

Eating Chinese – a historical banquet *

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 [Draft © April 2007. A paper prepared for 'The Future of US-China Relations', a conference organized by the US-China Relations Institute of the University of Southern California, 20-21 April 2007. To be cited only with the author's permission.]

Cauldron

(*Ding* 鼎)

Leung Ping-kwan 梁秉钧

As the Zhou Dynasty rebuilt the Empire
 and celebrated the unity of All-Under-Heaven,
 courtiers were honoured, ceremonial music composed
 metals melted, vessels cast, new injunctions set in bronze,
 power revalidated.

The grand banquet commenced, noblemen and elders took the
 places of honour;

while savage fauna bubbled restlessly in the cauldron,
 a sober phoenix motif replaced the gruesome mask of the
 Beast.

Our humble bellies have ingested a surfeit of treachery,
 eaten their fill of history, wolfed down legends –
 and still the banquet goes on, leaving
 an unfilled void in an ever-changing structure.
 Constantly we become food for our own consumption.
 For fear of forgetting we swallow our loved ones,
 we masticate our memories and our stomachs rumble
 as we look outwards.

Creation's aspirations are trussed,
 caught tight by the luminous bronze.
 In his campaign against the Chu, the southern state,
 as the Emperor approached the wilderness beyond the Central
 Plain,
 ten thousand bawled for the rustics beyond the pale,
 to make their low bow of homage;
 stone and metal engraved; vessels fashioned;

* Some of the material in this paper has appeared in different guises. See my essays 'A Year of Some Significance', published in the *Review* weekly supplement of *The Australian Financial Review*, 31 March 2006, where it was published without notes under the title 'Historical Distortions'. An online version appeared in *China Digital Times* (Zhongguo shuzi shidai), UC Berkeley, with notes, at: http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2006/04/a_year_of_some_significance_geremie_r_barme.php; and, 'After the Future in China', published as 'After the Future' in the *Review* supplement of *The Australian Financial Review*, 29 September 2006, subsequently posted on *China Digital Times* on 21 November 2006 at: http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2006/11/after_the_future_in_china_geremie_r_barme.php

tintinnabulations of history.

The proclamations sit heavy on the stomach,
 destroy the appetite;
 the table is altogether overdone.
 May I abstain from the rich banquet menu,
 eat my simple fare, my gruel, my wild vegetables,
 cook them, share them with you?
 Is there a chance
 your pomp and circumstance could ever change,
 evolve
 slowly
 into a new motif,
 some new arabesque
 of beauty?

1996

*(Translated by John Minford
 and Can Oi-sum)*

The year 2006 started with two Internet-related incidents that do, in a sense, convey well the kinds of issues and dilemmas common to the life of mainland China's netizens, historians and thinking individuals. They also illustrate the two aspects of my ruminations on contemporary Chinese culture that relate to food, history and China's engagement with the wider world.

The incidents also reveal something of what I would call the 'grey economy in information', cultural debate, as well as life on the Chinese Internet. I would suggest that the 'grey economy of information', as opposed to the black or bootleg economies which trade in the overtly illegal and contraband, are a form of arbitrage where individuals take advantage of the imbalance between official news outlets and the commentariat and popular opinion. In the resultant field of exchange, surplus value is generated by controversy, innovation, rumour, hard information and, among other things, celebrity. I have written at length on the subject of the 'greying of Chinese culture' elsewhere,¹ but it is the grey economy of data and debate that I wish to speak of here.

Both incidents involve what are now felt to be the perennial or 'classic' issues of cultural freedom, Internet repression and censorship so commonly remarked upon in regard to China, and which, in many cases, frame international discussions about freedom of information, societal change and politics in that country. They are also issues that increasingly concern us as we contemplate the internationalization of Sinophone culture, language, thought and practice, the so-called 'soft power' dimensions of China as a valent global presence.

While the Chinese authorities occasionally have the temerity to claim that there is no censorship of the Chinese net,² lengthy

¹ See my *In the Red, on contemporary Chinese culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p.99ff.

² Declan McCullagh, 'China: We don't censor the Internet', CNET News.com, 31 October 2006 at:

studies undertaken by universities in North America and Britain provide details of the methods and extent of internet filtering and censorship that form something of a backdrop to my remarks.³ I should also note that this is not a paper about the broader social issues related to the net in China, which I hope our colleague Guo Liang will address, but rather notes towards understanding present-day elite cultural practice as highlighted recently on the Chinese net, added to by some preliminary reflections on how this relates to some of the broader questions under discussion at this conference.

The Wolf Totem

In January 2006, Hu Jintao 胡锦涛, China's President and General Secretary of the ruling Communist Party, reportedly ordered the closure of the online publication *Freezing Point* (Bingdian 冰点). Edited for some years by two well-known journalists from *China Youth Daily* (Zhongguo qingnian bao 中国青年报), the e-paper had published many controversial articles on governance, the environment, politics and culture in China. However, in a recent issue it had reprinted a piece by the historian Yuan Weishi 袁伟时, a professor at Zhongshan University in Guangzhou 广州中山大学.

This is no place to delve into the arcana of Yuan's piece, suffice it to say that the well-known, and relatively outspoken, historian expressed his dismay on reading some of China's modern history high school textbooks. In them he found dangerous distortions of the historical record. Highly selective and ideologically-driven descriptions of events leading up to the infamous razing of the Garden of Perfect Brightness (Yuanming Yuan 圆明园), the imperial Manchu demesne outside Beijing which was destroyed by Anglo-French forces in 1860, and the Boxer rebellion of 1900, were not only incorrect but, Yuan warned, serve only to inflame nationalistic passions among impressionable teenagers. Yuan also cautioned that the irrational spirit guiding history teaching in China today endangers the country's mature and rational participation in the global community. He recalled that the xenophobic violence of the Red Guard generation was bred by just such a biased education.⁴

http://news.com.com/China+We+dont+censor+the+Internet.+Really/2100-1028_3-6130970.html

³ See Jonathan Zittrain and Benjamin Edelman, 'Empirical Analysis of Internet Filtering in China', Berkman Center for Internet & Society, Harvard Law School covering 2002, at:

<http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/filtering/china/>; and an update report, 'Internet Filtering in China in 2004-2005: A Country Study', at:

<http://www.opennetinitiative.net/studies/china/>

⁴ For both Chinese and English versions of Yuan's essay, 'Modernization and History Textbooks', see www.zonaeuropa.com/20060126_1.htm. Yuan Weishi does, however, stop short of providing crucial historical detail regarding the real reasons behind the sacking of the Garden of Perfect Brightness. It is an incident regarded by many as marking a turning point in China's relations with the West. Today, the site is a tourist destination, as well as being a place used to educate the young in patriotism. For the details of the history and destruction of the garden, see *China Heritage Quarterly*, No. 8 (December 2006), which takes as its focus the Garden of Perfect

Inculcated with a sense of patriotic ire through their school days, and convinced that the outside world was a malevolent enemy set on subverting China's revolution, the Red Guards attacked all things foreign during the early months of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. Countless people would lose their lives in the ensuing mêlée, although today very few people will admit to being involved with murder. The US-based academic Rae Yang is one of a handful of former Red Guards who is candid about her past. She recalls that her teachers were astounded by the visceral fury of the young rebels. Why should they have been so surprised that we acted like wolves, she asks. After all, we had all been fed on a constant diet of wolves' milk at school.⁵ In his article on teaching history in China today, Yuan Weishi observed with dismay that, 'Our children are still being fed wolves' milk!'

Freezing Point, the e-journal in question, was closed down and the editors given other assignments, although following Internet-based protest and outcries, a chastened version of the magazine was soon made available. The ban, however, was the first sign that 2006 would be a bad year for overt dissent and cultural disputation on the Chinese net. It would be followed later in the year by the government's ban of *China Century* (Shiji shalong 世纪沙龙), the longest lasting and arguably the most prominent forum for independent intellectual debate for the mainland. However, just as the forced restructuring of *Freezing Point* had done little to hinder the availability of Yuan's controversial text, so too did the wholesale censorship of the Chinese authorities of other sites failed to staunch the flood of net-centred intellectual contestation.

The Mantou Murder

The second incident in late 2005 early 2006, one that also absorbed users and observers of the Chinese net, helps to illustrate in counterpoint the rise of the maverick net user, and enriches our understanding of the shifting sands of Internet regulation and cultural evolution in China outside the realm of political *causes célèbres*.

In late 2005, the veteran filmmaker Chen Kaige 陈凯歌—a man hailed two decades ago as a leading figure in China's new wave of cinema—released his latest and arguably most ambitious film. It was claimed that 'The Promise' (*Wuji* 无极) would be on a par with the best works of the Japanese director Akira Kurosawa 黑泽明, the long-time auteur-hero of the Chinese director. Premiering with great fanfare at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, and carrying the high hopes of the

Brightness and its history (www.chinaheritagequarterly.org). *China Heritage Quarterly* is an e-journal produced by the China Heritage Project at The Australian National University.

⁵ See Rae Yang (Yang Rui), *Spider Eaters: A Memoir* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Yang's candour is also evident in her appearance in *Morning Sun*, a two-hour documentary on the Cultural Revolution made by Carma Hinton, myself and Richard Gordon (Boston: Long Bow Group, 2003). See www.morningsun.org

nearly has-been Chen, 'The Promise' was, however, an instant flop. For those of you who have yet to battle your way through this lugubrious, indulgent fairy-floss of pixillated mock-profundity, I would suggest that it is an auto-orientalist piece of plotless hype. The film might beggar description, but it did invite lambasting.

Within weeks, a young man by the name of Hu Ge (胡戈) created an online parody of the movie that he called 'Murder by *Mantou*' (*Yige mantou yinfade xue'an* 一个馒头引发的血案). In it he interleaved pirated material from 'The Promise' with footage from a didactic TV law show. The comic voice-over was narrated in the hyperbolic tones of official parole.⁶ It was an indictment of the pompous work of Chen and a new stage in the inventive use of the Internet in China.

Spoofing, or *egao* 恶搞 in Chinese, was immediately popularized by Hu Ge's take-off. In reality, spoofing or parody has long been a central feature of certain kinds of Chinese storytelling. There is popular tradition of it to be found in the pointed recounting of classical tales with a contemporary twist. Shortly after the Cultural Revolution, for example, as teahouse culture went through a momentary popular (as opposed to a municipal or state-orchestrated) revival in Beijing (as well as in other cities like Chengdu, noted for its teahouse culture and storytelling are famous), storytellers took to satirizing local politics and culture as they recounted episodes from such famous works as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. I recall one such informal gathering in 1979 at a small teahouse at Chaoyang Menwai 朝阳门外, a site now occupied by the looming Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Then there were the marvelous 1980s spoofs of the novelist Wang Shuo 王朔, who made light of political slogans and campaigns, as well as taking potshots at intellectuals and his fellow writers in his comic fiction (as he has been doing once more in his recent writings on the net). Some may also recall the famous case of Kong Yongqian 孔永谦 in 1991, when that spoofing 'T-shirt artist' created mock slogans and sayings that festooned his best-selling T-shirts (*wenhuashan* 文化衫) during the spring and summer months of that year. They created an immediate commercial craze, followed by heavy-handed political repression.⁷

As these cultural creators in China showed, parody in politics can have powerful resonances with the broader population, although it can also make distasteful situations more palatable. While in the US there is the 'Daily Show' on Comedy Central, on ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) TV we have 'The Chaser's War Against Everything', a weekly show that lambasts politicians, their politics and their increasingly hubristic posturing. And, more recently, in America the 'Vote

⁶ For Hu Ge's 'Murder by *Mantou*', see <http://blog.sina.com.cn/m/huge> (also on YouTube). This blog also contains his later spoofs of TV ads, songs, MTVs, the US and so on. See also http://www.danwei.org/internet/hu_ges_new_spoof_action_movie.php

⁷ For details of Wang Shuo and Kong Yongqian, see my *In the Red*, pp.62-98 & 145-178 respectively.

Different' clip available on YouTube is another example of the spoofer's art, also with a political edge.

In China, Hu Ge proved that the public appetite for parody is undiminished. Many local bloggers and the international media took an intense interest in Hu's seemingly confrontational and transgressive 'Murder by *Mantou*'. It was in reality a story of much about nothing, although Chen Kaige made much of it; too much. Chen, one of the fathers—or now for younger people, grandfathers—of China's new wave of cinema had long since moved from being an edgy cinematic path-finder to becoming one of the many aging cultural leaders of China mired in state-sponsored commercialism and domesticated avant-gardism, all the while succoured by international capital. The doughty director was affronted by Hu Ge's satire and was quick to threaten legal action against the young upstart. But, while Hu became famous, Chen was lampooned for his pompous lack of humour. Even Hong Huang, publisher of China's *Time Out*, cultural entrepreneur and a woman hailed by some as the 'Oprah of Beijing', used her blog to castigate the stuffed-Armani suit that is her ex-husband.

Hong had launched her blog on Valentine's Day 2006, using it thereafter to share her aperçus and insights in the fashion of any number of other tireless bloggers, she also basked in her status of bitch-as-boss. The hungry maw of the Internet is well known for driving even the most creative and insightful individuals into twittering inanity; and in China, as elsewhere, it provides an ideal vehicle for the vacuous lucubrations of celebrities and their promoters. While waxing lyrical on the most mundane of subjects, Hong also praised the efficacy of the net in delivering services in a country where the print media remain inefficient and hide-bound.

It was her entry on Hu Ge's 'Murder by *Mantou*' that really garnered her fame, being read some 700,000 times in the first days after its appearance. She called it 'My Ex and Steamed Bread' (Qianfu yu mantou 前夫与馒头), and she used it to chide Chen Kaige, telling him in no uncertain terms to lighten up and get a life:

Being able to laugh at yourself is a weapon that every person with nous needs in their armoury. If you can make fun of yourself, especially when you're in a tight situation, it usually helps you to effect an escape. Of course, it is hard to be laughed at by others, but there's not that many people who, like Lu Xun, want 'to keep beating a dog that's fallen into the water'. Most people will give you a break and laugh along with you..

Listen, everyone, if you reckon that our magazine [*Beijing Time Out*] is more coarse grain than fine flour, you're welcome to scrunch it up into a *mantou*.

And another thing, I've got to apologize to the people concerned, but if I didn't get this off my chest I'm sure I would have developed cancer.

自嘲是每个聪明人必备的武器，特别是遇到困境的时候，能够自己点拨自己一下，就可以解围了。被别人嘲笑是很难受的一件事情，但是象鲁迅那样要“痛打落水狗”的人还是少数，大部分人都不会网开一面，一笑了之。

… 求大家行个好，多看我们的杂志，如果觉的我们也是粗粮，欢迎把我们蹂躏成馒头。

最后，必须向当事人道歉，但是我再憋着会得癌的。⁸

Rules & Regulations

As I relate the upshot of Hu Ge's comic entrepreneurialism, I am reminded of the research piece on the nascent Chinese Internet that the oral historian Sang Ye 桑晔 and I undertook for *Wired* magazine a decade ago. In that survey essay we introduced the concept of 'The Great Firewall of China' (a 'wall' that we observed from the very start was as porous as the bricks-and-mortar Great Wall of China⁹), and we quoted the supervisor of the newly created Internet surveillance system in Beijing. He spoke at length about the ways that the Internet would unfold in China in coming years, presaging much that has happened. He also told us, in what we thought of as being his amusing and gnomic style, the mantra for state control: 'Everyone can eat the fried beans in the wok, but if one pops out someone's gonna get hurt' (*chao dou dajia chi, bengguo zha yi ren* 炒豆大家吃, 崩锅炸一人). It's a line that can be glossed as: 'You make a problem for us, and we'll make a law for you.'¹⁰ Although, everyone knows the common Chinese quip that sums up the wisdom of the masses in the face of officialdom: 'You might have your policies, but we have our strategies' (*shang you zhengce, xia you duice* 上有政策, 下有对策).

On 9 April 2006, the authorities launched what they called a 'civilizing the Web' campaign (*wenming ban wang* 文明办网), a push both for control and for improved netiquette. The official media reported that, over a 12 day period, almost two million 'unhealthy postings and photos' were deleted and 600 forums closed down on 14 Chinese web portals. Seven major Chinese web portals were openly criticized for their 'bad information postings', whose 'billions' of web pages require further 'cleaning' by the 'net nannies'. (It is noteworthy that it was not until one year later, 9 April 2007, that leading US Internet figures like Jimmy Wales, creator of Wikipedia, were reported to be suggesting the need for a code of net conduct so that civility could temper a blogosphere careening in the direction of the uncouth.¹¹)

⁸ Hong Huang, 'Qianfu yu mantou', 16 February 2006, at: <http://blog.sina.com.cn/u/476bdd0a010001ug>

⁹ See, among other things, the Sang Ye oral history interviews on the Wall in Claire Roberts and G.R. Barmé, eds, *The Great Wall of China* (Sydney: Powerhouse Museum, 2006).

¹⁰ Barmé and Sang Ye, 'The Great Firewall of China', *Wired*, June 1997, at http://www.wired.com/wired/5.06/china_pr.html

¹¹ See *The New York Times* story as carried in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 April 2007.

By August 2006, the authorities began to regulate the spoofing fad, just as they had regulated (or attempted to regulate) so many other cultural and social extrusions over the past three decades. As the deputy director general of the State Council Information Office Internet Department (*Guowuyuan waixuanban wangluojū* 国务院外宣办网络局) Peng Bo declared, 'people's thinking is befuddled by it. It disrupts the mainstream values of the majority of people, confounding thinking about honour and disgrace [*rongruguan* 荣辱观], and confusing right and wrong. It undermines the bottom line of contemporary morality, inciting dissatisfaction among the broad masses of netizens [*guangda wangmin* 广大网民] and the broad masses of people, leading them to oppose such things.'

As a posting by 'Ada' noted on 20 August 2006 at www.danwei.org, Section 25 of the Film Administration Regulatory Code of SARFT provided guidelines familiar to anyone who has dealt with how culture is overseen in the People's Republic,

According to Rule 8, it is stipulated that content may not insult or slander a third party, or damage a third party's rights [侮辱或者诽谤他人, 侵害他人合法权益], nor may content. Rule 6 states that it shan't 'Disturb the order of the society, harm the stableness of the society [扰乱社会秩序, 破坏社会稳定], or, according to Rule 9: 'Harm social morality or excellence of Chinese culture [危害社会公德或者民族优秀传统文化]. Failing all else, there's Rule 10, the catchall that states that it is forbidden for content to include 'Any other material prohibited by Chinese Law' [有法律、行政法规和国家规定禁止的其他内容].

In October 2006, the authorities—or, more precisely, the State Administration of Radio, Film and TV (*Guangdian zongju* 广电总局, or SARFT)—promulgated new regulations requiring both mobile phone users and bloggers to register their numbers and screen-names, along with their national identity card numbers (called as a 'real name system', *shimingzhi* 实名制).

This elicited a quick, and characteristically humorous, response from the leading Internet commentator and blogger Wang Xiaofeng 王小峰. Calling SARFT the 'State Administration of Constant Anxiety over Radio, Film and TV' (*Guangdian zongji* 广电总局) he observed that,

...even though I am often at the receiving end abuse from the trolls and pests of the Internet, I don't want a real name system. Being uncivilized is one of the important features of the Internet.

Being uncivilized is also an important characteristic of Beijingers. You can't just pretend to be civilized for a few days because you're holding the Olympic Games, it's not realistic. You can't just prove that you are civilized by

forcing people to use real names on the Internet, that's just cheating yourself and everyone around you.¹²

I would argue, however that 2006, a time when the Internet spoof and the blogosphere flourished in China, once more brought to the fore issues that for scholars and observers of Chinese post-Cultural Revolution culture are extremely familiar. In the mix of popular activism, media sensationalism and overt regulation, we see the ways in which the Sinophone cultural world is evolving and, despite the best efforts of the authorities, growing and maturing. I would sum up the unfolding negotiation among users, regulators, observers and commercial opportunists in the following, albeit abbreviated, way:

- The tussle between bureaucracies (in this case the competition between SARFT and MII (Ministry of Information Industries *Xinxichanye bu* 信息产业部). The fight over jurisdiction of online video, and indeed the lucrative online industry;
- A crackdown that itself modulates and domesticates oppositionist trends;
- The use of moral outrage as a weapon, whereby the authorities, unelected and unrepresentative though they may be, pose as the guardians of public interest, social norms and morals;
- The shadow boxing between guerilla creators, copyright owners and the authorities;
- International attention and hand-wringing over Internet freedom and censorship in authoritarian China; talk of the inevitable undermining by the masses of an overweening bureaucracy and authoritarian one-party state;
- Attendance on the next mini-eruption;
- The inevitable, and profitable (both personally and commercially) 'cultural stir-fry' (*wenhua chaozuo* 文化炒作) or beat-up generated by the incident and those imitators inspired by it; and,
- Further evidence that an increasingly informed and savvy population is continuing to negotiate, cannily, fitfully and sometimes painfully, spaces for expression with the über-kultur of the regnant party. This 'defeudalization' of the media will continue, however, despite the publicity surrounding such 'landmark incidents' the constant constraints on the freedom of expression limits in a myriad of ways the potential for Sinophone culture to grow in a more complex, substantive and diverse fashion both at home and internationally.

(It should be noted, parenthetically at least, that the domestication of disturbatory cultural phenomena has, nonetheless, been extremely successful in some cases. Witness, for example, the transformation of the avant-garde art scene in Beijing and other major cities from being an underground

¹² Wang Xiaofeng, 'The paradox of registering bloggers' real names', posted by Jeremy Goldkorn on www.danwei.org, 25 October 2006 (danwei.org translation). For the original, see Wang Xiaofeng, 'Boke shimingzhide beilun', posted at Wang's blog (<http://www.wangxiaofeng.net/?p=491>) on 24 October 2006.

movement during the 1970s-90s, to become an element of pluralist consumerist-socialist China today. 'Art factories' like 798 at Dashanzi in Beijing and Moganshan Lu in Shanghai show how successfully a counter-culture can be transformed into a thriving business, a tourist attraction and an international market force.¹³)

Hu Ge's *mantou* left its mark in a number of ways. For those familiar with May-Fourth era Chinese cultural concerns, for instance, it brought to mind the blood-soaked *mantou* in Lu Xun's emblematic short story 'Medicine' (Yao 药). That story describes how an ailing patient is fed a steamed-bread dipped in the blood of an executed revolutionary. It ends with the death of the patient and the funereal vision of a graveyard dotted with mounds that look like a field of *mantou*.

But, as others have noted, history tends to repeat itself as farce. In early 2007, at a meeting of movie bureaucrats, Zhao Shi 赵实, the head of the Film Bureau of SARFT, threw a few steamed breads of her own as she critiqued the contemporary Chinese film scene. 'What is it with these *mantou* all over the screen [*mantai dou shi mantou* 满台都是馒头]?', she asked in some off-the-cuff remarks at the meeting. She was, in fact, referring to the cleavage shown by Gong Li and other actresses in the veteran director Zhang Yimou's 张艺谋 latest film, 'Curse of the Golden Flower' (*Mancheng jin dai huangjin jia* 满城尽带黄金甲), a tale of love, intrigue and court politics set in the Tang dynasty. 'How much better is a film like [Kevin Costner's recent movie] "The Guardian". It could well be a [socialist] keynote [*zhuxuanlü* 主旋律] movie. Okay, so it's not about the PLA, but it does promote the spirit of heroism.'

Worshipping at the Temple of the Five Viscera

The travails of a virtual *mantou* are not the only way that people can gain an appreciation of the shifts and rifts of the contemporary mainland Chinese cultural world (and its international participants). In the gustatory realm, and that of restaurant as cultural centre, the place where people 'worship at the temple of the five viscera' or *ji wuzangdian* 祭五脏殿, much can be said of the ways in which China's power as consumer and creator are unfolding.

In the mid 1990s, as part of the project that became the English language book *China Candid: the people on the People's Republic* (2006), Sang Ye interviewed an economist who was also an adviser to the State Development and Reform Commission. Although the interview did not make the final cut of either the Chinese or English-language versions of the book, that economist made an observation that is relevant to my discussion of food and politics in China's new global history. He said,

¹³ I have written at length on the subject of domesticated dissent and the art world in my *In the Red*. See also my essay 'Telling Selves & Talking Others', *ArtAsiaPacific*, No. 52 (March-April 2007), pp.72-75.

The most basic human right is the right to eat your fill. Regardless of what the West might say, it is still very hard for China's Premier to achieve this goal. You do the math [using mid 1990s statistics]: China has over 1.2 billion people, that means 1.2 billion gaping mouths. If you think about it, that is the equivalent of a black hole over four square kilometers in size. So, you hand this gaping maw to China's Premier and it's his job to fill it with rice and flour. Heavens, that four square kilometres is the mouth of China! Okay, so you don't have enough rice or flour, millet and corn flour will do. If it was a foreign mouth that demanded milk and bread then there'd be a lot of hardship, and there'd be far more than the present 60 million people who have inadequate food and clothing.

从民生这个基本角度说，吃饱是最最基本的人权。不论西方怎样讲，对于我们中国，对于实际做事情的中国总理来说，这仍旧很困难。你算算，十二亿人 [这是当时，即 1990 年代中期的数字]，大家都把嘴张开，就是四点几平方公里的黑洞，把这么大的大嘴交给他，他得放进去多少大米白面才能饱啊！谢天谢地，这四点几平方公里是中国嘴，你没有大米白面，小米棒子面能吃饱也行的，也不错。要是长了外国嘴，喝牛奶吃面包，尚未解决温饱的公民可就不止六千万了。

Following the lean years of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution (from the late 1950s to the late 1970s), the revival of food was a, if not the, central aspect of Chinese culture as a whole. One could argue that the reclamation of civilian life started with the stomach. Sensory revival, and gustatory recuperation, in many ways led the way in creating, showcasing, and celebrating the economic and material renaissance of the country. Indeed, it is noteworthy that the first book that was published following the most extreme censorship of the Mao era was a cookbook, one with the then politically correct title *Recipes for the Masses* (*dazhong caipu* 大众菜谱). The resuscitation of cooking methods, the pursuit of produce, the proliferation of restaurants—from the first private eateries in Beijing (like Yuebin Lou 悦宾楼, near Dongchang Alley 东厂胡同, in the late 1970s), Chengdu and elsewhere, from the cheapest take-outs to the extravagant palaces of pleasure that have flourished in every city—have marked a new age for Chinese food, and an expanded cultural repertoire for local and global definitions of what it is to be Chinese.

Conspicuous consumption, or rather the competitive display of wealth (*dou fu* 斗富) was an element of Chinese culture long before Thorstein Veblen first articulated his ideas about the burgeoning bourgeoisie in Europe and America early last century. It is the message-bearing, or symbolic form of food that is particularly important in these competitions of consumption. Grand meals in noted restaurants, recondite dishes in rustic surrounds, the eating of exotic foods, meal-time entertainments, the imitation of the habits of the gentry, or indeed of the imperial court, are elements of Chinese eating and food culture more than ever before.

Writing in the 2nd century BCE, the poet Mei Sheng 枚乘 warned that rich foods and liquors were 'The Drug Which Rots the Stomach'. He wrote of the luxury available to royalty at his

time in his 'The Seven Exhortations to Rise' (Qi qi 七啓), a work later used by Mao Zedong to caution his own cadres against the perils of excess. In his famous rhapsody, Mei Sheng wrote a description of lavish food that would do any Roman imperial banquet proud; one which the extravagant eaters of contemporary China are now competing to consume.

Cook

The flesh of a young calf
Garnished with the tenderest shoots,

Brew

A harmonious broth from plump dog flesh,
Cap it with a layer of mountain truffles.

Prepare the rice of Chu

And the fine cereals of the South,
Choice dainties.

Rolled into balls,

Dropped in the mouth,
They will melt at a taste,

Summon the master chef Yi Yin to perform the cuisine,

The famed cook Yi Ya will blend and spice it,

And then prepare well-cooked bear's paw,

Add a sweet sauce,

Take delicately sliced, braised lean meats,

Slivers of fresh carp,

Adorn the whole with autumn-yellow sapan,

September mushrooms plucked amidst white dew,

Serve with wine steeped in orchids,

A sip will freshen the mouth,

Then add the flesh of wild pheasant,

The fetus of home-reared leopards,

Taste a little rice,

Drink much thin gruel,

And it will be like sun melting snow.¹⁴

One can list just some of the most recent luxury culinary developments in the Chinese capital. For example:

The Yijin Yuan in Beijing has stipulated that the lowest tariff for diners is 10,000 yuan;

Membership for the Chang'an Club (diagonally opposite the Beijing Grand Hotel) costs US\$10,000, and for Christmas 2006 they charged 100,000 yuan for a private dining room, although usually it is only 5,000 yuan;

The Beijing No. 6 Club at Yongnanli, Jianwai, advertises itself not as the 'most expensive' private club and eatery, but as 'more expensive' than any other. It costs 100,000 yuan to join;

In 2007, some major restaurants offered Chinese New Year's banquets (*nianye fan* 年夜饭) for a table of twelve for the auspicious price of 88,888 yuan. All were booked out;

¹⁴ Mei Sheng, 'Qi qi', translated by John Scott, from John Minford and Joseph S.M. Lau, eds, *Classical Chinese Literature: An Anthology of Translations, Volume I: From Antiquity to the Tang Dynasty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), pp.283-4.

It is hard to imagine what the 'Olympics feasts' of 8 August 2008 (2008.8.8), the day the Olympics open in Beijing, will cost; however, A personal (untried) favourite example of contemporary excess is the dish known as 'Zhangzhong bao' 掌中宝, 'precious paw'. To make it the tender centre of a chicken's foot is cut out and lightly sautéed. It is said hundreds of chickens are required to make one banquet-size serve of this delicacy.

Even the most modern scientific achievements in China can have a gustatory dimension. In October 2003, Chinese food finally went extraterrestrial. The first Chinese 'taikonaut', Yang Liwei 杨立伟, was said to have sampled a range of one-bite traditional Chinese recipes while circling the earth in the Shenzhou 神州 5 sputnik. And, in October 2005, when the Shenzhou 6 spacecraft was launched, a restaurant in Changchun 长春 made 'Shooting Heavenwards', a dish crafted from turnip and pumpkin that paid homage to the success of the nation's space program. The food sculpture was nestled among spicy chicken wings to indicate flight, with fried papaya fritters wrapped in egg white to show the smoke coming out of the rocket at takeoff.¹⁵

Many of the changes witnessed by Chinese society during the reform era have been accompanied by a monumental adjustment to the superstructure of thought, attitude and taste. Among the burgeoning aspirational classes the desire to catch up, and even surpass, the West in terms of consumption has become something of a *leit-motif*. While some writers have noted that 'the majority of the Chinese population (mostly the Hans) may have trouble developing the new dietary habits and digestive capacities, especially lactose tolerance, that will enable them to swallow double cheeseburgers and Whoppers',¹⁶ it is the shift to global-scale consumption that is as much a mark of China's arrival on the world scene as anything else.

Just as Hu Ge's virtual *mantou* was sating the public hunger for satire, in March 2006 the party launched yet another propaganda campaign exhorting the people to new heights of self-restraint, hard work and denial. In the midst of rampant consumption of every imaginable kind, consumption pursued in the vaunted 'harmonious society' (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会) promoted by Hu Jintao and the party, political quiescence is energetically policed, and the party continues to make (increasingly comic) gestures towards the avowed Yan'an tradition of 'frugality and plain living' (*jianku pusu* 艰苦朴素).

The new propaganda push of March 2006 launched the 'Eight Worthies and Eight Shames' or 'Eight Does and Don'ts' (*barong*

¹⁵ Of course, this is not to deny the culinary artefice of America's own Martha Stewart, the lifestyle guru who sent her close friend Charles Simonyi heavenward in April 2007 with a Martha special: quail roasted in wine, duck breast with capers and, among other things, rice pudding. See Maria Glovinina, 'Tourist blasts off with Martha's menu', Reuters, 9 April 2007.

¹⁶ Gang Yue, *The Mouth That Begs: Hunger, Cannibalism, and the Politics of Eating in Modern China* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1999), p.377.

bachi 八荣八耻, a shorthand for *bage guangrong bage chiru* 八个光荣八个耻辱). This is a values statement that articulates in the epigrammatic shorthand favoured by propagandists what it is to be a good citizen, indeed what it is to be worthy of one's Chineseness.¹⁷ The list has been extolled by commentators who have in its wake produced volumes of explication that place the policy at the centre of contemporary Chinese identity. They claim that the values incorporated in the Two Eights are in fact a modern articulation of the basic elements of Chinese civilization, developed and decocted for more than two millennia. The Associated Press formulated the following translation of the dos and don'ts:

Love, do not harm the motherland.
 Serve, don't disserve the people.
 Uphold science; don't be ignorant and unenlightened.
 Work hard; don't be lazy and hate work.
 Be united and help each other; don't gain benefits at the expense of others.
 Be honest and trustworthy, not profit-mongering at the expense of your values.
 Be disciplined and law-abiding instead of chaotic and lawless.
 Know plain living and hard struggle; do not wallow in luxuries and pleasures.

以热爱祖国为荣、以危害祖国为耻
 以服务人民为荣、以背离人民为耻
 以崇尚科学为荣、以愚昧无知为耻
 以辛勤劳动为荣、以好逸恶劳为耻
 以团结互助为荣、以损人利己为耻
 以诚实守信为荣、以见利忘义为耻
 以遵纪守法为荣、以违法乱纪为耻
 以艰苦奋斗为荣、以骄奢淫逸为耻

Some may remember the early punk rocker He Yong's 何勇 lament in his 1990s song 'Garbage Dump' (*Laji chang* 垃圾场): 'This world we live in is like a garbage dump./People are like insects,/All fighting one another./We eat our conscience,/And we shit ideology./Is there any hope?/Is there any hope?'¹⁸ It is perhaps in that spirit that, within days of the new Lei Fengesque campaign being launched, popular parodists were flashing mocking SMS reworkings of the 'Eight Dos and Don't's' to mobile phones throughout the country. One of the 'spoofs' popular in the film world goes as follows:

当前国家大力提倡树立社会主义荣辱观，影视行业也相应提出了八荣八耻新标准：
 1、制片人睡女演员、为出品人当老鸨为耻，以不

¹⁷ I would point out that the Australian government formulated its own 'values statement' around the same time that the 'Eight Does and Don'ts' appeared, though the Australian list boasts nine items. See my observations in 'Shared Values: a Sino-Australian Conundrum', a keynote address to the 50th anniversary conference of the Oriental Society of Australia, Sydney University, 5 December 2006, forthcoming in print.

¹⁸ See 'Ending' from the transcript of the film 'The Gate of Heavenly Peace' at <http://www.tsquare.tv/film/transend.html>

向电视台购片人行贿为荣。

2、导演以不抵制制片人二奶演员为耻，以保护工作人员身体健康抵制不限时工作为荣。

3、制片主任以吃演员和器材回扣为耻，以不用假发票、白条贪污为荣。

4、剧务以克扣剧组盒饭标准为耻，以不自己多吃多占为荣。

5、摄影以贪污胶片拍广告为耻，以布光不重女轻男为荣。

6、演员以欺压工作人员随意改戏为耻，以不卖身求角色为荣。

7、录音以偷听谈话、搬弄是非为耻，以配合各部门积极调整为荣。

8、审片人以故意刁难要三倍为耻，以不受制片人贿赂为荣。

It is in the connection between rampant consumption (of goods, food and resources) that we are reminded of the precarious relationship between 'consuming one's capital' (*chi laoben* 吃老本) and 'sitting idly while eating the mountain empty [of food]' (*zuochi shankong* 坐吃山空). During the mid-1990s wave of xenophobic writing in China (and its Doppelgänger in the West), there was talk of how China, once a sickly and starving country, could as a rampant economic consumer of resources eat up the world. The threat of China now moves onto a planetary scale as a resource hungry and environmentally destructive super-consumer in negative competition with the US (which is figured as being a super-consumer confronted with the need to learn moderation).¹⁹

Whereas Lu Xun issued the call to 'save the children' in the May Fourth era, despairing as he was of the anthropagic dimension of traditional Chinese culture, it would appear that in the new millennium the call will be to save the children, not from the man-eating dangers of traditional culture, but from the health hazards of hypermodernity and obesity.

As to the abiding fascination with and embedding of China and America, it is useful to record a comment made by a former chef at Fang Shan 仿膳, the 'Imitation Imperial Cuisine' restaurant at Beihai Park in Beijing. He is now one of the designers of the menus for China's Olympic Games:

Sure, I've eaten that American fast food—Macdonald's and KFC. Kids under 30 have eaten lots of that stuff, and spent time in those noisy fast food places. I can't cope. The government's always going on about how China is prey to Western 'peaceful evolution'; that Western culture and politics will corrupt us and turn us into a vassaldom of international capitalism within three to four generations.

¹⁹ See Li Xiguang, 'Zhongguo hui chengwei chiguang shijie liangshide "emo" ma?' (Will China become the 'demon' that devours the world's food?), in Li Xiguang and Liu Kang, eds, *Yaomohua Zhongguode beihou* (Behind the Demonizing of China) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehuikexue chubanshe, 1996).

That's ridiculous! Our young people are already being corrupted by their junk food. The fact of the matter is that Chinese cooking itself is starving; our cuisine is too lean! Our own national traditions are undernourished. Chinese restaurants are always going out of business; but have you ever heard of a Macdonald's in China going bankrupt?

My son loves the stuff, but how can you get your fill on a burger? He needs at least seven or eight to fill up, and then he's hungry again in half an hour! No wonder they are doing so well.

Sure, I know about that documentary film *Supersize Me*. Surprised he didn't get sued by the corporations. But that's what junk food does; it's expensive and bad for you.²⁰

The Cantonese writer and humourist Shen Hongfei 沈宏非 further sums up a home-grown awareness of China's (and, in reality, all modern societies') consuming dilemma with a story about food. He noted that the expression *fa cai* 發財 or 'make a fortune' sounds like *facai* 髮菜, 'hair vegetable', a wild vegetable that looks like hair and that grows in the hilly west of China. It became extremely popular in Guangdong in the 1980s, with the new market economy fuelled by the reforms. The Cantonese, famous for their entrepreneurial spirit and a fondness for auspicious names for foods, generated a huge demand for *facai* vegetable and, as it had been in Hong Kong before, now in Guangdong it became a crucial ingredient in New Year's dishes and as a business gift that symbolized the hope for even greater wealth and success in the coming year.

Shen acerbically noted the relationship between the 1997 sand storms that buried villages in towns throughout north and northeast China and this culinary delicacy,

The frenzied harvesting of this wild plant, which was a natural ground cover in the dry western provinces, contributed to massive soil erosion. That exacerbated the ferocious dust storms that blow in to Beijing from the Gobi Desert every spring. Recently, the Chinese government banned the sale of *facai*, but I don't think that will stop anyone.

So, every time a Cantonese stuffs their face with *facai* [hairy vegetable] thinking it'll help them *fa cai* [make money], a Beijing resident spits out another mouthful of dust blown in from the Gobi Desert.

The Future of Facing the Past

In recent years the concept of 'cultural heritage' (*wenhua yichan* 文化遗产) has entered mainstream Chinese discourse; indeed,

²⁰ From an interview by Carma Hinton done in 2005 as part of a Long Bow Group project on Chinese cuisine.

2006 saw the celebration of the country's first Cultural Heritage Day.²¹ While cities throughout the country are boasting a boom in museum construction, it is often in the design and construction of restaurants that inventive heritage protection is taking place. For example, 'Mom's Hot Pot' (*laoma huoguocheng* 老妈火锅城), a restaurant chain started in Chengdu, features the innovative designs of Zhu Cheng 朱成, collector, connoisseur and cultural entrepreneur. Passionate about preserving the material culture of Sichuan, Zhu has helped the restaurant owners turn one of the chain's multi-storey 'Mom's Hot Pot' restaurants into nothing less than a gustatory museum. It contains ancient bronzes, theme rooms featuring different eras—dynastic, republican and revolutionary—gardens, farm fields, and in some areas even the conveyor belt style of food delivery popularised by sushi train restaurants. The eclectic collection includes terracotta funerary figures and homes, complete with miniature courtyards and pigsties. There are also *bas relief* carvings set in the walls, parts of an old courtyard and bronze figures cast by modern artisans, replicating traditional teahouse scenes. Thus, while diners 'worship in the temple of the five viscera' they can also travel through the temporal *mélange* of contemporary China, a place experiencing a unique period of historical revivals, to which we now turn.

Previously, I have used the work of the Russian philosopher Mikhail Epstein to broach the subject of what happens 'after the future' in China. In the 1990s, Epstein had remarked that in Russia,

The 'communist future' has become a thing of the past, while the feudal and bourgeois 'past' approaches us from the direction where we had expected to meet the future.²²

That is to say, the particular vision of the future in countries that pursued state socialism predicated itself on eliminating the vestiges of the bourgeois (and in the case of China, feudal) past. History texts, the media, propagandists and party leaders proclaimed that the truth of communism beckoned. The world of consumerism, individual acquisition, private property, as well as the legal codes, cultural habits and political protocols that went with them were accordingly relegated irredeemably to the dung-heap of history. The past was defunct, of interest only as a museum display or as a cautionary tale. The bright future of communism, however, was not only a promise, it was an inevitable end of history.

With the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc and the dismemberment of the Soviet Union, this vision of the future was foreclosed. As Epstein would observe, Russians—for they were no longer Soviets—faced a world that literally came 'after the future'. In other words, their present as gauged

²¹ For this and a detailed tracking of the rise of 'heritage' in contemporary China, see the e-journal *China Heritage Quarterly* (www.chinaheritagequarterly.org), founded in 2005 and edited by G.R. Barmé and Bruce Doar.

²² Mikhail N. Epstein, *After the Future: Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, trans. Agnesa Miller-Pogacar (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p.xi.

from the 1990s was one in which the ineluctable future promise of communism had now become an anachronism. Meanwhile, the long-excoriated era of capitalism took its place as a new, irresistible future.

I would argue, however, that another kind of temporal legerdemain has taken place in China. There too the 'traditional' vision of state socialism has been ruptured, not by political collapse, but by party-sanctioned economic reform. The proffered future of perfected socialism and distant communism while an artefact of the past in former socialist countries, is only a partially discredited, or some would argue sidelined, state project in China. The vestiges of Marxist-inflected thought continue to cloak discourse in the official realm, even though its translation into social practice is often marginal at best. For all intents and purposes, the future that was the promise of socialism and party-directed revolution, while rhetorically present in state-orchestrated 'reality,' has nonetheless been relegated to the past, or merely a parallel present.

Hence, 'after the future in China' there too has come a past that was decried for decades. In an age in which the country is 'making up for the [unfinished] lessons of capitalism' (*bu zibenzhuyide ke* 补资本主义的课) a crude theoretical confabulation has been created. All forms of neo-liberal reform are legitimated in terms of creating 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'. Since the country is making up for lost time its institution of state-sponsored capitalism is spoken of as being but the 'preliminary stage of socialism' (*shehuizhuyide chuji jieduan* 社会主义的初级阶段), a period during which manifold forms of social inequity, economic dislocation, injustices and irregularity will inevitably appear and be dealt with as required. As a result of these policies, and keeping in mind the metaphor of the 'steam engine of history' (*lishide huochetou* 历史的火车头) that was common in the era of high socialism, much is now made of China 'joining tracks' (*jiegui* 接轨) with every aspect of the globalized world.

For China, unlike the redundant socialist polities of the Eastern Bloc, is not only living in a time after time, or rather in a time 'after the future'. It remains an authoritarian state ruled by a Communist Party that officially cleaves to Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. The panoply of state socialism—its symbols, meetings, anniversaries, diction and doublethink—remain central to the political vocabulary of the country. The prolepsis embedded in the official discourse about socialism is unchanged. The future of communism is still spoken of unabashedly—even if few would take it seriously—and the linear history plotted from the party's founding in 1921 through social strife, war and liberation leads inexorably to the present, even if its telos is not necessarily at the end of that line.

Furthermore, under Hu Jintao money from the state coffers is being poured into socialist and party education, and into 'theoretical innovation' within the context of party dogma,

allowing it, to use the official catchphrase of the Jiang Zemin 江泽民 era, 'to advance with the times' (*yu shi ju jin* 与时俱进). Nonetheless, the commercialised media and popular taste make much of a past that the party can only hope to incorporate into its own historical edifice. As Epstein wrote of post-Soviet Russia,

Now... the communist 'future' and the socialist 'present' have become our genuine past, so that all of our history opens to us simultaneously, along with all the historical layers of twentieth-century humanity. The present may be chaotic, unstable, and unreal, but we have finally come into possession of the past, or, more precisely, it has come forward to possess us.²³

In China, paradoxically, the communist 'future' and the socialist 'present' coexist with other pasts offering a particular vista of historical pluralism. It is thus that China is experiencing revivals of histories past, suborned, suppressed or forgotten, and it is a process that has been unfolding for some two decades. Thus, the pluralism of the Tang dynasty is extolled along with the global reach of the Mongol-Yuan; the greatness of the Han is celebrated, as is the multiethnic empire of the Manchu-Qing.

In Conclusion

It is as these histories 'come forward to possess' China, opportunities frustrated, lost or overlooked in the past present themselves. Even the 'paths not taken' during the Republican era are better known today than at any other time since the end of the Cultural Revolution.

The paths to the future, either in China or in the Sino-American dynamic, may not be via the alimentary canal or through the simple regurgitation of some long-sidelined history. It is in mind of this, and in conclusion that I would join with the Hong Kong poet Leung Ping-kwan, whose work 'Cauldron' opened this essay, and ask,

Is there a chance
your pomp and circumstance could ever change,
evolve
slowly
into a new motif,
some new arabesque
of beauty?

²³ Epstein, *After the Future*, pp.295-96.