

SPACES OF URBAN FOOD CONSUMPTION IN
CONTEMPORARY CHINA

by

BENJAMIN PALSA LEAMON

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This research seeks to explore how the physical spaces of food consumption are changing in urban contemporary China, and examine how ideas of China's past and future are mobilized in the discourse surrounding eating and food consumption. Finally the interactions between these physical spaces and the construction of discourses of food hygiene and purity are discussed. These questions are explored through a variety of popular and academic sources. In seeking to answer these questions, I focused on the use of hygiene discourse to marginalize street food vendors, and promote as friendly and comfortable the physical spaces of fast food restaurants, as well as the commodification of China's past in Cultural Revolution-themed restaurants. Additionally, I examine the ways in which certain forms of sociality are fostered through and encouraged by the designed spaces of food consumption.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
History of Chinese Cuisine	2
Impacts of the Cultural Revolution	3
Methods	5
Street Food:	6
Discourse of declining authenticity:	6
The Physical Environment of Street Food Consumption	9
Street Food and Hygiene	15
Fast Food Restaurants:	19
Creation of a “Modern Space” through the construction of hygiene and service:	19
Fast Food Restaurants as Designed Physical Spaces	22
Discourse Surrounding Increasing Localization of Fast Food	27
Food Safety	29
Cultural Revolution Restaurants:	31
Conclusion	35
Further Research	36
Bibliography	37

Introduction

The dish commonly found on US restaurant menus "Kung Pao Chicken" is known in China as *Gong Bao Ji Ding*. Today it is a restaurant staple, however during the Cultural Revolution to order a plate of *Gong Bao Ji Ding* could be considered politically incorrect. While the exact origins of the recipe are unknown, one legend surrounding the dish claims it originated in the late Qing Dynasty, and was popularized by a governor of Sichuan Province, Ding Baozhen, who bore the official title *Gong Bao*. During the Cultural Revolution, these ties to the old imperial bureaucracy were sufficient to have the dish renamed *hong bao ji ding*, or *hu la ji ding*, respectively translated as "fast-fried chicken cubes" and "chicken cubes with seared chilies" (Dunlop 2008).

In both historical and contemporary China, food has been central to cultural politics. While imperial cuisine was long characterized by extravagant banquets comprising myriad dishes and exotic ingredients, the historical importance of this style of eating remains contentious. In an interview with the Legal Evening News, the Chinese Commerce Minister Gao Hucheng was quoted saying "High-end food and drink consumption had never been part of Chinese culture" (Legal Evening News 3/7/14). Contemporary Chinese foodways are changing rapidly, changing traditions and ways of eating that span hundreds of years. In this work I will explore three areas in which change is articulated: street food, fast food chains, and Cultural Revolution-themed restaurants. I will explore how in each of these cases, discourses relating to food purity and China's culinary history articulate with the present, and seek to examine how the physical space of food consumption dictates its use.

History of Chinese Cuisine

To understand the changing foodways of contemporary China, historical trends must be briefly examined. Anderson argues that the main elements of Chinese cuisine have been in place since the late Song Dynasty. During the previous Tang dynasty, millet and wheat were the principle grains of Chinese fare. In large part, this was a function of geography. Northern China, the heart of the Tang Dynasty was characterized by widespread consumption of multiple grains such as wheat and millet, in contrast to the rice-growing south. As the focus of the empire moved south during the Song, rice became more central. By the Ming Dynasty, approximately 70% of Chinese grain consumption was rice. Linguistically, this shift left a lasting mark; the literal translation of the expression ‘to eat food’ in Chinese is ‘to eat rice’. Other iconic foods such as fish, tea, tofu, and soy sauce were also further adopted and popularized during the Song Dynasty. This refining and shaping of Chinese cuisine was in large part due to two factors: increased agricultural yield, and an increasing commercialization of food (Anderson 1988). Agricultural yield expanded hugely during this period. Effective soil management, new tools, and intricate irrigation networks all contributed to this jump in production (Elvin, cited in Anderson 1988: 76). Furthermore, book-printing allowed agricultural information to be disseminated quickly, and the introduction of quick-growing champa rice strains imported from Southeast Asia contributed to a huge jump in agricultural output (Anderson 1988: 77).

Additionally, a growing market within China led to an expanding class of affluent and mobile workers, eager to explore new foods. This adventurousness also saw a proliferation of regional cuisines. Growing markets meant the basic elements of

cuisine became more standard. A popular expression stated that seven things people can't do without every day were firewood, rice, oil, salt, soybean sauce, vinegar, and tea. As more dishes were developed and circulated throughout China, a growing sense of identity was fostered through food. In the case of dairy, this identity was expressed through a rejection of foods that were seen as belonging to northern "barbarian" groups, namely cheese and milk.

Following the Song Dynasty, the final piece of a cuisine that has largely endured arrived during the Ming Dynasty with the introduction of New-World crops. Maize, sweet potatoes, beans, squashes, and chili peppers grew in previously un-filled agricultural niches, and represent the final piece of a cuisine that remained largely similar from the late Song to the years of the Cultural Revolution (Anderson: 1988).

Impacts of the Cultural Revolution

The goals of cuisine during and after the Cultural Revolution were practicality and frugality. Klein writes about the perception of food in China during the 1950s-1970s, using the Cantonese city Guangzhou as a case study. He writes that people "sometimes claimed there had been little or no "food culture" [...] during the revolutionary years" (Klein 2007, 512). This lack of a perceived food culture is often directly attributed to the extreme lack of staple foods. The experimentation and elaboration of the late Song dynasty was rejected in favor of simpler food representing wholesome proletarian values. Hubbert writes that "Mao's legitimacy as a socialist ruler is often reflected upon through popular commentary about his 'simple' eating habits", a discourse that continues today (Hubbert 2005, 135). The agents of the Cultural Revolution saw high-end restaurants as "corrupt, bourgeois institutions", which were

subsequently closed (Swislocki 2009: 217). While many were later re-opened, “they were reduced to serving the same basic items of everyday [...] fare” (Swislocki 2009: 217). Chinese cuisine experienced a process of massification during the early years of Communist Party rule. The traditional system of informal apprenticeships was the target of government policies attempting to standardize cuisine, and centralize its teaching in state academies. In these academies textbooks and standardized courses were employed, and aspiring chefs were examined and then ranked. (Klein 2007). Even today however, many chefs lament this change, citing the greater flexibility, innovation, and effectiveness of the private apprenticeship system.

Another key factor that shaped Chinese cuisine during this period was the organization of cooking and eating around the work canteen unit. In Guangzhou, traditional Cantonese was “to be ‘reformed’ to be more suitable to the idea of frugality”, a process that occurred throughout China (Klein 2007: 518). In a time where private cooking was seen as bourgeois, work canteens provided more standardized food. While the goal of these canteens was to adapt recipes previously accessible only to the bourgeois, “few if any canteens lived up to these revolutionary ideals” (Yan cited in Klein 2007: 518). During the 1980s and 1990s, many previous policies were reformed. Food scholars in China view this as a restoration of many aspects of China’s culinary reputation, and paved the way for many of the contemporary changes I endeavor to discuss in this paper (Gao and Gong, cited in Klein 2007).

Methods

In conducting my research for this thesis I attempted to draw from a range of sources, both academic and popular. It is my hope that this allowed me to explore a wide range of viewpoints relating to the history and changing nature of foodways in China. In doing so, I employed academic sources discussing China, food studies, and the intersection of these two fields. In terms of popular sources I reviewed newspaper, magazine and blog articles, as well as videos that pertained to the relevant topics. The rapidity of change in many of these topics made these sources particularly useful. It should be noted however, that with limited knowledge of Chinese, my analysis was confined to English language sources, and those I could find in translation. While I was able to draw on the field work of others, first-hand exploration of these trends was not possible within the scope of this project.

Street Food:

Discourse of declining authenticity:

Writing in 1988, Anderson presents street food as a cuisine in peril. While discussing the changes affecting China's culinary landscape at the time, he writes "The worst thing that could happen in the future, in my opinion, would be the disappearance of working class street food" (Anderson 1988: 253). Anderson presents these "traditional" forms of food in stark contrast to newer forms of eating, and newer foods. He writes that while there are still street vendors, they are being influenced by newer restaurant trends, and that culinary diversity is being lost. He expresses a fear of the loss of cultural heritage, saying that "The lure of the new, and the fact that the old was widely known and thus not worth bothering to write up [...]" means that older recipes are in danger of being lost (Anderson 1988: 252). This casts street vendors as guardians of China's traditional culinary heritage, and sets them in opposition to modernity, an often repeated and problematic discourse.

Anderson introduces a common thread in the discourse relating to Chinese Street food, tying changing foodways to a discourse of authenticity. In charting what he sees as a declining trend in street food, he sees a "general loss of concern among Chinese with local variation in food and other matters of authenticity" (Anderson 1988: 253). In Anderson's view, "authentic" Chinese street food ranks among the best Chinese cuisine has to offer. This nostalgia for a cuisine beset by the changing forces of modernity is common, particularly among English language sources which lament this assumed loss of authenticity (Dunlop 2013). In discussing the changing street food

landscape for a western audience, Dunlop laments the increasing rarity of certain kinds of street vendors. In many of these arguments, street food is a cuisine beset by forces of change, and authentic recipes are dying as a result. While writing on the topic of authenticity, Heldke notes that this response to changing foodways is common. She writes “If patriotism is the taste of the foods of our childhood, then unfamiliar tastes must stand as instances of global cosmopolitanism—or acts of treason” (Heldke 2005: 387). Many worry that more historic Chinese restaurants and foods are imperiled by western-style restaurants (Klein 2007). The identification of traditional street foods with an essentialized conception of China and Chinese values is also present in Chinese sources.

The television series, “A Bite of China” also touches on street food in a program meant for a contemporary and internal viewership. In the episode “The Story of Staple Foods”, the program charts the process of creating yellow broomcorn buns. The vendor, Lao-Wang, is seen grinding the grain in a mule-driven mill, kneading the dough by hand, and sweating profusely as he performs his duties. The cleanliness of the water used is mentioned, and the program carefully emphasizes the hand-made nature of the buns at every stage of the production process. Again the opposition of these “traditional” buns to more modern methods is stressed; the narrator intones that Lao-Wang believes “The broomcorn ground by machines is never as good as the broomcorn milled by their own mill” (A Bite of China 2012). The entire food, from its creator, to the processes surrounding its production, to its culminating sale are portrayed as historic, traditional, and authentic. Even the traditional architecture and design of Lao-Wang’s home is mentioned. The program states this explicitly, saying “Lao-Wang’s

bun's are genuine, and so is he" (A Bite of China 2012). The satisfying nature of his work, and the reliability of his existence are all asserted.

And yet, this discourse of authenticity, and its created dichotomy between tradition and contemporary street food fashions are fundamentally problematic. Just as Lao-Wang is a participant in modern China, interacting with mobile phones, city-dwelling children, and the market realities of China's food-service landscape, isolating street food as a bastion of tradition and authenticity denies the dynamic conditions which have and continue to shape the foods. The romanticization of a cuisine as authentic and genuine is inherently predicated on denying the evolving nature of these foodways. Heldke writes "under scrutiny, the very notion of authenticity begins to break down [...] such an understanding dismisses out of hand the possibility that an insider might regard it as 'authentic' to *modify* a dish in order to respond to different local conditions and ingredients" (Heldke 2005: 388). While Heldke is chiefly concerned with interactions between inside and outside actors and their search for authenticity, I argue that her arguments can be productively applied to the discourse surrounding street food. Vendors employing "modern" cooking and processing techniques, as well as ingredients cannot be responsibly marginalized from the discourse surrounding an appreciation for street food. Dunlop discusses her time in Sichuan Province, and the changing and evolving nature of street food "Every few months a new street-eating craze arrived, and a rash of identical stalls would jostle for position with the dispensers of more established fare" (Dunlop 2008: 40). The same processes that shaped and created the diversity of street foods continue to operate, resisting the discourse that attempts to mythologize them as fixed points on a static scale of authenticity.

The Physical Environment of Street Food Consumption

One way in which all street vendors interact with the changing realities of urban China is through their physical environments. Historically, these itinerant vendors have been a constituent part of a vibrant and celebrated street life in many parts of China. Near the end of the Qing Dynasty, Fu Chongju detailed the various types of street vendors in Chengdu, and the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are considered a time of particular culinary diversity (Dunlop 2008). According to Dunlop, the street life of this time period is still an enduring object of nostalgia, at least among connoisseurs of street treats. The physicality of the spaces inhabited by street food is important however. Street vendors are both forced to integrate into existing environments, and shape and create the spaces they inhabit. In “A Bite of China” Lao-Wang is seen peddling his bicycle through streets crowded with cars, pedestrians and horse-drawn carts. Physically, the vendors need to negotiate this complex landscape continuously in order to sell their goods. While restaurants have the opportunity to design and craft their interiors, the setting of street vending is continuously changing and not under vendors’ control. Middleton argues that much of urban mobility can be conceptualized as a socio-technical assemblage. Writing on the subject of walking, she notes the importance of “mediating mundane technologies’ [...] such as shoes, clothing and luggage, within the embodied, spatial and temporal rhythms of pedestrian movement” (Middleton 2010: 577). Even if Lao-Wang’s bicycle, thick gloves, and clothing do not in isolation tie him to the fabric of contemporary China, these mediating technologies impact his embodied experience as he negotiates the changing landscape of the streets.

Just as the physical spaces of the street mediate vendors' experiences and interactions with the city and their customers, the presence of vendors shapes and alters the social and cultural spaces of the streets they inhabit. Dunlop writes extensively about the sensory experience of a Chengdu street filled with vendors during the 1990s. "The notes *ding ding dang, ding ding dang*, beaten out on two ends of a piece of metal, signified the arrival of the Ding Ding toffee man, selling his pale, malt-sugar sweetmeat [...] Best of all was the shouted '*Dou huar! Dou huar!*' of the flower bean curd vendor. I would rush to catch up with him, and he would put down his shoulder pole and the two red-and-black wooden barrels suspended from either end" (Dunlop 2008: 39). One study found that in selecting street food purchases 41% of respondents indicated sensory appeal as a primary driver (Liu et al. 2014). The equipment carried by the vendor, their shouts, and the sounds of their equipment are all constituent to this attraction. This kind of economic activity on the streets adds an additional dimension to urban mobility. Situated between the scale of mobile subjects using the streets as transit spaces and the projects and goals of municipal governments and planners, these agents have the capacity to provide both the delight evident in Dunlop's account and potential obstacles to easy pedestrian and automotive mobility.

Street food also has the capacity to create tension between vendors and local authorities in other ways. Again drawing on her experience in Chengdu, Dunlop writes that Uighur kebab vendors were associated with the illegal trade of cannabis. While she acknowledges that only a small proportion of these sellers were actually involved, "because of the link between the kebab sellers and the hash trade, you could always tell when a police crackdown was in progress. Suddenly, with no warning, the aroma of

sizzling lamb and cumin vanished from the streets, and you couldn't find a kebab anywhere, however hard you looked" (Dunlop 2008: 242). Here the smells and sounds of street vendors are mapped onto more complex societal prejudices, with consequences for which groups are allowed to use this public setting, and to what ends. A more contemporary example of official suspicion towards street vendors as a class of workers can be found in the state's case that they are primary drivers of air pollution. In 2013 The Wall Street Journal reported that due to concerns of air pollution, officials planned to shut down many kebab stalls. China Central Television quoted city administration officials in Beijing as saying "This outdoor barbecuing can cause the PM2.5 [a particularly hazardous size of airborne particle pollutant] to rise rapidly" (Chin 2013). The China Daily newspaper, also state run, was quoted as saying "As the weather warms up, the streets gradually fill up with roadside barbecue spots, sizzling kebabs on the grill and cold beer, which also create serious air pollution and undesired noise for the neighborhoods" (Chin 2013). Here again, the physical and sensory manifestations of street vendors are highlighted. While according to many experts the assertion that kebab sellers are the primary drivers of PM2.5 air pollution is patently ridiculous, a fact that has not been overlooked on Chinese social media, this official opposition to street vendors contrasts with their valorization in the "A Bite of China" program. While it is likely that this is more a case of the Beijing authorities wanting to be seen to be tackling the problem of air pollution than a sustained war on street food, the fact that the push is directed primarily at unlicensed kebab vendors is also significant. Street food is less easily regulated, and the widespread fear of pollution could be an effective cause to justify clamping down (Liu et al. 2014). Another possible motivation for the

clampdown I suggest, is the perception that stalls selling food on the streets are emblematic of a pre-modern China, and at odds with a rapidly urbanizing nation.

As China urbanizes, many historic neighborhoods are being demolished in order to make way for new development projects (Wong 2013). In many cases, these new developments are less compatible with the presence of street food vendors. Dunlop writes of experiencing this rapid architectural change first-hand: “Great swathes of Chengdu were cleared [...] not only the more ramshackle dwellings, but opera theaters and grand courtyard houses, famous restaurants and tea houses, and whole avenues of *wutong* trees” (Dunlop 2008: 41). Many of these neighborhoods would be replaced “with a modern grid of wide roads lined with concrete high-rises”, a change that saw a decrease in the number of street vendors (Dunlop 2008: 41). My aim here is not to critique or evaluate Chinese urban planning or redevelopment, but to explore its interaction with historic foodways such as the selling of street food. Taylor writes that “These urban agglomerations [historic neighborhoods] reflect both physical tangible heritage values and intangible values related to regional building styles and traditions, ways of living, sense of place and a multitude of cultural assets” (Taylor 2013). Dunlop notes that the redevelopment and demolition of many sections of Chengdu corresponded with the removal of well-known street food vendors. As suggested by the China Daily article, street vendors and their accompanying sounds and smells can be seen as incompatible with these new spaces.

Concurrently, spaces aimed at mimicking the atmosphere of these historical neighborhoods are being established. Many of these spaces deliberately harken back to previous historical eras, and reimagine the physical spaces of street foods in a way that

is much more intentionally designed and crafted. One example, found in Chengdu, is Jinli street. Jinli street was created following the redevelopment of large swaths of Chengdu, and the accompanying decline in street vendors. While there is a suggestion that the street used to be associated with cloth sellers, the street has been redesigned to showcase street food (Brinded 2012). In a cultural context where street food is becoming increasingly stigmatized and questioned, Jinli street is a designated site for consumption. While there appear to be some itinerant vendors in the vicinity of the street, the vast majority are installed in fixed buildings and wear uniforms. Country foods and festival foods which are no longer commonly available are also sold. Furthermore there is an element of spectacle to the proceedings. The creation of the foods themselves is part of the attraction, as is the case with glutinous rice balls that are dramatically thudded into toasted sesame flower (Dunlop 2013). Architecturally, the street has been remodeled in a style murkily reminiscent of the Three Kingdoms Period, or the Qing Dynasty, depending on the source consulted (Brinded 2012). Tourism sites further note that the street plays host to a range of folk crafts and traditional opera performances (“Jinli Old Street” 2014).

Jinli street today is a more highly designed space than the streets and stalls it is intended to replace. Multiple sources, suggest that the function of the site is primarily as a destination for tourists (Dunlop 2013; Brinded 2012; China Highlights). It is important to note that while many itinerant street vendors use public spaces in a way for which they have not been intended, Jinli street is designed for this type of economic activity. On the side of the local and regional authorities, creating these economic spaces ties street vendors to a specific site, and allows for them to be more easily

integrated into tax and property systems, as well as regulatory regimes. It also however, provides a space for tourists to interact and engage with history in a tangible form.

While I was unable to find any exact data on the subject, a survey of videos taken by tourists suggests that Jinli street caters to a predominantly domestic, rather than foreign audience.

Heldke argues that cuisine can be conceptualized as an experiential entity, based on John Dewey's understanding of art. Dewey asserts "the actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience," and he emphasizes 'the human conditions under which it was brought into being' as well as 'the human consequences it engenders in actual life-experience' [...]. The work of art 'happens' as a result of the interaction of some product [...] with some perceivers" (Dewey 1987 cited in Heldke 2005: 389).

Bracketing, as Heldke does, the question of whether cuisine may be considered an art, understanding street food as an experiential entity allows us to explore the combined effects of the food and its environment on the consumer. The tourist comes to Jinli street, billed as historic, looking to consume not just the food itself, but the created atmosphere sold as tradition and history. While we were discussing the characterization of street food in "A Bite of China" as genuine, authentic, and the fruit of honest hard work, Professor Buck argued that the series was an attempt to provide urban Chinese a cultural script through which to understand their country's past. I argue that a similar process is operating in the creation of spaces such as Jinli street. By staging street food consumption in conjunction with the historical, it becomes synonymous with the past, and separated from ideas of a contemporary China. In this way history becomes commodified. Tourists are consuming China's past just as much as they are glutinous

rice balls. At the same time, by celebrating street food as an emblem of the past, it becomes a means of interacting with China's present and future state.

Street Food and Hygiene

A second common discourse surrounding street food in China casts it not as a vanishing emblem of culinary diversity, but as a dangerous vector for parasites, toxins, and foodborne illness. Watson discusses a common thread to this dialogue, writing “parents now worry more about what their children are eating [...] Rumors frequently sweep through Beijing and Shanghai with the same story line: migrants from the countryside set up on a roadside stall selling *youtiar*, [...] To expand the batter, they add an industrial detergent to the mix, creating a powerful poison that kills everyone who eats it” (Watson 2005: 72). Food safety crimes are common: meat adulteration and vegetable processing contamination are common sources of complaints (Liu et al. 2014). Liu et al. further write that “the sanitation and safety inspection techniques of food safety inspectors remain almost totally unexplored, and the practical guidance for SFs [street foods] is largely lacking” (Liu et al. 2014: 213). The problem of food safety is a real concern, beyond the realm of panic and urban legend; Liu et al.'s study of street food vendors in Shijiazhuang found 66% lacked food safety knowledge and sanitation techniques and were unaware that their improper handlings could cause food contamination and cross-contamination” (Liu et al. 2014: 213). Gutter oil, whereby oil recycled from cooking, extracted from rotting meat, and slaughter house waste is resold as cooking oil is also an increasingly prevalent concern (Lu et al. 2014).

At the same time however, the discourse of fear surrounding the consumption of street foods extends beyond the risk of contamination, and relates to larger societal

trends. Mintz argues that large-scale changes in foodways can be conceptualized in terms of inside and outside meanings. In Mintz's framework, inside meanings relate to everyday conditions of purchase and consumption, while outside meanings encompass larger political, social, and economic trends (Mintz 1996). In this model, outside meanings set fence-posts for people's everyday experience. These trends, such as urbanization and the construction of a discourse of hygiene are then articulated through societal institutions. Regulatory bodies, state-run media enterprises, and local authorities all act as subsystems which "set the terms" against which these meanings in culture are silhouetted" (Mintz 1996: 21). It is within these terms that behaviors are changed, and individual perceptions are shaped.

Discourses of street food cleanliness fit well into this model, as broad trends such as the construction of hygiene and food purity are negotiated on a daily basis through consumer purchasing choices. Liu et al. isolate adulteration as the largest source of concern among consumers of street foods in their survey (Liu et al. 2014). At the same time however the antithesis of adulteration—purity, is a problematic concept. The word can connote either a sense of un-spoiled, natural, organic growth, or an idea of biological safety, devoid of bacteria and antiseptic (Mintz 1996). I suggest that this dichotomy strongly relates to the competing discourses on street food. On one hand are the narratives which mourn the potential loss of diversity and authenticity, while on the other are those that paint street food as a cuisine in dire need of modernization.

Closely connected to ideas of what can be considered pure, are questions of who can be considered pure (Mintz 1996). In Watson's initial quote, the offending vendors were "migrants from the country", while in Dunlop's discussion of the association

between illicit drugs and street food, the subset of vendors caught up in the police dragnet are part of the Uighur ethnic minority (Watson 2005: 72; Dunlop 2008). Similar to the emergent discourse of hygiene in the United States in the late 19th and 20th centuries, the food purity discourse surrounding street food is tied to social hierarchy and bio-politics (Bobrow-Strain 2008). Foucault's concept of biopolitics characterizes "the emergence of the health and physical well-being of the population in general as one of the essential objectives of political power," and made "the imperative of health-at once the duty of each and the objective of all." (Foucault, cited in Bobrow-Strain 2008). In this context, street vendors are set in opposition to the health of society, and their food cast as agents of contamination. Food consumption fits within a larger hierarchy of social power, whereby the individual positions themselves relative to others, however in this case setting the debate in terms of a bio-political hierarchy attaches new meanings to existing foodways (Bobrow-Strain 2008; Mintz 1996). It is important to note that while concerns of street food safety are not all spurious, it is also crucial to acknowledge the danger that often accompanies such discursive trends. Bobrow-Strain writes that "food purity discourses often authorized quiet coercions, and reinforced exclusionary politics", even as they have the potential to create improvement (Bobrow-Strain 2008: 22).

Discourses of authenticity and tradition, urbanization, food purity, and hygiene all converge on the topic of street food in China. Held up as both a consumable emblem of China's historical values and richness as well as its current public health concerns and changing use of urban space, the inside meanings attached to street food are rapidly changing as a result of larger societal trends. The multiplicity of roles for which street

food has been mobilized is remarkable. As Anderson and Dunlop wax poetic on the golden days of street food's culinary diversity, others fearfully discuss its toxicity and adulteration. These conflicts are played out on multiple scales, from larger public health and pollution campaigns initiated by the state, to daily purchasing decisions, as both consumers and producers of street food navigate a changing physical and discursive landscape.

Fast Food Restaurants:

There are multiple elements of discourse surrounding the physical spaces that comprise fast food restaurants. The connection to a perceived western modernity, the construction of hygiene, and purity, and the relationship between staff and patrons all have specific internal meanings that contribute to their success. Equally important are discourses tied to the outside meanings of fast food restaurants, which have the potential to explore practices such as marketing and the conscious design of spaces that prioritize certain forms of sociality in an attempt to cultivate a specific consumer base. The physical spaces created by fast food restaurants have allowed the restaurants to market themselves in specific ways and guide customer perception of their role in modern China's culinary landscape.

Creation of a “Modern Space” through the construction of hygiene and service:

Initially, fast food restaurants in China tried to associate themselves closely with their American counterparts. In Hong Kong, the first McDonald's franchise played up its American roots, eschewing Chinese characters on its signs and menus in favor of bright English text and images of the dishes offered, similar to many Chinese restaurants in North America. This created image of Americana initially led many to believe that fast food restaurants would be unable to break into the Chinese market (Liu 2008: 5). Early franchisees emphasized the exoticism of McDonald's, and the chain was seen “as an outpost of American culture, offering authentic hamburgers to ‘with it’ young people eager to forget that they lived in a tiny colony on the rim of Maoist China” (Watson 2005: 72). Only after the restaurants became “safely established” in

mainland China over the course of the next twenty years did they begin to incorporate Chinese text on menus and signs (Watson 2005: 27). By 1997 there were more than 35 franchises operating in mainland China, a number which now exceeds 2000 according to China Retail News (Yan 2005).

Despite these early misgivings, the perception of western modernity is one of the key reasons for McDonald's and other chain's success. Rural visitors to Beijing "take Big Mac boxes, Coke cups, and napkins home with them as proof that they did it right" (Watson 2005: 72). Subsequent to it's opening, some parents brought their children to McDonald's as a way to connect with a perceived U.S. American culture. Identification with Americana are not, however the only practices key to the conception of fast food restaurants as modern spaces. Fast food restaurants have employed a range of practices to solidify this perception of modernity.

The social context of food consumption is important, and in the context of China I would argue critical in promoting the popularity of fast food restaurants. Gusfield writes that restaurants should be regarded in terms of their position in a system of social codes (Gusfield 1992). From formal restaurants to casual snack-stands, a range of interactions and cultural norms accompany food consumption. Shelton describes restaurants as "an organized experience using and transforming the raw objects of space, words, and tastes into a coded experience of social structures" (Shelton 1990: 525). Commonly cited attractions of fast food restaurants are "friendly employees, quick service, spotless floors, climate controlled and brightly-lit dining areas" (Yan 2005). Consistently maintaining these practices is seen as emblematic of a modern restaurant experience (Yan 2005). These practices are so significant, Yan notes that the

draw of these amenities often eclipses the restaurants' culinary attractions. "[...] although few were impressed with the food itself, they were all thrilled by the eating experience" (Yan 2005: 82).

One possible reason that this eating experience is a particularly powerful asset in the Chinese context stems from the legacy of the Cultural Revolution. Klein writes that during the Cultural Revolution and subsequent years the process of massifying Chinese cuisine, coupled with the prevalence of eating in work canteens led to an unfriendly environment in many eating spaces. Customers were fed, rather than served (Klein 2007). Fast food restaurants in China were one venue where this trajectory was reversed, offering what is perceived in many cases as friendly and polite service. When asked about the shortcomings of traditional Chinese restaurants, young people often report that they "are not known for their customer service, and that they often fall short of the cleanliness standards set by the new Western-style restaurants" (Chan et al. 2006). Although particular restaurant staff may be extremely friendly, there is a widespread discourse that the staff at fast food restaurants are more genuinely friendly, regardless of examples observed on a case by case basis. Furthermore in many cases, restaurant tours are available, turning the spectacle of food production into both an attraction and an opportunity to emphasize the restaurants' cleanliness (Shelton 1990: 520; Yan 2005). Barrow-Strain discusses the creation of hygiene discourse in relation to the industrial production of bread. In a discussion that bears striking resemblance to the discourse comparing street food and fast food, he asks "Faced with these risks [of adulterated and impure food], why experiment or chance the criminal carelessness of untamed bread when the scientific bakery is near?" (Barrow Strain 2008). I suggest that

the industrial kitchen of the fast food restaurant fulfils a similar role discursively, reducing the element of human danger in the food production process, and presenting an image of scientific hygiene. Kitchen tours showcase this process, and add a dimension of perceived transparency. Whether or not the cleanliness of fast food genuinely surpasses that of non-western fare, a topic that will be discussed later, the perception that these restaurants are friendly spaces is significant. I argue that this perception of friendliness solidifies the more abstract promises of modernity, renders them tangible, and ultimately surpasses them in importance. The most important aspect of creating this social environment lies in the physical design of the restaurants which selectively adopt and reject elements of the American fast food model.

Fast Food Restaurants as Designed Physical Spaces

The physical structure of fast food restaurants in China shape their use in a very different way than fast food restaurants in the west, encouraging certain forms of sociality. The design and layout of the spaces consumers inhabit shapes and guides their behavior, and fast food restaurants create spaces geared towards encouraging certain forms of behavior and creating specific perceptions amongst their consumers. In his work on urban mobility, Ole Jensen argues that mobile situations can be understood as being staged from above and below, as individuals interact, shape, and resist designed spaces (Jensen 2012). I argue that this framework can be extended to explore the interaction between consumer practice and the planned environments of fast food restaurants. Just as transit authorities construct spaces that promote certain forms of behavior, Chinese fast food restaurants structurally suggest their own social and cultural

use. While Shelton may describe space as a “raw object”, upon closer inspection reveals it to be highly processed.

The inaugural Chinese McDonalds near Tiananmen Square boasted 700 seats, and 29 cash registers. On its first day of operation alone, it catered to over 40,000 customers (Yan 2005). The first KFC also opened near Tiananmen Square to a similarly enthusiastic welcome. The building occupied 12,000 square feet, comprised three floors, and could seat 500 patrons served by a staff of 150 (Karabel 2009). While today not all Chinese fast food franchises operate on this magnitude, these initial branches were important in shaping the view of fast food restaurants as modern spaces.

Apart from their scale, as early as 1994 fast food restaurants in China began to design physical environments to promote and encourage specific forms of sociality. While American fast food restaurants are designed for quick eating, and are physically designed to support this paradigm, Chinese fast food restaurants create comfortable private and semi-private seating areas. Larger areas target friend groups and families, where it is common for groups of young people to sit for hours chatting over beverages or a shared side of French fries (Yan 2005: 92). Commonly several small dishes will be ordered, and be consumed over the course of an afternoon. Social interaction over long periods of time is facilitated (Chan et al. 2006). Fast food chains such as McDonald’s and KFC have not only embraced this trend, they actively seek to create and encourage it by offering conducive spaces. Small secluded sections are also offered, nick-named “Lover’s corners” to allow people to go on dates while enjoying privacy. While it would certainly be possible to go on a date or relax with friends without these specialized spaces, I argue that the creation of these purpose-built spaces is key to the

creation of a social and cultural atmosphere that supersedes the importance of fast food's western provenance. Once the restaurant has established this social context, and has become a default site for social interaction the conception of modernity and its association with the west ceases to be the primary attraction.

In some cases, the use of specialized spaces to create new forms of sociality is especially pronounced. Traditionally, birthdays were not celebrated to the same extent in Chinese culture as their western counterparts. Now however, KFC and McDonald's franchises offer free birthday parties in bespoke children's sections. These parties can include announcements over the restaurant loudspeaker, recordings of birthday songs, and the presence of costume-clad mascots. These events are articulated as specifically western activities, however again adapted for the local market. When Colonel Sanders proved an unpopular mascot among Chinese children, a new, more child-friendly mascot was added. Named "Chicky", the mascot looks like a large chicken wearing a KFC baseball cap (Lozada Jr 2005). Children are actively sought out and cultivated as consumers. A previously nascent market, children are being incorporated into the consumer class as well as shaped as consumer subjects. Through a mix of western practices and specialized physical spaces, fast food franchises are seeking to create new markets, and expand their influence. This demographic is particularly significant due to the age-disparity in fast food consumption, and Garner's observation that young people tend to be less sensitive to price (Garner 2005).

The centrality of these social spaces to the success of fast food restaurants is supported by market data. Garner's 2005 report depicts fast food consumption as a generation-specific practice. He notes that people in the 20-29 age bracket, the youngest

group surveyed in his data set, eat in western fast food restaurants approximately six times more than the 50-59 age group. (Garner 2005: 194). I suspect that this number has grown since 2005, particularly in consumers younger than 20-29, in light of Chan et al.'s assertion that "restaurants have become their [Chinese youth's] extended dining room and their living room" (Chan et al. 2006: 90). Chan et al. go on to write that these environments further serve as a site for self-expression: "they provide the independence and freedom from family supervision that the car represented to American teens in the 20th century. In China, Western-style restaurants provide a haven for young people to socialize and try out their new identities, away from their parents' observant eyes" (Chan et al. 2006: 93). In diverging from the American model, Chinese fast food spaces have encouraged a unique, and profitable, use of space among a demographic of consumers with high spending power and low price-sensitivity (Garner 2005). In this way, fast food restaurants have become important spaces in the lives of many of China's urban youth, and have fostered new forms of interaction.

While in many cases the consumer perception of fast food, particularly western fast food, has been in line with corporate interest, this is not always the case and it is important to acknowledge the agency of the individual consumer in shaping these spaces. While the physical environment of the restaurant can be framed from above, as to an extent can interactions between employee and customer, the perceptions and opinions customers bring with them effect how they view and interact with these spaces, staging the situation from below. In the case of friend groups casually using fast food restaurants to talk, conduct phone calls, and date, the perceptions surrounding these practices can shape the space as comfortable and friendly (Chan et al. 2006).

On the other hand, the participants in these spaces often view them in a more critical light, in opposition to the goals of the franchisees. Recent food-safety scandals have caused many to view fast-food chains in a more critical light. Historically, it is precisely the identification with the west cultivated by many fast food chains that has led to protest, attracting complaints of cultural imperialism. Following the U.S. bombing of Belgrade in 1999, protestors picketed fast food chains and bore signs reading “I’d rather starve to death than eat McDonald’s” (Hooper 2007: 439). In many circles, the transnational nature of these businesses features in the discourse surrounding them. They are “regarded as in tension with ‘local’ assertions of identity and culture” (Robertson 1995, cited in Hooper 2007: 439). While the dichotomy between foreign and domestic goods can be somewhat illusory—McDonald’s runs and operates huge farms and distribution centers in China to cater to its restaurants—there is still a dialogue of resistance to foreign products (Hooper 2007; Watson 2005). Robertson, cited in Hooper, argues that nationalist discourses of China’s history of negative interaction with a foreign Other stimulates this dialogue of cultural resistance. In one example, military and occupation rhetoric was mobilized to argue against western goods. “Multinational troops have once again invaded China. This time they come not with guns and cannon but with cosmetics, cars, and western cuisine” (Zhao 1990, cited in Hooper 2007). While foreign brands can convey a sense of sophistication and quality, domestic brands are often packaged with nationalist rhetoric. In his more recent analysis of consumer motivations to purchase domestic vs foreign brands, Garner noted that a sense of nationalism was an important factor (Garner 2005). In these contexts, the atmosphere

created by these restaurants to facilitate socializing is reframed as hostile, exploitive, and imperialist.

Discourse Surrounding Increasing Localization of Fast Food

While I argue that the social atmosphere created by fast food restaurants is critical to their success, portraying them as friendly and cool, another discourse exists surrounding the food itself. Upon first arriving in China, fast food entered a culinary landscape already crowded by other forms of convenience food. *Xiaochi* or small eats have traditionally served as snacks, rather than meals, and during the 1970s *hefan* boxed lunches were sold to domestic tourists visiting Beijing. These forms of eating however, are distinct from fast food (Yan 2005). Early on many reported that western fast food did not make them feel full. While the food could be very expensive, it was primarily the social and cultural environment that proved to be successful (Yan 2005).

The food itself however, is undergoing changes. On one hand what might be considered the traditional fare of franchises such as McDonalds and KFC “have been gradually domesticated, in the sense that a formerly exotic, imported food has been transformed into a familiar and even intimate type of cuisine” (Lozada Jr 2005). The French fries today’s youth nibble during study breaks can hardly be called exotic. At the same time, the foods available at fast food restaurants are also becoming more localized. “Menus vary only when the local market is deemed mature enough to expand beyond burghers and fries”, and increasingly these menus are being altered to reflect the tastes of their younger, urban demographic (Watson 2007: 71; Chan et al. 2006). As children and young adults become increasingly important consumers endowed with economic power, and in smaller families exclusive parental attention, fast food is often

an expression of love (Chan et al. 2006). In fast food restaurants, children are interacting with the cuisine differently. Rather than eating in a family-style way, they are encouraged to choose their own food (Watson 2007, 74). Food, and food consumption is increasingly associated with personal identity, and the autonomy of the individual.

Local and national foods are being incorporated into menus in an attempt to keep up with rapidly shifting tastes. “The 1200 KFC outlets offer egg rolls and seasonal Chinese vegetables in addition to the fried chicken and biscuits normally on its menu. Häagen-Dazs sells ice cream moon cakes in flavors like passion fruit, beautifully packaged in bright red and gold bags” (Chan et al. 2006: 95). This localization of menu items also reflects an increasing diversity of non-Chinese food available in these spaces (Watson 2007, 75). While French argues that fast food restaurants may be stymied in offering regional specialties such as Shanghai’s *xiaolongbao* or Cantonese hotpot, unable to adapt regional specialties to localized palates, there is evidence that many Chinese restaurants are creating fusion versions of regional, and even sub-regional specialties in an attempt to differentiate themselves in an increasingly saturated marketplace (Chan et al. 2006).

Beginning in the late 1980s with the competition between KFC and Ronghuaji, competition for customer’s favor has been fierce (Lozada Jr 2005). While there are many Chinese fast food chains that seek to copy or emulate western brands, often with creative names and signage markedly similar to existing brands such as KFC and McDonald’s, they have yet to become as popular as their original western counterparts (Watson 2005). Franchises like Red Sorghum, the Jinghe Fast Food Company, and the

Beijing Beef Noodle King have all tried to compete with western fast food (Yan 2005). So far, all of these domestic chains have failed to capture a McDonald's or KFC-sized piece of the market. The market report *China Industry Reports* argues that this is largely due to effective quality control, cost controls, the establishment of brand names, and the ability to alter goods and services in favor of local market conditions (Ibis 2014). As competition grows, so do the variety of foods on offer. While the market report further notes that the competition is increasing, one common thread is present in nearly all discussions of the fare served at fast food restaurants: its safety.

Food Safety

Watson explains that in a context of frequent concern regarding food purity, McDonalds and other fast food chains are perceived as a clean and safe alternative to street food. He writes: “parents now worry more about what their children are eating” and points out that in many cases there is a developed discourse on the unreliability of Chinese restaurants and street food (Watson 2005: 72). While he acknowledges that these stories are often unverifiable and often fit into the category of urban legend, the presence of these narratives reflect a deep concern over food supply and consumer protection. Perceptually, many feel that fast food is a safer alternative to traditional Chinese street food. Again, I suggest that this relates directly to the restaurant's associations with ideas of the construction of hygiene.

This discourse of food purity however, has not remained unchallenged. During the summer of 2014, a massive food safety scandal revealed that the hygienic and modern image cultivated by these chains was often inaccurate. Since 2012, there have been a number of high profile scandals. Excessive amounts of hormones and antibiotics,

the mislabeling of meat, and most recently the revelation that one of the plants run by OSI, a meat distributor, has been using expired meat to make a variety of products have all taken their toll on the spotless reputation fast food franchises seek to portray (Moss and Gough 2014). “Government investigators have since found that workers at the plant, Shanghai Hushi Food, used expired or rotten meat to make Chicken McNuggets, beef patties and other food products totaling more than 5,000 boxes” (Moss and Gough 2014). According to news reports, Burger King, Starbucks, Papa John’s Pizza, KFC, and McDonald’s are all affected by the scandal. While it is too soon to tell the effects of the most recent scandal, previous food safety scares have not altogether destroyed trust in fast food chains.

Ultimately fast food consumption in China is a continually evolving trend. As the market place becomes more fragmented and the previously unquestioned reputation of western fast food chains becomes tarnished, a greater plurality of eating venues may emerge. In any case, the physicality of the restaurants is key as fast food chains seek to create and appeal to new groups of customers, and cater to the tastes of the young urban Chinese demographic. I argue that it is the physical spaces, and the environments they support more than anything else, that has led to the market dominance of western fast food chains.

Cultural Revolution Restaurants:

If fast food restaurants are primarily successful due to their ability to create a compelling and innovative social space coupled with a perception of hygiene, another set of restaurants adopt deliberately anachronistic decor and cuisine to mobilize and commodify China's past. The Cultural Revolution-themed restaurant is one such example that fits into this trend. Restaurants such as Shanghai's Beidahuang and Beijing's Black Earth, specialize in rustic food from the provinces to which many of their cities' youth were sent (Swislocki 2009; Hubbert 2005).

The restaurants are also physically designed to facilitate an important and specific social function. Swislocki notes that "Many former sent-down youth use them for getting back in touch with other sent-down youth whom they met in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution and with whom they have lost contact" (Swislocki 2009: 228). A bulletin board stands by the door, "on which customers could post their contact information to facilitate such interactions" (Swislocki 2009: 228). It is important to note that this is not a role played exclusively by the Beidahuang and Black Earth restaurants, but by many similarly designed and themed restaurants throughout China (Hubbert 2005). The interior of these restaurants are often decorated with posters of revolutionary operas, farm implements, and propaganda slogans (Hubbert 2005). I see a parallel between the function of design of these restaurants and the design of many fast food franchises.

While fast food restaurants seek to portray a friendly, antiseptic eating environment to facilitate interactions among groups of young people, Beidahuang and restaurants like it serve a similar role, albeit for a completely different demographic and

utilizing different aesthetic means. In both cases however, the restaurants are private spaces facilitating certain types of social contact. The owner of the Black Earth restaurant in Beijing articulated this explicitly, saying he felt a responsibility to provide a public memorial space: “The restaurant gives priority to the educated youth and their experiences.... After they enter they go directly to the business card wall and read them and stick theirs on the wall [...] We need to remember what the educated youth went through” (Hubbert 2005 135-136). Black Earth and Beidahuang may provide a convenient place for former sent-down youth to reconnect and reminisce, however the entire experience from the facilitating-technology of the bulletin board to the space to sit and talk are intrinsically commercial. Despite the owner’s stated goal of providing a space for public remembering, Black Earth is a private enterprise (Hubbert 2005). The inherent irony of private enterprises memorializing a socialist past aside, there are vast differences in the ways and means these restaurants portray the past.

This disconnect can also be found in aspects of the decor employed by the restaurants, and the uniforms worn by its staff. Hubbert writes “furnishings referenced the aesthetically austere Maoist era that decried such efforts as reactionary, yet stood in marked contrast to it, coinciding neatly instead with the ubiquitous billboards outside extolling the benefits of improvement and interior design” (Hubbert 2005: 130). In one restaurant in Chongqing, the beer-stocked refrigerator is labeled “weapons chest”, and restrooms “liberated areas”. Staff are dressed as Red guards, and frequently break into revolutionary song. (Century 2013). In these restaurants, the Maoist phrase slogan “Serve the people”, “now serves as a marketing ploy, emphasizing the waiters’ dedication to service” (Century 2013). Hubbert argues “The vision of the Maoist body

remains present, yet it is re-clad in the garb of capitalist modernity” (Hubbert 2005: 130). Just as the identification with hygiene present in fast food restaurants is revealed to be a carefully constructed process, Cultural Revolution restaurants package and commodity a specific, and necessarily incomplete, conception of history.

From a culinary standpoint, the food at these restaurants appears wildly variable. Beidahuang, the Cultural Revolution-themed restaurant in Shanghai specialized in the food of a specific province, Heilongjiang, where many Shanghainese youth were sent. The food is localized not to a broad Shanghainese demographic, but to a very specific consumer base. Dishes such as wild grass and fried dough appear on menus, in an attempt to recreate the fare of the restaurant’s particular consumers would have experienced during the Cultural Revolution. The owner of Black Earth mentioned similar attempts to engage with the concept of food scarcity, while still meeting the caloric needs of his patrons (Swislocki 2009; Hubbert 2013). At the same time however, many Cultural Revolution-themed restaurants serve alcohol and local specialties such as Chongqing Hot Pot (Century 2013). At one restaurant in Kunming, food traditional to the local Dai minority group is available (Hubbert 2005). While some older people who lived through the Cultural Revolution point out the deep contradictions between these modern food-service spaces and the realities of the time period they represent, younger customers feel these spaces connect them to a past that feels increasingly far away in a rapidly developing China. One interviewee, a 22-year-old in Chongqing articulates these feelings, saying “Today’s China feels so cold and detached compared to the land that my grandparents lived in [...] It is a shame that people today are no longer accustomed to sharing and working together” (Century 2013). Another customer at

Black Earth discussed how the food made her feel connected to her aunt's struggles during the Cultural Revolution: "The living conditions were terrible; however, their spiritual life was rich. [...] They got on well with each other. They really worked hard to help China" (Hubbert 2005: 141). These restaurants offer not just a connection to past events, but to the lived experience of loved ones. In this context, I suggest that the social connections between previously educated youth fostered by these restaurants serves a double purpose, convincing young and increasingly affluent consumers of the establishment's connection to the past.

Both the fried dough and wild grass from Black Earth and the Chongqing restaurant's "weapons chest" are attempts to engage with China's past, albeit from different perspectives. Hubbert notes that both of these approaches are compatible with current Chinese policy: "While the party's current authority is linked to the very economic policies of consumerism and free markets that negate its historical, Maoist premise, these are also the very policies that have enabled restaurants like Black Earth to memorialize that troublesome history" (Hubbert 2005: 136). These restaurants act not only to reinforce a sense of continuity during the reform era and beyond, but present a depoliticized and consumable interpretation of history (Swislocki 2009; Hubbert 2005).

Conclusion

Each of the trends that I analyzed yielded insight into the changing foodways of contemporary China. Several connected discourses presented a stark dichotomy between street vendors and a constructed conception of modernity. Food safety, pollution, and use of public space discourses all serve to marginalize street vendors. While not seeking to ignore legitimate concerns of cleanliness, these biopolitical arguments are also tied to exclusionary politics that privilege certain economic activities and means of food consumption above others.

Many of these same discourses were mobilized by fast food restaurants to encourage business, and draw customers to the social spaces they created. Many fast food restaurants have embraced and created spaces designed to feel clean, modern, and hygienic. Connected to a discourse of hygiene and food purity, these spaces aim to commodify and sell the kind of safety that street food is perceived as lacking, while creating and shaping the consumer patterns of young urban Chinese people. These spaces encourage certain forms of sociality, and are designed to be attractive to specific demographics. Cultural revolution restaurants mobilize and commodify history in a similar, and yet opposing way. As with fast food, the social and cultural space created by the restaurants is designed to encourage social contact in a specific context, however rather than commodifying ideals of the modern, they seek to commodify and memorialize the past. These spaces seek to selectively privilege certain conceptions of the past and consequently become joint spaces of leisure and memorial. In all of these cases, food and the spaces of food consumption become areas where questions of China's history are articulated, and possible futures coexist and intermingle.

Further Research

Academically, I feel this project has raised several avenues for future enquiry. As mentioned in my methodology section, my research was confined to English-language sources and Chinese sources that were available in translation. I believe there is evidence of a more developed discourse on many of these issues accessible through sources written in Chinese. Ideally, continuing to survey Chinese-language sources would prove productive, and lead to new insights. Furthermore, while I was able to make substantial use of other researcher's fieldwork, first-hand experience was beyond the scope of this project. Highlighted by the mobility research I have explored, first-hand observational and embodied experience is invaluable. I believe further research, particularly relating to the use of space in restaurants, could benefit from traveling to these businesses and conducting field research.

Finally, there were several topics that I feel could productively add to this research, however were ultimately beyond the scope of this project. Changes occurring in home cooking, food purchasing patterns, and regional cuisines are important to the discussion of changing foodways in China. I hope to have the chance to explore these topics in more detail during the course of future academic projects.

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