inequalities in the unacceptable and deteriorating quality of his food, and this was reflected in his deteriorating health.

For some unknown reason, Taichung prison mostly served food that did not taste good and did not nourish the body. The worst part was the rice, always mixed some impurities, sands, and bad rice. According to Jianji's complaints on February 27, 1930, we see that staple foods were low in ingredients and of poor quality and an almost meatless diet:

Recently the rice has been very bad. Since four or five days ago, there has been an increase in water, a lot of black rotten rice, rice husk, immature and bad husk of the black grain skin, a bowl of rice there are one hundred and twenty to thirty, such light food, with a fan car can be blown away, and when you wash the rice can be floated and run out, so why is it mixed with so much, it's inexplicable! Sweet potatoes are also rotting more and more, and the amount of food is sometimes more.

近日の飯はひどく悪い。(四五日前から)水気が多く、まっくろな腐った米が多く、モミガラ、ミノラナイ悪いモミガラの黒い空っ粃が一つの飯に百二三十粒も入ってゐる。斯様な軽いものは唐箕にかけた時飛ばされるか、洗ふ時水に浮いて流されるかしてしまふ筈だが、そんなに多く混ってゐるのは不思議だ！蕃薯も腐ったのが多く入って来るやうになった。オカズは時々量が多くなってゐる。²

During the very cold winter in February 1930, Jianji had been suffering from a combination of food deprivation and illness in prison. Even after repeated medical treatment and medication, his physical ailments could not be relieved. With insufficient exercise and diet, Jianji had no choice but to write diary and read books. However, his illness also prevented him from writing and reading regularly.

As a result of his dietary disorders, his body underwent dramatic changes in three months, with weight loss and a variety of ailments including diarrhea, vomiting, fever, and weakness in arms and legs. He had several medical check-ups and was diagnosed with nutritional deficiencies. Apart from taking cod liver oil, he tried to supplement his diet with milk and eggs at his own expense but was also refused. He paraphrased the doctor's orders in his diary of 28 March 1930:

² Jian Ji, *Jian Ji's Prison Diary*, 190.

The cause is weakness due to malnutrition, and there is no alternative to increasing the quantity of food and eating nutritious food. But prison rules do not allow good food to be given freely, so liver oil was given first. The medication is useless.

營養不足のための衰弱だから、食物の量を増やし、そして營養あるものを食べるより以外になほす方法がない。だが刑務所の規則を勝手にして良い食物を與へるわけに行かないから先づ肝油を與へる。藥を飲んでも役に立たない。³

The sensuousness of food is central to understanding the power of food as a vehicle for memory (Holtzman 2006, 365). In discussions of trauma memory, food is certainly seen in a positive way as a healing method. However, food can also trigger traumatic memories related to experiences of abuse, inequality, or terror. Physical experience is particularly linked to both body and inner memory, which over time become imbued with latent references to the past and an atmosphere of familiarity (Fuchs 2012, 13). In special circumstances, such as war, famine, shipwrecks, food becomes a scarce resource. One may also be forced to eat a poor-quality diet in prison, as the diarist did. In other words, the inedible food itself and the conditions in which it is served are harmful to physical and mental health and can undermine self-esteem, with immediate and long-term consequences. Therefore, the effects of rotten foods do not only cause significant physical changes, but also have an immediate psychological and emotional impact.

Instead of being subjected to specific direct beatings or humiliations in prison, the poor food allowed Jianji to experience a sense of abandonment as his body gradually deteriorated. Food does not simply symbolise social bonds and divisions; it participates in their creation and recreation (Sutton 2001, 102). The critical agency of food in prison is to weaken the embodied self of a prisoner. Related to Foucault's theory (1977) is the notion of 'surveillance' which is institutionalised through disciplinary means to produce tamed bodies. The control of food, obviously, is a most common form of prison administration, a way of asserting power, but also of discouraging the possibility of resistance. Likewise, the officials of the institution at times consider the inmates' status as prisoners to mean that they were not worthy of tasty, nutritious, or even edible food (Soble et al 2020,12). Eventually, inadequate food in prison creates a vicious circle of resistance and repression. These traumatic experiences, reflected in Jianji's writing, also reveal the strong relationship between food and human bodies.

Continuity of will and sense

As a first-generation leader of the peasant movement in colonial Taiwan in the 1920s, Jianji knew about the types of grains and the fundamental interaction between food

³ Jian Ji, *Jian Ji's Prison Diary*, 203.

and the human body. He even lamented that a healthy diet would prevent mental depression and allow one to reflect on one's own crimes (Jian 2005, 177). He clearly stated that prisons have to protect the health of the inmates so that they can maintain the mental power to reflect on their behaviour. This statement further highlights that good nutrition would in turn have an impact on social embeddedness (Jian 2005, 179). Jianji questioned the difference in treatment between the two prisons. The factors that led to the discrepancy were incomprehensible to him:

There is no way that the facilities provided to the same inmates in the same prisons vary according to the size of the prisons, but I wonder why there is such a difference even in the food. What is the basis of the decision? How much does it cost per day? How many people? How much should it be?

同じ刑務所、同じ受刑者に與へるのに、設備は刑務所の大小のために差異のあるのは止むを得ないが、食物にまでこんなに差異のあるのは何故だろうか？何に依って決定されるのだろうか？一日何圓？または何匁？または何程の容積といふのか？⁴

It is clear that in prison, where people experience little joy and are often faced with a sense of boredom, the satisfaction of a tasty meal can be a sharp contrast to the dullness of daily life (Vanhouche 2022). Freedom of choice of food was taken away from Jianji in prison and he was forced to divert his attention to other physical activities. Reading and writing seemed to give him renewed vigor. From April 1930, possibly because the quality of his food had not improved, he rarely mentioned anything about his meals in his diary and mostly turned his attention to book notes. His favourite excerpt was from a magazine called “Humanity” which was his main source of new knowledge. He was still very concerned about the relationship between food and people, such as the use of agricultural waste, the state of the world's rice economy, and so on.

Ideally, a life writer's invocation of a particular food may transubstantiate an object, transforming it into something else by interweaving the remembered pleasure of eating a food with the politics of hunger and scarcity as a sign of class or economic positioning (Smith and Watson 2010, 149). But in this non-fictionalised diary, food as a substance is linked to power relations, and food memories are evoked or drawn into the real world through the senses and experiences of the diarist. David Sutton (2010, 220) makes us pay more attention to sensory aspects which are experienced like few other things both inside and outside the body (and transformed in the crossing of bodily boundaries). In the later stages of the incarceration, the role of food in the diary becomes weaker and has less description, but unfortunately fuses into the form of physical pain. Even though Jianji was still physically weak, he once wrote to his brother on March 22, 1930 that he had recently heard the hawking sound

⁴ Jian Ji, *Jian Ji's Prison Diary*, 194.

of ice-cream being sold outside, but that it made his body shiver uncontrollably (Jian 2005, 198). The memory of the food still triggered his body's senses. It made him acutely aware of the subtle connection between the body and food. In other words, the lack of food intake translates into the growth of other consciousnesses. A similar description can be found in some textual records of deliberate fasting.

Conclusion

We have an explicit concern in the dietary criticism of Jianji of exploring the relationship between food and himself. The conclusion can be summarised in three ways. The first is to understand the attitude of state authority through prison food. The Japanese colonial government had moved towards a modern scale of prison governance by the end of the nineteenth century, yet inequalities of treatment still existed in practice. The quality and inadequacy of the food reflected the normality of Taichung Prison at that time, and the attitude of deliberately not dealing with improvement. In particular, the officials of the institution considered that their status as prisoners meant that they were not worthy of tasty, nutritious or even edible food. Secondly, regarding the connection between food and traumatic memories, in the case of Jianji, food is an extension of prison punishment that directly affects the trauma of the inmates. This daily accumulation of displeasure and dissatisfaction becomes part of the physical and psychological experience and cannot be avoided. We can specifically see the physical changes of a normal human being who has been tortured by poor food. Also, Jianji's individual body, part of a moral and spatial order controlled by terror, disappeared (literally) and reappeared through narrative reconstruction (Lock 1993, 144). With his words, food is becoming less and less in the final months of Jianji's diary. But it's becoming another form of consciousness raising to support Jianji's will eventually.

This paper explored food as a hidden resistance within public history (Taiwan's history under Japanese occupation) and personal memory (prisoner activist) to show a demand for human rights in colonial Taiwan. Jianji's prison diary, which combines public history and personal memory, demonstrates the ability of (written) memory to transcend traumatic experiences and become an inspiration for society and humanity. On the whole, Jianji's prison texts are certainly not a romantic dining experience. But the process is a practical insight into the connection between food and the outside world, the body and consciousness. Such experiences may not be universal and are often overlooked as marginal. Fortunately, the diary survives and could reflect the trauma and will of an incarcerated man, which represents the sadness of inequality for many individuals who are unable to speak up.

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