

Food, Hunger, and the State

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Against a Background of Hunger

Until recently, perhaps the main reason parents wanted their children to attend sports schools was because they received extra food subsidies (*huoshi buzhu*). Food subsidies have been an important part of China's sports effort since the implementation of the sports school system in 1955. Food is not something that Chinese people take for granted; it occupies an important part in their calculations about social relations, future survival, and success. When asked about the benefits of their chosen career, sportspeople are likely to answer that their work is "bitter," their salaries and prestige are average, "but we eat a little better" than people in other occupations. Despite eating better than nonathletes, Chinese athletes at all levels express constant concern that they will not be able to eat enough food to support hard training, that their "nutrition can't keep up" (*yingyang genbushang*). This constant sense of scarcity was puzzling to me since I knew that athletes' diets were far richer than the average Chinese diet. Could the hunger that athletes felt in fact be due to inadequate nutrition?

Certainly there is evidence that malnutrition was still widespread in the 1980s. A national survey of nearly one million Chinese between seven and twenty-two years old from all parts of China concluded that, according to the height-weight ratio established by the World Health Organization, 28.98 percent of male students and 36.60 percent of female students in China suffered from malnutrition. They were, however, taller and heavier than ever before, and rural students were growing faster than urban ones (Wu Jingshu 1988). Iron deficiency was common and was related to the low consumption of meat (*China Daily* 1987, 1988).

Moreover, in the not so distant past there were periods of real deprivation. Cao Xiangjun, member of the Beijing City handball team, recalled that after they won the championship in the 1959 National Games, they returned to the dorms for dinner. Tears welled up in her eyes when she saw the pitiful portions they had. One of the

courses was the left-over leaf droppings from cabbages, boiled in salt. The kitchen staff felt very badly. They were still hungry when the "victory banquet" was over. Even in 1979, there was a story that the women's national racewalking team all became anemic during a training camp. Their meal allowance was then 1.5 yuan (40 cents) per day. Their coach gathered orange peels and sold them to raise money to buy ginseng and a clay pot with which he boiled the women a medicinal soup (Li Jian 1987). A State Sports Commission document issued in 1981 stated that "some athletes have acquired anemia and other diseases of malnourishment" and tried to rectify the situation by revising nutritional standards (Guojia tiwei zhengce yanjiushi 1982: 872). Anemia is perceived as the most immediate danger of inadequate nutrition. The word for anemia (*pinxue*) literally means "poor blood." That concern about malnourishment focuses on the blood is another example of the way in which complex social situations are condensed into the symbolism of body fluids.

Children must be put into sports schools at a young age in order to receive food subsidies during their most important growth years. Events in which training usually starts at older ages may be affected by early malnutrition. For example, a track and field coach who liked to recruit peasants for their endurance and toughness said that he was careful to examine the family's economic situation before he accepted the child for training. If the family was poor, the child might not have had adequate nutrition when young and might not be able to stand hard training.

In sum, many Chinese, even urban Chinese, actually do experience hunger. And even if they are not experiencing it now, many people have recent and vivid memories of hunger. It has been my experience that people who have known hunger can never forget the importance of food. This is the background for the obsession with food among contemporary Chinese.

However, when one examines the situations of specific individual athletes, it is hard to believe that they are suffering from malnourishment. Since they are obviously in good health, I am inclined to believe that their perception of hunger is not due to outright malnourishment, but rather to the social and cultural frames within which food is distributed. Food is very much a part of an entire hierarchical system, with the state at the top of the food chain and the athletes very close to the bottom.

Food and the State

There are a multitude of phrases in Chinese that portray the relationship between the individual and the state in terms of food. The ubiquitous phrase "eating out of the big pot" is a metaphor for dependence on the state for subsistence and security. To have an "iron rice bowl" is to have the lifelong job security promised by socialism. Sun Lung-kee argues that food is the central problem of any Chinese state: "If only they 'have a bite of food to eat,' the common Chinese people will not revolt" (Sun Lung-kee 1983: 39). In other words, the central problem for the Chinese state is to control its "person-mouths" (*renkou*) – its population.

One of the benefits of being a high official in China is access to more and better food. A high official is often literally a "big man." I was told that the same bureau that supplies food to the national sports team in Beijing also supplies the nation's top leaders. When the Party has attacked governmental corruption, official banquets

have been a prime target for establishing and the root of bureaucratic

In Mayfair Yang's *guanxi* because of the Those who are lower higher in status receive the other and therefore Thus, those of lower status those of higher status A familiar person is a stranger is a *shengren* "raw" into the "cook

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Food is clearly an issue to view the effects of individual and the state

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Many athletes left the locus of food-sharing out food based on at policy, athletes were their food. Eating in dishes offered were hence. In a pointed criticism referred to the phrase the state and observed it is inside the sports and undersize gymnas Unlike in many other state policy was perceived more food than women

The national team institute student competition "iron rice bowl" – no recreation. The national received special foods

have been a prime target (Anderson 1988: 245). Banquets are one of the techniques for establishing and maintaining the *guanxi* ("connections") that is perceived as the root of bureaucratic corruption.

In Mayfair Yang's analysis (1989), food is so important in the establishment of *guanxi* because of the symbolism of incorporating another's substance into oneself. Those who are lower in social status tend to give the banquet and those who are higher in status receive it. To incorporate another's substance is to be possessed by the other and therefore to be beholden to and dependent on the donor (pp. 43-4). Thus, those of lower status use the gift of food as a means of extracting favors from those of higher status. Food is used to transform an outsider into an insider. A familiar person is a *shuren*, which literally means a "cooked or ripe person"; a stranger is a *shengren*, literally a "raw or unripe person." The transformation of the "raw" into the "cooked" makes the establishment of *guanxi* possible (p. 40).

It goes without saying that food is also extremely important within the family. Traditionally in rural China, a family was primarily defined as the group of people who ate food cooked on one stove (see Wolf 1968: 28). A family member was called a "one-mouth-person" (*yikou ren*).

Food is clearly an important expression of social relationships. How then are we to view the effects of state rationing on perceptions of the relationship between the individual and the state?

In the late 1980s, athletes, like coaches and physical education teachers, received a food subsidy from their work unit, with the amount determined both by state policy and by the local cost of food. The subsidy was in addition to the grain rations that all urban Chinese received; athletes received the higher level of grain ration that was reserved for people engaged in hard manual labor (25 kg per month). According to policy guidelines, the subsidy could not be given directly to the athletes in cash but was calculated into the preparation of food in the communal cafeteria. Eating in the team cafeteria was a prerequisite to receiving the subsidy.

Many athletes left home at a young age to board at sports schools. For them, the locus of food-sharing shifted from the family to the communal cafeteria that dished out food based on athletic performance. Since the food subsidies were set by state policy, athletes were very conscious of the fact that the state provided them with their food. Eating in a communal cafeteria meant that the times of meals and the dishes offered were highly regimented and allowed little room for individual preference. In a pointed critique of the communal cafeterias in sports teams, Yin Weixing referred to the phrase "eating out of the big pot" as a metaphor for dependence on the state and observed, "The true 'big pot' cannot be any more fully embodied than it is inside the sports team cafeteria" (Yin Weixing 1988: 113). Oversize shotputters and undersize gymnasts all received the same subsidy. So did women and men. Unlike in many other realms of life, with respect to food subsidies the uniform state policy was perceived as discriminating against men since they actually needed more food than women.

The national team athletes received the highest subsidies. One physical education institute student commented that being on the national team was like having an "iron rice bowl" – not like in the United States where you have to pay for your recreation. The national team athletes each received 15 yuan per day, and they also received special foods which could not be bought on the open market. At 600 yuan

(\$162) per month, this level of nutrition was far beyond the reach of the average monthly wage of 100 yuan; as one professor noted, at this rate even the premier of China could not afford to raise a top athlete. Professional athletes ate more food and higher-quality food than the average person. By a "high-quality" diet, my informants meant primarily two things: more meat or fish and more dairy products (primarily milk and yogurt). Dairy products are not a typical part of the Chinese diet. The emphasis on them for athletes is a result of an awareness that they form a large part of the Western diet, the assumption being that they explain the greater size and musculature of Western athletes.

Provincial and municipal team athletes also ate well, with an allowance of 12 to 15 yuan per day. The amount varies according to the cost of living in the area, which is usually lower than in Beijing, so that provincial athletes claim they eat better than Beijing athletes. Zhejiang Province athletes, for example, got three dishes for lunch and dinner, two of which contained meat. These numbers were fixed by policy. They also received many supplements, such as oranges, apples, and other fruit, and "royal jelly" (a substance made by honey bees which is often used as a dietary supplement). Even with all of these extras, young women on the team laughed about the fact that when they weren't eating they were snacking, so that they actually ate all day long.

The situation of physical education institute students shows the importance of food subsidies. In order to encourage students to become teachers in a country that had frequently denounced teachers (and worse) in the previous decades, the Education Commission gave students in teacher training programs a food subsidy. In 1988 at the Beijing Physical Education Institute, this subsidy was one yuan per day, which at 30 yuan per month was still almost one-third of a lecturer's salary. This subsidy was distributed in the form of vegetable tickets (*caipiao*) to be used in the school cafeteria and was combined with grain ration tickets (*mianpiao*) of 45 *jin* (25 kg) per month.

Everyone I talked to maintained that this allowance was not enough to maintain hard physical training, and most students required up to 40 yuan extra from their parents. They repeatedly told me they were afraid to train hard because their nutrition "can't keep up." This was despite the fact that many acknowledged they had more grain tickets than they could possibly use. Grain tickets were exchanged for rice and flour products, primarily steamed buns (*mantou*). Students explained that they could only eat so many steamed buns. What they really needed was meat and vegetables.

Nutrition was given as the reason that provincial and national team athletes who came to the physical education institute often saw their performances decline. One athlete had been accustomed to eating 15 yuan per day of food on the Guizhou team and was now eating only four yuan; it was easy to see why she felt deprived, even though she still received more than the one yuan given to most physical education institute students. Her four-yuan subsidy was due to her former status as an athlete and a "model worker." She often fondly recalled the meals on the provincial team. When I asked her if she ate better before coming to Beijing, she replied, "Of course I ate better then. Now I'm paying for my own food." On another occasion, she made a statement that shows how food and emotions are wrapped together. She noted that she felt she could adapt to the inferior nutrition at the physical education institute, she could adapt to living with five other roommates, but the hardest thing was getting used to not being pampered. "I couldn't adapt to that."

One shotput and complained that food could not eat enough. In the past, the institute had a food subsidy, but now it had a new gymnasium being built and economic difficulties.

If the physical education college student, who was even worse off. How much steadily increased as Beijing city gave 0.3 yuan based on daily roll tax. The other women began to refuse the money, but if they take it, it just goes to them in preparation for them to participate in the Games. In 1988, the amount was considerably in that the 0.30 yuan in 1988 of yogurt!"

When I participated in the topic of utmost concern daily six yuan (\$2) of complaints resulted in lunch and supper at person. The conflict went to the point that the some "face" to the members on the team. "commendatory position to the cause of the morning, they were"

Twice a day we received eggplant, or mushrooms. The amounts stayed the same. We also received a whole lime or orange soda. Of the fact that they was given to the cafeteria and then saved some 360 yuan, no small

Is it fair that they experience fatigue? so many coaches?

One shotput and discus coach at the Beijing Institute of Physical Education complained that food was a particular problem for male throwers. They simply could not eat enough to become big enough to throw well. He complained that in the past, the institute had given a subsidy in addition to the Education Commission subsidy, but now it claimed "economic difficulties." Sweeping his arm toward the new gymnasium being erected for the Asian Games, he asked, "Tell me, what economic difficulties are there?"

If the physical education institute students could not eat their fill, then the regular college student, who received no subsidy at all from the Education Commission, was even worse off. However, members of college teams were given a special subsidy that steadily increased as efforts were made to raise the level of college sports. In 1985, Beijing city gave 0.30 yuan (8 cents) to college athletes for each day of training, based on daily roll taken at team practice. I consistently received more money than the other women because I did not miss practice during my menstrual period (I tried to refuse the money, but my coach explained, "This is the state's money. If you don't take it, it just goes to waste.") This was increased to one yuan per day early in 1986 in preparation for the Second National College Games, but only those selected to participate in the Games received the subsidy. In preparation for the third Games in 1988, the amount was raised to four yuan per day. Food prices had also risen considerably in that time. However, four yuan made a difference, in contrast to the 0.30 yuan in 1985 which, as one athlete complained, "Won't even buy one bottle of yogurt!"

When I participated in the training camp for the 1986 National College Games, a topic of utmost concern was whether or not the cafeteria staff was skimping on our daily six yuan (\$2) worth of food. Heated debates at team meetings and repeated complaints resulted in a guarantee that we would get at least one meat or fish dish at lunch and supper and that each supper would include two bottles of yogurt per person. The conflict had caused relationships with the cafeteria staff to deteriorate to the point that the service was very surly. A strategy for rectifying this by giving some "face" to the staff was suggested during a team meeting by one of the Party members on the team. He sneaked into the cafeteria one night to hang a large "commendatory poster" (*biaoyangshu*) on the wall praising the staff for their service to the cause of the Beijing City College Team. When the staff entered the next morning, they were pleasantly surprised and friendly relations were restored.

Twice a day we received cucumbers, tomatoes, green peppers, bamboo shoots, eggplant, or mushrooms stir-fried with eggs, shrimp, beef, pork, or fish. The elements stayed the same, but the combinations changed. Because there was a heat wave, we also received a weekly "nutritional supplement" of twenty-four bottles of lemon-lime or orange soda pop and three watermelons. My teammates were very conscious of the fact that they were not allowed to receive their six yuan directly, but that it was given to the cafeteria, while the coaches and leaders received theirs in cash and then saved some of it by eating at home. Over two months, this would come to 360 yuan, no small sum. A younger coach asked rhetorically,

Is it fair that they get as much as the athletes, who train hard, put out lots of sweat, experience fatigue? I'm a coach, and I don't think it's fair. And why do you have to have so many coaches? When we go to Dalian [for the National Collegiate Games] at the

very least there will be one official for every athlete, if you include all the workers. And they will all get a subsidy, too. That's China. It's just the way it is.

In this hierarchical system, the hunger for food was intimately linked with the hunger for athletic success and ultimately for the security that success brings. Most people would be unable to completely fulfill their personal aspirations. Thus, hunger could refer to "the lack of fulfillment of personal aspirations and desires" as much as to real malnourishment (Kahn 1986: 122).

That the food subsidy was based on performance was peculiar to the lives of athletes. However, it was part of a wider pattern that applied to Chinese society as a whole. Food was an important marker of hierarchy and insiderhood long before the current ration system was put into place. This use of food persists, but it has been taken over by the state in both formal and informal ways. In this way the state can partly dictate the hierarchical structure of Chinese society. According to the traditional symbolism of food, by providing food to people the state is reinforcing its superior social position and making its recipients beholden to and dependent on it. Mayfair Yang even suggests it is "possessing" the recipient (1989: 44). Top state leaders can ensure themselves access to better food. Lower-level officials can expect to be treated to banquets. Even coaches on a municipal college team can set themselves apart from their athletes by taking their meals at home and saving the subsidy while requiring that the athletes eat in the cafeteria. These practices stimulate much resentment. Food and power are intimately linked. Food is one of the main ways in which the Chinese state is symbolically constructed as provider, superior, and incorporated part of the self.

Thus, it is not surprising that food played an important symbolic role in the student demonstrations of 1989. The mass hunger strikes in Tiananmen Square were begun as a way to break away from an authoritarian family that was perceived as acting in complicity with state power. Refusing food was an act of rebellion against the family because in the Confucian scheme of things, to damage the body inherited from one's parents was unfilial (Chiu 1991: 342). At the same time, the students were very conscious that food also symbolized Chinese people's relation to the state. Chiu, a graduate student from Hong Kong, wrote that he had a late night conversation with a group of students in the square in which the question of "who fed whom?" arose. He pointed out to the students that they received monthly subsidies from the state; didn't they owe the state something in return? The students replied, "No! We were taught to think so ever since we were born. And some may still be accustomed to thinking so. But not any more." "To take the Party as our mother and give thanks for its breast-feeding? Not a chance, not any more!" "We finally learned that They don't ever feed anybody. On the contrary, They themselves were fed, and far over-fed all those years" (1991: 341).

Thus, the student hunger strike was an attempt to break away from the family and the state by constructing new boundaries around individual bodies, outlining a new and different conception of self in the process.

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Conclusions: The Body Caught in the Middle

Because of the nature of their occupation, athletes rely on their bodies as vehicles to improve their lot in life. However, the aspects of their bodies that most preoccupy them are not so much things like bigger muscles or better endurance, but aspects related to reproduction and nutrition. These physiological processes are central to the two most important dependencies in a Chinese person's social life: dependence on family and state. Because a person has little control over these dependencies, the processes attached to them are a subject of much anxiety and calculation.

While reproduction and food have always been central in Chinese culture, many things have changed. Previously, they were embedded in an entire hierarchical cosmology that saw humans and nature as engaging in a never-ending exchange of essences. Human social life was one manifestation of these cosmic exchanges. Today, reproduction and digestion are no longer embedded in an entire "cosmic hierarchical biology," though fragments remain. For example, the 6:30 morning exercises required of physical education institute students, in which inhalation is emphasized, probably stem from the ancient belief that these *yin* hours are best for augmenting one's *qi* (Ware 1966: 139). However, what remains of the classical conceptions of body and cosmos are partial fragments. By contrast, the socialist state and its communist ideology are ever-present in the birth control policy and the food rationing system. Family and class allegiances are sometimes in conflict with the state. The bodies of athletes are caught in the midst of pressures to produce better sports performances for the state and oneself but at the same time to avoid damaging one's ability to marry (and marry well) and to produce children.

One similarity between contemporary and historical China is that the web of dependencies is nearly inescapable because it is so complete. As a result, the boundaries between the body, the family, and the state are more fluid than in the West. The body is not a sealed vessel situated at the center of these social axes, and the person who possesses that body does not do so completely. The "disorganization of the self" described by Sun reflects the social pressures that continuously pull the individual's identity in different directions, while the somatization of Chinese culture reflects the individual's attempt to pull together the fragments of the body that are particularly subject to these centrifugal forces. Because of the importance of food in this process, the student hunger strike in 1989 stands as a powerful symbolic effort to stake out a space for a new and more autonomous self.

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