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The Food Narrative Mechanism in "Welcome to Dragon Restaurant"

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Abstract:
War-themed films usually take war events, character fates, or historical conflicts as their narrative core, while Welcome to Dragon Restaurant selects "food" as a crucial medium connecting everyday life and war experience. This paper takes the food narrative in the film as the research object, and investigates how cooking, eating, and changes in food states participate in the meaning construction of the film. The paper argues that the film first establishes the order of everyday life centered on "eating" through family dining tables, restaurant spaces, and chefs' labor. As war factors enter the narrative, food gradually breaks through its dietary function and becomes an important medium for expressing life predicaments, driving character actions, and sustaining interpersonal relationships. Among them, food clues such as "fried eggs", "sprouted potatoes", and "Xu Fu's braised rice" correspond to the manifestation of war pressure, the action transformation of daily skills, and the memory preservation of individual experience respectively. The film does not base heroism on grand actions that change the course of war, but presents ordinary people's ethical choices to maintain life dignity in the context of war through everyday practices such as cooking, caring, and sharing food. Thus, Welcome to Dragon Restaurant completes the narrative transformation from food writing to war reflection, making "eating" an important entry point for understanding the everyday heroism in the film.

Keywords:
Welcome to Dragon Restaurant, food narrative, audio-visual language, anti-war narrative

Food in film is not merely a life-like decoration for characters and scenes. Eating behaviors, cooking processes, and the spaces where food is situated not only possess texture at the level of bodily perception, but also participate in the organization of character relationships, social structures, and narrative rhythm. Early domestic studies on food-themed films have noted that eating scenes can carry cultural information, enhancing the flavor of life in the film while participating in the generation of its ideological implications. In recent years, relevant studies have further discussed how hot pot, dining tables, and eating behaviors become imagery and narrative resources of film.

Foreign studies on food and film have also gradually gone beyond the single question of "what food symbolizes", and turned to examine the connections between food and mise-en-scène, character interaction, social relations, and ideology. Cynthia Baron points out that the integration of food into the mise-en-scène and narrative design of film can affect the audience's understanding of characters and their interactions, and reflect the social relations addressed by the film. Navarro Martínez and Buitrago Alonso examine the food phenom-

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enon in film from the dimensions of eating behavior, eating places, and food itself, emphasizing its narrative and socio-cultural functions. These studies collectively suggest that food is not a passive object waiting to be viewed in film, but may become an important medium for organizing narrative.

Welcome to Dragon Restaurant provides a focused and specific text for this issue. Set in a Chinese restaurant as the main narrative space and centered on the chef Xu Fu, the film takes cooking, eating, and restaurant operation as the basic ways for him to enter life in a foreign land. In interviews with the creative team after the film's release, director Wen Muye noted that food shots are closely related to characters, environments, and plots, and that the process of shooting food is actually "shooting and portraying people". Another interview with the creative team described the film as the story of "a Chinese chef adrift in war", and emphasized that gourmet food and the flames of war constitute an important tension of the film. Therefore, food in the film is not a decorative element attached to the story, but forms the narrative structure together with character identity, spatial order, and war experience.

Among the current direct academic discussions on the film, Ding Yaping discusses the film from the dimensions of temporal form, sense of reality, anti-war expression, and "everyday heroism", pointing out that Chinese gourmet food is not the ultimate goal of the film, but an important incision connecting social reality, ethical emotions, war crises, and rescue operations. This research provides an important foundation for the thematic interpretation of the film. However, if we stay at the value correspondence between gourmet food, peace, humanity, or anti-war, it is still difficult to fully explain why the film repeatedly arranges cooking, eating, and changes in food states, nor can it explain how these food elements exert practical effects in the advancement of the plot. Rather than continuing to ask what food "symbolizes", it is better to return to the film text itself, and examine how food is presented, how it enters character actions, and how it changes its own function in different narrative situations.

Accordingly, the "food narrative mechanism" in the film can be understood as the process in which food enters the film narrative through visual presentation, spatial organization, character action, and plot recycling, and continuously completes meaning transformation in specific situations. For Welcome to Dragon Restaurant, this mechanism first establishes the everyday order in which ordinary people can cook, wait, and eat normally. Then, war invades this order in the forms of sound, environmental pressure, and approaching death. On this basis, cooking transforms from a professional skill into a way of acting to cope with crises and care for others, and finally enters collective memory through a meal named "Xu Fu's braised rice". Therefore, the film does not attach "anti-war" as a pre-existing theme to food; instead, it allows the destruction of everyday life by war to gradually endow food with narrative significance beyond diet itself.

1. Food and the Construction of "Normal Life"

1.1 The Cooking Process and the Establishment of the Chef's Identity

"Welcome to Dragon Restaurant" first allows food to enter the silver screen with material texture. Ingredients, cookware, flames, and cooking movements together constitute the basic visual units of the kitchen scene, but the film's emphasis on the cooking process is not limited to creating gourmet spectacles. The director once mentioned that different dishes require specific shooting methods according to characters, environ-

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ments, and plots, and that the sense of realism of food and lens presentation need to be considered simultaneously. Thus, the visualization of food itself has already entered character building and narrative organization.

The opening of the film does not directly introduce Xu Fu's identity as a chef. Children after the war board the vehicle one by one, and the sound of customs interrogation enters before the picture, pulling the audience back from the post-war scene to the interrogation Xu Fu is facing. The picture returns to a close-up of Xu Fu's face, and when the interrogation involves that war, the camera slowly pulls back and enters a flashback. The transition formed by sound, character's face, and spatial transition makes war first a reality that Xu Fu must face in the present, and then a trigger for memories of his personal experience.

At about 00:03:03, the young Xu Fu begins to explain why he went abroad to work as a chef; at about 00:03:44, the film enters the cooking sequence. What matters here is not how many Chinese dishes the film presents, but that it does not use shots of finished dishes to directly prove that Xu Fu "can cook". Instead, it presents the cooking process continuously through different shot scales: long shot, medium shot, close shot, and extreme close-up. Ingredients entering the cookware, the body's participation in cooking, and the gradual completion of dishes together constitute visible evidence of Xu Fu's professional identity. A chef is no longer just a professional term in a character's resume, but becomes observable physical competence on the screen through the labor process.

This treatment also changes the position of food in the frame. Food is not a "finished product" statically waiting to be viewed, but the object and medium through which character actions unfold. How Xu Fu processes ingredients and completes cooking determines the final state of the food; and the audience's viewing of these actions, in turn, builds their recognition of Xu Fu's professional ability. Food thus has the dual attributes of material object and action medium: it is both an object to be made and viewed, and a practical process to confirm the character's professional identity.

This sequence ends with Sweet and Sour Mandarin Fish with Pine Nuts. It is not until eating begins at about 00:05:41 that the audience learns that the series of dishes were the last meal Xu Fu prepared for his family before going abroad to make a living. The delayed revelation of information changes the emotional nature of the previous cooking shots. Previously, the audience saw the process of a chef completing dish after dish; when the information of "the last meal" emerges, these actions simultaneously carry the meaning of family bonds and the experience of departure. The film does not tell the audience "this is the last meal" in advance and then reinforce emotions through food. Instead, it first presents food as a form of labor, and finally reveals the family context of the meal. Thus, emotions are not directly declared through character dialogue, but generated in the process of gradual release of narrative information.

More importantly, this meal establishes the benchmark of "normal life" for the subsequent war narration. Cooking, waiting, and eating together constitute an everyday temporal structure that can operate continuously at its own pace. The reason why war can be perceived as a disruption of life order is first of all that the film has shown the audience how this order originally operates. Food here does not first mean abstract "peace", but means someone cooks, someone waits, someone sits around to eat, and means life can continue according to daily rhythm. Therefore, the last meal at the opening not only establishes Xu Fu's identity as a chef, but also sets an important measure of life for understanding the consequences of war throughout the film.

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1.2 Food Flow and Restaurant Routine in Continuous Space

If the family banquet before departure places food in private life, after entering the Dragon Restaurant, the film further places food in the social space formed by production, service, and consumption. The key here is not that the restaurant is "busy", but how the film organizes the back kitchen, front hall, dining tables, and character relationships into a sustainable life system.

After "Welcome to Dragon Restaurant", the camera turns to the sky above the city, with a subtitle indicating "four months later". Along with the advancement of the city scene, the sound of TV news enters before the TV picture. Then the film cuts into the interior of the restaurant, and through a continuous spatial mise-en-scène lasting about 1 minute and 55 seconds, integrates the back kitchen, front hall, customers, and other areas of the restaurant into the same temporal scene. The camera follows the movement of the waitstaff: food flows from the back kitchen to the front hall, and then returns to the kitchen from customers' orders. Thus, the restaurant is not stitched together by multiple isolated "gourmet shots", but a continuous living space maintained by the constant movement of food.

This spatial organization endows food with social attributes different from those at the family dining table. Inside the restaurant, cooking, serving, ordering, waiting, and consuming are not isolated events, but a continuously circulating chain of relations: the chef's labor must reach the dining table through the physical actions of the waitstaff, and customers' demands must return to the kitchen to be responded to. In this process, food connects the kitchen and the dining table, as well as professional labor and everyday consumption. The restaurant is therefore not only a place where food is consumed, but also a living space where people establish specific relationships through food.

The camera further passes by queuing customers at the door and children inside the restaurant. Facing waiting and urging customers, the manager needs to constantly maintain order; after a customer with a child is seated, he folds a napkin into a rose and gives it to the child. This detail makes the restaurant's function go beyond simple commercial exchange. Characters' actions in the restaurant include waiting, appeasement, service, and care, which together with food consumption constitute the density of social relations in the restaurant. Mary Douglas points out that a meal is not a naturally occurring physiological activity; its participants, time, and order together constitute the structure of social relations. From this perspective, the importance of Dragon Restaurant lies not only in how many Chinese dishes it serves, but in that food allows people of different identities to temporarily enter the same shared living space.

This continuous spatial mise-en-scène has another function. It is not until the camera moves from the front hall to the staff rest area that the audience discovers another spatial state behind the busy restaurant. The film does not create a contrast by switching to another independent scene, but allows the camera to gradually discover this space through continuous movement. Thus, the restaurant is not a fixed setting that is "introduced", but a life system that is constantly rediscovered as characters move physically.

More importantly, this spatial movement is always accompanied by the sound of TV news that entered the scene earlier. The TV sound does not disappear immediately when the picture turns to the restaurant. While the audience watches the back kitchen, dining tables, and character actions, they can still hear news about state relations and the situation in the Middle East. It is not until the camera enters the staff rest area that the

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TV picture reappears, and the audience confirms that the previously persistent sound comes from the television. The manager then turns off the TV. Therefore, war does not enter the Dragon Restaurant at this moment; it has already persisted as an off-screen reality while the restaurant's daily life unfolds.

In this way, the film forms two simultaneous filmic layers: the picture maintains the life order of cooking, serving, ordering, queuing, and service; while the sound constantly reminds the audience that there are conflicts between countries outside the picture. War does not first interrupt the restaurant with explosions and gunfire, but enters everyday space through the ordinary medium of TV news. The more complete the life order established by food, the more obvious the pressure formed by the off-screen war. The continuous shot thus goes beyond the function of simply displaying space: it organizes food production, consumption, and character interactions, and at the same time allows war reality and restaurant life to share the same temporal structure.

This spatial movement finally returns to Xu Fu in the back kitchen. When the restaurant manager brings customers' orders back to the kitchen, the demands from the front hall reconverge into specific cooking labor. Xu Fu then tells the manager to "open your mouth" and hands him the freshly stir-fried beef. The camera finally settles on the freshly finished Stir-fried Pork with Scallions. Thus, the previous spatial movement gains a clear narrative focal point: food goes from the kitchen to the dining table, and then returns from the dining table to the kitchen, completing the cycle with character tasting and the chef serving the dish. The film thus transforms "the restaurant is busy" into a life system supported by food flow.

2. The Audio-Visual Relationship Between Food and War Situations: How War Enters the Life Order Established by Food

2.1 Off-screen War: Life Pressure in the Everyday Sound Field

In the sequence where children are about to be tricked by the principal into "going off to battle", the film does not directly foretell death with a single war picture, but interweaves children, schoolbags, the driver, and fried eggs. The children are told that they will "go to war" in two days, but are actually arranged to be suicide bombers charging at US military checkpoints. The death mechanism of war is first manifested here as the manipulation of children's cognition, and fried eggs become an important visual node in this process.

The film gives a close-up of fried eggs: the eggs in the frying pan gradually turn yellow from their original edible state, and the picture immediately cuts back to the principal's encouragement to the children. Then, small schoolbags are presented one by one, and the audience knows they contain bombs. The picture cuts back to the young girl's innocent face, and the driver's numb state as he prepares to detonate the bomb behind. After fried eggs are repeatedly interwoven with these images, food is no longer just an ordinary food that children rarely get to eat, but begins to assume the function of a time marker: as the children get closer to death, the fried eggs continue to lose their normal state.

This treatment is particularly noteworthy because the change of fried eggs does not carry meaning independently. The children are constantly encouraged and sent to "battle", while the restaurant manager, Dave, and Xu Fu can only witness the process. Just as the characters' action space is compressed, the film returns to

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food again and again. The eggs gradually turn from golden brown to burnt, forming a juxtaposition with the death the children are about to face. Food thus no longer bears gustatory meaning, but becomes a temporal process that can still be viewed and perceived when characters cannot change the situation.

The children prepare to “go to battle” amid slogans, and the restaurant manager sheds tears at the sight. The film finally presents the completely burnt fried egg with a gradually advancing frontal close-up. At this moment, the previous deception by the principal, the children’s death, the driver’s numbness, and the helplessness of the restaurant characters are condensed into the same material image. The film does not simply make “fried eggs symbolize death”, but compresses the process of death that is not yet completed but already irreversible into the change of food state. The eggs that should have entered the normal eating order can no longer be eaten normally; they become a material trace of the disruption of life rhythm by war.(i.e., Table 1)

Table 1. *Changes in the State of Fried Eggs and Their Narrative Functions*

Narrative Position of Fried Egg	Interwoven Content	Food State	Narrative Function
First appearance	Children are encouraged to "go off to battle"	Gradually turning golden brown	Establishes the temporal sense of approaching death
Second appearance	Principal deceives the children; driver prepares to detonate	Significantly burnt	Juxtaposes children's death with food wastage
Final appearance	Restaurant manager sheds tears; characters fall into helplessness	Completely burnt	Condenses the irreversible pressure of death into a material image

Fried eggs thus reverse the measure of “normal life” established at the beginning of the film. Cooking, waiting, and eating at the family dining table in the opening still follow a normal rhythm, while the eggs here, though still being cooked, have lost the possibility of normally reaching the dining table. The change in food state thus gives the abstract violence of war a micro-scale: war means not only distant battlefields, but also that food that could have been eaten normally ends up burnt, and that children who should have been sitting at the dining table are sent to a predetermined death outcome.

3. How Food Enters Character Actions

3.1 “Dragon Raises Its Head”: The Formation of Professional Identity and Character Relationships

If the first two chapters mainly discuss how food establishes a measure of life and becomes a perceptual medium of war pressure, the further question is: when does food truly enter characters’ actions and begin to change character relationships? The food tasting scene at Dragon Restaurant around 11 minutes and 28 seconds provides a typical case.

At the beginning of the tasting, the film establishes the spatial relationship between Xu Fu and the boss through an extreme long shot: the boss sits on one side of the table, and Xu Fu stands on the other. The characters’ positions first correspond to the professional relationship of the tasting scene—Xu Fu is in a position under evaluation, while the boss holds the power to decide whether to hire him. Then, Xu Fu serves and in-

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troduces the dish “Dragon Raises Its Head”. This detail reconnects to the earlier family dining table: the same dish was part of the last meal Xu Fu shared with his family before going abroad, but now it enters a foreign restaurant and becomes a professional object to test cooking skills.

The repetition of “Dragon Raises Its Head” is therefore not a repetition of the dish, but a transformation of food’s function. When it first appears, it connects family and departure; when it appears for the second time, it connects profession and evaluation. The same dish spans different spaces and connects Xu Fu’s dual identities as a family member and a professional chef. Thus, the film does not complete the identity declaration at once through the character’s self-narration, but allows the same dish to enter the character’s family life and professional life respectively, so that the character’s identity gradually emerges in specific actions.

After tasting, the boss points out that the dish is too salty, and believes that locals prefer sweet flavors and dislike spicy ones, so it needs to be adjusted according to local tastes. The conflict is thus embodied in the question of exactly “how a dish should be made”. The boss emphasizes customer preferences and market acceptance, while Xu Fu insists on his own professional experience and understanding of Chinese cuisine production methods. Food here is no longer just an object to be tasted, but a specific medium for conflict in character relationships.

This conflict is first reflected in characters’ expressions and speech acts. When the assistant translates the boss’s opinion, Xu Fu’s expression gradually shows disdain. Then he explains that the kitchen equipment is shabby, and emphasizes that he has been a chef for 30 years and knows what real Chinese food is. Thus, professional identity is not a fixed and completed background, but is reconfirmed in judgments and debates around food.

When the boss says that customers do not care about “authenticity”, only whether it suits the palate, the conflict further focuses on the standards of Chinese cuisine production. Xu Fu admits that he can adjust according to customers’ requests, but refuses to make what he considers Americanized Chinese food. This debate is not abstracted into empty cultural discussions, but always unfolds around specific dishes and cooking methods. Food thus translates cultural identity into concrete practice: how to cook a dish, what can be adjusted, and what cannot be accepted become ways for Xu Fu to strive for professional subjectivity.

At the same time, Xu Fu brings a chair and sits opposite the boss. This physical gesture directly changes the mise-en-scène. Previously the boss was sitting and Xu Fu was standing, with the latter in a position waiting for evaluation. When Xu Fu takes the initiative to sit down, the two characters’ physical positions become more equal, and he shifts from a job applicant accepting the tasting result to a chef actively expressing professional judgment. The debate triggered by food thus changes not only the characters’ verbal relationship, but also their spatial relationship.

When the assistant translates Xu Fu’s words, Xu Fu begins to recount the boss’s life experience. After listening, the boss stands up and walks towards Xu Fu, and the conflict escalates further. In the end, however, the boss admits that what Americans make cannot be called Chinese food, and says to Xu Fu, “Mr. Xu, welcome to Dragon Restaurant.” Thus, the tasting scene completes the transformation from dish evaluation to character identity confirmation. Food is not only a tool for testing cooking skills, but also an action medium through which professional identity is established and character relationships change.

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"Dragon Raises Its Head" first appears as a dish in family life, then as a dish in professional relations, and later enters the daily operation of Dragon Restaurant. Food thus completes its movement from private life to professional practice, and then to socialized consumption. This repetition makes food no longer a background, but truly enters the causal relationship of the film's plot.

3.2 Wedding Banquet: From Individual Skill to Collective Action

The large-scale cooking scene at the wedding banquet further transforms food from Xu Fu's individual professional skill into a collective life practice. Interviews with the creative team mention that this scene uses a fusion dish of iron pot stew and Arabic grilled fish, with members of Dragon Restaurant participating in the production together, to express the wedding atmosphere and people's longing for normal life under the shadow of war.

What is truly noteworthy here is not the abundance of food, but how food reorganizes characters into a shared temporal framework of action. When multiple characters participate in production together, the kitchen is no longer just a place for the chef to work alone, but a space for cooperation, communication, and relationship confirmation. Food concentrates the physical actions of different characters around the same pot of food, transforming professional skills into collective practice.

If "Dragon Raises Its Head" confirms Xu Fu's professional subjectivity through a single dish, the wedding banquet further expands this individual ability into the action capacity of the restaurant community. Food thus completes its second functional transformation: it is no longer just proof that "a chef can cook", but a concrete practice of whether a group of people can jointly maintain life order. The closer war approaches, the more important the everydayness maintained by this collective cooking becomes.

4. From "Cooking for Whom" to Sustaining Life: The Ethical Turn of Food

4.1 Sprouted Potatoes: From Food Knowledge to Limited Resistance

What truly transforms "cooking" from professional labor into acts of resistance is not an abstract value declaration, but the concrete food practice of sprouted potatoes.

After the children are clearly told that they must "go to battle" in two days, Xu Fu, the restaurant manager, and Dave prepare food for the children again. Dave says "there are not enough eggs", and the restaurant manager immediately says that the frozen beef originally reserved for Chinese New Year does not need to be saved, and that beef and potato stew can be made the next day, taking the initiative to prepare the ingredients. What seems to be just a rearrangement of existing ingredients actually constitutes foreshadowing for subsequent actions.

It is particularly noteworthy that the film immediately shows the restaurant manager constantly scrubbing the previously burnt frying pan. The completely burnt eggs in the previous scene correspond to the fact that children's death is approaching, and the traces left on the cookware still exist at this moment. The two food scenes are thus connected through material residues in the kitchen: the former shows that war is taking chil-

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dren away, while the latter begins to brew how characters use food to delay this deprivation.

The children gobble down the beef and potato stew. The restaurant manager sits on the floor watching them, then secretly hands Dave a bottle of cola and says, "Let's drink it together when we get out." This set of actions does not directly show "heroic acts", but still maintains the form of everyday life. The ethical significance of food thus comes not from the character's declaration, but from the change in the question of "cooking for whom": it previously served making a living and consumption, but now serves keeping the children alive.

Then, the film presents potatoes that have taken root, sprouted, and grown green leaves through an upward shot. At this point, the previous beef and potato stew gains a new interpretation: sprouted potatoes are not the accidental cause of later food poisoning, but life knowledge intentionally used by the characters. When the principal finds that the children collectively have mild food poisoning and the doctor orders at least five days of rest, the restaurant manager takes the initiative to take responsibility, admitting that he may not have cleaned the potato sprouts properly when preparing the ingredients.

What matters is not whether this "excuse" is clever, but that the film subsequently reveals the real motivation for the action. Before the principal leaves, the restaurant manager turns his back to Xu Fu and says, "I put the potato sprouts on purpose, to buy some time." At the same time, he hands the broken-off potato sprouts to Xu Fu. At this point, food transforms from a kitchen ingredient into a shared secret of action among characters. The restaurant manager still uses ordinary kitchen knowledge, but this knowledge has gone beyond professional purposes and been transformed into a concrete action to delay the children's death.

This action later costs him his life. The restaurant manager tells Dave to "eat well", pushes him behind, and then admits to the principal, "Yes, it was me", and is finally shot dead. After the gunshot, the film does not immediately focus the camera on the corpse, but cuts back to the potato sprout in Xu Fu's hand, then to his expression and Dave's shocked face. The potato sprout thus changes from an ingredient to physical evidence of the action, becoming a concrete remnant of the restaurant manager trading his life for time.

Xu Fu then breaks down in tears looking at the potato sprout in his hand, and the film intercuts this state with previous everyday scenes of the two getting along. Food here has a dual nature at the same time: it both proves that the character has carried out an act of resistance, and preserves the loss caused by this resistance. Thus, the key to sprouted potatoes is not that "spoiled food suddenly becomes useful", but that the film transforms a kind of life knowledge belonging to the kitchen into a limited action to intervene in the war order.

War establishes a coercive order that determines who can survive and who must die, and the resistance the restaurant manager can carry out is very limited: he cannot change the war, nor can he stop the principal from continuing to cause children's deaths, but he can use food knowledge to buy a few days for the children and bear the consequences. "Resistance" here is translated from a grand political concept into a concrete action: letting children who are about to be sent to the battlefield live a few more days.

4.2 From Making a Living to Caring: The Shift in the Object of Food Ethics

Xu Fu initially cooks because cooking skills constitute his professional ability and means of livelihood. He hopes to end his overseas life and return to his family, and cooking first has a distinct subsistence attribute. Therefore, the character transformation in the film is not a change in cooking skills themselves, but a change

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in “who to cook for”.

In the early stage, food is mainly for family and customers. After war intervenes, food faces children in danger. Food thus shifts from commodity production to care practice, and from meeting consumption needs to sustaining specific lives. Claude Fischler points out that food not only has biological significance, but also participates in identity relations between individuals and groups. In the film, this social attribute is further transformed into an ethical attribute: food becomes a practical form of whether characters are willing to bear the fate of others.

Thus, “resistance” should not be understood as direct resistance in the military sense. Neither Xu Fu nor the restaurant manager can change the macro process of the war. What they can do is to use limited life skills to maintain certain everyday relations that should not be canceled within the established structure of violence. Michel de Certeau’s discussion of the practice of everyday life suggests that even within established structures, ordinary people may still strive for limited space for action through specific ways of use. In the context of the film, this space for action is specifically manifested as lighting fires, cooking, sharing food, stalling, and caring for children.

Therefore, the “resistance” constructed by the film is not that characters suddenly gain superhuman heroic abilities, but that professional skills gain new functions in the face of new ethical objects. Cooking skills do not change, and food does not break away from everyday life; what really changes is the object that food serves, and the price characters are willing to pay for this service.

5. From a Meal to a Memory: The Recovery of Food Clues

5.1 “Xu Fu’s Braised Rice”: Reaffirmation of the Meaning of “Eating”

The restaurant manager’s death becomes the real turning point for Xu Fu’s actions. Previously, facing the children’s impending fate of “going to battle”, he once thought he could not save everyone. But after the restaurant manager traded his life for time, Xu Fu finally spends all his savings and takes the children to escape from the school.

On the run, he gathers crude pots, spoons, and stone slabs in the village, finds common ingredients, and makes the last meal for the children. Compared with the relatively complete kitchen and rich dishes at the opening family banquet, the cooking utensils and ingredients here are very simple, but the film again presents the food production process in detail. Cooking thus returns to its most basic function: to give the fleeing children something to eat, so that their bodies can continue to move.

The children ask what dish this is, Xu Fu says “braised rice”, and the children repeat the word with a smile. The bonfire at night and warm-toned imagery form a contrast with the cool-toned atmosphere of the previous campus space, giving this meal the quality of life that comes with eating together again. Xu Fu and Dave talk about their plans after leaving while eating: Dave wants to find his former teacher and the little girl, while Xu Fu says he wants to go home. Dave asks if he will come back, and Xu Fu pauses for a moment before answering “yes”. At this moment, food is no longer just a means of survival to satisfy hunger, but recovers as a form of everyday life that allows people to talk about family, the future, and “later” again.

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The next day, the pursuers sent by the principal finally find them. Earlier, after tasting the braised rice made by Xu Fu, the boss of Dragon Restaurant first comments that it is still too salty and points out that Xu Fu is not familiar with local ingredients and seasonings. Then he hands the rice to Xu Fu's mouth and repeats "open your mouth" in Chinese. This action immediately cuts back to the boss's previous war memory of losing his wife and daughter: at that time, Xu Fu also handed food to the boss and said "open your mouth". The two time-spaces are connected by the same action, and food thus becomes a visual interface between character relationships and war memories.

More importantly, Xu Fu says at this moment, "Those are also children." This sentence completes the recovery of the previous ethical choice. Earlier, the restaurant manager tried to persuade Xu Fu to save the children, but Xu Fu chose to hold back because he realized he could not save everyone. Then the restaurant manager took action through sprouted potatoes and ultimately sacrificed himself. At the end, facing the same question, Xu Fu no longer takes "whether everyone can be saved" as the premise for action, but accepts the most basic ethical fact that "those are also children".

The repetition of "open your mouth" further reinforces this change. Xu Fu once handed food to the boss, and later the boss hands food back to Xu Fu. The originally one-way care relationship is reversed here: in the past, Xu Fu cared for the boss who had lost his family; now, before death comes, the boss hands food back to Xu Fu. The delivery of food thus transcends the specific action of eating, and becomes a form of relationship continuously passed between characters.

In the end, before carrying out the execution, the boss says "open your mouth" in Chinese again. After the gunshot, Xu Fu falls. Using the temporal framework established by the earlier customs narration, the audience knows that Xu Fu does not really die. More importantly, "open your mouth" does not become a terminator of death, but continues to connect the death scene with the previously repeated eating, caring, and memory. Food thus becomes a form of interpersonal relationship that war cannot easily sever.

5.2 The Name on the Menu: Food Preserves a Person's Actions

Many years later, Xu Fu returns to the former Dragon Restaurant. The familiar dishes on the menu first evoke his personal experiences, but what really makes him pause is the last page that says "Xu Fu's Braised Rice". The waiter tells him that this dish comes from the experience of a Chinese chef who fled the war zone with more than 20 children over 20 years ago. It was the last dish the chef made for the children before he was killed; later, the children named the dish in his memory.

At this point, food completes the last and most important functional transformation in the film: it no longer depends on Xu Fu himself to exist, but becomes a form of collective memory that can independently preserve character actions. Xu Fu did not know at first that his name would appear on the menu, so his shock comes not from "discovering a dish", but from discovering that the actions he once carried out have transcended his individual life and entered other people's everyday lives.

The film does not immediately reveal that the restaurant owner is the child from back then, but allows Xu Fu to gradually approach this fact through the waiter's story. Then, the camera enters the familiar restaurant corridor, which echoes the scene of making braised rice for the children back then. Finally, the picture enters

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the back kitchen, and the audience sees the back view of the boss and head chef wearing an eyepatch. The character's identity is not directly declared through a frontal close-up, but the narrative already allows the audience to complete recognition based on previous memories and spatial clues. Food, space, and characters thus jointly undertake the function of memory recovery at the end.

This ending is particularly important because it does not choose to preserve Xu Fu in a monumental way, but chooses a dish. What it preserves is not the character's abstract "heroic image", but a concrete action: once someone made this meal, someone ate this meal, and someone survived because of it. Food thus gains a form of memory different from historical archives and monuments—it is not a static past, but a past that can be remade and re-eaten in everyday life.

Looking back at the food clues throughout the film, "Dragon Raises Its Head" and "Xu Fu's Braised Rice" constitute two groups of movements in opposite directions. "Dragon Raises Its Head" moves from the family dining table to professional space, and then to the daily consumption of the restaurant, completing the expansion of Xu Fu's identity from private life to social life. "Xu Fu's Braised Rice" starts from personal cooking, enters other people's memory through rescue efforts, and finally becomes a public dish on the restaurant menu. The former allows the character to enter society, while the latter allows the character to be remembered by society even after leaving his individual life.

Therefore, what the film finally recovers is not just the character Xu Fu, but the act of "eating" that runs through the entire film. At the beginning, Xu Fu cooks for his family; in the middle, he cooks for restaurant customers; after the war breaks out, he cooks for the children; at the end, this dish becomes food that others continue to make and eat. Food thus completes the complete movement from professional labor, everyday practice, to ethical action, and then to collective memory.

6. Conclusion

Welcome to Dragon Restaurant does not base its war narrative on grand battlefield depictions or heroic actions. Instead, starting from the life experience of ordinary people, it re-examines the most basic everyday behavior of "eating" in the context of war. Food in the film does not simply assume the function of cultural symbols or emotional decoration, but undergoes constant meaning transformation in the process of narrative advancement: it is first a component of family relations and professional identity, then becomes a perceptual medium for war pressure to enter everyday life, and finally transforms into a carrier of character actions and emotional memory.

From the perspective of the film's structure, the food narrative always keeps pace with changes in characters' situations. The last meal at the opening establishes Xu Fu's originally stable life order through cooking and eating. After entering the Dragon Restaurant, food becomes a bond connecting chefs' labor, restaurant space, and character relationships. The cooking debate triggered by "Dragon Raises Its Head" makes food a way to confirm characters' professional identities; fried eggs and sprouted potatoes further change the narrative function of food, transforming it from an object of daily consumption into an important medium for expressing war harm and driving character actions. The ending "Xu Fu's Braised Rice" completes the final recovery of food meaning, allowing a specific cooking act to enter collective memory.

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Therefore, the "resistance" in the film is not the direct action of confronting the enemy in traditional war films, but an ethical practice built on everyday life. Xu Fu and the restaurant manager cannot change the overall direction of the war, but they still respond to the harm caused by war to ordinary lives through concrete acts such as cooking, sharing food, and caring for children. The film thus shifts heroism from the heroic deeds of extraordinary characters to the life choices of ordinary people, so that "everyday heroism" no longer stays at abstract value judgment, but gains perceptible cinematic expression through the concrete medium of food.

In this sense, the uniqueness of the film lies not in how much Chinese gourmet food it shows, but in its rediscovery of the relationship between food and people: why people cook, who they cook for, and whether people are still willing to keep a meal for others after the order of life is disrupted. What the film ultimately preserves is not a dish, but a life ethics of insisting on caring for others even in the face of war. Food thus becomes an important narrative mechanism connecting realistic experience, character actions, and war memory in the film, and also constitutes an important path for understanding the expression of everyday heroism in the film.

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