

Three Tastings of the Delicacy

Baoshu

Translated by Xueting C. Ni



1. The Sumptuous Banquet

The provocative little waitress wheeled the serving cart over, on which, a dish sat covered with a gleaming, radiant cloche that looked like it had been made of pure gold.

Smiling, the waitress maneuvered the cart directly in front of the guest, and then carried the dish, still with the lid on, to the table.

Just as she was about to reveal its contents, the diner gently pushed her delicate, jade-like hand away: “One moment, I have something to say.”

Across from him, the host gestured, indicating “please, continue.”

The guest spoke unhurriedly: “Although I haven’t mentioned my name, you all know who I am. My photograph has often been featured at the top of the rich lists, and even for the ordinarily wealthy, this million RMB private *sifang*¹ experience would be beyond their means.”

The host nodded, indicating that they knew exactly the man’s name and status.

The tycoon spoke again: “beautiful women, fast cars, luxury mansions—all hold little interest for me, nor do I have ostentatious hobbies, such as space travel or deep-sea exploration. My only passion is eating. I built my fortune from nothing, but right from the start, any time I had earned even a little money, I would invariably treat myself to a meal of something I had never eaten before. It’s a dilemma that, after all these years, I have exhaustively worked through the gourmet cuisines from every part of the world, and my tastes have become increasingly demanding. Recently, no matter how delicious, or how rare the delicacies I have found, none of them have been able to pique my interest. My friend told me that you serve an incredible feast here, and his mysterious avoidance of details convinced me to come and give you a try. I have yet to see anything either good or rare. These half naked girls you have serving me are as laughable a gimmick as the pure gold tableware. I am truly disappointed. I’m sure these tricks work well on the tuhao², who’ve yet to experience the real state of gourmandise, but quite honestly? Seeing these things has already killed my interest. I therefore bid you goodnight, though I assure you, I shan’t expect my one million back.” With that, the tycoon stood up and prepared to leave.

Still smiling, the host urged: “please wait a moment longer. Even if you don’t eat, there’s no harm in taking a look, is there? Aren’t you even a little curious about what’s under the cover? Perhaps a peek may convince you to change your mind?”

The tycoon pondered this, nodded, and returned to his seat: “fine, let’s see what cure you’ve got in your gourd,” and reaching out, he lifted the golden dome.

He was a seasoned connoisseur, but what he saw still left him stunned.

Presented on a wide crystal platter was an odd black helmet.

It took a good while for the tycoon to formulate any sort of action. He picked it up and carefully examined it, and, ascertaining that the helmet was in no way edible, his anger instantly flared: “what’s the meaning of this?!”

“Just as you said,” the host spoke leisurely, “having tasted all the rare and unusual delicacies of the world, what could satiate your appetite? Nothing. So, the search for anything new would be fruitless. However, if those sensations, caused by enjoying good food, from another person could be transmitted into your brain, then naturally you would be able to experience the sweetness, the richness, the aromatic taste of food, all afresh.”

The tycoon snorted: “And this helmet can do that? I’m a businessman and have seen more than my fair share of con artists, so don’t even think about trying to swindle me.”

“Well, then you should be able to see that I’m no swindler. I am, in fact, a scientist, not a chef. I can’t even cook a simple dish of fried egg and tomato. I was initially a researcher at a university, developing a long-distance project to read brain waves, but unfortunately, it failed, and the higher-ups cut my funding. However, there was a by-product from my many years of research, and it’s that helmet. That is why I opened this “Taste of Herz” sifang experience, hoping to raise enough funding to allow me to continue with my original research.”

“So you’re saying, that this fancy bucket can collect people’s brainwaves when they’re eating?” The tycoon’s demeanour changed to one of curiosity.

“The headset is only a transmitter; the actual mechanism behind it is in the back. It’s about two or three storeys tall. Humanity’s most basic desire is their appetite for food, and the hunt for the gourmet is the highest form of this desire, so of course it will generate the most intense of brainwaves, which can easily be recorded by the apparatus, and almost as easily transmitted to others. Put it on, and you’ll have the full sensory experience of the subject as they enjoy their food. Taste, scent, textures and temperature, pain... Everything, of course, except auditory and visual recordings so as to, technically, not invade their privacy.”

“Interesting,” mused the tycoon, now fully engrossed. “Well, let’s give it a try.”

“Wait,” said the host, “let me clarify the function. There are seven levels, categorised according to the intensity of pleasure received by this helmet. Each level allows you to experience a random signal. Think of it as blind ordering. However, with regards to the final level... being that this represents the most intense transmission of brainwaves, at the moment we cannot guarantee it would not cause damage to the brain, so please do not select that level. If anything were to happen

to you, it would make international news.”

The tycoon indicated his agreement and pulled on the helmet.

“In that case, bon appetit,” the host courteously replied, before withdrawing with the female attendants.

An hour later, the tycoon rang the bell, summoning the host.

“I haven’t felt this way for a very long time!” the tycoon gushed excitedly. “It was all so delicious, so infinitely evocative!”

“Did you try every level?” asked the host.

The tycoon nodded.

“Would you mind recounting the experiences to me? So I can record it for the sake of my research?”

The tycoon closed his eyes, savoured his culinary memories, and slowly began to speak:

“The first level was very spicy, with a fresh *xian*³ taste and an aromatic sensation. Probably *mapo doufu* at some Sichuanese restaurant. Not particularly interesting, so I quickly skipped it.”

“The second level tasted rich, tender, sweet, and buttery, melting as soon as it entered the mouth. That should have been high quality Snowflake beefsteak,⁴ but for me, it’s an everyday meal, so I didn’t stay for long.”

“The third level, I experienced an exceedingly ravishing *xian*, smooth and tender taste, mingled with the scent of sea breeze. It was actually very familiar to me. Fruit de mer. Good quality lobster, abalone, and such.”

The host smiled and commented: “but for you, this wasn’t anything new.”

“No,” said the tycoon, “but from the fourth level onwards, it was different. That kind of pure, light, yet rich and crisp taste, with the elegance of fresh vegetables, the exquisite delicacy of young meat, and the rich aroma of mushrooms, all combined into one, yet distinguishable in layers...” as he spoke, his mouth began watering in response.

“Do you know what the dish is?”

“An excellent broth *baicai*,⁵” the tycoon answered without hesitation. “The taste and texture were just right, state banquet quality. I tried it once ten years ago, but the chef passed away, and I have never again tasted broth *baicai* made to quite the same standard again. Where did that cast come from? Can you check?”

“Of course.” The host opened their laptop, and pulled up the log. “It came from a small town in Sichuan; the precise location is—”

“Please, just send it to me after the session,” interrupted the tycoon, whose enthusiasm was still focused solidly on his dining experiences. “Let me tell you about the fifth level. That was a type of chocolate; tasted like it was from Mexico. It was more bitter than the usual chocolate, and even a bit savoury, but at the end, it became something infinitely more relishable in its nectar and fragrance. Of course, the taste itself was nothing special...but in that sweetness, there was like a kind of...joy and a jubilation that lifts the soul...I think, it must be chocolate given by a lover. It felt full of that passion. It made me think of my first wife. It’s a shame we divorced, and she left with a billion of mine.”

“But enough of this, let’s talk about level six, which was just...water! I have no idea what kind of water, but it was almost like nectar. Such a pure, bright taste. I’d never tasted anything so delicious as this water; not even the celestials’ ambrosia could be better than this! I drank it down so desperately, as if my life depended on it, but never felt like I had drunk enough...what kind of water could do that?”

“Let me check the location...” replied the host. “The location...is...an oasis in the Taklamakan Desert. It must be a desperate, dehydrated traveller who found the water source there and drank to their heart’s content.”

“Makes sense!” The tycoon slapped his thigh. “I wondered how simple water could taste so good! That sounds about right. OK, so in the seventh level—”

“Wait!” interrupted the host, flustered by this. “Did I not make it very clear that you should not access the machine’s seventh level? It’s incredibly dangerous!”

“I’m sorry,” said the tycoon, a little embarrassed, “but level six was so fiercely satisfying, and knowing the seventh must be even better, I really couldn’t resist...luckily, nothing’s happened.”

“Okay then,” the host sighed, feeling it was no use protesting further. “What did you experience, precisely?”

The tycoon savoured it, as if reliving the memory of eating in his mind, before replying: “It was a kind of roast meat, a little like roast piglet, but a hundred times more mouth-watering! Just smelling it alone made my soul tremble. I only got to taste a piece or two; it was burning hot and had a charred crunch, as though it had just been pulled out of the fire, but the sensation of putting it in my mouth... I felt like I was being consumed by fire myself, and then reborn from the ashes! Just what kind of meat is this? And where was it eaten?”

“From the coordinates...” mumbled the host, as he browsed the logs, “should be...” he gave an awkward, unfamiliar place name.

“Oh,” said the tycoon, “I know there’s a lot of rare birds and beasts there, but they’re all protected species. I’ve never had a chance to taste them so...perhaps it’s some kind of monkey or sloth? But how could it taste so good?”

The host shrugged, indicating he had no way of finding out.

“Wait, it’s been a warzone there for months. The conflict has caused a huge famine, and there’s been no way for international aid to reach them. Thousands of people starving to death... they’d probably eat anything now. Who cares about protecting animals when you’re starving? But the conflict’s been going on for over six months...so what’s there left for those people to eat now? What else...but...”

The tycoon’s face changed, his lips continued to twitch a few more times, before he bent double and was violently sick.

2. The AppetAid Service

Some years later.

“A steak meal, please,” said the youth sitting at one of the tables in a small restaurant to the welcoming orderbot, which was rolling towards him.

“Certainly, sir, and will you be requiring the AppetAide service?” the synthesised voice asked.

“Of course,” said the customer, without hesitation.

In this restaurant, a steak cost 40 RMB, whilst AppetAide, at 35 RMB, was almost as costly as a dish. However, ordering it meant that the taste could be improved severalfold, giving even an ordinary dish the taste and impact of a high-end banquet for its user, so it could be said to be well worth the cost.

“Then please choose your zuocanshi.⁶” Rows of profile pictures began scrolling across the wafer-thin screen on the orderbot’s chest, the majority of which were pretty-looking women of every body type, some as voluptuous as Concubine Yang of Tang, others as slender as Queen Zhao of Han, each beautiful in their own way. The rest were elegantly handsome or earnest-looking men.

Without even lifting his head, the youth replied straight away: “the usual please, Number 88.”

Number 88 hadn’t even been displayed, but her beautiful face was already present in the young man’s mind. For the past year, whenever possible, he would pick number 88 as his zuocanshi. In fact, he had built his whole order according to the schedule that Number 88 had announced ahead of time: when she said she was eating steak, he would pick steak, when she was eating seafood, he would pick seafood. Her lucid and elegant features, her slight but shapely figure captivated him, but more importantly, it was that tiny mouth of hers, and the incomparable taste buds it contained. Abundant, refined, and dynamic. Every meal with her was like the most splendid of symphonies, sending him head over heels, unable to extract himself from the sensations.

As the meal began, Zuocanshi88 materialised at the table holographically, as if she were facing the diner. Lifting her fork, she gave the youth a small smile, her dimples seemed to light up the whole room.

It was a shame that he wasn't the only one Number 88 was smiling at, as today, he wasn't the only one dining with Zuocanshi88 in the restaurant. He could clearly see a bucktoothed, acne-scarred man sitting diagonally across from him, who had also ordered steak and Number 88, and she was simultaneously flashing her brilliant smile at him.

The coincidence was unfortunate, and whilst there were probably several thousand people across the country all being serviced by Number 88's *AppetAide* right now, it was unusual to meet a "fellow fan" at the same restaurant.

If he had enough money, the youth thought, he would love to buy Zuocanshi88's exclusive services and enjoy the one-to-one dining experience, but the price for that was astronomical. Remembering his ever-emptying e-wallet, the youth reluctantly angled his head away, so he didn't have to look at the ugly simp who still sat diagonally across from him.

"Darling, I'm all turned on and ready to go. Come on, let's do it together!" Said 88 with a smile. With the gleaming steak knife, she deftly cut off a piece of rosy, succulent, red Matsusaka beef, medium-rare, before skewering it with her fork and placing it between her enticing cherry lips.

The youth put a piece of steak into his own mouth, and began to chew. Of course, his standard flank steak that cost a mere 40RMB was coarser and tougher, and was much harder to slice, so his actions could not completely synchronise with those of his Zuocanshi. However, when he placed the steak in his mouth, the stimulation of his taste buds activated the brainwave reception functions of his neuro-implant for taste and smell, and 88's dining sensation came flooding through the transmission.

Delicate and distinct sensations he had rarely experienced in real life flooded his mouth, such aromatic fragrances, smooth tenderness, warmth, and the xian piquancy, all came swirling around the tip of his tongue, forming a complex and beautiful vortex.

The transmission and reception of "FlavorWave" and *AppetAide* had been in development for over a decade, and had long attained greater commercial value than the simple sensation-stealing helmet it originated from (which was still embroiled in a slew of legal issues). No matter how fantastic the gourmet tastes the helmet allowed users to experience, they could not rely on absorbing electric brainwaves to provide them actual sustenance, and those who got used to eating 'brainwave meals' found everyday dishes dull, which led to problems not only with daily living, but also of survival. Therefore, many restaurants began adopting the technology, transmitting it into their customers' brains as an accompaniment to dining through the "*AppetAide*," thus improving their dining experience immensely and guaranteeing that they would enjoy the food with absolute satisfaction. As the FlavorWave augmentation service became increasingly popular

with customers, it rapidly became a common service, available at exclusive restaurants and dive diners alike. With this, many related companies and organisations were formed, but Taste of Herz, the company that pioneered the technology, remained one of the biggest players in the industry.

The only pitfall was that there had yet to be any development in an apparatus for storing and replaying these brainwaves, so the whole experience relied on live-streaming. Despite this, the receptor and transmission devices had already been simplified to a microchip that could be implanted into the brain, so there was no longer the need for clumsy, heavy devices like the helmet. Along with all of this came the birth of a new profession: the AppetAide Zuocanshi.

Zuocanshi would be able to taste all the most exquisite haute cuisines, prepared by the most masterful chefs and, simultaneously, transmit their gourmet experience to diners who are only able to afford ordinary fare. Though this sounded like an enviable profession, not everyone could become a verified AppetAide partner. The oral and olfactory sensitivity required by this trade was exceptionally high, and had even become the new threshold for all professional sommeliers. To maintain the optimum conditions, the Zuocanshi's tastebuds, mouth, olfactory receptors, and nasal cavity must be maintained to the highest of standards, with regular examinations by a doctor to ensure the best perception and optimum oral sensation during dining. Furthermore, a Zuocanshi's presentation and appearance was also an important factor to consider. Of course, rather than brainwaves of indeterminate origin, people much preferred to share the gourmet experience with a beloved figure they could see seated in front of them, who could provide them with all kinds of other delectable associations.

Zuocanshi88 sipped the red wine and then picked up another morsel of beef, chewing carefully and slowly for a good while, her posture and deportment eternally impeccable. Such deportment was said to be the dining etiquette of the British monarchy. The youth knew that her line of work was not an easy one. It was said that, in order to produce the most vibrant of dietary experiences, Zuocanshi need to starve themselves for days beforehand, becoming so hungry they could eat a whole cow. However, in order to maintain their eating etiquette, they must dine without letting that desperation show. It was vital to avoid accidentally biting their own tongue or lips. In the early years, there was a Zuocanshi who was so starved that, in a ravenous frenzy, they almost bit their tongue clean off, transmitting that sensation of pain to countless recipients, generating wretched howls simultaneously across hundreds of cities and thousands of restaurants.

This was, of course, a mistake that Number 88 would never make. Her dining techniques were the best. It was not just the gracefulness of her posture, the delicacy of her feelings, but the fact that the food seemed to take on a magical quality as soon as it reached the tip of her tongue. Steak, sauces, asparagus, wine, even bread: the sensory quality of each was at its apex. Main, supplementary, and base notes – the *jun chen zuo shi*⁷ of tastes, flavours, and textures, combined and separate, creating countless amalgams of exquisite and blissful moments. The youth felt as if he was surfing on a sea of roiling waves, constantly bringing him to the climax of desire.

Suddenly, 88 slowed her chewing, letting her eyelids drop a little, displaying an expression of intoxication, as if engrossed in the incomparable flavours. There was an indescribable charm and loveliness in her expression, which, combined with the delectable steak, provided the utmost enjoyment.

But something in this scene made the young man pause. The expression on the face in front of him gave him a strong sense of déjà vu. He felt sure he had seen that exact look before. This shouldn't be a surprise, having already "dined" with her so often over almost a year, he would have seen a similar expression from Zuocanshi88 countless times. But this manner and expression was still giving him an uncanny sense of familiarity.

Why was this?

Being in the midst of his gourmet experience, he let it pass and thought no more of it. However, as the dining continued, similar feelings rose in him, again, and again, and again.

Half an hour later, when Zuocanshi88 had completed her synchronised dining, she stood up, curtsied sweetly, and disappeared.

The youth paid the bill and wandered out of the restaurant. Number 88's expressions and movements throughout the meal were fresh in his mind, but he repeatedly had the feeling that something was not quite right.

"Bring up the recording of my dining experience today." Back home, the youth instructed the AI assistant on his chip to access the video. Because of his infatuation with 88, he would use a camera in his glasses to record the visuals of her AppetAide session, every time, often playing them back to savour the moment.

Yet this time, when the Zuocanshi's enticing, smiling figure was projected before him, the youth had no capacity to enjoy it. He scrubbed forward to the moment he'd initially felt déjà vu, and then instructed his AI to "make a search through Zuocanshi88's channel for all similar images."

In the past year, he'd made over 270 recordings of 88, and from them, the AI found over 1500 images with similar postures. However, the youth added some more selective criteria, refining by the same outfits, same foods, and so forth.

Very quickly, that number of similar images had fallen to nineteen. The youth browsed through the first two pages before stopping on the third: one of the thumbnails was exactly the same as the scene he had just experienced at the restaurant. The placement of the food, the pose of the person, it was exactly the same. Identical down to the intricate pattern of creases in her outfit.

"Overlap the two images," he commanded.

The AI overlapped the two images, and even though the background was different, every

visual element related to Zuocanshi88 and the dish overlapped perfectly, with no point of distinguishment.

That had been an AppetAide service from four months ago.

Hoping that it was just a wild coincidence, he spent a few minutes comparing the full footage from the two experiences and found that, although the two were not exactly the same, for around one minute before and after this image, 88 made exactly the same movements. Undeniably, at least this part was a recording.

“Those bastards have cracked FlavorWave storage! What a fucking cheat, keeping it secret and still pretending it’s a live stream,” raged the youth between gritted teeth.

The clever young man quickly unravelled the ruse: if they made FlavorWave storage public knowledge, then people would want to purchase the stored experiences and enjoy their dining on their own, just using those recordings repeatedly, so how would Zuocanshis get any more business? The whole AppetAide industry had insidiously concealed the truth, remixing the same recordings to disguise them as live casting, thus lowering their costs, deceiving the public, and exploiting everyone for their own explosive profits!

Poor Zuocanshi88. Perhaps after she had made those recordings, she had already been dropped by these unscrupulous companies!

With this thought, any hesitation in the young man’s head vanished, and he began writing up his findings at a tremendous speed. Trimming up and processing the two clips, he uploaded it to every social media site he could. With the two different backgrounds and the date stamps, it was very easy to prove that the 3D recording was made at different times. The ironclad evidence was as irrefutable as the mountains.

The young man was not wanghong,⁸ so he had no net-celebrity, and for the first couple of days, his post languished, with only a few of his friends sharing it. But after all, this concerned the AppetAide network, a technology that millions of people relied on in their daily lives, so eventually, it was bound to catch someone’s attention.

After three days, the number of reposts began to snowball until, finally, it went viral across every platform.

Overnight, it received over a million reposts. The video was watched over 10 million times.

Immediately, a representative from Taste of Herz stepped forward to dispel the rumours, stating that there was absolutely no such thing, that the video was made by a malicious image manipulator, and further demanding that the rumourmongers step forward and take legal responsibility for their defamation. For a time, they even seemed to manage to quell the story.

However, the power of the masses had been activated, and soon, people across the internet began searching for their own evidence. After another day, a whole new round of similar recordings began to emerge across the internet, and the truth of the matter could no longer be denied.

Aside from the recording scenario imagined by the youth, people began hypothesising other frightening possibilities, such as these companies presenting pretty or handsome models as the “faces” of the experience, whilst transmitting the Zuocanshi experiences of crusty old men who liked to pick their feet or withered old ladies with hairy chins. This would be a hundred times worse than just pre-recorded streams.

Given the serious nature of the accusations and public sentiment growing more and more contentious, the police eventually stepped in to formally investigate the issue.

A month later, the truth came out, and what a truth! It’s said that the truth often exceeds conjecture, but that day, when the youth saw the headlines, he almost passed out.

CEO of renowned dining experience and live-casting company Taste of Herz, Dongguan Hurton, and numerous high-ranking personnel have been arrested and detained by the police. The police revealed that Taste of Herz has been exposed for illegally breeding and keeping several hundred Tugou dogs and Yorkshire Saddleback pigs and for transmitting the “FlavorWaves” generated by feeding them via the AppetAide Service to hundreds and thousands of customers around the globe, whilst simultaneously employing digital deepfake technology and A.I. tracking to generate “human” disguises for these subjects. With gustatory and olfactory senses far exceeding those of humans, the brainwaves provided by the canine Zuocanshi have proved extremely popular. This hair-raising hoax has been perpetrated over a period of at least three years. According to certain sources, many other companies have also been perpetrating similar clandestine operations ...

3. The Last Meal

Some years later.

The launch event for Taste of Herz Dining Experience Group’s new product was about to begin. Already, over a million people had registered their participation online, and some important guests had been invited to the Experience Centre itself to attend it in person.

The VIPs gathered. Champagne glasses clinked.

An elderly gentlemen sat down by a middle-aged man, and when their eyes met, there was instant recognition.

“Hello...you’re that tycoon!” said the middle-aged man excitedly. “One of the earliest diners to enjoy the FlavorWave system! They say that was the time when you tasted the world’s most forbidden–”

The old tycoon laughed loudly to interrupt him. “Those are unreliable rumours, and the truth was nowhere near as sensational. But back then, when I had invested a few billion in Taste of Herz, there were all kinds of rumours about me. It was inevitable really...but, if I’m not mistaken, you’re the young kid who first exposed the Herz Live Experience scam, yes?”

“I’m more of an ‘old kid’ now,” said the erstwhile youth rather bitterly, “but I never expected that after that, things would take a path like this...”

After being exposed for the scandal of transmitting FlavorWaves from dogs, and even pigs, to humans, the entire industry imploded, taking companies large and small with it.

However, this turned out to be nothing but a temporary setback. Customers who had grown used to the enhanced sensory brainwaves of the animals and to the much sharper, more sensitive, and abundant stimulation they provided to the tongue, found that returning to the FlavorWaves of human Zuocanshi no longer satisfied their appetites. But as it’s those with courage who reach the headiest of heights, many people quickly broke through that mental block: justifying to themselves that, since we happily consumed the bodies of animals already, why not consume their experiences too?

Despite there still being waves of objections, including religious figures and thinkers, who decried “the degeneration of humanity” till they were blue in the face, a new market, providing animal FlavorWaves rose from the ashes, and with it, the almost expired Taste of Herz Group rose again like a phoenix, its business expanding further and further.

“Had you not poked a hole through that paper window, it would have taken many years to transform the market,” the old tycoon smiled. “Who’d have thought that, after the story broke of our use of animal FlavorWaves, the public would be clamouring for a whole new world of gourmet experiences. And us old *taotie*⁹ would be reaping the benefits!”

The younger man had to agree: “when they first used animals, they were just trying to save the costs of human labour, and so needed the eating experience to be at least comparable to that of humans for the scam to work and satisfy the customers, but after it went public, people couldn’t help but dig into the experiences of thousands of rare and unusual predators, expanding our menu enormously...that is, I should say, expanding our ‘Gourmet Sensory Spectrum.’ It’s fascinating.”

“It sounds like you’ve tried a few yourself?”

“Yes, over the last few years, I have tasted the xian of fresh grass in the mouths of cows and goats, the sweetness of bamboo leaves enjoyed by giant pandas, and the wonderful delight felt by a kitten’s first taste of fish...you must have experienced these yourself?”

“Not only these, but so much more...have you ever experienced the lion’s thrill when it digs a warthog out of the mud and cracks its skull in a single bite, so the brains explode into its mouth? Or the chewiness of a giant squid when a sperm whale dives into the depths and tears it apart? Or the interwoven icy cold and blazing heat when a polar bear on the glacier bites into a tender, young, blubbery seal pup?” The old tycoon rolled each experience off as if they were familiar delicacies.

“I have to say, I’ve never tasted those. They’re all premium experiences, reserved for the super-rich. The FlavorWaves of these rare, wild animals are hard to capture; each experience must cost a few billion at least.” The middle-aged man mused, salivating, before smacking his lips and swallowing repeatedly.

“But experiences such as these are worth any amount of money. Look, why don’t you come and see me another day, and I’ll treat you to a proper banquet!” the old tycoon suggested with largess.

“Well...then thank you. Thank you very much! But, on the subject of banquets...do you have any idea what today’s experience might be?”

“Well, it has to be some new development in animal AppetAide,” the old tycoon shrugged, “but these people, there’s nothing they haven’t already come across, so I really don’t know what this new thing this could—”

“Esteemed guests, welcome to the Taste of Herz Dining Experience New Development Press Conference Live!” The CEO of Taste of Herz appeared on stage, interrupting the tycoon.

After a short introductory speech, he finally revealed the mystery: “in today’s event, we will be introducing the world to a whole new Gourmet Sensory Experience! Initially, we could only transmit, receive, and interpret human brainwaves that were related to eating, before being able to extend this to different kinds of mammals. As for other organisms, due to the difference in their inherent biological make-up, which was far too distanced from that of humans, their brainwaves took entirely different forms. And this barrier was one we were unable to break through for a very long time. But recently, our scientists have cracked the code, and successfully interpreted the corresponding brainwaves of reptiles, in a manner where their brains could connect with those of humans. Today, the FlavorWaves that everyone will be enjoying come directly from...crocodiles!

“Crocodiles?” The middle-aged man was a little disgusted. “Those dull, dirty creatures? What could be so special about their experience? Don’t they have brains, like, the size of an egg?”

“Perhaps,” the old tycoon said, patting him on the shoulder, “but still, all life is full of wonders, and the unique flavours that animals on the hunt experience have given me many delightful culinary surprises. For instance, when I was receiving the ’waves of an anteater whose tongue was stuck deep into a nest of ants, the ants crawling all over it felt sweet and active, like a mouthful of popping candy...quite unforgettable!”

“OK. That makes me want to try it less...” The middle-aged man frowned.

But still, he activated the receive function on his implant.

Under the anticipation of thousands of people in the venue and the millions viewing online, a magnificent landscape appeared on the giant screen before them.

The scene was split into left and right sides, each side bisected between top and bottom. The top part of both sides showed what looked like sky, snowy mountains, and woods; the bottom half was a dark green world strewn with floating algae. The host informed everyone that this was the world as seen through the eyes of an 18-foot-long Nile crocodile, floating on the water. ToH workers had anesthetised the beast and implanted a FlavorWave transmitter chip into its brain. Of course, the crocodile was completely unaware of any of this.

The Nile crocodile stayed motionless in the waters for a long time. The host said it could spend the whole day waiting like this by the water’s edge, but just then, as a herd of bison appeared in the distance (driven, of course, by the staff), the Nile crocodile began to respond, at which point, the audience began to receive its FlavorWaves.

This was an exceptional feeling. Clearly it had not yet eaten anything, but there was already an intangible thrill stimulated in its mouth, like humans salivating when they look at food, imagining its taste the food before eating it—but this feeling was much fiercer than simple salivation.

This kind of aperitif thrill drove the Nile crocodile to make its move. Slowly, it swam towards the herd, coiling its body and gathering momentum to strike.

Although it had no ‘eating’ to transmit, the middle-aged man was already feeling the extraordinarily fierce excitement of the predator. It wasn’t a desire to eat, but rather the impulse to launch his entire body, wrap it around the prey, and become one with it! It surpassed even the strongest of his sexual urges.

The bison began wading through the river, and a moment later the crocodile suddenly lashed out, snapping its jaws around the leg of a young calf! With a biting force of around 5000 pounds, the bite penetrated the tough skin and tight flesh, delivering the marvellous sensation of blood doufu. That fresh warm blood flowed into its mouth, tasting sweet through the metallic tang, and like a taste bomb, exploded in the mouth of every diner!

In an instant, the middle-aged man felt as if he had become one with the crocodile, a fierce thrill transmitted to all parts of his body. He chomped the air, roared, clenched his fists, and as the crocodile performed its signature ‘death roll,’ thrashed around in his seat. He could see that the old tycoon and the other diners were making similar movements. If he were an onlooker, he might have found it comical, but in the moment, he could only marvel at it. How awesome! How stimulating! Every movement of his body was accompanied by an invigorating freshness and delicacy of taste that he had never experienced before, on an entirely different plane of eating

sensations than that of humans, or any other mammal. In pleasurable and comfort it was more comparable to sex. If Zuocanshi88 had ever really existed, she would be a joke compared to this.

After a series of flips and rolls, tearing and biting, the young calf stopped struggling underwater and quickly became a mess of bloody and broken meat. The Nile crocodile dragged this back to its cavernous nest and began to enjoy its catch. Each great mouthful was unusually fresh, fatty, and satisfying, stretching out and relaxing each and every armour-like scale on its body.

The whole experience had been faithfully transmitted to every diner. In reality, the waiting staff had delivered thick slices of fresh steak, but the silverware remained untouched—that would only have ruined this extremely marvellous experience.

The crocodile's appetite was surprisingly large, and in no time at all, the entire baby bison was in its stomach. That joy of a full stomach, followed by a deep, deep sense of satisfaction, was felt by every diner, who now felt as though that they too had eaten an entire bison. There had never before been such a fulfilling dining experience!

"I've never felt this way before! How could it be so....so good?" The middle-aged man struggled to find the words to describe it.

"Interesting," said the old tycoon thoughtfully. "I think it's because reptiles are cold-blooded animals, who are far less active than mammals. Their usual states are almost completely stationary; they expend most of their vitality in just those rare occasions of hunting, mating, or fighting for their lives. It's precisely the lure of a wonderful meal that send their bodies into momentary explosiveness. It could be said that they devote their entire bodies, no, their entire lives, to eating! They are the world's most profound epicures! How marvellous!"

Yet even more marvellous things were yet to come.

The next day, very little of that deep feeling of satisfaction had dissipated. The old tycoon hardly wanted to move, nor could he bring himself to eat. Unsettled by this, he enquired of the other guests, and found that they were having a similar reaction.

Discussions began across the internet. Some people started researching crocodiles, and soon discovered a terrible truth that, after eating a large meal, they could go for months, even a year, without needing to feed again! That Nile crocodile had *faithfully transmitted its experiences* into the press conference, so even if its FlavorWaves were no longer being received, the minds of those who attended the event were retaining the state induced by these brainwaves.

The old tycoon was shocked to find that his appetite had totally vanished, soon realising he not eaten anything for two whole days. Very quickly he began to rely on injections of nutrients to keep himself alive.

According to statistics collected shortly thereafter, among the first batch of people who participated in the experience of crocodile FlavorWaves, these symptoms had manifested themselves in as many as 85% of them.

It was a relief that this condition didn't actually last for a whole year. After three days, appetites returned. One morning, the old tycoon woke up feeling ravenous. He leapt out of bed and, without even getting dressed, rushed to the nearest bakery stall, picked up the first ham roll he could find, and devoured it as if it were the best thing he had ever eaten. The old man breathed a sigh of relief that he seemed to be returning to health.

He had no idea that this was only the beginning.

Soon after, the old tycoon realised that he now no longer needed the stimulation of AppetAides and could enjoy even quite basic food with hearty abandon and pleasure. Every time he ate, he was consuming several times his usual fare, filling his stomach to its absolute fullest. After eating his fill, he would slip into a profound contentment and exhaustion, not wanting to move a muscle. Even his thoughts were beginning to grind to a halt. He could lie or sit like that for hours on end, his mind a total blank, not even moving a finger.

It wasn't until a day or two after, when the food had been completely digested, that his brain resumed its basic abilities, and with the cravings of a drug addict, he would go about looking for his next meal.

He became less and less communicative, and after a month, struggled to even string a whole sentence together.

In other words, like several other million people, he had started to live the life of a crocodile.

Soon, all the attendees were taken into hospitals, but there was nothing that the doctors could do.

Later, medical research discovered that the Nile crocodile's FlavorWaves had activated a dormant reptilian cortex deep within the human brain, causing an appetite that had been suppressed by centuries of evolution to awaken, fundamentally—and permanently—altering the body's functioning.

Although Taste of Herz had performed a minimal number of experiments previously, to test the technology they had used the more common Chinese alligator and certain species of fish, the side effects from which were naturally not as strong. When they had just begun the clinical trials of the Nile crocodile, Taste of Herz discovered that their competitors were about to announce similar dietary experiences, and so pressed ahead with the launch before tests were completed, resulting in this tragedy that brought disaster upon millions of people.

As for the old tycoon and the man who broke the story? They did not feel miserable. After losing most of their human thoughts and behaviours, they could at long last live in the eternal

world of the epicurean, and focus on becoming one with their beloved food, without any other distractions.

Perhaps, then, this is the most profound meaning of the gourmet: I eat, therefore I am.

Notes

1. Sifang – traditionally *sifang cai* are the most exclusive of dining experiences. The dishes are served in private mansions. They are not open to the public, nor advertised, nor is there a menu. They are cooked by the host themselves from secret recipes passed down through the family for generations.
2. Tuhao – a derogatory term meaning “earth rich,” referring to the nouveau riche from China’s rural areas.
3. Xian – Chinese term for umami.
4. Snowflake beef is a premium category of wagyu beef.
5. Broth baicai – *kaishui bacai*, an haute cuisine of Sichuan and one of its greatest classic dishes, created by an imperial chef named Huang Jingjin, consisting of Chinese leaf vegetables skilfully cooked in chicken or pork bone broth supplemented by pieces of tender meat.
6. Zuocanshi – “master appetite enhancer.” In Chinese cuisine, a *zuocan* dish is traditionally a food or drink accompaniment, such as a sauce, a dish of pickles, or wine, that supplements the main dish and improves its taste and the diner’s appetite.
7. Jun chen zuo shi – “ruler, minister, aide, envoy,” originally meaning those that govern the country. They also represent the principles for TCM (traditional Chinese medicine) prescriptions, the “ruler” herbs being the ones that nourish vitality, the “minister” and “aide” components doing most of the treating, supplemented by the “envoy” herbs. Here, the idiom is extended to oral sensations.
8. Wanghong: social media influencers
9. Taotie – the terms means “ravenous gluttony” and refers to a mythical beast, one of the Four Fiends, that is cursed with an all-consuming hunger.

Baoshu, science fiction author, translator, member of the China Science Fiction Literature Association, and scholar of the China Berggruen Institute. His well-known works include novels such as *The Thinking Verse* and *The Ruins of Times*. He has published over one million words in multiple novellas. He has won major categories in the Chinese Galaxy and Nebula Awards, and many of his works have been translated into English, Japanese, Italian, German and other languages. He has also been editor-in-chief of collections such as *Chinese History in Science Fiction*. His translations include *The Cold Equations* and the *Star Maker*. This short story was originally published as a *Galaxy's Edge* exclusive.

Xueting C. Ni was born in Guangzhou, during China's re-opening to the West. Having spent a childhood living in cities across China, she emigrated with her family to Britain, where she continued to be immersed in Chinese culture, alongside her British education, realising ultimately that this gave her a unique a cultural perspective in bridging her Eastern and Western experiences. After graduating in English Literature from the University of London, she began a career in the publishing industry, whilst creating works of non-fiction and literary translations. Since 2010, Xueting has written extensively on China's cultures and its place in the Western consciousness, working with companies, institutions and festivals, to help improve understanding of China's heritage and innovations, and introduce its wonders to new audiences. Xueting has contributed to the BBC, Tordotcom and the Confucius Institute. Her non-fiction works include *From Kuanyin to Chairman Mao: An Essential Guide to Chinese Deities* (Weiser Books), *Chinese Myths* (Amber Books). Her curated fiction in translation includes *Sinopticon: A Celebration of Chinese Science Fiction* (Solaris) and *Sinophagia: A Celebration of Chinese Horror*. Xueting is currently working on a range of projects, including a book on wuxia culture. She lives just outside London with her partner and their cats, all of whom are learning Mandarin.