

Children's Food and Islamic Dietary Restrictions in Xi'an

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One warm spring afternoon in 1995, I rode my bicycle over to Aifeng's house, as I did several times a week during the eighteen months I stayed in Xi'an.¹ Aifeng had plans to visit a wholesale market, and asked me to accompany her. With an extra hand to carry packages, she would be able to buy more of the items her family needed. I had gone shopping with Aifeng many times, but in the past we had stayed in the Muslim district, where Aifeng lived. Just behind her house was a small street market where ten to twelve farmers from the nearby countryside gathered daily to sell fruit and vegetables. This time, however, we rode our bicycles for ten minutes outside of the Muslim district until we reached a busy wholesale market just east of the Xi'an city wall.

The market was a large, concrete-paved lot studded with several roofed, wall-less edifices and encircled by small shops. In the stores, under the covered areas, and out in the open, several dozen vendors displayed boxes and bags of packaged food, soap, paper products, and other factory-produced goods. Aifeng had clearly visited the market many times before; she knew exactly where to buy the cheapest bulk toilet paper and laundry detergent. I helped her load the household goods she bought onto our bicycles and then followed her toward the food vendors.

Although the offerings were plentiful, Aifeng bought only two types of food. She meticulously checked through the many brands of factory-produced, individually packaged instant noodles (*fangbian mian*) for sale until she finally found a large box labeled *qingzhen*, or "pure and true." The term *qingzhen* possesses many meanings in China, but it most frequently refers to food that meets Islamic standards for dietary purity.² Like the vast majority of the Muslim district's residents, Aifeng kept a *qingzhen* diet. Aifeng also purchased some packaged snacks for her granddaughter, a one-and-a-half-year-old girl who, along with her father (Aifeng's son) and mother, lived in the upper two floors of Aifeng's house. A vast array of mass-produced, packaged snacks, including candied nuts, puffed rice, chocolates, crisps, biscuits, and hard candies, were for sale at the market. Aifeng purchased enough of these foods to fill two large bags. Later, when we returned to her house, she immediately

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It was not until months later that I realized the significance of our trip to the wholesale market. At the time I simply noted what goods Aifeng had bought; only afterward did I realize that, unlike the instant noodles she had purchased, the snacks she had bought for her grandchild were not marketed as *qingzhen*. Furthermore, while Aifeng had spent a great deal of time studying the labels of the instant noodle packages, she had paid very little attention to the labels of the snacks she bought for her granddaughter. Based on everything I had seen and been told about the Muslim district and its residents, Aifeng had violated the local standards for Islamic dietary observance by purchasing food for her granddaughter that was not *qingzhen*.

Such an act was difficult to reconcile with what I knew of Aifeng and her family. Aifeng sold *qingzhen* stuffed breads (*baozi*) in a small restaurant she operated with her family on Barley Market Street (*Damaishi jie*) in the Muslim district. She was intimately familiar with which foods were *qingzhen* and which were not, and was careful to adhere to the Islamic dietary proscriptions. In fact, Aifeng was a devout Muslim whose religious observance went far beyond the minimum level of eating *qingzhen*. Although her business and family obligations prevented her from worshipping five times a day (as stipulated in the Qur'an), she nevertheless donated money, food, and other goods regularly to the mosque, upheld Islamic precepts of dress, fasted during Ramadan, and worshiped at the mosque whenever she could. Given the importance she placed on being a Muslim, why did she buy snacks for her granddaughter that were not *qingzhen*?

Children's Food in China

... [F]loodways in the People's Republic of China (PRC) have undergone significant transformations in the wake of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms. One obvious effect of the reform policies has been the appearance of a variety of new foods on the market, including the mass-produced, packaged snack foods discussed here. These foods have had a profound impact on the nutritional intake of PRC citizens, particularly that of children. The consumer practices surrounding these new foods also indicate that important changes have occurred in the character and quality of family relations: the balance of power between older and younger generations, appears to be shifting.

Both of these phenomena have affected the Xi'an Muslim district. During June 1997, I asked Peng, an eleven-year-old resident, to record his total dietary intake for seven days. Peng's food diary revealed that he ate mass-produced snacks similar to those Aifeng purchased for her granddaughter on a daily basis. Peng's high-school-age brother was the only other member of his immediate (nuclear) family who ever ate these foods, but he and his parents agreed that Peng's consumption far outstripped his brother's, at that time and in the past. This pattern matched the eating practices of other children I observed during eighteen months of field research in the Xi'an Muslim district in 1994 and 1995.

Peng was able to eat these snacks because his parents were providing him with "occasional" spending money that amounted to three yuan a day, a fact they had not

fully appreciated until we examined his food diary together. They and Peng's brother assured me that Peng was the first member of their family ever to receive what was, in effect, an allowance. The qualitative (and quantitative) shift in parent-child relationships suggested by Peng's intake of the mass-produced foods was replicated in families throughout the Muslim district.

The consumption of mass-produced snack foods described here differs from the other studies in this book in its religious and ethnic implications. In the Xi'an Muslim district, the new snacks mark an ideological and empirical transformation in local Islamic observance and ethnic practice. They represent a significant modification of the centerpiece of Chinese Muslims' collective identity, namely food preparation and eating habits.

Chinese Muslims or Hui

The Xi'an Muslim district is a small ethno-religious enclave containing approximately 30,000 Chinese Muslims. The vast majority of the district's residents are members of the "Hui nationality" (*Huizu*), one of the PRC's 55 officially recognized minority groups (*shaoshu minzu*). Altogether China's minorities make up 8.04 percent of the total population. The Hui are the third largest minority nationality, and the largest of the eleven minorities officially designated as Muslim (Gladney 1991:26-7).

China's minority nationalities have received considerable scholarly attention in recent years, both inside and outside China. Of concern to many American social scientists have been the ways in which "nationality" (*minzu*) designation relates to ethnic affiliation (see, e.g., Gladney 1998, 1991, 1990; Lipman 1997; Harrell, ed., 1995; Harrell 1990; McKhann 1995). According to the government, China's nationalities conform to the Stalinist criteria for "nationality" status, possessing common territorial, linguistic, economic, and psychological traits (Jin 1984; see also Gladney 1998), but the widely dispersed and linguistically and occupationally diverse group known as the Hui fails to meet a single one of the official criteria. Their status as a nationality rests entirely on a historical perception of difference stemming from their Muslim heritage and Islamic observance (Lipman 1997, 1987; Gladney 1991).

Observance of the Islamic dietary restrictions, or eating *qingzhen*, forms a core element of Hui collective identity. The best understood and most familiar aspect of *qingzhen* food consumption is the Hui abstinence from pork. This marker of difference is fundamental and basic: Chinese of all ages, classes, and "nationality" affiliations referred to it when they learned that I studied the Hui. Invariably any mention of Chinese Muslims evoked the remark, "Hui do not eat pork."

A variety of scholarly works have discussed the importance of the pork taboo and *qingzhen* food consumption to maintaining ethnic boundaries between the Hui and China's majority nationality, the Han. One foundational study of this divide is Barbara Pillsbury's article "Pig and Policy" (1975), which is based on ethnographic research conducted on Taiwan. The most important study of *qingzhen* in the PRC is Dru Gladney's *Muslim Chinese* (1991), which explores the concept of *qingzhen* in four distinct Muslim communities. Gladney's work reveals the centrality of *qingzhen*

to Hui identity, as well as a meaningful ethnic id

While Gladney's study of dietary practices, which what *qingzhen* meant, stated the most important "clean" (*tebie gan*) food can be clean in content. As Jishu, imam must eat clean things: pork, alcohol, blood, fashion, were "dirty"

Residents of the Muslim believed that the pig and eating trash. Jiqin pigs by the speed at which pork and a piece of lamb to examine the two meats would still be "good," also appears in a part (Ma Tianfang 1971).

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to Hui identity, as well as the critical role that official policies have played in causing a meaningful ethnic identity to coalesce around the "Hui nationality" label.

Qingzhen

While Gladney's study demonstrates that the concept of *qingzhen* is not limited to dietary practices, when I asked residents of the Xi'an Muslim district to explain what *qingzhen* meant, most people responded by talking about food. Many Hui stated the most important characteristic of *qingzhen* food was that it was "particularly clean" (*tebie ganjing*), or sometimes "clean and sanitary" (*ganjing weisheng*). Food can be clean in several respects, and one of the most fundamental is in its content. As Jishu, imam of one of the local mosques, put it, *qingzhen* means "Hui must eat clean things." He said that the foods proscribed in the Qur'an, namely pork, alcohol, blood, and animals that have not been slaughtered in the Islamic fashion, were "dirty" and Hui could not eat them.

Residents of the Muslim district stressed that pork was especially dirty. They believed that the pig was a disease-carrying animal with filthy habits, living in dirt and eating trash. Jiqing, a gatekeeper at a local mosque, exemplified the dirtiness of pigs by the speed at which pork rots. According to him, if a person took a piece of pork and a piece of lamb and left them out for a week, when she or he returned to examine the two meats the pork would be maggoty and disgusting, but the lamb would still be "good," that is, dry and edible. This explanation of pork's dirtiness also appears in a pamphlet for sale in one of the district's Muslim products stores (Ma Tianfang 1971).

Xi'an Hui were extremely concerned with keeping pork away from food, cooking utensils, and the house. Many residents talked about how important it was for Hui not to eat anything that had touched pork or come into contact with lard. Chen, who worked in the public showers owned by one of the mosques, spoke at length about Hui fears that pork products would "pollute" (*ran*) their food. The contaminating power of pork made it impossible for Hui to use cooking or eating utensils that had ever contained it. For this reason, she said, "We are not willing to eat one mouthful of your food, nor drink one mouthful of your tea."

As Chen's remarks suggest, fears about coming into contact with pork products, or even utensils or dishes that had once contained pork, caused the Muslim district's residents to avoid any food that was not prepared by Muslims. Doing so meant refraining from patronizing non-Hui restaurants or food stalls and refusing to eat or drink at the homes of non-Hui. In this way, the pork taboo negatively affected Han food businesses. More deeply felt, however, were its effects on social situations that involved Hui and Han. If Hui visited a Han home, they did not accept any food or drink from their host. This refusal to consume was a striking violation of hospitality in the Chinese setting, where visiting should include both the offer and the receipt of at least a small quantity of food or beverage. Even a cup of hot tea, the most common form of hospitality offered to guests in China, was unacceptable to a Chinese Muslim guest in a Han house. The very cup in which the tea was served, if it belonged to a Han, would cause most Xi'an Hui to refuse it, for they believed that simple washing could not cleanse Han dishes of the residue of pork.³

Hui -
Han
hospitality

In addition to food content, food preparation techniques also played an important part in determining which foods were *qingzhen* and which were not. Yan, who worked in her family's restaurant, stressed the care that Hui took with food preparation when explaining *qingzhen*. She pointed out that Hui washed vegetables, dishes, and hands in separate basins, and kept different types of food segregated and "in order" (*fenjie*). Other Hui, both men and women, explained *qingzhen* by indicating that Hui washed frequently, and paid close attention when they cooked. One man noted that the character for *qing* has the ideographic representation of water in it, which, he said, shows that Hui "rely on water" (*yi shui wei zhu*).

To a large extent, *qingzhen* was equated with being Muslim. To make *qingzhen* food, one woman told me, you must have "washed a major ablution" (*xi guo da jing*), that is, washed yourself according to the proper Islamic procedure. As Jiqing explained, the *qingzhen* signs food entrepreneurs hung over their establishments showed that the cook was a "believer" (*mumin*). To produce *qingzhen* foods, one had to be Muslim, and in Xi'an, being Muslim meant being Hui – as evidenced by the local habit of using the terms "Muslim" (*Musilin*) and "Hui" (*Huimin*) interchangeably. *Qingzhen* encapsulated the essence of being Muslim in the Chinese context. It was central to local conceptions of identity: as Yan put it, "*Qingzhen* means Hui."

Non-*qingzhen* Food and Western Food

The foods that Aifeng bought for her granddaughter and that Peng consumed were diverse in flavor and ingredients. Most were new arrivals to the area; residents said that the vast majority of such mass-produced snacks had been available in the area for only ten years. One exception to this was soda. Mingxin, a butcher, remembered seeing Chinese-made sodas for sale in the late 1970s. At that time a soda cost eleven *fen* per bottle, a price no ordinary person could afford; only the children of cadres and important people drank it.⁴ Nevertheless, although soda had been present for a longer period, Mingxin placed it in the same category as chocolate, biscuits, and hard candies: all were "foreign" foods, produced in "foreign" factories or made by "foreign" machines. He pointed out that even though many Chinese factories produced such foods, they "had learned about them from the West." Mingxin was not alone in perceiving a great variety of new foods on the market as products of "the West" – meaning Europe and the United States – even though many of them were manufactured in Asia. This perception was widespread in the Muslim district, especially with regard to snacks wrapped in machine-made packages.

In Xi'an the number of foods actually imported from the West was limited, and their high prices tended to prevent most Hui from buying them. The majority of mass-produced snacks that locals ate were made in China. Many foreign-brand foods available in Xi'an were produced in Chinese factories, some of which were located in Shaanxi province. By 1997, even such well-known "Western" products as Coca-Cola were made and bottled in Shaanxi.

Residents of the Xi'an Muslim district identified certain foods as Western based primarily on what they learned from the media and large department stores and supermarkets. Hui regarded some foods as Western because they saw them being

served and consumed in Europe. Television programs in China about the West's foods and foodways made "the West" a place of whom had ever taken

Xi'an's Chinese Muslims had available in department supermarkets. Supermarkets when I arrived in Xi'an. Company (*Haixing*) city center when I arrived had opened in Xi'an's district, and attracted stores that lined the stores scattered throughout a variety of packaged.

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served and consumed in media representations of the United States, Canada, and Europe. Television programs, both those made in the United States and those made in China about the West, played an important role in educating locals about Western foods and foodways. In addition, movies, news programs, and newspaper articles all made "the West" a meaningful category in the imaginations of my informants, none of whom had ever traveled to the United States or Europe.

Xi'an's Chinese Muslims also learned about Western foods from the products available in department stores, wholesale markets, convenience stores, and a few supermarkets. Supermarkets (*chaoji shichang*) were a new phenomenon in Xi'an when I arrived in January 1994. A Hong Kong firm called the Seastar Overseas Company (*Haixing haiwai gongsi*) had recently opened two supermarkets near the city center when I arrived; by the time I left in August 1995, at least two more stores had opened in Xi'an. One of these supermarkets was quite close to the Muslim district, and attracted some of its residents. This supermarket, the many department stores that lined the main streets surrounding the district, the small convenience stores scattered throughout the area, and the nearby wholesale markets sold a variety of packaged, mass-produced foods.

Between 1994 and 1997 the available products included such beverages as Coca-Cola, Sprite, Tang fruit drink, Nestlé powdered milk, and Nestlé instant coffee, and such foods as Snickers, M&M's, McVitie's Digestive Biscuits, and several kinds of Keebler cookies and crackers, many of which, such as mango-flavored sandwich cookies, I had never seen before. These foods were originally developed in Europe and the United States, and had spawned a variety of Japanese and Hong Kong imitations. The Hong Kong brands, especially Khong Guan and Garden biscuits and crackers, were particularly popular in Xi'an. Many PRC companies also sold Western food spinoffs in Xi'an, such as carbonated drinks, crackers, crisps, cookies, ice cream bars, and candy.

In addition to brand-name promotions, media representations also contributed to the development of stereotypes about Western foods and their ingredients. Butter and milk in particular were regarded as typical of Western food. Even in snacks produced locally, the presence of dairy ingredients lent them an aura of foreign-ness and luxury. For Hui in their thirties and older, dairy products symbolized a high standard of living. Mingxin remembered craving milk as a child, when little was available and his family was too poor to buy it. He commented that low levels of milk production were partially to blame in the past, but since the reform period began in 1978, China's cows had been "science modernized" (*kexue xiandaihua*) and so dairy products were both readily available and affordable.

A number of Xi'an enterprises sold foods such as fresh yeast bread and cakes containing ingredients that caused Hui to regard them as "Western." Unlike the packaged, preserved factory food, local restaurants and bakeries made these foods daily and sold them fresh. However, Chinese Muslims generally refused to consume them; most would only eat the locally made "Western" foods that other Hui produced. No one I knew ate food from the American fast-food chain Kentucky Fried Chicken, the Han Chinese fast-food chains that sold hamburgers, hot dogs, pizza, fried chicken, and the like, or the many bakeries outside the Muslim district that produced yeast bread and oven-baked cakes. Hui also abstained from carbonated beverages that came from soda fountains rather than cans or bottles. They

justified their abstinence on the grounds that these locally produced Western foods were not *qingzhen* since they were not made by Hui.

As the preceding discussion makes clear, a number of foods identified as “Western” did not fall into the category of foods Hui were willing to eat. When foods were made in local restaurants and food stalls, residents of the Muslim district would eat only those foods made by Muslims. This was because, “Western” or not, foods made by Hui were by definition *qingzhen*. What was more perplexing was that Hui also ate foods that were produced in factories and thus not made by Hui. Three factors made these foods acceptable: they were not made with pork, they were perceived to be Western, and they were the product of industrial production techniques that did not involve the extensive use of the hands.

An event from Aifeng’s and my shopping trip shows the importance of the first two criteria. After Aifeng had purchased her food, I began sorting through the piles to buy some for myself. As I looked at the offerings, I was drawn to a different sort of food than Aifeng was. What was to me more exotic and novel were the factory-produced versions of traditional Chinese food like mung bean cakes (*liudougao*) and peanut cakes (*huashengsu*).⁵ Seeing me rummaging through the boxes and sacks, Aifeng came over to examine what I planned to buy. When she saw the factory-made mung bean cakes, she shook her head. “We can’t eat those,” she said. “They aren’t *qingzhen*.”

Clearly Aifeng placed mass-produced mung bean cakes in a different category from the packaged snacks she had bought for her daughter. What caused her to perceive the cakes and the instant noodles with which she took such care to purchase a *qingzhen* brand as requiring attention to *qingzhen*? The answer lies in their familiarity. The mung bean cakes and noodles were the result of industrial food production techniques, but they were recognizably Chinese. They were foods that Hui knew how to make, and ones that were commonly prepared and consumed throughout China. Aifeng knew that when non-Muslims prepared mung bean cakes or noodles they made them with lard; only Hui made such foods with vegetable oil. Her experience and upbringing told Aifeng that she could only consume traditional Chinese foods if they were made by Hui. Even factory-produced “traditional” foods were associated with pork, unless they were certified *qingzhen*. Aifeng and her neighbors recognized factory-produced foods such as mung bean cakes and noodles as part of a local universe in which foods were either Hui and edible or Han and inedible. Western mass-produced foods, however, stood outside of this realm.

Young Consumers

Many residents of the Muslim district bought Western industrial foods, but although many Hui adults purchased them, few actually consumed them. Most of these foods were eaten by children. By and large, Hui adults limited their intake of mass-produced foods to carbonated beverages, coffee, and juice-based drinks. None of these beverages were popular with adults over thirty, and they did not form a part of most adults’ daily food intake. Generally, such beverages were used to host visitors and guests. Soda, for example, was an indispensable part of any formal banquet at a restaurant, and was also served with the meals that Hui provided for

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guests at circumcisions, engagements, and weddings. When the Barley Market Street Anti-Alcohol Association, a grassroots organization dedicated to keeping alcohol out of the Muslim district, hosted a public rally, it provided soda to everyone who attended. Most families I knew kept bottles of soda or boxes of juice drink on hand in the refrigerator for guests, especially during the summer, when temperatures in Xi'an soared well over 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

The other mass-produced Western food that occasionally formed part of the adult Hui diet was candy. Like the Western beverages, mass-produced candies were not eaten daily by the Hui adults I knew but rather were offered to guests. Packaged candies were placed out on trays for guests to eat casually during the lengthy celebrations of life-cycle rituals or brought out for important visitors. Candy also constituted an item of exchange during marriage transactions. Families whose children became engaged or married participated in formal rites of gift-giving (similar to those described in Yan 1996:176-209). In the Muslim district, these exchanges frequently involved food. For example, at one stage during the marriage process, the bride's family presented the groom's family with gifts of nuts, dates, and other fancy snack foods (*gaodian*). A wide variety of traditional pastries were used on this occasion, but packaged hard candy also frequently constituted one of the items exchanged.

Despite these gift exchange and hosting practices, most Hui adults found "Western" foods unpalatable. A frequent comment Hui adults made was that they "could not get accustomed" (*buxiguan*) to the taste of candy, soda, or other Western foods. In general, locals complained that Western foods were "too sweet" and "not filling" (*chi bu bao*). Hui used these foods for gift exchanges and hospitality because they were novel, expensive, and associated with the West and what the West represented, not because they thought the foods tasted good.

Hui children, on the other hand, ate factory-made Western food in large quantities. Parents and grandparents regularly purchased packaged Western snacks for children to eat between meals. Many families I knew kept supplies of these foods at home. Aifeng frequently fed this type of mass-produced snack to her granddaughter when the little girl cried or if she started playing with something Aifeng did not wish her to play with – in short, when Aifeng wanted to distract her. Peng's father bought large cases of soda for his sons; he explained that offering this treat was one way he rewarded his children and encouraged them to work hard in school.

Most parents enabled their children to eat snack foods by giving them spare change. I frequently saw children run up to their parents and ask for a few *mao*.⁶ The parents' usual response was to hand over a little money and send the children away. Children spent this money at the small, family-run convenience stores in the area, quite a few of which were near primary and middle schools. Among school-age children, trips to the convenience store occasioned comparisons about who had tried which snacks, queries about which snacks contained toys, and judicious expressions of preferences. Children frequently ate these foods in or around school property, and the schoolyard formed an important venue for the dissemination of knowledge about new snacks.

Some Chinese Muslims questioned the propriety of consuming Western foods. Jishu, an elderly imam, refused to drink carbonated beverages or eat any foods associated with the West because he believed they were not *qingzhen*. Although he

did not criticize others for eating these foods, he said that he hoped his abstinence would inspire other Hui to emulate him. Most ordinary Hui avoided offering Western food to imams and members of the community considered to be particularly devout. For example, at the weddings, funerals, and engagements I attended, imams and other "men of religion" were not served Western soft drinks, though lay guests were. Nor did the banquets provided by the mosques for collective religious rituals (such as the annual summertime mourning ritual for the Hui massacred in Shaanxi during the late nineteenth century or the wintertime celebration of the Prophet's Birthday) include any foods associated with the West: no factory-produced snacks, canned or bottled beverages, or local Hui-produced yeast breads or cakes.⁷

"Neutral" Foods

For most Chinese Muslims, mass-produced Western foods were neither *qingzhen* nor taboo. Instead, they fell into an amorphous category of their own. The apparent neutrality of mass-produced Western foods derived in part from the absence of pork or lard in such products. For example, on one occasion I asked Peng's father if Hui could eat chocolate. He responded with a puzzled look. "Of course," he replied. "Chocolate? There is nothing in that (*mei sha*)." "Nothing" meant no pork; neither chocolate nor the other foods Hui considered Western were made with pork or lard.

On another occasion I spoke with Aifeng's daughter Xue, a young woman in her twenties who worked in a department store, about Western foods. Xue had traveled to Beijing with her co-workers on a trip sponsored by her work unit; when she described her visit, she complained about how difficult it was for her to find food that she could eat while she and her co-workers, who were all Han, were sightseeing. Because her Han colleagues ate in places that were not *qingzhen*, she often went hungry. Indeed, she chose to sit outside during meals, so concerned was she to avoid violating *qingzhen*. After listening to her remarks, I asked her whether she could eat in Western restaurants like Kentucky Fried Chicken: did the *qingzhen* food taboo apply to such places? Xue replied that she could not enter or eat in fast-food restaurants because they were not *qingzhen*. And what about the ice cream bars they sold on the street, I asked, could she eat those? What about when she was thirsty? "About some foods it is hard to say (*shuo bu qing*)," she responded. "I could eat an ice cream bar, or drink a soft drink, or even eat packaged biscuits (*binggan*) if they didn't have lard in them."

Intrigued by the neutrality of mass-produced Western foods, I visited Zenglie, a retired professor of Hui history whose family lived in the district. Zenglie characterized these snacks as one stage in a historical development whereby Hui came to eat foods that were once avoided. It used to be, Zenglie said, that Hui would not drink water that did not come from wells owned by Hui; now everyone drank the water that came through the pipes the government installed. Sweets (*tianshi*) and non-alcoholic beverages (*yinliao*) were also foods that had once been prohibited. However, Zenglie noted, in the past such foods were all made by hand. Now they were made in factories, so Hui could eat them.

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Noodles were cooked inside and outside from fancy hotel to most restaurants criticized and avoided Muslim district, a almost always machine rolled, or cut in the hands.

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Once cut, the noodles cook would grab them into a big wok filled stove that was prepared were removed with taste. If the custom cooked meat, pick green bean threads cook would ladle them

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The Food Industry and Food Production

Industrial production clearly played an important role in rendering the new foods acceptable to Hui. Such foods differed from the vast majority of edibles sold and consumed in the area: most foods available in Xi'an during the mid-1990s were hand-made. "Hand-made" in this context signified more than just the degree of personalization this phrase denotes in the contemporary United States. Rather, it refers to the absence of almost every kind of food processing machine or tool, and to the extensive and intensive use of hands in all forms of food preparation.

As described above, cleanliness figures highly in the Hui concept of "pure and true." Hui criticized Han for being dirty, not just because they consumed pork, but also because they regarded Han as less than sanitary. Several Hui commented to me that Han did not wash their hands after using the toilet, and that Han washed their hands in water Hui considered stagnant. Given the nature of local food-preparation techniques, these sanitation practices assumed a high degree of importance.

Noodles were one of the most popular foods for sale on the streets of Xi'an, both inside and outside the Muslim district. They were sold in establishments that ranged from fancy hotel restaurants to tiny street stalls seating fewer than ten customers. In most restaurants and stalls, noodles were made to order; the urbanites I knew criticized and avoided establishments that sold pre-prepared dried noodles. In the Muslim district, as on many of Xi'an's smaller streets and alleys, fresh noodles were almost always made in the customer's presence. Though noodles could be pulled, rolled, or cut in an assortment of shapes and sizes, all involved significant use of the hands.

Typically, noodle preparation began with making the dough. The cook poured flour and water into a large basin, and then stirred the mixture with chopsticks. As the dough thickened, the cook abandoned the chopsticks in favor of hands. Once the right proportions of flour and water were achieved, the dough was removed from the basin and kneaded by hand. Kneading took anywhere from ten to twenty minutes. Then, if the cook were preparing cut noodles – the simplest sort to prepare – he or she flattened the dough with a rolling pin, using his or her hands to stretch the flattened dough. Once the dough had reached the desired thinness, the cook cut it with a knife. He or she would stop after cutting the right amount of dough for a single bowl, pick it up, and put it to the side in a pile. This process would continue until all the dough was cut.

Once cut, the noodles were ready for boiling. When a customer appeared, the cook would grab one of the piles of noodles with his or her hands and throw them into a big wok filled with water that was heated by a large, round coal-burning stove that was probably made from an oil drum. After a few minutes, the noodles were removed with chopsticks, placed in a bowl, and seasoned to the customer's taste. If the customer wanted them with meat, the cook would cut a few slices of pre-cooked meat, pick them up by hand, and place them in the customer's bowl. Then green bean threads, cilantro, and onions would be added, also by hand. Finally, the cook would ladle broth into the bowl, and serve it to the customer.

Noodles were by no means the only sort of food made by Xi'an restaurateurs that involved the use of hands, nor did noodle preparation involve the most intensive use

of the hand. Steamed stuffed buns (*baozi*), dumplings (*jiaozi*), stovetop-baked flatbread (*tuotuo mo*), and most other foods sold on the streets of Xi'an all required hands-on preparation. Only a couple of the hundreds of food stalls in the Muslim district possessed machines for food preparation; most enterprises hired multiple laborers to hasten and increase food production.

The contrast is clear: foods that Hui made were produced by hand, on site, while the customer watched; packaged foods, on the other hand, were made by machine, in distant locations, and away from the consumer's gaze. The physical distance between where mass-produced foods were made and where they were consumed, the invisibility of the production process, and the use of machines all contributed to the Hui tendency to regard these foods as neutral.

Industrial processing also defamiliarized food by rendering its products significantly different in appearance from the foods that Chinese made by hand (see Hendry 1993 for a discussion of the transformative effects of wrapping in Japan). The mass-produced foods were sealed in plastic, glass, or aluminum. Their wrappers were air-tight and leak-proof; they were packaged with expensive materials that could not be produced in the Muslim district. Local packaging was much more casual. Hand-made foods were wrapped in paper and tied with string, or put into flimsy plastic bags tied by their handles. Often consumers would bring their own dishes or bowls to transport their purchases home. Indeed, much of the hand-made food produced in Xi'an was consumed on the spot rather than taken home.

Ingredients and food type also contributed to the strangeness of "Western" factory-made foods. They were standardized in color and shape. Many were dyed. Some were dried and coated; as a category they tended to be crisp. By contrast, hand-made Hui foods were irregularly shaped and varied in size. They were made without artificial colorings, and they tended to be soft.

Consuming Modernity

Mass-produced Western food was alien: encased in sealed containers, made by unfamiliar and unseen production techniques, containing ingredients that were rarely used in local cuisine. Unlike the mass-produced mung bean cakes, they were not "Chinese" but visually, texturally, and orally exotic and foreign. Their "Western" quality was an important reason why Hui consumed them. In the eyes of many Chinese Muslims, the West represented wealth, advanced technology, science, and modernity. By eating the Western factory foods, Hui linked themselves to progress, scientific knowledge, and prosperity.

Largely because of the images and stories of the West transmitted since the economic reforms, Xi'an Hui regarded the West as modern, advanced, liberal, and wealthy. Purchasing and eating food that was Western allowed Hui to assume something of these qualities. Local residents used Western food to make a statement about their cosmopolitanism and familiarity with things foreign. While most adult Hui did not like the taste of ice cream, soda, chocolate, or potato chips, many liked to think of themselves, and liked to be thought of, as modern, progressive, and aware of the world outside China. One way of creating this image was to purchase Western foods, give them as gifts, keep them around the house, feed them to

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children, and serve them to honored guests. Since only two Hui families made Western-style foods, very little hand-made Western food was available in the Muslim district. Furthermore, the yeast bread and cake these families produced were highly perishable and limited in variety. Hui who wanted to use the contents of their pantry to create a modern, affluent image had little choice but to buy factory-made products, even though they did not meet some of the criteria for *qingzhen*.

Factory-made Western food had the added attraction of being intimately tied to industry, and through this to science and modernity. Things scientific had an immense power in the Muslim district. Residents referred to the Qur'an as "extremely scientific" when justifying their belief in Islam, and "scientific" methods of Islamic education, which involved the use of language cassettes, were privileged over the "old" methods of rote memorization. Hui associated science with development, improved sanitation, and high standards of living. The "advanced technology," as one resident termed it, through which factory-made foods were produced, enhanced their attractiveness.

The modern, scientific aspect of Western factory-made food was particularly important for children. Adult Hui wanted their children to succeed in contemporary society. They wanted their children to have wider experiences than they had had, and to ascend higher on the social ladder. This desire was most obviously manifest through the stress parents placed on their children's education. Parents willingly paid extra money to send their children to better schools, enroll them in extra tutorials, or hire private tutors. Providing their children with Western mass-produced food was another means parents used to prepare their children for the modern world. Through these foods parents hoped to introduce their children to things foreign and equip them to live in an industrialized, technologically advanced, cosmopolitan world.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu writes that "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (1984:6). Xi'an Hui wanted to be classified as modern. Their pursuit of secular education, their enthusiasm for living in high-rise apartments, their preference for religious education that used the technologies of modern life such as language cassettes and videotapes, their desire to make the pilgrimage to Mecca and enjoy the experiences of foreign travel such as riding in airplanes – all demonstrate that residents of the Muslim district approved of and wanted to participate in modernization (see Gillette 2000 for further discussion). Consumption of packaged, mass-produced Western foods was yet another arena in which they pursued modernity. In this case, what was occurring in Xi'an was not the "logical conformity" of taste to social position that Bourdieu describes (1984:471; see also 1990) whereby people prefer goods and services that express their existing social position. Rather, Hui consumption of Western mass-produced foods is an instance of people developing a taste, or instilling a taste in their children, for what they wanted to be: advanced, cosmopolitan, modern.

The Government and Mass Production

Consumption of mass-produced foods was also part of an ongoing reconfiguration of the relationship between the Shaanxi provincial government and Chinese

Muslims, both with the Muslim district and with the wider community of Hui residents elsewhere in Xi'an and Shaanxi. During the summer of 1996, one high-level provincial official told me that the government's Religion and Nationalities Bureau was debating a policy that would certify factories as *qingzhen*. Four criteria had been decided upon: in factories officially designated as *qingzhen*, the "cook" must be Hui (he did not elaborate upon who, in the factory production process, would be considered the cook); the ingredients must not contain pork or pork products; leaders of the factory must be Hui; and at least 25 percent of the factory workers must be Hui. This last point was revised during the week I was visiting; a few days after our initial conversation this official told me that the percentage of factory workers who must be Hui had been increased to 45 percent. He explained that if this policy went into effect, it would apply to many enterprises, including those that did business with Islamic countries. Fears that Muslims from outside China would disapprove of the criteria had caused the provincial government to raise the required percentage of Hui employees. By June 1997, this policy to regulate *qingzhen* had passed through all the necessary administrative channels, but no actions to implement the policy had yet occurred.

The provincial government's debates about certifying factories as *qingzhen* took place in the context of a more general effort to define the meaning of *qingzhen* in secular terms. A few years prior to these debates, the city government's Religious and Nationalities Department created criteria for certifying hand-made Hui foods as *qingzhen* (see Gillette 1997:108-37). Although residents of the Muslim district linked *qingzhen* closely to religion, the government sought to use nationality-based criteria to redefine *qingzhen* as a category based on nationality affiliation. In both the city and the provincial government's eyes, membership in one of the officially created Muslim nationalities determined which foods and which food producers were *qingzhen*.

The Shaanxi provincial government's proposed policy raised questions about the significance of contemporary *qingzhen* labeling, at least for me. Did the instant noodles Aifeng selected, which were advertised as *qingzhen*, adhere to the standards for "pure and true" that had been set by local Chinese Muslims, or did they more closely resemble the secular definitions propounded by the government? Such labeling had enormous potential to mask food preparation practices that diverged widely from those considered clean in the district. By allowing factories to market their industrial products as *qingzhen*, the government added another level of complexity to the Hui evaluation and use of mass-produced foods: did *qingzhen* mean Islamically pure, made by a member of the Hui nationality, or made in a factory whose employees were mostly non-Muslim? The government's actions also foregrounded the puzzling question: to what extent can a machine be considered *qingzhen*?

Hui and Han Eat Together

Local standards of *qingzhen* have shifted in the Xi'an Muslim district. The availability of mass-produced Western foods was transforming what *qingzhen* meant, particularly with regard to children's food consumption. Hui attitudes toward mass-produced foods suggest that *qingzhen* was still defined in opposition to Han, but not

in opposition to modernization.

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This phenomenon reaffirms Bourdieu's insight about social identity, that "difference is asserted against what is closest, which represents the greatest threat" (1984:479). To Xi'an Hui, the food of their next-door neighbors, the Han, was quintessentially polluted. However, they did not feel the same way about factory produced Western food, even if it was made by machines operated by Han. In part, their attitude reflected that the Hui, like nearly everyone else in China, wanted to modernize. Eating Western mass-produced food was one means of achieving a progressive and scientifically advanced image. Most Chinese Muslims elevated the goal of modernization over strict adherence to qingzhen guidelines. To reach this goal, qingzhen was being reinterpreted solely as that which was not Han, rather than that which was Muslim.

The need for such redefinition was a relatively recent development. Throughout most of the Muslim district's thousand-year history, residents had limited contact with the West. Beginning in the 1980s, however, opportunities to encounter the West through the media and through interactions with foreign visitors to Xi'an increased dramatically. In addition, many more Western products became available than ever before. Xi'an Hui associated such products with "the good life" they saw in media representations and in the material lifestyles of foreign tourists. They embraced this image of wealth and modernity by consuming food they perceived as "Western." Western foods were carefully categorized as distinct from Han food, even when both were made through mechanized factory production.

The consumption of mass-produced Western foods connected Hui with consumers of similar products in the United States, Europe, Japan, and elsewhere. As Jack Goody writes, "processed food is more or less the same in Ealing as in Edinburgh" (1982:189). However, eating this food has not led to cultural homogeneity (see also J. Watson, ed., 1997). While the Hui treatment of candy and crisps may resemble that found in the United States, for example as a snack for children, in other ways it differed markedly. Residents' use of candy and yeast breads as part of the formal engagement presents given by the groom's family to the bride's family, for example, was a practice not found in mainstream American society. More important, Western food in the Muslim district possessed a significance it did not have outside China. One difference was that Western food was not regarded as suitable for regular meals, even in forms that most Americans consider to be substantial, such as yeast bread. Instead, it was closely linked to children and to childish practices such as snacking. Another difference was its special value and quality. Coca-Cola in the United States is quite ordinary and inexpensive, but in Xi'an it was a prestige food, served to honored guests in homes and at banquets.

Despite the sharp distinction Hui made between themselves and Han, and the care they took to avoid mass-produced foods that were considered "traditional Chinese," the consumption of Western mass-produced foods made it easier for Hui to interact with Han. For although Hui adults differentiated between Han foods and Western mass-produced foods, the snacks they allowed their children to eat, and the soft drinks they drank, were also found in the homes and mouths of Han. These foods provided a common ground for Hui and Han to eat together. Hui visitors at Han households could accept Han hospitality if offered a can of soda rather than a cup of

tea. If food was the most important factor that kept Hui separate from Han, then the consumption of Western, mass-produced foods diminished the differences between Hui and Han, particularly for children. One wonders where and how the boundary between Hui and Han will be drawn when the children of the 1990s have grown up.

NOTES

- 1 Based on discussion with my informants, I have chosen to use personal names without family names in this chapter. Xi'an is a city of about two million in Shaanxi Province, one of the five provinces that comprise northwest China.
- 2 Other meanings of *qingzhen* that residents of the Muslim district reported included honesty in business, belief in Islam, and observance of a Muslim lifestyle.
- 3 While Hui refuse Han hospitality, Han accept Hui food and drink, freely consuming Hui foods and using Hui cookery. See Pillsbury 1975 for a discussion of this issue with reference to the Hui on Taiwan.
- 4 A *fen* is one one-hundredth of a yuan.
- 5 These "cakes" do not resemble Western oven-baked cakes at all. They are made of seeds and nuts compressed into squares, and are not baked.
- 6 One *mao* is one-tenth of a yuan.
- 7 The annual mourning for what is known as the "Hui Uprising" (*Huimin qiyi*) takes place in the Muslim district on the seventeenth day of the fifth lunar month of the Chinese calendar. See Gillette n.d. and Ma Changshou 1993 for further information on this late nineteenth-century massacre. The Prophet's Birthday occurs on the twelfth of the third lunar month of the Islamic calendar, but was always celebrated in January in Xi'an.

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