

Foodways as Borderlands: Identity and Culture in The Barbarians Are Coming

Alina Zhong*

Basis International School Shenzhen, Shenzhen, 518000, China

*Email: alina_zhong2026@outlook.com

Abstract: This paper examines how foodways-taste preferences, eating habits, and culinary practices-function as borderlands that shape racial, ethnic, and class identities in David Wong Louie's *The Barbarians Are Coming*. Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's theory of distinction and Guillermo Verdecchia's concept of borderlands, it explores how the protagonist Sterling Lung's culinary journey reveals tensions between assimilation and cultural memory. By analyzing food as a semiotic system of class and cultural hierarchy, the study argues that foodways delineate imaginary homelands and social boundaries that both constrain and define identity formation in diasporic contexts.

Keywords: Foodways, Borderlands, Identity, Class, The Barbarians Are Coming.

1. Introduction

"If food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries. [1]"--Mary Douglas, "Deciphering A Meal"

David Wong Louie's *The Barbarians Are Coming* (2000) begins with "FEAST OR FAMINE" [2], foregrounding the semiotic significance of food in this novel about inter-generational Chinese immigrant family tensions revolving around hyphenated identity, collective memory, and assimilation. This project explores how foodways-taste preferences, eating habits, and culinary practices-operate as borderlands that structure the protagonist's race/ethnicity and class consciousness.

Sterling Lung, the novel's protagonist, is a 26-year-old American-born son of Chinese peasant parents who run a laundry business in Lynbrook, Long Island. After graduating from the Culinary Institute of America, Sterling becomes resident chef at the Richfield Ladies' Club in Connecticut, where he makes French haute cuisine for upper class American patrons. His parents aspired for him to pursue medicine, but he chose cooking, believing French cuisine signifies upper-class social status. However, Sterling painfully discovers that his inextricable Chineseness demands he cook "authentic" Chinese food. He must "blend the aristocratic cuisine in which [he] was schooled with sprinklings of the plebeian fare that the masses apparently want" [2]. For Sterling, "aristocratic cuisine" refers to French food; "plebeian fare" refers to Chinese cuisine, the "barefoot food, eat-with-sticks food" [2]. Sterling's distorted perception-aristocratic versus plebeian-associates foodways with hierarchical ordering that determines social class. Throughout *The Barbarians*, foodways provide an axis for understanding the interlocking tensions between race/ethnicity and class.

"Tell me what you eat: I will tell you what you are." This maxim of Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin posits a direct correlation between foodways and identity. As Mary Douglas points out, "the message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and

transactions across the boundaries" [1]. People's taste preferences and their ways of cooking, eating, and sharing food disclose who they are, where they came from, and their aspirations.

Ethnic foodways pose challenges to this correlation. The centered-peripheral mentality makes ethnic foodways othered and exotic. Immigrants discover that Americans "do not eat the same things in the same ways as they themselves do." It is almost impossible to maintain identical foodways to those in the homeland, as ingredients may be unavailable and lifestyle changes affect eating habits. Ethnic foodways reflect immigrants' struggle with hyphenated identities. In Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands*, he quotes Milan Kundera: "the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" [3]. Ethnic foodways function as borderlands that delineate cultural identity and construct "imaginary homelands" through this struggle of memory [3].

Drawing on Guillermo Verdecchia's idea of borderlands and Pierre Bourdieu's notion of class distinction, this project examines how foodways function as borderlands to structure and distinguish classes in *The Barbarians*, through Sterling's ambivalent assimilation into American culture.

2. Foodways as Borderlands of Class and Identity

In Guillermo Verdecchia's *Fronteras Americanas* (1993), Pablo Ramirez notes that nations create "a bounded relation between subjects and national territory" through an "inside-outside logic of a bounded space; one is either a native or a foreigner, an insider or an outsider" [4]. Verdecchia explains that "a border is more than just a division between countries; it is also the division between cultures and memories" [4]. In "struggling memory against forgetting," individuals traversing national borderlands create what Salman Rushdie calls an "Imaginary Homeland," made up of "shards of memory [that] acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were remains" [3].

Sterling Lung suffers from unrealistic expectations-from his peasant parents who work ten hours daily in the laundry barely making enough money-and from his American Dream. The Lung live in the cramped basement of the laundry, have

no car, and rarely go out. Growing up with a "back-of-the-laundry soul," Sterling desires spacious space and decent lifestyle. As a French chef at the Richfield Ladies' Club, Sterling dedicates himself to reaching the middle class, refusing the predictable Chinese-American identity. Despite his Chineseness, Sterling attempts to traverse borderlands by rejecting Chinese cuisine and committing to French cooking. However, his efforts are in vain: traversing borderlands only renders his identity inarticulate and incomplete. Food, kitchens, and restaurants function as borderlands of class and power. Crossing these borderlands, Sterling is trapped in in-betweenness where he is always an exile or outsider.

To Sterling, food symbolizes spatial ordering of class. French cuisine and the Richfield Ladies' Club function as status markers, a civilized pathway from working-class existence, complicated by his marriage to Bliss Sass, a Jewish dentist from an affluent Connecticut family. Sterling's in-betweenness manifests in his association of rich American life with kitchen riches:

This is a house of plenty, in the land of plenty, America the beautiful, and its fruity plains, amber waves of grain, chicken in every pot, popcorn-peanuts-and-Cracker Jack. Let the slightly spoiled go to the dogs [2].

The word plenty conjures lavish feast imagery. The "dogs" insinuate barbaric Chinese immigrants. Contrasted with civilized patrons, uncivilized dogs starve, desperately waiting for "slightly spoiled" leftovers. It is a famine no feast can eradicate, a feast that only highlights endless famine.

Tottering between civilized and barbaric status, Sterling attempts to cut all ties to Chineseness that would thwart his American Dream. European haute cuisine and private clubs represent upper-class status and sophistication his upbringing failed to afford. He celebrates his privilege as French chef among well-to-do Americans, trying to shed cultural heritage. However, he fails to recognize that fixed social stratification has already determined his position. At his first sight of the Richfield Ladies' Club:

When I drove up for my job interview and first laid eyes on the big white house, with its dark green shutters, vase lawn, ancient oaks and elms, bounded by imposing stone and wrought-iron fences, I felt I had arrived. After spending the majority of my years growing up in the back of a Chinese laundry, I was on the verge of ascending to a new station in life [2].

Sterling mistakes the building's magnificence for his auspicious future. He soon realizes grandeur is not transmissible and proximity to the upper-middle class doesn't change his second-class citizenship. He is "devastated by the news my residence would be the carriage house apartment. [...] I occupied the servant's quarters. And I was undeniably the servant" [2].

Sterling agonizingly acknowledges being "cramped in [his] tiny apartment in back," "occupying the servant's quarters" despite sharing "the same grounds, the same pipes, the same electrical lines" [2]. The words "cramped," "tiny," and "quarters" echo enclaves/Chinatowns in Asian diasporic studies. Moving from his parents' cramped laundry to the spacious Richfield Ladies' Club to serve "the white and wealthy doesn't move him out of his parents' class position."

In *The Barbarians*, irrevocable class borderlands make upward mobility unrealistic. Capitalism requires hierarchical spatial organization with classes ordered in prescribed positions. The Lungs' laundry and Sterling's servant quarters function as rigid borderlands distinguishing specific classes.

This explains Sterling's desperate resistance to his parents' lifestyle and eating habits, which he deems plebeian and un-American:

Oh, the privilege of being an American, cars and quick escapes! Until I was fourteen or fifteen my family never owned a car. That fact was consistent with the profile of Chineseness that was forming in my young brain: We don't own cars, we don't live in houses, we don't eat anything but rice. Each one a racial trait [2].

Chinese foodways as borderlands manifest in Sterling's self-identification with white middle/upper-middle class Americans, compelling him to disparage Chinese foodways as inhumane and unnatural. Sterling defines "real food, what real people ate" as food "with forks and knives, your own plate, your own portions, no more dipping into the communal soup bowl. Food from boxes and cans" [2]. Foodways function as borderlands separating not only nationhood but human-hood. Chinese people aren't "real people" so their foodways are unreal. The words "own plate," "own portions," and "no communal soup bowl" recapture capitalist hierarchical positioning: each class has its own place.

In *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Anlin Cheng explores racial grief and inferior complex [5]. Cheng's notion explains Sterling's identity crisis: to identify with national ideals (white middle-class Americans), the racialized Other must desire their own disparagement. Since young, Sterling learned to use forks and knives, eat from his own plate, not share communal soup bowls. Contrasting American civilized table manners with Chinese communal manner, Sterling internalizes racist, binary education that instills class and racial discrimination into the private sphere.

To Sterling, Chinese foodways symbolize his family's life, while American food shows "how real people lived" [2]. He recalls: "The best were Swanson TV dinners. Meatloaf, Salisbury steak. I was convinced Salisbury steak was served in the White House every night. Meat in one compartment, vegetable medley in another, apple crisp next door. What a concept! Everything had its own house or its own room"[2]. "Meat in one compartment, vegetable medley in another" links foodways with classed identification where everyone is positioned in a specific place.

3. Food and the Habitus: Cultural Identity Through Taste

The habitus refers to "second nature" or "embodied social learning" signifying internalized self-consciousness. Bourdieu extends this to class-demarcated behaviors, arguing that taste preferences express class distinctions and cultural belonging. Following Bourdieu's logic, Sterling's vocational choice reveals that he unconsciously believes he has estranged himself from Chineseness; distanced himself from fast-food Americanness; and integrated into highbrow taste as a connoisseur of elite cuisine culture. Sterling fulfills his American Dream through cooking:

Quite frankly, my purest desires are in the kitchen: for the exact flavor, the clearest consommé, the perfect meringue, precise paysanne-cut potatoes, one-half by one-half by one-quarter inch. My greatest desire, the one that inspires the others, is to please my diners, that they love my food and love to take me into their bodies, into their hearts [2].

Sterling prepares diners and controls the food's ingredient, flavor, and size. He doesn't passively submit to highbrow culture but actively forces rich ladies to digest his version of

haute cuisine. Sterling emplaces his subjectivity through cooking French food.

However, in his mother's kitchen, these "purest desires" vanish. He spurns her "casual, capricious, undisciplined style of cooking" compared to "what I learned at a cost of thousands of dollars in student loans" [2]. His mother despises French food: "That lo-fahn (foreign) food you cook, don't tell me that's what you eat too! I worry for you". In fury, Sterling grabs the rice pot and "accidentally hook her arm, and the rice spills out, each grain crashing on the linoleum, crackling like static" [2]. This scene symbolizes Sterling's rejection of his rice-dominated culture and his mother's love. The dramatized sound effects reveal his agony from consciously rejecting his culture.

Sterling's class-consciousness demonstrates ambivalent, defensive, hesitant moments. His childhood favorite steamed pork with rice is now relegated to "barefoot food, eat-with-stick food" [2]. His parents' refrigerator contains "bundles of medicinal herbs, twigs, bark, berries, and what look like worms bound with pink cellophane ribbon"—traditional Chinese soup ingredients Sterling deems inappropriate as "food."

Despite disavowing Chinese foodways, Sterling realizes his French cuisine efforts aren't appreciated. Repeatedly labeled "our Chinese chef," he struggles being considered only in ethnic terms. Because he is Chinese, he's qualified only for Chinese food. His extensive training doesn't qualify him as French chef. He responds, "I am a chef, one who specializes in continental not communist cuisine" [2], appealing to Cold War ideology to articulate his Americanness. Ultimately, Sterling is replaced by Wong Chuck Ting who, despite no training, is deemed "authentic" because "he is from China" [2].

Sterling's choice to become a chef rather than doctor can be read as rejecting the Chinese-American Model Minority ideal. His parents wanted him to be a doctor for class mobility. Yet "preparation of food is often associated with domesticity and falls under the sphere of influence of women in the home." Sterling's choice violated Model Minority expectations, making him an exile and outsider. His reluctance to fulfill the Chinese chef role suggests more than simple assimilation.

Jose Esteban Munoz invents "disidentification" as an alternative to binary subject positions. "Good Subjects" identify with ideology; "Bad Subjects" resist and "counter-identify". Disidentification is "the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly oppose it; rather disidentification

is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" [6].

Sterling's resistance to become a doctor and reluctance to perform Chinese culinary complicate reading his identity within either-assimilation-or-resistance logic. He refuses the performative script of Chineseness yet doesn't fight structural injustice. He continues inhabiting the French chef position as gesture toward middle-class assimilation. His disidentificatory acts challenge the logic that as Chinese-American he should cook Chinese food. *The Barbarians Are Coming* unfolds a multilayered story beyond binary readings of civilized versus barbaric, middle class versus working class, and Americanness versus Chineseness.

4. Conclusion

The notions of foodways-as-borderlands and habitus-as-class-demarkation provide nuanced reading of Sterling Lung's ambivalent, defensive, hesitant struggle with class, race, and ethnicity in *The Barbarians Are Coming*. He is an exile and "disidentified" subject in postcolonial American landscape where borderlands of nationhood and class are difficult to break down. As Gary Okihiro explains, Asian Americans entered America's racial backdrop long before first immigrants' arrival. When Americans eat Chinese food, they digest the Americanized version of Chineseness. Similarly, Sterling's preference for French haute cuisine over American fast-food, with his mother's perception of American food, decodes their ingrained bias for American culture formed perhaps even before their arrival in America.

References

- [1] Mary Douglas. (1972). Deciphering a meal. *Daedalus*, 101(1), 61-81.
- [2] Louie David Wong. (2000). *The Barbarians are Coming: A Novel*. Putnam Adult.
- [3] Rushdie Salman. (1992). *Imaginary homelands: Essays and criticism 1981-1991*. Penguin.
- [4] Verdecchia Guillermo. (1993). *Fronteras Americanas (American Borders)*. Coach House.
- [5] Cheng Anne Anlin. (2001). *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*. Oxford University Press.
- [6] Muñoz José Esteban. (1999). *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. University of Minnesota Press.