

Dinner with Darwin



Three Fish Heads, Hyman Bloom, 1950s

I was raised in atheist-communist China. Like creationists, atheists also have their own theory on human origin. According to Darwin's theory of evolution that I learned at elementary school, we all came from a single cell which gradually evolved into fish, and then monkeys, and then humans. Of course, fish and monkeys were just the representatives my teacher used to make the theory more comprehensible to her young pupils. By no means were other animals excluded in the process.

There were no fairytales in my childhood. Fairytales, along with other acclaimed literature were cancelled, deemed a bourgeois influence. The animal stories in Darwin's theory

were as close to fairytales as I could get. Darwin was my Hans Christian Andersen even though his evolutionary fairytales were presented as reality.

After the Culture Revolution (1966-76), life became more tolerable. Our family was able to put meat on the table. But eating animal flesh posed a serious problem for me because Darwin was forever before me. I was convinced that all animals were related to me in one way or the other—I was the direct product of their evolution. It's reasonable to assume that, just like a butterfly who once was a worm, I, in the eternal past, could have been a chicken, a fish, or a pig. The biological connections I had with them made the dinner table experience somewhat uncomfortable. Darwin was never far from our dinner table. Staring at the meat in front of me, I felt like I was having relatives for dinner. Eating my distant cousins sounded sickening. Such practice was truly abhorrent.

Besides, if the evolution game continues, someday, we could end up on dinner table too, eaten by the ones who surpass us in the evolutionary chain. The fate of the human race looked so incredibly ominous. Will they cut us up and name different parts like we do to pigs and cows? Worse yet, will they roast us as a roasted pig with an apple in our mouths? These thoughts were horrifying, nonetheless, they are entirely logical if you believe in evolution.

In the early 1980s, my mom went on a business trip with a neurologist and a psychiatrist from the same hospital where she worked as a physician. After that trip, she began to incorporate fish heads into our diet. She told me that during the trip, whenever they reached a city, the other two would always look for a restaurant that served fish. They would fight for the heads leaving my mom with the best part of the fish, the meaty body. But it didn't take long for my mom to figure out the game. Since the other two knew more about the human brain, my mom assumed that fish heads must be super beneficial for the tofu-like substance in our head. I'm sure,

at the end of the trip, my mom joined the fight and got her share.

But I disliked eating fish heads. According to the evolution story told by my teacher, fish had a lot to do with who we are. She said since we had obtained more fish fossils than any other pre-historic relics, fish became the best-known animal from whom we came. However, this had never brought a sense of closeness and appreciation when I ate them. Their eyes were never closed even after a few hours in the crock pot. They typically stared back at me when I tried to pick a head up with my chopsticks timidly and with self-condemnation, desperately avoiding eye contact. Their mouths usually remained open wanting to communicate with me or making the last moan before vanishing into my stomach. Besides, each head had its own personality. Some were more expressive, angrier, more defiant, but never happy. Invariably, at the most awkward moment, Darwin always showed up. But I could never figure out his intention. Unlike the fish heads, Darwin had a resting bitch face (RBF) from which I could decipher nothing. That added extra stress. A few years ago, when I went back to China, my mom reminded me that most of my intelligence came from eating those fish heads during the developing years of my brain. I know that was not true. I abhorred fish heads. Whatever benefit I had from eating them was cancelled by the damage done to my brain on account of the stress from eating them.

In the summer of 1992, I became a Christian. According to the creation account, He made humans to rule the earth and animals for us to enjoy. Swiftly, Darwin disappeared in my life knowing that he could no longer exert influence on me. My life has been a lot better since he left. Realizing that fish and other edible animals are not my distant cousins and I have no biological tie with them, I have a totally different dinner table experience. And now, in my 50s, I notice the obvious decline in my cognitive function. All of a sudden, fish heads

do not look so repulsive. In fact, they are quite lovely, not angry, but happy and inviting. With each bite, I can feel the cognitive juice surging in my head.

I sometimes can still sense Darwin's gloomy face lurking in the distance. But we both know we have parted forever.