Serving a Nation of Billions:

Understanding Food as a Tool that Strengthens, Controls, and Mediates a Rising China Along the Tea-Horse Road

Coming to the Table- an introduction

None of my friends would ever call me a “foodie”. On the contrary, I’ve been repeatedly berated for my inability (or, rather, unwillingness) to approach the culinary arts with anything that might be held akin to skill or grace. Whenever I travelled I carried with me my attitudes toward food. Rather than seeking out the foreign and delicious; following locals to their favorite eateries, in search of meals that were truly representative of the life and work of the people who dined on them, food became a challenge to be overcome in pursuit of things that had for “real” socio-political significance, like statues and amphitheaters.

Eyeing down my dinner plate as if it were some obstacle, for many years I failed to understand that the staples we expect at the table, whether they be pasta, corn, or chow mein, are powerful tools that can bind societies together or isolate minority’s; even carry a nation into a global economy.

Traditionally articles on food feature reviews of food served to the culinary critic behind the pen, but the more I saw (and consequently, ate) the more I became interested in how food serves China.

Fig. 1 Perhaps the golden rule of eating abroad while in China
In Yunnan, a slow family prepared meal we shared at a guest house demonstrated the ability of sharing a table to strengthen cohesion. The predominance of Han food in Lhasa, and the restraints of our government approved Tibetan guides, demonstrated how culinary-imperialism aids the PRC in suppressing dissident periphery minorities. Finally, American fast food restaurants in Beijing witnessed the rising importance of China’s youth, their changing values, and the transition of a global economy tied to the West. Collectively these three case studies (social, political, and economic) demonstrate how food is being used, consciously and unconsciously, to serve a growing China.

**Yunnan Province- food serving society and the people**

Our first night staying at a Chinese guest house, a small traditional building centered around a courtyard in the town of Shanxi, we were invited by the head of the house to help cook dinner with her and her two children. Preparation began with washing and peeling all of the vegetable ingredients, which included tomato, corn, cabbage, potatoes (chopped), eggplant, carrots (shredded), cilantro/green onions, chili peppers, “pien-la” (to which we could not identify an English name), and, of course, mushrooms, which are something of a regional specialty in Yunnan. Scraps and skins from this preparation, rather than wasted in the trash, were tossed into a can and saved as feed for the cats of the house.

![Figure 2 Student Andrew Moore helping the cook of the home prepare vegetables for dinner](image)
Once finished, all attention turned to the inside of the kitchen which had a large “barn door” style window looking out over the eating area in the courtyard and, and was subdivided into three main work stations. The first was a cutting station with a large chopping block fashioned out of a cross-section of a fallen tree which had been aged down to a smooth and polished finish. Here the vegetables were chopped before being fried, in addition to the region’s traditional cheese (a kind of waxy ribbon that is flash-fried) and pork. Our translator explained that the pork must be cut a special way for meat to remain tender and retain its flavorful juices and that many young people are losing this skill.

Several strips of fly paper also lined the table. While this wasn’t necessarily anything more than an aesthetic problem, expectations of kitchen cleanliness in China, largely introduced by western fast-food franchises, has become an issue by which many Chinese now consider when selecting a venue, and the younger girl in the kitchen did her best to cover them up when she saw me looking. Closer to the door was a second and smaller station that consisted of a hotplate, a handful of bowls with either chopped pork or vegetables, and two frying pans, which were changed out regularly on the burner.

The kitchen’s final station was a wood burning stove that supported two large woks, which were constantly in use throughout the duration of the meal preparation. These woks could either fry large quantities of food or be converted to steam rice. Literally translated into “wood saving stove,” the unit featured two smaller doors to the furnace which were meant to deter the user from inserting larger pieces of wood, or too much wood at a time. Instead the family
gathered smaller pieces of wood, and even recycled the used chopsticks from our previous meal. Placed in a small nook up above this station was a small shrine to Zhao-Shen, the traditional Chinese “Stove God”; one of the most important deities and charged with the protection of the family.

Everything about this was contrary to my expectations of life in Yunnan. Kunming was a lesson in how quickly China was growing. Everywhere we looked the city was being built on top of itself by an army of cranes, and it seemed like people on the street were speeding along just to keep up. Comparatively our meal was quite slow (it took about an hour and a half to prepare, and almost as long to eat). Really it was kind of a therapy, especially those parts of it that stayed true to Chinese Tradition. While everything is changing around them, the familiarity and homeliness of family prepared Chinese cuisine can be a kind of anchor that roots modern Chinese in the midst of chaos.

Finally, and this may be fairly presumptuous on my behalf, but it felt like the preparation of our dinner, with the whole family pitching in together, served as a facilitator of social cohesion. Some of what we read for the course discussed the gravitation of young people in rural Yunnan toward the factories and business of the eastern coast. Often times this generation was separated from their family for long periods of time which was in itself a kind of social anxiety often compounded by economic issues. While it may seem insignificant, the role of sharing traditional food within the family seemed like an event that mediated this stress and helped maintain the unity of the family.
Tibetan Autonomous Region – food serving the CCP

Probably more indicative of our experience in Tibet than the food we shared there was the relative lack of availability we had to sample ethnic Tibetan cuisines during our tour through the region. Travel requirements for foreigners touring the TAR dictate that groups be accompanied at all times by a government trained guide and stick to a pre-approved itinerary, but because of our large group size we were assigned a pair of guides, Tashi and Tashi (out of convenience we called the shorter of them Two-shi). Having sampled Tibetan “mo-mo’s”, a kind of yak meat dumpling steamed or fried and topped with a spicy curry sauce, at a local street market, I was excited to try them in their home province. However time and time again we found our guides taking us to low end hotel restaurants that cooked exclusively Han Chinese cuisine and to which I imagine tour groups such as ours must be the only patrons (and perhaps, the local Han who make up 66% of Lhasa’s population).

Both our guides were ethnic Tibetans, and one of them was perhaps a bit too open with his criticism of the PRC than was expected. They told us that they could not take us to any Tibetan restaurants because their guide service contracted through a Han food service. Yet the question still remained, why did the guides contract with a Han and not a Tibetan food...
company, and why were we being discouraged to meet with regular Tibetans, much less share a meal with them?

A few people we met explained to us that economic disparity is still a divisive issue in Tibet, something that isn’t helped by the fact that this disparity generally follows ethnic divisions. One of the things the PRC is worried about is the visibility of affluent American tourists sparking a kind of class consciousness amongst the “have-nots”. Food in the TAR is used as a means of control, at least in Lhasa, by the predominantly Han Chinese government to simultaneously instigate the “Haninization” of local life and control the relationships foreigners form with the people of the area. There is an element of spontaneity when it comes to the sharing of meal; often times you find yourself breaking bread with an unexpected character. For a government whose control on foreign relations is absolute, this can be a potentially threatening possibility.

On top of this I began to pick up on a theme of cultural imperialism surrounding food in the TAR. Many people asked us why we even wanted to try Tibetan food in the first place. Insisting to us that Tibetan food was quite bland and unrefined, a claim that mirrored many of Han perceptions about the region, they encouraged us to stick to Chinese food. Our second

![Figure 7 Dico’s restaurant outside of Barkhor; green tent to left of sign is military watch point](image)
guide, the less vocal of the two, even made a case for the superiority of Han cuisine against that of his own heritage. At one point Sonam, a fellow student from Nepal who speaks Tibetan, was heavily rebuked when she asked if the waitress at a small noodle shop could speak Tibetan, as if the question was some kind of insult.

Placing this in the context of everything I had read preceding the trip about Sino-Tibetan relations, I gathered that food was being used here to bring the TAR into developing sense of nationalism propagated by a state. Paramount to the enduring mythology of the Middle Kingdom is that China is the center of civilization and that uncivilized periphery societies are naturally drawn to this, an idea that has not always played out in reality (especially in Tibet). For the CCP to bring Tibet into Chinese nationalism they would have to make Tibetans feel Chinese, a task that requires the suppression of Tibetan nationalism. While I didn’t see any demonstrations of Tibetan ethnicity openly restricted, I did gather that it was being subverted by Haninization and the sense that “Chinese-ness” was better than “Tibetan-ness”.

Returning to Lhasa following our tour of the rural TAR our guides sent us off on a rickshaw to an out-of-the-way Tibetan restaurant across for the Barkhor, one of the most holy sites in all of Tibetan Buddhism and site of the recent self immolations by Buddhist nationalists. We ordered four plates of different Mo-mo’s, both steamed and fried. Looking out the window I could spot the store front of one of the many “Dico’s” restaurants, a Chinese version of McDonald’s, and couldn’t help noticing a military watchtower perched on its roof, surveying the crowd below as the circumambulated the walk way, spinning their prayer wheels.

*Beijing- food serving the economy*
Arriving in Beijing I was excited to seek out western fast food restaurants such as McDonald’s or KFC, not because I was particularly interested about dining at these venues, but because I wanted to confirm for myself much of what I had read about their role in the country. As part of my course I delivered a presentation on *Golden Arches East*, an investigative report done in the 90’s by a team of anthropologists on the role of the chain in East Asia. In brief, the main assertions of the article were that Chinese diners were reinterpreting the restaurants for themselves (eating longer, using them as venues for social affairs or study halls, etc.), that they introduced higher expectations for cleanliness in China, and that youth were encouraged western food for them to learn about American experiences and make demands. Most of this was confirmed by experience. What I was interested though was what this meant for China’s growing economy.

As the gravity of China’s economic clout brings more investment capital inward and away from other areas of the world, and continues to develop a powerful upper class with expendable income, international exchange will inevitably lead to a country that is no longer the world’s factory but also a consumer monstrosity that places demands comparable to if not exceeding the United States. The immense popularity of western fast food restaurants within Beijing do not so much represent a social triumph for the United States as much as an economic one for China. American fast food restaurants represent an opportunity for China to embrace the capitalist lifestyle that is making it rich.

*Concluding Thoughts*
We are what we eat, and in many ways the staples we expect at the family table, whether they are pasta, corn, or chow mein, root us in the foundation identify. Aside from the listed ingredients of any dish one must also consider food as a vessel; one that holds our notions of what is wholesome or taboo, denotes a person’s place in the economic strata, and above all, fashions a sense of oneness between people who may share nothing more than the table they come together around.

To what ends China uses its food speaks a lot to where it is as a nation. At once it is straddling two worlds, the modern and the traditional. Additionally it finds itself confronting an age old concern: trying to gather itself beneath the vision of a unified banner. Finally, as the weight of China’s economy draws the involvement of the international community, China is entering a new age of consumer prosperity that is hungry recognition. In all of these areas food serves as a multifaceted tool that helps deliver China into its future.