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‘DO YOU EAT MEAT EVERYDAY’?

FOOD, DISTINCTION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

IN CONTEMPORARY RURAL CHINA

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Abstract

During my fieldwork in rural China, the question of what I was fed by my landlady was a matter of great contention amongst villagers. Locals competing for my (financial?) attention questioned her entitlement and her dignity as a host on the basis of her refusal to purchase meat every day. Criticising her for feeding me poorly emerged as a way to undermine the authority of my host, her ability to care and fulfil her responsibilities to the welfare of her family. This paper will look at eating practices in one village in rural Sichuan (China) and compare the diet of two families: my host family and a family that fiercely competed for my interest. In light of these examples, I will argue that claims to having a particular diet serve to articulate social identities, as an embodied idiom of social distinction in Pierre Bourdieu's sense (1984).

Diet has undergone dramatic changes in China since the onset of reforms, configuring differences in experiential horizons between generations and social groups. Following Bourdieu, I argue that income is not a straightforward determinant of food consumption. Choices with regard to food at once depend on various competing hierarchies of values and serve to constitute them. Some villagers have embraced the relative opportunity for a better diet by investing in food, especially milk and meat. These investments are part and parcel of a life trajectory towards a modern and urban-like life of comfort and well being, unencumbered by financial barriers. Others, amongst whom my host family, have rejected the consumerist quest for a particular kind of well being which relies on marketed goods, and they critique superfluous, conspicuous and (according to them) unhealthy consumption. Instead, they have adopted frugality which relies on the family's produce and they defend this simple diet as a healthier and sounder approach to both eating and family economy. I argue that parameters differ, but the aim is in both cases distinction and authority established by prioritising between more or less worthwhile investments, and thereby caring for family and guests. With reference to ethnographic examples, I show that the definition of what constitutes 'eating well' is not given but rather constantly negotiated. At stake in these disputes is not only villagers' bodily health, but also their 'social health', their position and acceptance as members of the local community.

Biography

Anna Lora-Wainwright is a Lecturer and Research Fellow in Contemporary Chinese Culture and Society at the Centre for Chinese Studies, Manchester University. She holds a B.A. in Social Anthropology and an M.A. in Chinese Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies. In 2006, she obtained a Ph.D. in Social and Cultural Anthropology from Oxford University, where she also held a lectureship in Modern Chinese Studies. Her field research and papers have been devoted to lay attitudes to health in rural Sichuan (China), healthcare provision, rural development and social inequalities, and the relationship between environment and health, especially with reference to diet and to cancer. In 2004-5 she was visiting research fellow at Sichuan University, with funding from the Leverhulme Trust.

KEYWORDS: anthropology, food, rural development, status and distinction

‘DO YOU EAT MEAT EVERYDAY’? FOOD, DISTINCTION AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN CONTEMPORARY RURAL CHINA

Introduction

Diet has undergone dramatic changes in China since the onset of post-Mao reforms, configuring differences in experiential horizons between generations and social groups, while articulating a range of diverse social identities and relationships. This paper will examine eating practices in one village in rural Sichuan on the basis of 15 months of anthropological fieldwork in 2004 and 2005. First, I will offer an account of the typical village diet, including drinking, snacking and feasting, and seasonal variation. Second, I will outline two different and equally widespread attitudes to food, and present an analysis of the discourses and experiences which contribute to shaping eating practices. I will show how discourses and practices surrounding eating were a locus of social distinction in both upward and downward directions. Accusations by locals that my host family was not good enough to me are in fact revealed to be strategies to undermine my hosts’ ability, legitimacy and entitlement to host a foreigner, and an attack on their status by extension. On the basis of my findings, I will conclude that locals’ *habitus* and taste (Bourdieu, 1984) are central to their perception of what foods are nutritious, fattening or appropriate for a given condition (such as colds or stomach-aches) and thereby influence their dietary patterns at least as much as does financial means.

Following Pierre Bourdieu (1984), I argue that income is not a straightforward determinant of food consumption. Choices with regard to food at once depend on various competing hierarchies of values and serve to constitute them. These hierarchies were related to income differences, but such differences could affect eating habits even after families had enough resources to purchase better food. Some villagers have embraced the relative opportunity for a better diet by investing in food, especially milk and meat. These investments are part and parcel of a life trajectory towards a modern and urban-like life of comfort and well being, unencumbered by financial barriers. They constitute a concern with ‘eating well’ (*chi hao*). Others, by contrast, have rejected the consumerist quest for a particular kind of well being which relies on marketed goods, and they critique superfluous, conspicuous and (according to them) unhealthy consumption. Instead, they have adopted frugality which relies on the family’s produce and they defend this simple diet as a healthier and sounder approach to both eating and family economy.

I argue that the aim is in both cases to establish distinction and authority by prioritising between more or less worthwhile investments, and thereby caring for family and guests. With reference to ethnographic examples, I show that eating practices and discourses may be understood as sites of negotiation around locals’ sense of self and its constantly changing boundaries. At stake in these disputes is not only villagers’ bodily health, but also their ‘social health’, their position and acceptance as members of the local community. Specifically, I examine meat and milk as particularly powerful pivotal elements in local negotiations of status and offer some thoughts on why this may be (changes following social economic reforms, consumerism, Americanisation, promotion of milk on TV, historical absence of these foods). Whether one bought milk for her child or grandchild, and whether she bought meat for the family as a whole, served to position locals vis-à-vis one another. This does not mean however that those who do not eat meat or milk see themselves as inferior. As I will show, there are competing parameters surrounding what constitutes eating well, and those who did not eat meat every day employed a variety of discourses to justify their choice and to empirically disprove the health-value of investing

in special food. More broadly, therefore, this paper points to the contribution of anthropological research to understanding the complexity not only of dietary patterns but also of the impact of post-Mao reforms on rural people's lives. By focusing on locals' perspectives and everyday experiences, it will provide a vivid account of the challenges villagers face and have faced, and of the ways in which they engage with them.

The research location

After Mao's death in 1976, social and economic reforms were advocated in an attempt to revitalise economic stagnation. Although reforms brought some advantages, such as increased prosperity and mobility, not all areas of rural China benefited from the reforms and, at any rate, advantages were short-lived. Overall, retreat in state support and dependence on the market engendered a sense of vulnerability to forces beyond villagers' control and reinforced the need for reliance on family networks and non-kin *guanxi*.¹ Both migration and economic reforms more widely have affected very visible generational differences in life experiences. If these differences, and in turn perceptions of the body and food, are already obvious for young adults and those older, they become even more prominent for young children and their grandparents, who, as a consequence of migration, are engaged in unmediated daily interactions. This is hardly surprising, but I propose we can gather a more vivid sense of these diversities by examining attitudes to food and eating practices they engender.

I carried out research in inland rural China, near Langzhong city, in a hilly area in the north-east of the Sichuan basin. Langzhong county is poor by Sichuan's standards, with an average yearly per capita income of roughly 2000 yuan (the equivalent of £ 135). Until recently, the area was rather cut off. In 2004 it took roughly 5 hours to reach Langzhong city from the provincial capital Chengdu (roughly 300 km away), a journey that only 3 years previously required a day's travel. Some investment has been put into the area as part of the 'develop the West' project (the west and interior of China being notoriously poorer than the coastal areas). Taking advantage of the stunning location of the city and of the original meaning of the name as 'surrounded by hills and water' (Liu, 2003: 3), Langzhong city is currently being promoted as the homeland of *fengshui* 风水 (commonly translated as geomancy), hoping to attract external investment and tourism. Temperatures range from freezing point in the winter, to 40 C in the summer. It is a very humid region, and as a consequence many locals suffer with rheumatism. Of course diet is often discussed in relation to climate. For instance, Sichuan is famous for its spicy food, and this is presented by locals as a consequence of the climate (chilli helping to expel dampness and wind) but also a matter of habitual taste – food without chillies in other words is tasteless.

I lived in one village, which I will call Baoma, for 15 months and carried out most of my research there, but I also visited a number of other villages in the area. The main setting of my research was 6 km from the city. According to official statistics, in 2003 Baoma had roughly 250 households and a registered population of 652, all of them Han. This number is however not necessarily descriptive of how many people were actually in Baoma. Over 130 were registered as village residents, but being economic migrants in large cities, mainly Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen, they did not live in Baoma and returned home sporadically, on average once every 18 months (see Murphy, 2002). Others commuted daily

¹ Many ethnographies have been produced on general social and economic changes after reforms. See for instance Chan, Madsen and Unger (1992); Croll (1994); Gao (1999); Potter and Potter (1990); Siu (1989). Two insightful volumes on developments in post-Mao China are Link et al. (2002); Perry and Selden (2003).

to jobs in Langzhong city. Conversely, over 100 village residents had bought city residency, and were thus registered as city residents, although they lived in the village on a permanent basis.

Local diet in rural North East Sichuan

My account is based, as predictable, on my host family: a couple of thirty-six year olds (Dajie and Cao Jun) and their twelve year old daughter Lida. But it largely applies to most of village families and would be recognised by them as typical. Indeed, a key conversation roller was “what do you eat at Dajie’s?”. When I replied “noodles at breakfast, watery rice (*xifan* 稀饭) at lunch and dry boiled rice (*ganfan* 干饭) at dinner” my informants would invariably respond “oh, that’s just like us then, we all eat like this”. Having informal meals in a range of families with variations in numbers of diners, age, and income corroborated these claims.

Breakfast consisted of a bowl of boiling water, noodles, fresh ginger, garlic and spring onion, Sichuan pepper (*huajiao* 花椒), hot chillies (*lajiao* 辣椒), rapeseed oil, soy sauce, vinegar, a little salt and flavour enhancer (mono sodium glutamate) and a seasonal vegetable, such as cucumber in the summer, garden beet (*tian cai* 甜菜), and sweet potato leaves in the autumn, cabbage in the winter, and preserved cabbage in the spring. If there was any food left over from dinner the previous night, this would be added to the bowl. Lunch consisted of one or two large bowls of unsalted rice porridge (*xifan* 稀饭). Usually some peanuts or maize or soybeans were boiled with the rice. This would be consumed alongside salt-preserved cowpeas, carrots or radishes. I observed very little of these vegetables being consumed, perhaps a small bowl of them would be shared by three people. Preserved cabbage was consumed differently, added to the bowl of watery rice or noodles. Occasionally (at most twice a month in the family I lived with), some pancakes with slices of pork fat may be consumed at lunch alongside porridge. They were considered a special treat, Dajie would eat little of them, leaving them for me and her daughter, who ate as much as 5 each time (40 cm² each). Supper consisted of steamed rice. Depending on seasons, the cook’s and the diners’ inclination, pumpkin and sweet potato were boiled with the rice. Rice would be accompanied by one or two dishes of vegetables and sometimes beancurd (*doufu*) and meat stir fried with rapeseed oil to be shared. Overall, meat nearly always meant pork; indeed, if the word meat (*rou*) is not qualified it is understood as pork. It is rare to eat any other meat, and it is in my experience only consumed at special occasions such as Chinese new year and birthdays, weddings and funerals.

Dajie bought some pork twice a week, 500 grams each time, to be shared by the four of us. Dajie routinely argued that she had bought ‘lean meat’, but it was usually at least 50 per cent fat. Dajie and her husband ate very little meat, and offered what they identified as ‘lean’ slices (in fact, they were at least partly fat) to me and their daughter Lida. Embarrassed by this, I ate little of it myself and left most to Lida. The meal was followed by a plain soup (boiled water, tomatoes or preserved cabbage, soy sauce and vinegar). If no soup was prepared, the family would drink some hot boiled water and vinegar. Food consumption was mostly based on family produce and therefore on seasons. Indulgence at New Year stood in stark opposition to a diet limited to preserved vegetables and sweet potatoes characteristic of some periods of the year. The most notorious of these was the time around ‘*guyu*’ 谷雨 literally ‘grain rain’, connoting the twelfth day of the third month of the lunar calendar, April 20th in 2005. Both in 2004-05, there was enough grain to feed families until the harvest in late August, but the relative lack of fresh vegetables remained

true for one to two months between April and May.

The ‘stingy’ host family and distinction

Eating practices were central to families’ perception of themselves and to how they were perceived by others.² My host family ranked as one of average wealth in Baoma. Their eating practices were however well below average, and known to be so. I formed a sense that my host family did not value eating meat or investing in food from my very first day in Baoma. Arguments between the landlady, Dajie, and the young woman assigned by Sichuan University to assist me for two months took place every day. Local officials also periodically tried to move me to a richer family and argued that Dajie was terrible to me because she constantly complained about having to feed me and my assistant meat every day.

Dajie argued that demanding meat everyday, as my assistant did, was unreasonably expensive for the amount of money agreed. A monthly amount of 500 yuan per person was agreed upon my first visit by Dajie and her husband, myself, my assistant, the village head and the head of the township. This would include rent of my room, bills, and food. For as long as my assistant stayed, it would amount to 1000 yuan. As a matter of principle, my assistant and I decided not to go back on our agreement, despite Dajie’s dissatisfaction. After my assistant from Sichuan university left (18/08/04), Dajie made it very clear to me that with only five-hundred yuan a month I could not eat meat every day. I was not at all bothered by this, and in fact much keener to be perceived as an easily pleased diner, so I would have a chance to gain insights into what village diet was really like. Dajie and I therefore agreed that I would eat whatever they usually ate. Having got to know her, I knew she would take this literally. As she grew accustomed and attached to me, she occasionally prepared some special treats, like meat dumplings once a month. The rest of the time I ate what villagers normally eat. Locals often remarked about it in our informal chats, and my reputation as someone who eats “anything that we eat” worked in my favour and enabled me to observe the locals’ daily diet. This however took months of persistent effort, and eventually took its toll, leaving me clinically very anaemic upon return from the field. Local diet may have played a role in this. Usually, I had at most 100 g. of lean meat (pork) per week, and at most the same amount of soybean curd (*doufu*); beans were a minor part of local diet as were eggs. The host family did not grow spinach because they did not like its bitter taste, and few other locals did. Water pollution by nitrogen fertilisers may also have contributed to this.³

During my stay, eating routines at Dajie’s remained a matter of great debate in Baoma and beyond. At first, and in some cases throughout, Dajie was heavily critiqued by locals for being ‘stingy’ (*xiaoqi* 小气), money oriented (*xiang qian* 想钱) and feeding me simple (*jianpu* 简朴) food. Villagers also often used a Sichuanese expression to describe her

² For a seminal study of commensality see W. Robertson-Smith (1894). Recent studies of food, identity and commensality in China include Jing ed. (2001); Kipnis (1997); Stafford (2000); Yang (1994) and Watson ed. (1997). Insightful edited volumes include Caplan ed. (1997) and Watson and Caldwell eds. (2005).

³ When nitrite enters the bloodstream, it reacts with the hemoglobin and forms a compound called methemoglobin. This compound reduces the blood’s capacity to carry oxygen. The oxygen level decreases, and babies show signs of a disease called methemoglobinemia also known as “blue baby disease”. For individuals who suffer from anaemia, cardiac failure or pulmonary disease, the symptoms of hypoxia may appear at lower percentage levels of methaemoglobin (personal communication with ONLUS staff, an Italian NGO carrying out research on water pollution in Langzhong in 2004).

attitude: *jigu* (叽咕). In standard Mandarin, *jigu* means to whisper, but in Sichuanese its meaning is closer to *baoyuan* (抱怨), that is to grumble or complain; it can also mean stingy, the correspondent of *linse* (吝啬) in standard Chinese. Of course, all involved had different stakes in the negotiation and discourses of local diet. There was however a widespread sense in which my sharing food with locals would be the most immediate way for me to form an impression of them, through which our diversities would be articulated, and either overcome or made more obvious. Locals brought different attitudes to their discussion on how I was fed by my host family and on local diet by extension. The key emerging elements were envy, shame and ‘distinction’. I present a few examples to examine how these were interconnected and to show that Dajie’s attitude was the result of cultural attitudes to meat (and milk) and of her *habitus*.

One of the most outspoken advocates of the view that my payment to Dajie was extortionately high was Wang Jing, the second assistant I was assigned by the local police when the first assistant left (18/08/04). She was a twenty-six year old laid off worker from Langzhong city. Wang Jing explained incessantly to me and to others in Baoma that the yearly rent of a two bedroom flat in the city was 3000 yuan, and that pork (eating other kinds of meat is rare in Baoma) only costs 7 yuan per 500 grams. Therefore, she argued, Dajie was absolutely unreasonable. Wang Jing despised my host family and more or less anyone in Baoma, she never spoke to locals, and when she did, it was to attack them or correct their claims. She was in turn fiercely disliked by villagers at large, who continued to tell me how inappropriate her behaviour was until well after she had left. It was obvious to both Wang Jing and I that working together was not productive, so our collaboration only lasted a month. Afterwards, I convinced local officials that I established a good relationship with villagers in the previous three months and therefore I could work alone for the remaining year.

Wang Jing’s attitude seemed to articulate a sense of superiority to villagers. It also expressed a perceived loss of face for Langzhong people as a whole due to one of the locals treating a guest poorly. The most pervasive feeling in Baoma however was one of more or less openly articulated envy. Locals questioned me directly as to why I had not moved into their house, and accused Dajie of not behaving appropriately. This escalated considerably after my first assistant left and the rumour spread that I would eat whatever Dajie cooked. One of her neighbours, a woman in her forties, complained that Dajie was one of two women in unit two who only cooked ‘basic food’. She added “I eat alone every day [her husband was a migrant labourer in Guangdong, and her only daughter had married]. So I eat steamed rice twice a day, and buy meat”. Another lady in her forties was shocked and outraged to hear I was not fed meat every day. “500 yuan is a lot of money, and that ... that woman is not even feeding you meat every day?! That is wrong, you should move” (23/08/04).

Some families became rather vicious indeed. Aunt Xi, a woman in her early fifties, repeatedly tried to convince me to live with her daughter Binbin, in the neighbouring village. I visited Binbin’s family roughly twice a month starting in mid November 2004, we became good friends, and I became her son’s adoptive mother upon my first visit. Whenever I visited, I would undergo a rather depressing anti-Dajie campaign. Aunt Xi argued “she’s outrageous, you’re such a nice person, and she’s only feeding you basic food. You should live with my daughter, you only pay three hundred yuan a month, and you’ll eat well” (24/11/04). Aunt Xi, Binbin, and her in-laws exchanged knowing looks about the unfairness of Dajie’s behaviour. When I visited, they made sure they would buy meat and

doufu, and cook at least three dishes. Yet, when I stayed at their house for two or three consecutive days (which happened three times in my fieldwork) it became obvious that their diet was not so radically different from Dajie's. They too ate steamed rice and stir fried dishes only once a day. The other two meals would be rice porridge and noodles respectively.

It is telling then that their attitudes to Dajie's behaviour and to her cooking did not comply with their own practices. They endeavoured to distinguish themselves from Dajie, but in fact their diets were very similar. Turning to Dajie's and Binbin's family situation offers some clues to these apparent divergences. Dajie was thirty-six, worked as a farmer, and the only financial income for the family was her husband's. He worked in the neighbouring city as a carpenter and earned at most eight hundred yuan per month. They lived in a brick built house adjacent to that of her in-laws, but had divided their family unit from that of her in-laws (as is most often the case).⁴ She often complained (in my observations rightly) that her in-laws were lazy and uncollaborative. In June 2005 she told me:

"You know what my mother-in-law is like, she could never have looked after Lida [her daughter]. Lida can't even sleep with her or her granddad, she complains he stinks of tobacco... and she can't cook, her food is terrible, I mean, you tried it didn't you?! I'm so unfortunate. Xueqin's and Xiaomei's mothers [her immediate neighbours who married the same year and also had a daughter each] have been away working for years and the grandmothers look after their children. They [the mothers] complain that they have to work hard, and that their mothers-in-law cannot care for the children properly. But they can, you've seen it, the children are fine. My mother-in-law? She couldn't do that, so I could never go away as a migrant and earn money, so our family is not so well off. She used to be really bad to me. Once my husband and my daughter were at a village meeting until after nine pm. She had cooked some pork rib and *nangua* 南瓜 (cucurbita maschata) soup. But she waited to bring it up here until they were back because she said she didn't want me to eat it all. As if I would have done that! So when she came I just left the kitchen, my husband went into a rage and didn't eat any either. Then I confronted her, I asked 'why are you so good to him and not to me?'. You know what she said?! 'He's my son, you're not my daughter!'. Imagine that. So I figured, they [in-laws] have their family, I have mine, I don't ask for any help... She's a lot better now, but she still doesn't really help with farm work. Take the wheat harvest. I asked a couple of times and she said she was busy, so I just did it myself. She doesn't help me, so I don't have to help her. I always say 'if you're good to me, I'm good to you; if you're bad to me I'll be bad to you', it's simple" (20/06/05).

Clearly, Dajie felt unfortunate because her in-laws were incapable of caring for her daughter, so the family had to rely only on her husband's income and on her farm work. The implications for gender and family relations of Dajie's mother-in-law's attitude are acute, and would merit a study of its own.⁵ Here I shall only observe that Dajie's example indicates the extent to which women are made to feel as outsiders in the family in which they have married, especially by their mother-in-law. Dajie's mother-in-law's refusal to leave her soup with Dajie implied not only that she did not want to offer her food, but also that she thought Dajie selfish and greedy, unable to properly care for her husband, and to put his welfare above (or at least on a level with) hers. M. Wolf (1972) cogently defined

⁴ Valuable recent rural ethnographies discussing the family and kinship in China include Ku (2003), Liu (2000), Stafford (1995, 2000), Yan (2003), Zhang (2002).

⁵ Excellent recent ethnographies on gender relations in China include H. Cai (2001); E. Judd (1994); C. Lee (1998); L. Rofel (1999) and L. Schein (2000). For an insightful historical account on the role of technology in creating and transmitting gender ideology see F. Bray (1997).

this process as the creation of the uterine family, by attempting to retain the first loyalty of their young sons for themselves and later prevent their daughters-in-law from intervening with this loyalty. Scholars have argued that the ability to migrate since the reforms has worked to empower women by allowing them to evade day-to-day dominance, and to earn money (Judd, 1994: 248). Yet, as we have seen for Dajie's case, their ability to migrate typically depends on the collaboration of the older generation, which empowers mothers-in-law over daughters-in-law. At the same time, the importance of enduring links with one's natal family should not be underestimated. Women often cared for their own parents and visited them regularly (see Lora-Wainwright, 2006). They could also enlist their support when their husband's family proved uncollaborative or actively hostile. Indeed, it was not uncommon to find villagers caring for their daughters' children (see Stafford, 2000: 110-27).⁶

Binbin by contrast had a good relationship with her in-laws. She was twenty seven, and hers was a four-generation family: grandmother-in-law, parents-in-law, the couple and their six year old son, all living under one roof. The village where they live is bigger than Baoma, with over 1000 people. It has its own primary school, which has a few hundred students and until 1998 it also had a middle school (students aged between 12 and 15), but this had since closed because students preferred to attend the school in the township. In general villagers did not go to the city themselves to sell vegetables, as some did in Baoma, because the journey was too long. Instead, retailers came to the village to purchase the produce for re-sale. Binbin had worked in Shenzhen for three years as a tailor earning 1000 yuan per month, and after her return she set up a family business with her husband making work gloves. Her husband went to the city to sell them and this provided a net earning of over 1000 yuan per month. They were also still farming their land (five people's allotment, that is 4.5 mu (9 fen per person)⁷, and breeding fish in the local pool. Binbin's father-in-law worked at a chemists' in the city, bringing home six hundred yuan per month. When I first visited them, Binbin and her family had just finished their new house, concrete-built, externally tiled and complete with a flat roof terrace, which cost them roughly 30,000 yuan. They were very well off by rural standards, but not unique in this. Binbin's husband was a certainly a man of 'distinction'. He was very proud of his business, of his new house, of the microwave given to him by his brother in law and of the machinery he bought for sawing (two sawing machines, a cloth-cutting machine, and an electric generator to avoid disruption in the Winter and Spring when electricity is routinely cut in the countryside). He also boasted his plans to soon buy "one of those really large TVs". He had a very disparaging attitude to other rural people, whom he often defined as lazy and backward.

As will become clear, Binbin's family's claims that Dajie was not caring properly for me were also efforts to show themselves to be starkly different from (and superior to) Dajie. Proclaimed differences in diet were indeed statements about their respective social positions more widely. The fact that the actual differences, in terms of daily diet, were not so prominent, made their discourses of diversity even more necessary, to highlight the fine line between them and Dajie. But Binbin's family's discussion on eating also articulated a degree of shame. Distinction and shame are indeed engaged in an inextricable interplay. The extent to which locals like Binbin felt ashamed at Dajie's attitude depended on the extent to which they felt a sense of belonging to a common community. In some respects, a member of the local community feeding me basic food meant a loss of face for the

⁶ For a historical argument in favour of the complexity of women's positions "not simply as objects of ideology but as its active producers" see F. Bray (1997: 377).

⁷ 1 mu corresponds to 6.6667 acres.

community at large, which motivated them to be so emphatic as to how *we* (Binbin and her family) are different, *we* eat properly, *we* may all look similar and live in the countryside, but *we* are not like Dajie. ‘We’ is therefore defined by Binbin and her family to be in opposition to Dajie and her family. Eating practices served as a key idiom for defining their identities and social status vis-à-vis Dajie.

If Binbin and her family opted to present themselves as clearly separate from Dajie, some of her immediate neighbours had a more ambivalent relationship with her. Cao Feng was a fifteen year old who lived in unit 2. All males in unit two (and some in unit one) shared the same surname, and identified themselves as descendants of a common ancestor, as ‘one family’. Following local customs, he therefore called Dajie ‘older sister’, because her husband belonged to the same generation as him. Cao Feng, his father and his grandmother took to caring for me as soon as I settled in Baoma. His mother had been away as a migrant for over three years, but whenever she telephoned she also expressed concern about my well-being and gratitude for my help and support to her son. Two months after my arrival Cao Feng’s father also left for Shenzhen, to earn money in preparation for his son starting high school the following year. As most fifteen year olds, he liked to feel he was treated as an adult, so I often asked for his opinion on my research and on my relationship with my host family. Cao Feng started to comment to Dajie on the food she prepared for me in July 2004 soon after I had settled in Baoma. Months later, Dajie angrily recalled Cao Feng’s attitude to her. “When you moved in and Xiao Tang [my assistant] insisted you eat meat every day, Cao Feng said that he and his granny were eating meat every day, that it was no big deal. After Xiao Tang left, I asked Cao Feng’s granny, and she laughed, ‘we’re lucky if we eat meat once a month! Sometimes we don’t even have oil to cook with, never mind meat’. That really made me angry... that kid is sly (*jiaohua* 狡猾) and good with words (*shuo hua hao ting de hen* 说话好听得狠), just like his father” (28/11/04). Dajie was angered by Cao Feng’s claims because they made her lose face in my assistant’s eyes and in turn mine, she assumed. It also forced her to buy meat every day for two months, which she perceived unnecessary and a waste of money.

Cao Feng explained to me that he wanted to make sure Dajie was treating me properly, because “we’re all one family, we can’t have one of ours (Cao) behaving like that!” (06/12/04). Cao Feng’s perception of Dajie as part of the ‘Cao family’ is significant and in stark contrast to her mother-in-law’s efforts to ostracise her. At the same time, Cao Feng included her in the Cao clan but still considered her behaviour unworthy of a Cao. His claims therefore were aimed at defending the reputation of the Cao family at large. But he was also attempting to present his own immediate family as exemplary, to distinguish his family from Dajie’s. Cao Feng was ashamed that someone of his own ‘Cao family’, would feed me poorly. This for him would create the impression that they were poor, and without dignity. He was thus very keen to stress that he would talk to her and her husband in my absence and urge them to treat me better. This was his way to show his care and interest in me, but also his way to save his family’s face, both on the nuclear level and on the wider level of the ‘Cao family line’.

These examples begin to highlight that disputes were not about nutrition as such, but about social status. *Doufu*, for instance, was also widely known to be a nutritious food (see Simoons, 1991: 70), and was much cheaper than meat. A 250 gram portion of *doufu*, which was enough to prepare one of two dishes for a meal shared by four people, cost only 1 yuan. A family’s diet was however never discussed in terms of how many times a week they consumed *doufu*. The pervasive question was “how often do you eat meat”? For children more specifically, it surrounded the quantity and quality of milk available to a

child. I aim to show that meat and milk played a particular role in negotiations surrounding social status based on diet because of their peculiar positions, culturally and historically. Throughout I refer to the specific cases of Binbin and Dajie, but my comments on them are not about them as individuals, but rather as cases of types of attitudes simultaneously present in Baoma.

Meat

As the emphasis on whether or not I was given meat suggests, meat was seen as a special treat. Traditionally, it was considered central to holding a banquet. In his study of food and philosophy in during the Zhou and Han dynasties for instance, R. Sterckx (2005) points out that aristocrats were defined as ‘meat eaters’ (ibid.: 38; see also Chang, 1977). This may not reflect their diet, but it does reflect the value of meat as something only the rich could afford. Similarly, the aspiration of starving peasants during the great Leap Forward voiced in a local saying was ‘to eat meat at every meal, as if it was New Year’ (27/02/2005). The value with which meat is endowed is thus cultural, rather than purely nutritional. Yet meat has until recently been nearly absent from village diet (Simoons, 1991: 293). The *habitus* of all but the youngest has been to eat meat at most once a week, or more likely less. The intersection between these two elements – the cultural value of meat and its near-absence from local diet – was activated in diverse ways, but not necessarily following income differences. As the case of Dajie shows, some with enough income to afford pork more frequently, remained disposed against it. I suggest that we may understand these differences in terms of the encounter between past experiences and new socio-economic environments engendered by the reforms.

Binbin and her family argued for the importance of eating meat as a way of being socially superior since it ensured the well being of their family and guests. For them, the emphasis lay on eating well (*chihao* 吃好). This attitude was fostered by a combination of the experience of shortage in the past, and the relative well-being of the present, which allowed more access to meat, while it also presented meat consumption as a parameter of prosperity. They equated eating little meat with taking little care over one’s diet and one’s family and guests by extension. In turn, this would result in a loss of status and face. Dajie, following their argument, lacked the skills on which a woman’s authority depends: the ability and willingness to be responsible for the well being of her family.

Dajie by contrast saw more loss than benefit in investing in meat, and thus proposed that one could be healthy without making a special investment in meat. Her refusal to buy meat every day should not be explained in personalistic terms as ‘stingy’ behaviour, but traced to the environment which generated it. In their criticisms of Dajie, other villagers also stressed the influence of habit on her behaviour. Stinginess, they emphasised, does not derive from a lack of money, but rather from habit (*xiguan* 习惯), ‘people who, even when they have money, are not prepared to use it’. Indeed, it was the habitual state of not having access to meat, which predisposed Dajie, and others like her, not to consume any. This attitude may be explained with reference to her *habitus*. Dajie had not customarily eaten much meat. When she was growing up, she may have eaten it twice a month, and she stressed that she still grew up to be a healthy woman. Based on her habits and her experience, she felt no urge to buy meat more frequently. But Dajie’s attitude was not simply formed sometime in the past to later remain unchanged. It is also part of her life trajectory, of how she perceived the recent social changes and the rise of consumerism. Dajie did not integrate meat consumption as a statement of a rise in the social hierarchy. She maintained, as she had learnt through her past experience, that eating one’s fill was important, and did not place

equal emphasis on eating well. The historical circumstances which made meat inaccessible were internalised, but her attitude was also an active engagement with the environment of reform. Dajie's and Binbin's social identities were not simply defined by the relative presence or absence of meat, nor was meat ascribed only one meaning (see Willets, 1997). The meaning of eating meat rather was subject to constant negotiation.

Milk

If meat was traditionally considered as a desirable but often inaccessible food, the other parameter of distinction – milk – was by contrast not historically part of the diet in the area, nor in China more widely (Simoons, 1991: 454-63). Milk products have historically been consumed in certain parts of China (Sabban, 1986). Yet, H. Huang (2002) argues that milk and milk products have remained marginal (and under-represented in the literature) for a number of reasons, including a genetically determined inability to digest lactose (also known as hypolactasia) (ibid.: 810), but predominantly on economic grounds (ibid.: 816). For him, agriculture on good farmable land could not compete with animal husbandry in terms of productivity, and thus milk, like beef and lamb, remained an expensive commodity. Although consumption levels are still low compared to Europe or North America, the rise in consumption shows, according to Huang, that the gastronomic gap (i.e. a distaste for milk and milk products) could be easily overcome, provided that living standards are sufficient to afford milk and dairy products. Indeed, at the time of fieldwork, milk, milk powder and yoghurt were heavily marketed as nourishing foods. Particular kinds of milk powder were produced to cater for young babies, children, students, new mothers, middle aged people, the elderly and so forth. Milk was also typically purchased (alongside soymilk and peanut milk) to be consumed during banquets by those who did not drink alcohol (usually women and children). Finally, it was purchased for those afflicted by illnesses which made them feel weak and unable to eat, such as locally widespread stomach and oesophagus cancer.

Milk was largely perceived as a highly beneficial drink, which would greatly improve bodily strength and size. Perceptions of milk, however, were not unified and presented a bone of contention, with different social groups attributing to it varying levels of importance for well being. Nevertheless, most argued that there was a link between milk-drinking and healthy Western bodies. Villagers could not explain with clarity where they learnt of the benefits of drinking milk, and typically replied, "I heard it on TV", or "scientists say it's good". Choice of brand depended on a combination of cost considerations, personal experience, TV adverts, and advice from neighbours and family. Susan Brownell found in her study of Chinese athletes that the emphasis on dairy products as high-quality foods is "a result of an awareness that they form part of the Western diet, the assumption being that they explain the greater size and musculature of Western athletes" (2005: 254). Villagers often commented that I was much taller and generally bigger than them because I must have drunk milk as a child. They also claimed that the tallest and fattest people on the planet were (North) Americans. One evening, after dinner, I sat by twelve-year-old Lida challenging her father Cao Jun to arm wrestle. When she was defeated, I jokingly volunteered to arm wrestle with him. His reply was "You'll certainly win, you people eat beef and milk every day, I'm sure you're stronger than me" (28/02/05). More than my body size or the amount of physical labour I carried out, my presumed past as a 'milk-drinker and beef-eater' persuaded Cao Jun that I must be physically stronger than him. It was very common for villagers more widely to comment on my 'fat and healthy' body as the product of milk-drinking, because, the argument went, milk is nutritious, and explains difference in body size between us.

Since milk was advertised and generally accepted as a very nutritious and healthy food, many carers bought milk powder, fresh milk or yoghurt drinks for young children. Although both Dajie and her husband Cao Jun regarded strong Western bodies to be produced by consumption of milk, they did not necessarily believe that providing children with milk and milk powder had any sure benefits. Dajie presented her daughter as undeniable evidence. Lida was never fed any specially manufactured food, such as milk powder, which was so popular amongst her peers and younger children. Sceptical of the benefits of milk, Dajie opined:

“If you are ill you are just ill, why would drinking something make it better?! Scientists say that drinking milk is good for you, but in the countryside few children drink it because it’s expensive, only rich families can afford it. The best milk is the one that’s just come from the cow; the one you buy from the shops is fake (*jiade* 假的), you don’t know what’s in it, it makes the kids too fat and that doesn’t look good. Lida didn’t have anything peculiar, and she’s tall and healthy, she never had any problems, and we eat very simple food... Look at Pingping [one of Lida’s school mates]. Her mother bought all kinds of special milks for her, and she still grew up the same as Lida. When I stopped breast feeding her I just gave her powdered rice (*mi huzi* 米糊子). Milk powder could harm your stomach anyway, so I never bought it ... Xiaomei [another of Lida’s schoolmates] had that stuff because her mum didn’t have milk. Xueqin [another schoolmate] didn’t have it, she didn’t even have proper meals because her parents weren’t home, her granny would be too busy so she’d eat breakfast at 11, but she’s healthy ... People say eating this is good, that is bad... but in the past we had nothing, and look, I grew up healthy anyway... there’s no point in that stuff, once you’ve eaten your fill, that’s all you need” (19/04/05).

Dajie’s refusal to accept that milk (powder) ought to be part of children’s diet did not by any means imply that she did not care about the diet of her daughter. On the contrary, she consulted her daughter on what fruit and vegetables she liked and farmed a large amount of tomatoes because it was Lida’s favourite food. Secondly, Dajie justified her reluctance to feed Lida milk powder on the grounds that it could be harmful. Thirdly, Lida and her mum argued over her food on a daily basis. In March 2005, for instance, Lida complained that the food was not tasty enough, and she added extra chilli, flavour enhancer (monosodium glutamate) and salt to her food, claiming “*now* it’s really tasty”. Her mum looked at her disapprovingly, and told her that she would have a bad stomach when she grew up. “Stop adding that, it hurts the stomach (*shangwei* 伤胃)”. “No it doesn’t, I always add it and I’m fine”, Lida argued back. “Whatever, you’re really not well behaved, but you’ll see how wrong you are... you keep eating that and in ten days you won’t feel like eating at all... like Xiaomei. Last year her great-grandmother gave her money and she kept buying instant noodles and snacks (*xiaochi* 小吃). She ate that for about a month and then started feeling really ill, anxious (*ren huang* 人惶), without energy (*mei jingshen* 没精神) and she couldn’t get up (*qi bu lai chuang* 起不来床). The doctor said it’s all that food, it harmed her stomach” (03/03/05).

As this proves, Dajie was indeed concerned about her daughter’s diet, and especially the harmful effects of consuming manufactured food and excessive chilli and salt. Dajie’s aversion to milk may be seen as an effort to negate hierarchies by which consuming it constitutes social status, befitting a new approach to health. According to her *habitus*, engendered by the historical lack of this product, and by her scepticism of consumerism, Dajie upheld the value of “eating one’s fill” as constitutive of health. If the perception of

meat as nutritious and desirable was part of her cultural baggage, milk had only recently come on the scene. Its status could be that of a nutritious drink as much as that of a fake, manufactured product that may harm the body. The lack of a cultural predisposition towards milk thus discouraged Dajie from consuming it.

Dajie conveniently conflated eating meat, milk powder and instant noodles for the sake of her argument. These were all constructed as indulgent pleasures; regardless of the fact that meat is a natural food product, milk powder is a manufactured product aimed at increasing health, and instant noodles are a form of fast food for which no claims were made to its health benefits, only as a fashionable snack. But for Dajie, the common denominator remained that these foods were outside of her *habitus* and significantly they were not home grown (cf. Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993; Bray, 1997: 24-6). Indeed, her rejection was not simply of manufactured foods, but of foods whose content is doubtful. Fresh pork purchased in the market was seen in the same light because she, as other villagers, was acutely aware that pigs may be fed genetically modified (GM) foods. The recurrent scepticism was phrased in terms of “you don’t know what’s in it”. More broadly then, her attitude articulated a scepticism towards recent developments, such as the introduction of fertilisers and GM foods, and of the consumer culture engendered by reforms. Her judgement of others’ eating practices was thus clearly also a judgement about them and an attempt to distinguish herself from them, to counter their snobbery and deconstruct the inferiority which was imposed on her. Her argument proposed that investing in meat and milk did not necessarily make for healthy bodies, and conversely lack of investment did not necessarily make for unhealthy ones.

Discussion: distinction, *habitus* and culture

The difference between these two positions – exemplified by Dajie and Binbin – may be understood with reference to Pierre Bourdieu’s writing on taste and distinction (1984), with some important differences. In his study of taste in rural France, Bourdieu found that differences in eating patterns were interconnected with class differences, but only provided that economic determinism with regard to class identity was questioned. Eating practices, he argued, become second nature, and “may be perpetuated beyond their social conditions of production” (ibid.: 190). In other words, income does not easily determine what people eat. While my data on Dajie substantiates this point, however some aspects emerge in my research that have not been highlighted by Bourdieu’s analysis. The first is the discrepancy between claims with regard to eating meat and actual practices. For the first half of my fieldwork (mid-June to December) some locals would claim they were eating meat every day. But life in Baoma convinced me this was very rarely (if at all) the case. The fact that people would be particularly insistent on my staying for a meal when they had meat, or that families with good relationships would call their friends’ children to eat when they prepared some meat, showed that eating meat was not common. Despite Binbin and her family’s insistence that their diet was better than Dajie’s, a few consecutive days spent with her family showed that their diet was in fact much like what I was used to in my host family. Similarly, Cao Feng claimed his family was consuming meat every day, but it soon became clear this was not so. This difference between self-perception and representation and actual practices highlights the complexity of locals’ engagement with eating.

Secondly, and more importantly, Bourdieu’s study displays relative inattention to the extent to which parameters for social judgement are far from unified but rather in a constant process of change. Daily discourses and practices are not simply articulated in reference to an accepted code employed to understand social status through eating. Nor may locals

positions themselves within social hierarchies in any straightforward way. These are fields of negotiation and contestation; by engaging in such dialogues, locals constantly redefine these parameters and mould their identities in the process. Consuming meat and milk is often a marker of social distinction. But for those, like Dajie, who consume less of these products, markers of distinction may lie elsewhere, for instance in their healthy body nourished on food from their own allotment, attesting to their ability to withstand the social pressure to consume milk powder or fashionable snacks and take pride in simple diet based on reliable home-grown produce (in terms that “you know what’s in it”). Far from accepting their inferiority or alleged unwillingness to fulfil her responsibilities towards their families, those like Dajie articulate competing claims about what constitutes health.

Whether the preferred parameter of distinction is ‘eating well’ or ‘eating one’s fill’, the food products that serve as parameters for distinction are culturally and historically specific. Meat and milk played a special function because of their peculiar cultural positions – one as an established nutritious food, the other as one whose importance is rising with the concomitant rise of consumerism. When they decide whether or not to consume these products, locals engage in practices of distinction, but the relative status that they gain through their choices is by no means undisputed. Whatever the position taken, eating habits were central to situating locals within a contested set of claims surrounding identity and status. Their mode of engagement with the field of eating was both a product of their past experiences and emblematic of their life trajectory. In turn, eating practices are telling of the settings in which people live and the challenges they face in contemporary rural China.

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