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Exotic Commodities

Modern Objects and Everyday Life in China

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EATING AND DRINKING

Sidney Mintz has noted how food rarely figures in discussions of consumption, maybe because of its ephemeral nature: food is transient and thus quite different from other forms of material culture. Yet the swift satisfaction which may follow ingestion should not obscure the cultural importance of food, in particular in societies where hunger was widespread and intense, as in China.[1] Moreover, food is often seen as the aspect of life least permeable to foreign influence, China again being a prime example. But as this chapter shows, every aspect of food was changed by the inclusion of the country in a global economy which hugely expanded the existing culinary repertoire. Changes in diet were not restricted to the wealthy elites of the coastal cities: the very staple of food changed in taste and aspect, as rice, sugar and wheat were increasingly produced industrially, white being the desired colour. Simple objects like the thermos flask and enamelware profoundly transformed the material culture of food, while those with a little money to spare might experience 'foreign' food—by a visit to a simple stall on the pavement or a lavishly decorated exotic restaurant with a menu in a strange language. Moreover, the use of tins enormously expanded the range of available foodstuffs, whether simple dishes or rare delicacies, across regions and seasons, for rich and poor alike. Cultural bricolage pervaded every aspect of life, including creative appropriations in the kitchen, as dishes now considered quintessentially 'Chinese' made their first appearance in the thriving culinary environment of the republican period - fried egg with tomato being a prime example. As in England and France, studied by Stephen Mennell,[2] the trend in modern China was towards a more varied experience in eating and more varied tastes—thanks to the advent of manufactured foods and the closer integration of the country with a global economy. Greater culinary diversity and complexity were the fitting result of globalisation for a country which had readily adopted foreign foodstuffs since the dawn of history in its search for health and longevity.[3]

China's sweet tooth

Modernity had a way of insinuating itself in the form of sugar. Sweets penetrated the imperial household via the Scottish tutor Reginald Johnston: Puyi was delighted by their tin box, silver wrapping-paper and different fruit flavours (his tutor used the occasion to explain to him how the fruity tastes were produced by new chemical techniques and how the neat shapes were made by machines).[4] In the household of Charlie Song, an entrepreneur who had been educated in America, children were taught to cook American food as early as the 1890s, and Song Meiling was famed for her ginger cookies and Christmas cakes.[5] In Chongqing and other cities it was considered by the 1920s to be a mark of social prestige among local ladies to be able to entertain foreigners at 'tiffin parties'.[6] Zhang Ailing liked to eat cream cakes because they were 'soft and easy to digest'; she was also fond of hot chocolate with cream.[7] As Lady Hosie noted, new China had a sweet tooth and appreciated sumptuous patisserie with mottoes piped in pink sugar; iced American layer cake was particularly fashionable among well-heeled ladies.[8]

Milk, when sweetened, was also consumed on its own rather than in pastries and cakes. A vogue for it appeared in the 1930s, as 600 cows in Nanjing produced milk for teachers, students, officials and hospital patients: as the *North China Herald* noted, the general view that China was a country in which milk was not drunk was a pet maxim in need of revision.[9] In Wuxi, an industrial city without the capital's concentration of foreigners and government officials, ninety-two registered dairies produced milk for the local population.[10] On the other hand, a report on the living conditions of workers in Shanghai noted in 1934 that milk was sold at a price that was beyond the reach of the average family.[11] By 1946, however, even petty urbanites in large cities consumed milk and butter, two imports which were considered a sign of prosperity.[12] However, not everybody was fond of cold milk: Kenneth Lo thought of it as slimy, and he only took to cheese years later as an impoverished student in Cambridge, where the rancid and formless mass was invariably served for lunch by English friends in their college rooms.[13] When Liang Yen was first confronted with cheese during a visit to a foreign academic in Beijing, she thought the yellow morsels revolting.[14] Cheese, Olga Lang noted, being abhorred in China, was rare and relatively expensive.[15]

The most popular dairy product, however, was ice cream (figure 81). Cold in heat, ice cream violated the natural order: its sweetness further ensured that it became a huge success. Zhang Ruogu even posed as an expert on the various

81. An ice cream vendor in Beijing, also supplying bottled soda, cold fruit juices and chilled watermelon, early 1920s.

flavours of the frozen substance: after a review of all the ice cream sellers in Shanghai, he proclaimed the soda ice cream sold by the Puji Dispensary to be peerless.[16] Ice lollies were also available, although they too were expensive even for middle-class consumers, so much so that a bowl of crushed ice with brown sugar on top was considered a treat.[17] Those who tried it were in for a surprise: when Zhou Zhaoxi ate ice cream for the first time in the summer of 1941, he shovelled a huge scoop of it into his mouth. Totally unprepared, he was numbed by the cold in his mouth but did not dare to spit it out, forcing it down and spreading the sensation to his stomach. He quickly developed a fondness for ice cream, although he would have to wait for many years after the communist takeover to taste his favourite snack again.[18] One of his aunts was so shocked by the coldness of ice cream the first time she tried it that she asked the vendor whether she could have a warm portion.[19] Ice cream may

have been relatively rare in Chengdu, but in the large cities along the coast, even coolies could afford to buy the street ice which they put into their tea in the 1930s. In Hangzhou shaved ice, ice cream and lemonades were all the rage during the festering heat of the summer in 1936.[20] In the 1930s more than ten large ice cream parlours operated in Beijing, some even delivering the substance by the bucketful to people's homes.[21] 'Hygienic ice cream' (*weisheng bingqilin*) and ice lollies (*bingzhen*) were peddled in pre-electric, heat-insulated wooden vats.[22]

The three white goods

Sweet edibles, from lemonade and champagne to cream and cakes, may have been popular in republican China, but they remained at the periphery of the everyday diet. White sugar, white flour and white rice brought industrially produced goods right to the centre of the table of a growing number of families. As early as the 1890s imported flour was cheaper than the locally produced product, and it steadily penetrated the interior.[23] One trade representative based in Fuzhou noted that an enormous increase in demand for foreign flour showed how the taste of the many 'is being taught to appreciate cleanliness in feeding, provided that it is not obtained at the cost of cheapness'.[24] Local stone-grinders usually turned out a coarse grade of flour, and increasing demand for well-milled flour produced by modern mills marked the decades after the 1911 revolution.[25] Even in remote Xunwu most of the flour used by 1930 was foreign-style,[26] while imported varieties accounted for about one fifth of all flour consumed in Beijing, not including the many local brands, from Peach in Tianjin to Lion in Beijing and Bicycle in Shanghai.[27]

A similar observation can be made about rice, as rice-hulling machines from Japan became the most significant import in agricultural machinery: individual holdings in the countryside were small, purchasing power was limited, native tools were cheap, and labour was plentiful, but carefully polished rice was increasingly a must even in the hinterland.[28] In Beijing in 1930 almost half of the rice bought on the market came from Japan and the United States; countrywide over half a million tons of the staple food was imported: it not only looked better, but was actually cheaper than locally produced equivalents.[29]

Sugar, too, was preferred in its refined form, and it was imported in growing quantities after 1900, as monthly trade reports from the maritime customs show.[30] As a customs commissioner based in Niuzhuang observed in 1902, it was often said that locals in the north liked to eat 'salt', as salted fish and meat as well as pickled beancurd were common, while in the south they liked to eat 'sweet'. Yet even in the north sugar from refineries was becoming increasingly

82. Candy shop with jars, bottles and packaged sweets in Bishan, Sichuan province, 1940s.

popular with the growth of purchasing power.[31] Sugar cubes were available in Shanghai already in 1895: they could 'boost health' and were as 'as white as snow' (*xuebai*).[32] After 1911 white sugar often replaced the brown sugar traditionally prepared at stone-roller mills as its cost went down when produced locally, whether milled by the Taigu company in Tianjin under British control or at the sugar refineries installed in Guangdong by the provincial governor Chen Jitang. Government restrictions on the use of coarse sugar were even passed in that province to enforce a state monopoly. By the mid-1930s 1,789 private sugar mills operated by hand had disappeared.[33]

White flour, white rice and white sugar were imperceptibly altering the very staples of everyday food. Noodles, besides being made increasingly from white flour, were produced by machines, as the noodle cutters, like other small items of new machinery, were ideal for small-scale industries. They were advertised in 1911 by the *Shenbao* as 'smooth, bright and clean' as well as 'lovely' (*ke'ai*) in appearance, for it is true that people everywhere love what is associated with their food.[34] Instant noodles, destined to conquer the East, appeared on the market in 1906: 'These noodles can be eaten instantly by simple addition of hot water, and taste delicious while being highly hygienic.'[35] Even in remote Chengdu, local observers satirised the use of machinery by

commenting that 'as most noodles are made by machines, people's hearts are also becoming mechanical.'[36] Other 'traditional' ingestibles, such as soy sauce, were increasingly produced in mechanised factories as mechanisation was thought to bring not only greater efficiency, but also a more 'hygienic' mode of delivery.[37] Mechanisation was also behind the spread of canned food, as the next section shows.

Tin culture

Preserving food was a vital strategy against hardship or scarcity in a country of poverty, and traditionally foodstuffs were smoked, salted, sugared, steeped, pickled, dried and soaked in many kinds of soy sauces.[38] With this background in mind, it is not surprising that the innovations brought about by what Jack Goody has called 'industrial food' were immediately adopted in modern China.[39] Food was traditionally sold loose and weighed by the seller, although packaged and branded food had appeared centuries earlier and became increasingly important in the late imperial period:[40] the move to prepackaged food was not an innovation in China, although industrial manufacture, the use of tins and better distribution were new. Republican China witnessed an explosion in branded foods in modern packing. Whereas in 1900 industrially packaged food was virtually absent, by the end of the 1940s it could be found throughout the country even in the humblest of places—in particular canned items. As an early admirer observed, tinned food was an instrument of progress, as sealing up (*mifeng*) allowed food to reach sealed off (*fengbi*) places: to proponents of free trade it symbolised movement and commerce.[41]

Condensed milk is a good example of the success of tins in China: a quantity to the value of $1.5 million was imported in 1921,[42] indicating the fondness with which the substance was welcomed. Kenneth Lo, who abhorred cold milk, learnt to appreciate Nestlé's condensed product while recovering from a bout of measles as a six-year-old in 1919. Nestlé came not only with porridge for breakfast, but was even taken on rambling trips to the mountains of his native Fujian province.[43] In the countryside dried and condensed milk was slowly coming into use in the 1930s,[44] and even in the Gansu backwoods condensed milk could be found in the early 1920s, some foreigners referring to it as 'condemned milk' due to its age and strange smell.[45] In Chengdu condensed milk was imported from Britain before 1937. During the Second World War a local factory set up by an ironmonger in the galvanised iron trade produced the first locally made condensed milk. He operated at first without modern machinery, the cans being made manually from wrought iron and sealed with tin, the final product being sterilised in boiled water.[46]

In general, canned and packaged food could be found in all interior towns by the 1920s, as locals were buying these articles in increasing quantity. The most important factor for consumers was the trademark or 'chop': when it came to foodstuffs, the relative merits of the brand were all-important.[47] A second consideration was diversity: scores of dishes, from shark fins to preserved eggs, were served at banquets in local restaurants, and it was precisely a desire for greater variety which allowed a more extended use of canned foods, whether produced overseas or locally.[48]

Tinned food was increasingly made by local merchants in the 1920s: already in the 1890s a canning factory appeared in Canton, and by 1930 dozens were busy churning out tins in a number of cities along the coast.[49] The Tai Foong Company, established in Shanghai in 1906, was turning out a huge variety of canned products by 1915, from fruit, vegetables, meat and fish to fowl and game, including woodcock, quail and snipe. Many of the foods—such as lychees, loquats, carambolas, ginger and bitter melon—were hardly known to foreign palates, let alone appreciated by them. Even common varieties of fruit were prepared in a distinctly local way: American pears, for instance, were considered too soft, the manager of the company explaining that 'the Chinese like to chew what they eat.' Fruit, consequently, was cooked at a low temperature to retain a certain hardness which appealed to customers: texture, which is often much more difficult to achieve in cooking than taste, remained a key concern in local cuisine even in an age of manufactured food. The meats and fish were prepared with sauces which would also have been difficult to sell anywhere but in China, for instance roasted turtle or scallops in chicken sauce.[50]

Cans were versatile: they catered for people with modest incomes and were sold as early as the 1910s along railways by vendors together with cigarettes and sweetmeats; on the other hand, canned delicacies such as shellfish and shark fins reached the interior to serve the wealthy.[51] Delicacies were also exported: in 1901 a quarter of a million rice-birds were earmarked for immigrants in California, as they were not only expensive but also judged 'repulsive' when enclosed with 'highly malodorous grease', according to one foreign trade observer (he thought them succulent when fresh).[52] Such luxury dishes not only reached consumers removed from the centres of production, but also allowed households to prepare prized delicacies without the need for a skilled cook or a visit to the restaurant. Tins democratised consumption, since they reached more people far inland and made available all year round products which hitherto had been available only at certain times of the year, as a team visiting the Tai Foong factory pointed out.[53] Fish reached much larger numbers of people, both rich and poor: and because fish is extremely

perishable—whether the common croaker or the exotic salmon—refrigeration and canning solved a universal problem of distribution.[54]

Canned foods, as well as packaged biscuits and wrapped sweets, were popular not only for reasons of taste and cost but also because they were considered more hygienic. Tinned or wrapped food was convenient to carry around, handy to use when travelling, and ideal as a gift: cans were praised by the *Shenbao* in 1911 as 'convenient for travellers'.[55] By 1930 even Ketchup—the quintessential American food—was produced locally and offered at half the price of the imported item, responding to consumer demand.[56]

Despite successful local imitations, packaged food from abroad could be cheaper than the local equivalent: packaging not only allowed fruit and vegetables to be preserved more easily, thus cutting costs, but also led to large-scale production which contributed to lower prices. Dried raisins from the United States or Japan were cheaper than the locally produced ones in Beijing in the 1930s.[57] Dried raisins were a good example of the portability of prepackaged food: American Sunmaid raisins could be found everywhere, whether hawked on trains or sold in shops.[58] Such was the success of the sweet raisin that the Sunmaid Raisin Growers Association was the third most important American company in China after Standard Oil and the Singer Sewing Machine Company. Besides portability, the popular idea that raisins were a source of iron probably also contributed to their success.[59]

From china to enamelware

Historians of material culture often point out that China brought porcelain to millions of tables in early modern Europe, but it is often ignored that porcelain was replaced by enamelware in tens of millions of households in republican China: enamelware was popular because it was cheaper and stronger than earthenware and porcelain. In a culture of mobility and portability, enamel utensils, produced by kiln-firing stained glass on to metal, were handy to carry drink and food around. Enamel pots, bowls, cups, plates and basins were all popular, and often covered in gay colours and pictures of landscapes or flowers. Even wooden chamberpots were displaced by enamel ones in Beijing.[60] Most came from Japan or were local imitations, whereas counterparts from Europe, invariably in white or blue, fared rather poorly.[61] The same could be said of china: cups, plates, mugs and bottles produced in Japan were cheerfully decorated in a riot of colours, appealing so much to the locals in Beijing that they were even traded by door-to-door merchants.[62] Outside the capital too, imported wares from Japan with bright colours and intricate patterns were popular.[63] It is tempting to think that cultural propinquity between Japan and China resulted in the successful marketing of colourful enamelware, but

Austrian imports were the first to start offering articles with bright, showy and flowery decorations in the 1910s specifically in response to demand in China: Japan cornered the market with cheaper imitations of Austrian goods during the First World War.[64] Whatever the provenance, as a trade representative noticed of enamelware, a bright finish was essential, as brightness was associated in China with newness: even articles which could be demonstrated to be better by the dealer would be declined if dull-looking.[65]

The more restrained decorations from Europe failed to satisfy popular demand: here, as elsewhere, a two-tier market appeared, as the austere designs and high quality artefacts from Europe pleased the wealthy eager to distinguish their consumption patterns from the shoddy, cheap and cheerful goods made in China or Japan for the poor. This was true of paint as well: in the 1910s German imports were successful because they corresponded to a popular preference for bright colours; paints imported from other countries were considered to be dull.[66] Loud colours would spread like a rash with the advent of plastic in the 1940s and '50s: as one of the founders of the plastics company Star Industrial Co. in Hong Kong explained, the bright red, blue and yellow of their domestic plastic-ware was dictated by customers in Asia, Africa and the Middle East, who did not like the more restrained brown and cream colours popular among the middle classes: 'made in China' provided the global poor with cheap but cheerful imitations of the luxury goods enjoyed by global elites.[67]

Beauty was found in the most ordinary objects, and even spittoons were often richly decorated with traditional landscapes: the Hwa Feng Company in Shanghai produced enamel spittoons with a rockery décor, as well as enamel washbasins.[68] Spittoons spread during the late Qing, and lavishly decorated opium houses often boasted white copper ones.[69] By the republican period, they were considered indispensable attributes of a hygienic modernity, and some municipalities even passed laws prescribing their provision in teahouses: this was the case in Chengdu in 1926 and again in 1932.[70] As is so common with objects borrowed across cultures, the actual uses of the spittoon could be different from those envisaged by their creators: in China they served more often than not as chamberpots. On the other hand, in Canton mouths were rinsed over the spittoon at the end of a meal.[71]

Chopsticks never disappeared, yet more 'modern' ways of eating altered the rituals around the table. Already in the 1880s the beauties inhabiting the imaginary world of Shanghai pictorials would hover in traditional dress around a table laid out with knives, forks, spoons, plates and glasses as well as salt and pepper: a clock inevitably occupied the centre of the mantelpiece.[72] Real cutlery quickly followed: even during the Boxer rebellion

banquets with foreigners involved not only German cakes, American candies and French fondants, but also individual plates, knives and forks as well as ivory chopsticks.[73] In well-to-do households, a family would sit around a table covered by a white cloth; although the dishes would be traditional, they could be served the 'modern' way, each having its own chopsticks and spoon with which to serve it—the same sticks no longer being used to convey the food to the mouth and serve oneself from the common dishes in the centre.[74] Hu Binxia, educated in the United States and later to become chief editor of the *Women's Magazine*, felt that local banquets were wasteful and 'unhygienic' (*bu weisheng*). At her own banquets the guests were given cold starters, cooked meat and vegetables, soup, pickles and fruits, accompanied by a small pot of rice wine each. Tables were covered with a tablecloth, a cup and a pair of chopsticks, and three plates were laid out for each guest. Guests were asked to tuck their napkin into their clothes, while cutlery was changed four times during the banquet, which concluded with tea and cigarettes in an adjacent room.[75] As new norms of hygiene were gradually disseminated among the modernising elites, the habit of sharing several plates at dinner parties was no longer considered sanitary. In some cases even top restaurants like the Dong Xinlou in the East City of Beijing would on request serve Chinese dishes in Western style with five to seven courses for each guest with knives and forks.[76]

EATING OUT

Foreign food and new objects could also be encountered during the occasional trip to an exotic restaurant. The first European restaurants appeared shortly after the first Sino-British war and were known as 'foreign food inns' (*fancaiguan*). With the growth of a resident foreign population in Shanghai and Beijing, European restaurants also appeared in foreign concessions from the 1860s onwards. In the capital they were located around the embassy district, while in Shanghai they were concentrated in the Hongkou and Xujiahui area. Most customers were foreign, but a few local individuals also took to foreign food, roast lamb and small snacks being the most popular dishes despite their prohibitive cost.[77] English and French food in particular became prestige objects for wealthy families in the 1880s, and foreign restaurants, fully equipped with tablecloths, napkins, cutlery and plates, mushroomed in Shanghai in consequence.[78] Most of the food presented as 'Western' in China was prepared from tinned food and seasonings by Cantonese chefs. Culinary exchange went both ways: many of these chefs introduced 'Western' cooking methods, ingredients and dishes into 'Chinese' kitchens. Some dim sum dishes

eaten today, such as roast pork puff and custard tart, were first introduced from abroad.[79] An all-time favourite in China—fried egg with tomato—was also created as a part of this process of gastronomic bricolage. Canned food facilitated this two-way traffic: as a commercial agent of the Department of Trade observed in 1915, a favourite dish in many restaurants consisted of canned peas served with small shrimps, while asparagus was also a popular addition.[80]

While banquets of this nature were common among a small number of wealthy elites educated abroad, even ordinary restaurants from the late Qing onwards started to serve set meals in foreign style for smaller parties. In Shanghai before the fall of the Qing a group of four people would be presented with four small dishes and two larger ones, always including a soup: this was known as *hecai*, a combination of local and foreign eating habits which became widespread after 1911.[81] 'Western-style' restaurants became fashionable in coastal cities because they often looked cleaner than most ordinary eateries. Bright and nicely decorated, with comfortable chairs rather than stools to squat on, they attracted the growing middle classes who took pride in following the more 'civilised' ways appropriate in an era of modernity. The tablecloths were regularly changed, and customers were provided with steaming towels, clean and perfumed, with which to refresh their hands and faces. Children were given high chairs. Private rooms had curtains and even electric bells to summon the waiters. Staff often dressed in clean outfits and were required to maintain a high standard of personal hygiene.[82] By the start of the Second World War foreign restaurants could be found in most cities. Several hundred emerged in Shanghai alone, more than thirty vied for customers in Canton, and a dozen catered for the social and political elites of Tianjin.[83] In Chongqing foreign food could be found all over the city.[84]

Local restaurants were also modernised: usually they were two-storey buildings with carved and ornamental fronts designed to attract attention. The kitchens were on the ground floor, and a broad staircase often covered with beaten brass plates might lead to the second floor, where large parties could be given, since most people did not entertain at home but in the restaurant.[85] More up-market restaurants considered modern interior design essential. When Dong Zhujun (1900–98) opened her legendary Jinjiang restaurant in Shanghai in 1935, she paid special attention to interior decoration. The public dining room and the twenty sound-proof private rooms all had walls covered with black ceramic tiles. The neon light outside was cream-coloured, a hue carefully chosen as being the most elegant at the time. A golden velvet curtain hung at the front door of the restaurant. The handrails of the stairs were sprayed with red paint to look bright and smooth and to complement

83. Open-air restaurant in Shenyang (Mukden), January 1948.

the red carpet covering the staircase. At the bottom of the stairs a carved table with a glass lamp illuminated the reservation board, while the booking room with the telephone was divided by a false wall. Imitation antiques were highlighted with neon lamps, a combination regarded not as 'kitsch' but, on the contrary, as conveying tranquillity and taste. From the ceiling in the lobby hung a huge crystal chandelier with a European landscape painting on the wall. The central piece on the second floor landing was a fish tank, the floor being covered with oak imported from the Philippines.[86] Some of these restaurants became favourite meeting places for local elites: this was the case of the French Chez Rovère (*Luowei fandian*), commonly known as the 'Red House' (*Hong fangzi*), which emerged as a cultural point of contact for the city's cosmopolitan inhabitants.[87] The elite status of such restaurants is evident from a line in a poem by Liu Shiliang about the Jufeng restaurant in Chengdu, which introduced ice cream to the city: 'Jufeng now serves both Chinese and Western food... I can only gaze through the glass window.'[88]

When was the menu introduced? In Europe the first restaurants to offer a variety of dishes to be selected from a menu probably date back to the late eighteenth century.[89] In China specialist restaurants appeared much earlier and were more widespread: a guide to Nanjing dated around 1775 recorded a whole panoply of eating houses, inns, taverns and restaurants where visitors could order meals before setting out on river trips to admire the local gardens of rich salt merchants.[90] In small restaurants a limited variety of dishes might be served, and customers would point out the food they wished to order if they did not already know what was on offer, or a greater variety might be listed on the wall in more imposing establishments. Menus probably spread further in the treaty ports, marking a shift away from a single host ordering on behalf of a whole group towards broader participation in the choice of dishes. Ge Yuanxu—intrepid observer of new mores—thus noted the menu (*liezhang*) in 1876, although he did not specify whether or not it was printed. In a society which put great emphasis on the presentation of the written word, menus were probably carefully calligraphed.[91] Elaborate menus thus appeared by the end of the nineteenth century in elite restaurants such as the Xinghualou in Shanghai.[92] A few decades later the famous calligrapher Zhang Daqian was reputed to have written the menu for several elite restaurants, some customers coming specifically in order to see, and presumably buy, the menu.[93]

How representative were these social trends? In the absence of detailed sociological surveys, it is difficult to evaluate how ordinary people were exposed to new fashions: many of the poor could hardly feed themselves, let alone visit a restaurant. Eating places for the poor, when they could afford it, were grey places with rough wooden tables and trestles on a mud floor, the

84. Dried fish on public bench.

cook at the entrance stirring huge metal cauldrons over a brick stove or frying in deep oil that exuded acrid fumes.[94] This does not diminish the value of a historical analysis of eating habits among social elites: as Sidney Mintz has argued, the very polarities which marked the differential uses of food between the rich and the poor in many societies were nutritional and social realities which cannot be overlooked. Maybe an analysis of the very contrast between the rich, dining on champagne and luxury dishes, and the poor, wolfing down a bowl of thin gruel, would be more rewarding than the study of the movement over time of certain foods up and down the social ladder.[95] Yet it was also true, as observed by Julean Arnold, a trade representative for the United States, that besides the large modern hotels which served the middle and upper classes, a panoply of restaurants of all sizes, types and varieties, including itinerant cooks carrying their stoves, ovens, fuel and dishes on their shoulders, could serve anything from Dutch soup to freshly baked bread at an instant's notice (figure 83).[96] After the Second World War a number of popular street cafés emerged in Shanghai which often consisted of a long table covered with a white cloth and equipped with glass cups, porcelain saucers, a hot water flask and a coffee jug, as tins of American light cream were piled up next to cocoa, bread, clotted cream and fruit jam.[97] As early as 1921 a Beijing newspaper conducted a consumer survey and found that 77 per cent of those questioned preferred local food, others expressing a penchant for foreign food, which included 'Western-style Chinese food' (*xishi zhongcan*) and 'Sino-Western food' (*zhongxishi*).[98]

Chow Chung-cheng was one who enjoyed regular outings to foreign restaurants. She recalled enjoying dinners in the European restaurant of the public park in Tianjin, although her family were almost the only customers: not only did a 'European' meal cost more than a 'Chinese' one, but few locals would actually seek out a modern restaurant in the middle of a park. The meal consisted of toast and butter and jam, oxtail soup, crayfish fried in breadcrumbs, pork chops, potatoes and salad, pudding, fruit and coffee.[99] Lin Xi, who also lived in a modern house in Tianjin, explained that bread and milk for breakfast was not simply a matter of show: it was convenient because no traditional pancakes could be found in his neighbourhood.[100] Chen Dingshan reminisced in the 1960s how he enjoyed eating foreign food served by beautifully dressed waitresses before 1949, although he also remembered some embarrassing moments, such as when his companion did not know a word of English and could only order by pointing at the menu: he was given a jar of pepper.[101] 'Ordering dishes' (*diancai*) was indeed one of the dreaded rituals in foreign restaurants against which popular literature warned, since it ruthlessly sorted the wheat from the chaff.[102]

DRINKING CULTURES

Tea and the thermos flask

Objects can be used for radically different purposes from those intended by their inventors, and the rubber hot water bottle (*reshuidai*) is a good example. Designed for medical purposes in the hospital and at home in Europe, it was used in China as a cheaper version of the thermos flask. The Wing On department store imported two varieties of hot water bottles and advertised them widely with bright neon signs: they were an instant success.[103] Hot water was cheaper to buy than to boil in China: whether in Shanghai or in Chengdu it was more cost-effective to visit a hot water stand, which could be found on almost any street. Two or three ladles cost a copper: rubber bottles were indispensable to carry the water back home and keep it hot.[104] Local factories in the coastal cities soon started producing imitations, and by the 1930s 4,000 were turned out in a day.[105] The hot water bottle never suffered from the medical connotation it acquired in Europe, and as late as 1948 an advertisement in the magazine *Family* praised the product as 'bright, colourful, durable and an excellent present for family and friends'.[106]

The vacuum flask was first invented by Sir James Dewar in 1892 and commercially produced by a German company in 1904 as the 'Thermos'. It was taken up in Europe and the United States by explorers on expeditions and scientists to store vaccines and serums; workers could use them to take

their lunch to the factory and children to take a meal to school. Thermos bottles were at first imported but produced locally from the 1930s onwards. Vacuum flasks were made in Hong Kong in 1933, leading to a whole gamut of ornaments, either classical in style or in streamlined forms with Chinese motifs.[107] 'Great Wall' vacuum flasks were not only hailed on the mainland in the late 1930s, but welcomed in many parts of the world, becoming one of the most successful products to be exported from China with the commercial revolution of the republican era. Produced by the Lixing Vacuum Flask Factory in Shanghai (founded in 1937), they came in 1-litre or 1.5-litre sizes and were made of pyrex glass.[108] Thermos bottles, like enamel spittoons and washbasins, came richly decorated to appeal to a variety of tastes, some being covered with auspicious motifs while others boldly displayed an airplane soaring up into the sky (figure 85).[109] The Butterfly brand was decorated with a modern beauty striking a pensive pose,[110] while Great Wall bottles were sprayed with gay flower motifs.[111]

85. Advertisement for a thermos bottle.

While the thermos was used specifically for outdoor activities in Europe and the United States, it travelled in and out of the house in China, where boundaries between the private and the public were far more permeable. Tea culture in particular was served very well by the thermos, as Innes Jackson noted: 'I saw so many thermos flasks that I began to blink... it is terrible to think how hard social life must have been before its invention. By its means tea can be produced for every guest on all occasions with abracadabra rapidity.'[112] Thermos flasks were also used when travelling by train: already in the 1920s passengers commonly carried Japanese ones in the south,[113] one foreign observer calling it the most popular travelling companion of train passengers.[114] In the Chinese theatre actors would have tea served to them by a thermos man, a personal servant who would bring his master his tea at the climax of every battle scene or court ceremonial on the stage.[115] The writer Mao Dun recalled that in the 1920s public parks in Shanghai were often full of families on picnics with their thermos flasks and food baskets.[116] Like so many other successful things modern, the thermos was both portable and versatile, adapting particularly well to the need to serve tea anywhere at any time. It was cheap, many costing as little as 75 cents.[117] The thermos flask was also a signifier of health and hygiene:[118] as an advertisement proclaimed in the *Young Companion*, depicting a young beauty pouring a cup of tea out of a thermos flask, 'After a bath has washed away all the dirt and dust one feels happy; now with the thermos flask one can also make a cup of fresh tea after taking a bath. It keeps hot water at the exact temperature one's heart desires.'[119]

In dwellings generally devoid of central heating or air-conditioning, the thermos bottle was the only space within which temperatures could be

6. A coolie drags a heavy
loaded with the personal
ns and their owner atop,
he thermos bottle ready.

controlled, and control of temperature was indeed viewed as an indispensable step forward towards civilisation. Any respectable household, according to the *Ladies' Magazine* in 1917, should have a thermometer: it could be used to check the temperature of the water in a bath to avoid scalding, when boiling eggs to achieve perfect cooking, and when making hot beverages for children to ensure that the temperature was right.[120] These prescriptions may seem unrealistic outside the wealthy circles in the large coastal cities, where running water, let alone the hot bath, was rare, yet they pointed at the symbolic nature of the thermometer as a device visualising subtle changes in the environment, quantifying hitherto subjective feelings of heat and cold, imposing a readable grid on nature, and normalising variations in temperature by declaring that body heat should be 37.0 °C.: Like other modern objects in an increasingly intertwined world—the clock and the ruler—it spread standardisation.

While the thermos was overwhelmingly used to serve tea, coffee also attracted some followers, although it was invariably served with milk and accompanied by sweet cakes or candies to disguise its bitter taste (the artist Jiang Xiaojian, who had studied in France and liked his coffee without sugar, was exceptional).[121] And coffee was not only a prestige item for conspicuous

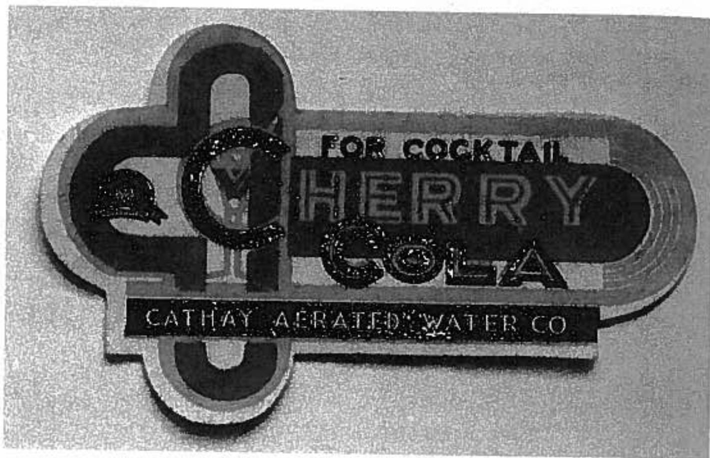
consumption in fancy restaurants: returned emigrants in Fujian and Guangdong drank coffee at home every day, for breakfast and to entertain guests, whether children or adults. Others were persuaded to switch to coffee by family members working abroad: as a fifty-five-year-old returnee in a small village explained, '[my sons] encouraged me to drink coffee in the morning, as it is said that it can wake you up. So I tried it and I really feel that what they said is true.'[122]

Dutch water

Tea varied widely in price and quality, from rare leaves brewed with imported water down to cheap jasmine tea made with ordinary rainwater, and was ideal as an indicator of elite status. Discerning customers distinguished between different regions, types and even parts of the leaf, while certain varieties such as Pu'er tea attained the status of luxury items. High-quality tea remained a relatively expensive beverage well into the twentieth century, since clean water was beyond the means of many people; in Suzhou it was obtained from selected wells and canals by special boats.[123]

With the advent of aerated water, however, new opportunities for refreshment presented themselves to a thirsty public keen to avoid contaminated water and eager to display status. The British pharmacy J. Llewellyn and Co. Ltd was the first to start aerating water in Shanghai in the early 1860s. Soda (called Dutch water, or *Helan shui*) and lemonade, both aerated, were immediately popular beyond the expatriate community, although danger lurked beneath these new pleasures: as Ge Yuanxu noted in 1877, 'When opened, the lid flies off, and care should be taken not to be hit in the face or eyes. It should be drunk immediately, and is very cooling.'[124] Urban legends about the dangers of Dutch water survived well into the twentieth century, for instance in the story published before 1911 about a shop owner who died after being hit by the flying cork of a bottle that broke in an accident.[125] Despite these reservations, by the 1890s the expansion of the soft drinks industry was such that many other pharmacies and companies started producing their own brands. The Aquarius Company specialised in the manufacture of effervescent waters in 1892: its soda waters, root beers, mineral waters, ginger ales, ginger beers, tonic waters, potassium waters and lemonades served a variety of purposes, some taken on their own, others served with meals, a few mixed with alcohol.[126] In the early twentieth century Tianjin also emerged as a centre for the production of fizzy drinks, Shuijing being a popular brand.[127]

By the 1910s aerated water was big business in China, as foreign trade representatives made clear.[128] Even in the bazaars in Beijing, crowds drank 'pink lemonade' consisting of various shaded waters in different coloured



87. Label for Cherry Cola.

bottles with long slender necks, which were used afterwards as horns.[129] Deng Yunxiang recalled how as a child in the capital he went on excursions armed with small bottles of aerated water rather than tea: 'The aerated water bottle was very special. It had a glass stopper the shape of a ball on the lid. To open the bottle one had to use a wooden plug to push the stopper down, and the gas would shoot out: it was great fun... A bottle cost five coins only, much cheaper than tea.'[130] Locally produced drinks in Beijing came in six flavours—lemon, banana, grape, orange, cola and 'sandstone', made from the root of a South American plant: they could be bought from small taverns, restaurants, shops and stalls throughout the city. While the city had many respectable lemonade producers—besides the many imports available from hotels and foreign shops—some cheap varieties using adulterated air or contaminated products could lead to an unpleasant taste or even poisoning.[131]

Further south a dozen types of lemonade could be found in Hangzhou, ranging from banana- or grape-flavoured sodas to locally produced Coca-Cola.[132] Huiquan made mandarin-flavoured lemonade sold in glass bottles shaped like oranges.[133] Watson's of Shanghai, China's biggest producer, a local company established in 1903 by the A. S. Watson group and run by Qu Chen (*Qu Chen shi*), brought relief to many during the sweltering summers:[134] when the tarmac was melting, customers swarmed around the lemonade and ice cream parlours which traded next to the department stores.[135] Lemonade even penetrated the countryside: 1,880 bottles of aerated water were consumed in impoverished Ding county, Hebei province, in 1934—as well as a

massive quarter of a million bottles of spirits, which puts drinking patterns in the hinterland in perspective.[136]

Several factors account for the rapid spread of fizzy drinks in the large coastal cities after 1911: the availability of raw materials, including sugar and fruit, the improvement in transportation, the use of advertisements and the advent of new forms of leisure all meant that a growing number of customers became familiar with soft drinks. The market was important enough for Coca-Cola, a company which failed to have much success in Britain between the two World Wars,[137] to approach the Shanhaiguan Soda Water Company in 1918 for possible cooperation,[138] leading ten years later to the first Coca-Cola bottling operation in China. By the 1940s the beverage had become so popular that many soft drink companies went bankrupt (it remained popular in Hong Kong after 1949, where it can be had heated with ginger as a medication to this day).[139]

'Open the champagne'

When expensive opium served in rare jade or ivory pipes ceased to be a viable way for respectable families to welcome an honoured guest, and tea served from a thermos had limited appeal in a culture of ostentation, champagne appeared in the reception rooms of the rich and powerful. In the early republican period, high officials and wealthy merchants often opted for foreign liquors as the choice beverage for their banquets, since they were much more expensive than local spirits and thus more effective as an indicator of wealth (500 grams of rice wine from Zhejiang cost 30–40 cents, as against a normal price of $10 for a bottle of foreign liquor).[140] Already in 1904 William Geil, who travelled all over China, was invited to drink champagne not only by reform-minded dignitaries like Duanfang, but even by local officials in hinterland yamens.[141] Katherine Carl, who stayed with the empress dowager to paint her portrait for the St Louis Exposition, was provided with a constant supply of the beverage.[142] At the wedding of Puyi, China's last emperor, special orders of European liquors were placed with the Beijing Hotel. By the 1920s champagne was regarded as a necessity for all major banquets. This was observed by Georg Wegener, travelling through China in the mid-1920s and noting that a certain cosmopolitan prestige was attached to people who could adorn themselves with a number of European attributes, none more so than champagne: 'The Chinese adore this sweet, fizzy drink, and the scholar-officials are aware that the Europeans of the coastal cities would not allow a banquet to be celebrated without sparkling wine. This is the reason why, whenever possible, they will present Europeans with this beverage... in the interior sparkling wines of dubious quality are being peddled

by agents of European and Japanese firms, with names unheard of [abroad].' He complained less about the impeccable *Carte d'Or* by Roederer offered to him in the Yangzi valley.[143]

Champagne also flowed in the dancehalls of Shanghai: dancing girls often encouraged their customers to buy the beverage in return for a fee. To 'open the champagne' (*kaixiangbin*) thus gradually became synonymous with the hooking of a client.[144] Yet in the cities of the hinterland too, champagne was fashionable with the well-heeled: in Chengdu during the annual flower fairs in the 1920s, champagne flowed freely, leading to many cases of inebriation.[145] Needless to say, champagne was hardly known in the countryside: even in the 1930s brandy and champagne were entirely new to the locals of Yangyuan county in Hebei province, despite their reputation for hard drinking.[146] In Shandong many starved during a famine in 1927 while a local governor drank champagne out of cut glass ordered from Belgium—as Hallett Abend indignantly reported for the *New York Times*.[147]

The cost of imported spirits remained prohibitive, even for amateurs of foreign drinks, and good liqueurs (crême de menthe, curaçao) and sweet wines were retailed in small fancy vials, as a few drops of the liquid were added to local beverages.[148] However, other factors besides price must have contributed to the success of champagne: its relative sweetness was no doubt one reason, while the bubbles already present in aerated soft drinks may also have facilitated its spread.[149] Foreign traders had long known that there was almost no demand for foreign spirits in China: as early as the 1840s one merchant of Fenchurch Street, London, was advised, 'We have for years past urged on our friends the impolicy [*sic*] of sending out large quantities of Wines and such articles to a country like this, where no demand exists for them beyond the few hundred individuals composing the foreign community.'[150] Gin, rum, brandy, whisky and other distilled drinks never became popular in imperial China, unlike beer and sweet wines at the end of the Qing. Zhang Deyi, diplomat to Europe in the 1860s, described the taste of red wine as acid (*suan*) and bitter (*se*), and could only swallow it with water added.[151] In South America, by contrast, fine wines were all the rage among republican elites in their quest for 'imported civility'. Not only were *vins bourguignons* and other expensive vintages imported in large quantities, but cuttings of the famous cabernet sauvignon and merlot rootstock were brought over from Bordeaux, more ambitious *nouveaux riches* from Chile even building their own chateaux in the Maipo and Aconcagua valleys. Further down the social scale drinkable wines, called *viñedos del país*, also appeared for ordinary people.[152]

Were drinks mixed? In an anthropological analysis of drinking in Japan, Stephen Smith has shown how drinks are generally taken on their own, not

for reasons of taste or expense but because social drinking emphasises the unification of individuals into a community.[153] Mixed drinks not only require special preparation that involves an inappropriate amount of attention being lavished on the demands of each individual drinker, but can result in socially awkward decisions having to be made in a situation which seeks group consensus: to pour a round from the bottle—whether champagne or beer—avoids these issues. A similar logic was no doubt at work in republican China, given the success of non-mixed drinks at all levels of society, from lemonade to champagne.