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Healthy eating in Shanghai: exploratory notes

Alimentación saludable en Shanghái: notas exploratorias

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It is unlikely for a foreign visitor in China to be indifferent to the food of the country. What stands out is not the culinary exoticism that draws the media and touristic attention to China, but the omnipresence of food in urban areas: streets are full to the brim with restaurants of every sort and size, markets of fresh products, living animals and fishes, food trucks and peddlers. Such omnipresence is also discursive and visual: food is at the center of casual conversations and the comments and images exchanged through digital media and social networks.

This discourse on Chinese food revolves mainly around the aesthetic and tastes of dishes and products, as well as the location and environment of the several places to eat. *Hao kan, hao che* (literally, "if it is pretty, it is delicious") is a frequent expression used in China that shows the importance people give to the aesthetic value of food when it comes to defining its appeal to be consumed.

Nowadays, discourse on Chinese food is increasingly focusing on their geographical origins and on issues related to production process, quality, benefits and health risks. Even though it is known that in China, and in many other countries around the world, food is regarded both as nourishment and as medicine, in the last decades, due to several bromatological scandals, food is becoming more and more associated with the idea of impurity, artificiality, contamination, and disease.(1,2) According to Wang's view, the interest in "safety" of products is more important than the element of "desire" as the driver of consumption in China.(3)

In 2015, social discourse on bromatological risks marked my daily experience during my six month stay in Shanghai working in the anthropological field. It was not my first time visiting China, and I had never paid attention to the several discourses on food quality and bromatological issues. However, in that occasion, I travelled to Shanghai with my wife and son, whose first birthday was a few days after our arrival. This personal situation strengthened the different dimensions of the material and discursive omnipresence of Chinese food, not only as an anthropological curiosity and a factor of culinary pleasure, but also as a responsibility and central concern of my daily experience as a father whose child had started to eat solid food more often.

These needs of fatherhood also connected me from a more personal and experiential perspective with the importance of the issues related to children's upbringing in the current Chinese society, especially, health, eating and educational issues, which I had only read about, but had never personally experienced. Soon, I realized that living with a little child in Shanghai would allow me to spontaneously talk to the people I would meet in the public places I visited with my son (parks, public transport, markets, shops, restaurants), and to other Chinese people I would meet at the university where I was staying, or even in the places where I used to do my fieldwork.

Within these exchanges, the issues about the quality of food and the bromatological risks involved were a central issue. Every time my interlocutors were other "foreigners" living in China with small children, and whenever I read publications aimed at expatriates, the magnitude of this problem would increase to levels of food paranoia. Each time I asked them how they dealt with this situation while raising small children in Shanghai, both Chinese and non-Chinese

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gave me the same answer: to buy fresh, organic, and imported products located in special sections of the biggest international supermarket franchises (Walmart, Carrefour) or imported and *premium* products supermarkets (CityShop, City Super, Olé, Fresh Mart). Some told me to buy boxes of fruits and vegetables on the internet coming from organic gardens in China or go to organic and "healthy" restaurants.

In Buenos Aires, I had never paid much attention to the issues related to the quality of food, let alone organic products. However, when I was in Shanghai, after listening to the public and informal discourse about food, eating and bromatological issues, the concerns and fears they caused, and the practical need to feed my son made me pay attention to the world of products, institutions, images, and discourses related to the so-called "healthy eating" and organic and ecological products in this city. During the months we spent in Shanghai, my son tasted and ate food of all sorts. His consumption of fruits and vegetables labeled as "organic food" would take turns with food bought from outdoor markets to sellers who very often would come to the city from urban or peri-rural suburbs to sell their products.

Although we did not strictly follow the advice regarding dietary habits about children's eating in Shanghai and bromatological risks in China, the truth is that this issue had a great impact on our stay in that city. But it has always been an issue in my daily and familiar life in Shanghai that had been unrelated, until then, to the themes and interests of my research work, the main reason why I visited that country: the study of wealth and consumption in China and, especially, the impressive increase in consumption of foreign luxurious brands, as well as practices and ideas of the marketing professionals that work for those brands in China.

However, as the research work I had started in 2014 was improving, after 20 days of exploratory fieldwork in Beijing and Shanghai, I began to find that the issues regarding wealth and luxury were strongly connected to eating problems in China and to the many concerns and social discourses on the quality of food and bromatological issues involved. I discovered that the luxury marketing in China did not focus much on the material ostentation of luxurious products but on its capacity to contribute to the cultivation of personal well-being. The kind of experience these products are meant to offer are shown both in the material aspect as well as in the values that international brands are aiming to associate with these products: originality, authorship, craftwork, quality, and purity. Foreign luxury goods are part of an increasing market of personal well-being (physical and spiritual) that seeks to create new subjectivities through the connection between people and practices, places, products, and ideas that the involved parties want to connect with nature, purity, spirituality, and authenticity. Here, eating plays a leading role.

Therefore, my interest in the marketing of luxury in China led me to the healthy eating marketing in Shanghai, for which I made a one-month exploratory research study between July and August 2016 that included: interviews and informal conversations with owners and managers of restaurants self-defined as "organic" or "healthy," as well as with web page owners that offer products labeled as organic or natural; a visit to a garden of "natural" production of vegetables in Chongming Island, two hours away from Shanghai; visits to restaurants; and enquiries on web pages, mobile phone applications, and virtual blogs specialized in this issue in China. It is important to note that, in this text, I have used pseudonyms to keep people's anonymity, but in the case of restaurants and other institutions, I have kept the original names.

Rubén, a friend of mine who has been living in Shanghai for 15 years and works as a food importer to China, laughed when I told him about my idea of exploring the organic market in Shanghai. *"In China it's impossible to grow organic food, since everything is contaminated,"* he said, echoing a thought I had already heard several times from many people in this country, not only Chinese

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people but foreigners as well. However, in the last decade, China tripled its organic production, and nowadays, ranks fourth place in the world in terms of: hectares of organic crops and its several varieties, as well as the consumption of these products, many of which come from abroad, since China is the main global importer of organic products.

Furthermore, the Chinese State has governmental systems for the organic and ecological certification of agricultural products. At the beginning of the 1990s, the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture created a certification of "ecological food" (*luse shipin,* literally "green food") for agricultural products with low chemical content, mainly destined to the local market. Afterwards, this Ministry created a certification of "organic food" *(youji shipin)* that applies to domestic and international products. The latter certification is concerned with *premium* food market products that can be found in major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, while the name of "ecological food" is widely spread in terms of product quantity and cities.[4]

Although in China the production and consumption of organic products do not exceed 1% of the agricultural production and the food consumption market, it is a continuously growing market. In fact, the significant investment increase of Chinese capitals in the organic and ecological production within and outside the country, especially in Australia, New Zealand and the US, the constant growth of Chinese importation of these products, and the growing interest of middle and upper classes in a healthier diet shows that this market will continue to grow in the years to come. In addition, bromatological and environmental contamination issues are getting worse, and in the last decade, the Chinese government has placed these kinds of problems at the center of its political agenda. In fact, the Chinese government has recognized that 40% of the rivers and 20% of the soil in China are severely contaminated.[5,6]

The following pages show an exploratory description of some sites for healthy eating in Shanghai that have emerged and grown at a high rate in the last decade. I use the category "healthy eating" as a generic concept to refer to products, places, and habits labeled as "healthy," "organic," "ecological," "natural," "bio," among other categories.

In Shanghai, sites for healthy eating have a strong connection to foreign actors, capitals, symbols, and cultural elements, mainly from the US, Europe, and Asia. At restaurants and websites that sell organic products, the foreign element lies in the ethnic background of the owners, investors, consultants, suppliers, and marketing experts. Furthermore, it is also shown in the origin of many products, the aesthetics of these eating places, the several types of elaborate dishes, and the constant blend of both Chinese and English language.

However, these foreign connections do not imply that these places and the market of healthy eating, in general, are aimed only at the significant number of foreigners living in Shanghai. On the contrary, in quantity terms, the customers of these kinds of establishments are mainly people that come from the most cosmopolitan and internationalized parts of the professional middle and upper classes of Chinese society. The consumption capacity of these sectors is encouraging the fast development of what is called "market of personal well-being" of the main Chinese cities. Said market includes actors, institutions, and activities with strong global connections related to body care, spirituality, eating, cultural education, and the redefinition of social relations and its relationship with nature.

Eating is probably the area that better shows the social, political, and cultural logics that propel the development of the market of well-being in China: the search for different methods to avoid, reduce, or redefine symbolically and subjectively, from an individual perspective, the effects of huge transformations and the complex relations between creation and destruction caused by the dizzying economic development of China in the past twenty years.

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HEALTHY RESTAURANTS IN SHANGHAI: AESTHETIC, OTHERNESS, AND COMMENSALITY

What first calls our attention to restaurants, websites, online platforms, and mobile phone applications related to healthy eating in Shanghai is the central role of the aesthetic and symbolic dimension. Eating appears, mainly, as a discursive field and an aesthetic regime created around two key symbols: nature and otherness. These dimensions can be seen by the naked eye in the names of most restaurants that reclaim the healthy or organic feature of the food they offer: "Element Fresh," "Hunter Gatherer," "Organic Kitchen," "Pure and Whole," "Sprout lifestyle," "The Urban Harvest," "Green and Safe."

The names of these restaurants connect eating with a state of nature, without references to traditions or cultural stereotypes related to Chinese history. It is a kind of nature that is expressed in another language, suggesting in this way an association between natural purity and foreignness. This discursive resource and this sensory association are not new in China. In Shanghai, it is quite common that Chinese stores have the names of their products and shops in English in order to take advantage of the good reputation imported products enjoy among local consumers.

The names of the restaurants also show a central dimension of the discursive and aesthetic regime that prevails in most of the activities related to healthy eating in Shanghai: nature as otherness. Healthy eating marketing in China feeds from the constant suspicion Chinese consumers have regarding quality of locally produced food in China, the frequent scandals of contamination and food adulteration, and the huge problems of environmental contamination.

This setting allows us to associate the food regarded as organic and healthy with a pristine nature distant from the daily experiences of Chinese consumers and, in general terms, from the Chinese environment. Therefore, in China, the market of organic and healthy food tends to be associated with foreign products, countries, brands, and tastes. This is even more reinforced in the marketing strategies used by these establishments, which seek to transform the consumption experience of these products into an experience of otherness.

In the restaurant menus, most of the products, ways of preparation, presentation of food, and names of dishes refer to foreign countries: wraps, falafel, hamburgers, hummus, guacamole, quinoa, kale, different types of green leaves, avocados, Mexican spices, tortillas, nachos, pizzas, sauerkraut, muffins, cakes, Caesar salad, energizing and detoxifying juices, Thai and Indian curries and Italian pasta, among others. Furthermore, there are also several ways of preparation and presentation of food that are almost missing in the multiple expressions and traditions of Chinese cuisine and its ways of consumption, such as dishes with undercooked food (particularly salads), the structure of the main or unique course, desserts, and the ways of "brunch." These ingredients and dishes associated with foreign countries and foreign food traditions usually coexist with ingredients and preparations that have high prominence in Chinese food: soups, black beans, tofu, bacon, chicken, dumplings, black rice, noodles, peanuts, squash, green tea, cilantro, ginger, and several kinds of mushrooms and peppers, among others.

The interior design of these restaurants revolves around two main aesthetics: on the one hand, a minimalist aesthetic of Nordic style with wooden furniture, natural and light colors (white, grey, and light-green), thin or round lines and without any ornaments on the furniture, smooth walls painted with light colors, large spaces, big windows, and discreet illumination. At other restaurants, the minimalist aesthetic is combined with some elements belonging to a more industrial or manufacturing aesthetic that includes smooth cement in floors and walls, iron beams, counters or shelves made of iron, wood or glass, high roofs, and focused illumination. In some cases, the rooms are decorated with plants, motivational posters with phrases in English (related to well-being and health) and

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landscapes, and, in others, the aesthetic asceticism of dim lights and white walls without any decoration prevails.

In those restaurants, the main decoration is the food available for consumption at the premises or the one to take away. In most of these establishments, the ingredients used in the dishes and the ready-to-eat dishes are exhibited in the main counters for customers to see. Many of them have a market sector where fresh fruits and vegetables are generally sold in wooden boxes and wicker baskets. These restaurants also have blackboards and posters that indicate he places of origin of the fresh products (many of these restaurants have their own gardens outside Shanghai), the cultivation techniques, and the harvest dates. In this sector, products that are presented as organic, natural, or ecological, generally of imported origin, are sold as well: wine, olive oil, cereals, condiments, canned food, sauces, and books on healthy eating and recipes from several places around the world.

The layout of tables and sitting style indicates the kind of commensality these types of restaurants promote. Here, the prevailing types of tables are communal, long and rectangular, small ones for no more than two people, or long counters with high stools for individual customers. Tables are generally narrow and have little space for no more than one or two dishes for each diner. The privileged commensality is that of isolated individuals who do not know each other or that of couples or small groups of friends or colleagues that do not eat from the same dishes but individually eat a chosen dish, and that do not devote much time to the act of eating and to the sociality of food. This layout of commensality radically differs from that of traditional Chinese restaurants, where tables are usually round, that sit the extended families consisting of grandparents, parents, siblings, and children. These kinds of tables have enough space for many plates, glasses, and bottles, and encourage slow eating and intense sociability between diners.

In turn, traditional Chinese restaurants tend to prioritize the abundance and visual exuberance of food and drinks, many of which are left unconsumed at the end of the meal. In these cases, the staging of food consumption excess is aimed at reflecting the economic wealth of the diners and seeks to avoid images associated with hunger and lack of food that have marked the life of Chinese people during the Maoist period. In healthy restaurants, by contrast, a minimal staging of food in its quality and aesthetic prevails.

While traditional restaurants stand out for noisy diners, their ease of movement between tables and a tendency to take more space (by lying down their bodies on the tables, moving chairs, or occupying the floor with bottles, clothes, or purses), healthy restaurants stand out for the relaxing ambient music, the diners' low voices, and a limited use of space, which fits with the individual consumption of food and the interaction in small groups.

In these restaurants, the prevailing aesthetic is no longer that of abundance and excess but of moderation and self-cultivation. In this way, the mixture, confusion, and vagueness of ingredients and tastes, the amount of sauces and oils, the intense tastes, fried foods, and the many consistencies of products characteristic of Chinese cuisine, have been pushed aside to give way to dishes of simple and soft tastes, elaborated with ingredients that can be easily distinguished and are individualized in terms of names, origin, and nutritional properties.

Healthy eating in these restaurants demands a physical and emotional discipline consistent with the current "civilization" programs promoted by the Chinese government through posters in the streets, publications and television shows that encourage body and health care, and the teaching of public and private manners to Chinese citizens. In the obsession for food "quality" and eating that these restaurants show, there is also a hint of the government's obsession for the improvement of the citizens' moral "quality" (*suzhi*).[7,8]

Most of these restaurants were opened in the last 10 years and due to the rapid success of some of them, many branches were also opened in neighborhoods with offices, shops,

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hotels, and the most exclusive shopping malls in Shanghai. Sectors with middle-upper purchasing power, expatriate workers, and tourists go to these branches. The managers and owners of these shops to whom I spoke with told me that, at first, "healthy eating" attracted mainly foreigners living in Shanghai and the significant community of the Chinese Diaspora that had "returned" to China in the last years in order to work and do business (Chinese-born people or born to Chinese parents but brought up abroad), but in recent years the customers are mainly of the local population.

During the many times I visited restaurants to eat and conduct interviews, I could tell that most of the customers were Chinese women of around 20 and 30 years of age from sectors of high purchasing power and greater international experience (work, educational, touristic experience) of the middle-high Chinese classes, that, in the last decade, have experienced a huge growth and diversification both in consumption size and capacity and in aesthetic and culinary preferences.[9,10]

In terms of gender, this composition is a result, on the one hand, of the fact that, in China, as in other parts of the world, eating and eating-related issues (food choice, cooking, health, nutrition, children's upbringing) usually fall on women. On the other hand, "healthy eating" is placed in a group of discourses and practices related to self-care and family-care, in which women play a prominent role. In addition, unlike Chinese men, young women are the ones more open to cosmopolitan experiences[11] in areas such as eating and leisure time, cultural preferences, and aesthetic styles.

CULINARY PEDAGOGY

Most of the people in charge of restaurants and web pages with whom I spoke in Shanghai told me that the organic and healthy eating market in China requires a lot of work regarding "consumer education" in several aspects: "awareness" of the importance of healthy food for people's health and the advantages of organic food production for the environment, the assessment of the nutritional quality of organic food, and the teaching of the different ways of preparation, combination, and taste evaluation of foreign products. These businessmen refer to "taste training" as a cultural education that aims to change the food industry, both in a setting of cosmopolitan experiences and in an emblematic example of global character of the big urban centers in modern day China.

But this pedagogic attitude also involves moral education. On the one hand, the constant association of healthy eating with products, practices, and tastes of foreign origin contributes to the strengthening of the widely spread idea in China that every "quality" product, especially food, always comes from another country. This "quality" is understood both in material and moral terms. The many environmental and food contamination problems, and the growth of the counterfeit industry, resulted in a big questioning of the "values" and moral "quality" of those in charge of the production and commercialization of all sorts of products in China. Most of the people I met in Shanghai told me that Chinese consumers do not trust national products because they do not trust in the ethical values of Chinese businessmen.

These moral representations of the Chinese food market contribute to the transformation of healthy eating in a market that not only produces, sells, and consumes food, but also values and moral representations of products, people, places, and practices. Healthy eating spaces in Shanghai achieve their public legitimacy by appealing to the sense of trust created in Chinese consumers by the products, people, and knowledge that come from some regions of the world (Australia, Canada, US, Japan, and Europe). To this end, these spaces and those in charge of them, mostly foreign businessmen in Shanghai or Chinese people born and raised abroad, spread a pedagogy that aims to teach the moral properties and qualities of the products they offer, of the people who sell them and the places where these products

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come from, as well as the different cultures, wisdoms and techniques to which these products are associated.

Many of the menus in these restaurants and websites have a detailed description of the ingredients in the dishes they offer, their nutritional benefits, origins, and farming processes, as well as biographical studies of the owners or the history and philosophy of the restaurant. For example, I will describe at length the institutional discourse of Hunter Gatherer, an establishment I visited many times in some of their three branches in the more exclusive commercial or office neighborhoods in Shanghai (and a soon-to open store located in a well-known luxurious shopping mall), and it also has two vegetable gardens of its own in Chongming Island and in Shandong province.

The institutional slogan shown in the Hunter Gatherer's webpage reveals how this restaurant understands their activities, "We are a seed-to-table ecosystem that serves and celebrates real food." In Shanghai, a special feature of the restaurants and establishments like Hunter Gatherer is that they are presented as nodes in a wider network that includes producers, distributors, sellers, and consumers of food products, or as a network in itself that involves this variety of players and practices. The latter one is that of Hunter Gatherer that, in its depiction as an "ecosystem," appeals to a holistic perspective of the relationship between production, distribution, and consumption of food and to metaphors about the order of nature to explain their methods of institutional organization.

On the contrary, the idea of "true food" that appears in this institutional slogan is a moral statement about the constant suspicion that burdens the eating market in China, and which arises from the national or international media coverage that many problems of "false food" and food adulteration have received in the last decade.

Nowadays, Chinese food refers not only to pleasure and celebrations but also to suspicion and fear. Most of the people I met in Shanghai showed this uncertainty regarding food. On the one hand, my Chinese interlocutors in Shanghai (friends, colleagues, occasional acquaintances, and people I interviewed or that I observed eating in different environments) always showed a strong pride for the richness and diversity of Chinese food (products, culinary traditions, tastes, textures, colors, and scents). But, on the other hand, they also recognized a source of danger and suspicion in the food produced in China, related not only to the nutritional quality of the products, their origin, or their method of production, but also to the authenticity of their materials. On many occasions, at a restaurant or at a street stall, my interlocutors said that they did not know if the ingredients shown in the menu or those announced by the seller were actually the ones they were eating (particularly regarding the meat used as stuffing in ravioli, soups or sautéed rice, noodles or grilled skewers).

In this context, the establishments and actors related to healthy eating consider the reliability of their products and the honesty of their practices as the feature that differentiates them from the rest of the establishments and players of the eating market in China. Thus, Haunter Gatherer's web site[12] states:

> Seed-to-table isn't just a slogan at Hunter Gatherer - it's the bedrock of who we are. That means we serve real food made with fresh, chemical-free produce grown on our self-owned farms. When you join us for a meal, we want you to know where your food comes from. We believe high-quality food is about more than just taste; real food should be naturally raised and benefit everyone, from the farmer to your health.

Building trust is also a fundamental element in the aesthetic performance that defines the symbolic and spatial organization of these restaurants[12]:

> Here at Hunter Gatherer we believe in being honest about how our food moves from the farm to your plate. That's why our restaurant features an open kitchen, where you can watch our chefs and team

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> members in action. That open character is extended to our dining area, set within a clean, contemporary atmosphere.

This extract reveals that the Chinese healthy eating market faces a commercial and ethical dilemma: on the one hand, building trust is necessary in a national context where local products are under a strong suspicion of contamination, artificiality, and adulteration. On the other hand, this is a market that seeks to be distinguished from the industrial food production by means of redeeming local and small scale products as a source of authenticity, quality, and economic and environmental sustainability of food and its production.

Then, how does one differentiate from China and redeem their local production at the same time? In response to this dilemma, Hunter Gatherer has adopted a strategy commonly used by many other players of this Chinese market: not only to resort to products they grow and manufacture themselves, but also to act as moral intermediaries that guarantee product reliability of other players. This strategy is clearly shown in the way Hunter Gatherer justifies the products that are sold in the market sector filled by every restaurant:

> From fair-trade chocolate to fresh produce delivered from our chemical-free farms, our marketplace is stocked with trusted all-natural products consistent with our real food philosophy. We only include third-party products that pass our stringent standards, which is why the majority of the items you see are sourced from abroad – the selection of reputable all-natural products in China is currently very limited. However, sourcing locally is very important to us and so we're working hard to search for and support trustworthy domestic products. Our goal for our marketplace is to help build a more local and sustainable food system in Shanghai and beyond.

CUISINE AS A MORAL VENTURE

Judy, an Australian born to Chinese parents who has been living in Shanghai for more than 15 years, specializes in healthy nutrition and natural therapies. In 2013, she and a one of her Chinese colleagues created a company that currently combines, in its two stores, different activities related to healthy eating: a cooking school, a coffee shop, a food products store, and a catering service for events. The corporate institutional slogan is "Cultivating healthy habits." In July 2016, while talking to her at one of her stores, Judy told me that all of her corporate activities seek to create spaces to learn and become aware of the connection between eating and health in China. Judy and a team of nutritionists and cooks, both Chinese and non-Chinese, give cooking lessons that last one or more days in which they introduce participants to the use of ingredients deemed healthy that have not been spread much throughout China (particularly grains, sprouts, and raw food), as well as to the preparation of dishes that are not part of their daily diet (desserts, breakfast with fruits, soft cakes, juices, and smoothies), and that come from other countries or that belong with dietary principles that do not receive much attention in China (vegan, vegetarian, detox, holistic, naturalist, macrobiotic cooking). There are also healthy cooking courses for children and housemaids, among others.

In August 2016, as part of my ethnographic research on Chinese marketing, I accompanied an international consultant in the development of a market survey on food and drink consumption that included interviews and dinners with ten families in their homes and restaurants of the different neighborhoods of Shanghai. In said research, I found the same trends that Judy mentioned about the gaps in the generational transmission of knowledge about food and food preparation, as well as in the scarce time that urban generations younger than 40 years old spend in

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their households cooking. In Judy's opinion, this situation results in the almost complete lack of fresh food in the eating habits of these generations, as well as their focus on ultra-processed and fast preparation foods such as fried food, which are harmful to health.

Judy says that in China there are many healthy culinary products and traditions unknown to most of the younger generations. Therefore, she explains that their teaching activities about eating not only seek to "introduce" foreign culinary practices and healthy products of foreign origin to the eating habits of Chinese consumers, but their culinary pedagogy also seeks to have consumers "rediscover" ingredients, products, and food preparation techniques of Chinese culinary history that have been forgotten or are unknown nowadays to young adults in China.

Aside from cooking classes, Judy's company also offers many seminars and courses that connect eating with physical and spiritual well-being: traditional Chinese medicine, ayurvedic and energizing therapies, yoga and meditation techniques, detoxification diets ("sugar-free week challenge," "gluten-free," and so on). For example, in November 2016, this company organized a four-day workshop on "energizing foods" that includes the following classes: "introduction to energizing food," "ginger-based recovery," "whole grains," "energizing cooking."

These courses are announced through digital marketing (the company's web pages and, particularly, digital networks and mobile phone applications). As in other areas of Chinese commercial and social life, in the healthy eating market, digital networks and platforms play a dominant role in the stage of spreading and exchanging information, pictures, ideas, and opinions. The pictures of food and dishes that surf these networks have a detailed visual treatment and a careful staging, which are in harmony with the concept of food widely spread in China, which claims that food that is a feast for the eyes is tasty as well.

But in the case of pictures of food deemed healthy, this concept also adds elements related to people's physical and emotional well-being. In these pictures, the dishes are made to represent the physical and spiritual state of those who consume them. Yet, people who consume these products rarely appear in the pictures. Food, taking the form of ingredients and ready-made meals, appears in the center of the picture, while the act of eating and the diners are almost absent from the aesthetic diet that constitutes healthy eating marketing. I believe that this is a result of the fact that the marketing for healthy eating in Shanghai is, above all, a marketing for the moral benefits healthy products give to those who consume them. This is why, in most of these establishments, the spotlight is on the aestheticizing and moralization of the products before that of the consumers.

Like other business owners associated with healthy eating I met during my research work in Shanghai, Judy acts as a "moral entrepreneur"[13] who seeks to modify the universe of the most conventional rules, values, and practices associated with eating in China. The courses offered in her company display a culinary pedagogy that seeks to transform food, eating, and the act of cooking in a civilizing process that involves a redefinition of the ideas and values regarding body and health, tastes and manners, family and social relationships, and the bond with the environment, as well as people's relationship with the culinary tradition of their own country.

NEW FARMERS

Most greens and vegetables sold in organic products web pages and those consumed in the healthy eating restaurants of Shanghai come from villas located at Chongming Island, 100 kilometers away from Shanghai. Some of these gardens have national and, to a lesser extent, international certifications that guarantee the organic, ecological, or pesticide and pollution free nature of their crops and fields. Many others farm under the "conversion" regime required as a prior instance for organic certification, which implies a special treatment of the soil for at least three years

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to get rid of lingering pesticides and chemical fertilizers from previous plantations. There are also smaller gardens in terms of production volume that define themselves as "natural agriculture" or "ecological" gardens, and that do not aspire to gain organic certifications because they do not believe in the honesty of those involved in the certification processes or because they disagree with the so-called "organic" cultivation techniques.

In July 2016, I spent a whole day in Chongming Island visiting a garden that considers itself as part of the latter group and provides greens and vegetables to some restaurants and middlemen in Shanghai. The main responsibility for the villa falls on Wang, a Chinese man of around 40 years old that left his job as a qualified employee in Shanghai to move to the countryside and engage in "natural agriculture," a Japanese farming philosophy based on the principle of minimal human intervention in the plantations. Eight years ago, Wang leased a house surrounded by approximately 50 hectares in Chongming and started an agriculture project to which Yujing, his current partner, joined later on, and she is in charge of the administrative and educational tasks in the garden. Before her "life change," as she defined it, Yujing lived in Shanghai and worked as an English translator, for which she trained at a prestigious Chinese university.

Wang and Yujing define themselves as "new farmers" because, according to what they have told me, their ideas and practices of farming are very different from those of the "traditional farmers." Yujing believes that her urban middle class background along with her university education is not what distinguishes her from traditional farmers that live with them on the island. For her, the main difference lies in the fact that she and Wang respect nature. Old farmers, she says, are used to using powerful pesticides and chemical fertilizers to speed up crop growth and increase crop size to gain more economic profit.

While we walked through the rice fields and globe squash, eggplant, potatoes, aromatic herbs, and bell pepper plantations, Yujing told me that, "when old farmers from the area come here and see this, they tell us we don't take good care of our crops, that everything is full of bugs and weeds, that our crops aren't pretty or big or that they are of different sizes." Traditional farmers, she says, "don't understand us." She also explains that what they do is not organic horticulture, since they neither want or are able to pay for the certifications, whose veracity they distrust, nor do they follow the criteria of those gardens that seem to be organic but, for what she told me, are actually similar to the traditional ones: they are all "nice and clean," do not have bugs or weeds, use greenhouses, which are "quite unnatural," to grow vegetables that are "all the same, and very flashy."

Wang and Yujing live in a big and attractive two-story house, very similar to houses built by other farmers in the area, mostly with contributions from their children and relatives who achieved a significant improvement in their economic situation by working in Chinese cities, which went through a huge economic growth during the last two decades.

When I arrived at the garden, at 10 in the morning of a week day, Yujing told me her house was a community space. She and her husband live on the second floor, the only private space in the house. On the first floor there are rooms rented to guests that are visiting the garden for some weeks in order to learn "natural farming" techniques, or that leave Shanghai for a couple of days to come into contact with nature and learn the basic notions of horticulture. The day of my visit, there were four guests: a Chinese journalist that had been there for three weeks exploring the work in the garden and carrying out interviews as part of research that had prompted her to visit organic villas throughout the country ("there's a boom in organic villas in China," she told me), a young Korean woman, and two young Chinese men that had moved there three months earlier to learn natural farming techniques (both of them were from the urban middle class, one of them was an

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art student and the other was a French translator who had left her job to "move to the countryside"). The house ground floor is a huge space that has a common kitchen, a living room, and two small rooms for workshops and gatherings.

During my stay, I had lunch and dinner with Yujing, Wang, the guests, and other garden helpers (three neighbors no older than 25 years old who had been brought up in the big cities and had "come back to the countryside" to learn how to work the soil). The dish ingredients came from their garden or from nearby gardens with which they traded products: black rice, globe squashes, potatoes, red and green onions, garlic, beans, peppers, carrots, cilantro, turnip, ginger, homemade tofu, and homemade noodles. The cooking methods that Yujing had used were fast and simple: boil the rice, noodles, potatoes and legumes, and sauté in the wok for the green leaves, bell peppers and onions, with the addition of sesame oil, sunflower oil, soy sauce, garlic, and ginger. All the food was placed on plates in the middle of the table for each of us, the diners, to help ourselves. Some dishes were simple combinations such as potatoes with onion and cilantro or beans with onions. Each diner had a deep dish with rice in it that, throughout the meal, was combined or mixed with bites of the rest of the dishes on the table.

When it was dinner time, a group of about 15 Chinese youths, who I was told had come from a nearby city with the intention of having a "good meal" in a rural environment, arrived. The arranged menu was noodles that Ho, the Korean guest, kneaded and cut in front of them and that Yujing cooked together with the garden's vegetables sautéed in the wok. The youths would not stop taking pictures of them while cooking, of the ingredients, and then of the dishes they were eating. They were fascinated with the food and the place they were visiting. They kept on saying, "*Hen hao che, hen hao che*" (very tasty, very tasty).

These young people are part of a huge growth in rural tourism during the last decade among Chinese urban middle classes. A widespread type of rural tourism is that of the so called *nonjiale*. It consists of farmer or "new farmer" families who open the doors of their homes and gardens to guests coming from the cities in pursuit of making contact with the rural world's iconic symbols: rustic and healthy food, traditions, authenticity, natural surroundings, animals, manual labor, and a different pace of life.[14]

This increase in the popularity of rural tourism among Chinese urban middle classes also includes people who live in cities and rent a plot of land in functioning villas, who decide what to plant and hire the services of a random farmer or the owner of said villa to be in charge of the crops they visit during their holidays or weekends. Yujing told me that even though this type of tourism represents an additional income for farmers, usually, tenants are not interested in learning how to cultivate the land, but they use their plots as recreation spaces or consumption sites to take pictures to show to their family and friends. They see nature and the garden's "healthy" products that they can take home as new ways of social distinction.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The goal of these exploratory notes is to show some of the different meanings that the healthy eating field acquires in Shanghai based on the perspectives of the players and institutions involved in its production and commercialization. At first glance, what I have presented here is very much in tune with global transformations related to a consumer's growing interest in getting to know about the food production process, its geographic origin, and its quality, as well as having a greater concern over the social and environmental impacts of its production, commercialization, and consumption. They are processes that have been labeled as "ethical consumption" and that, broadly speaking, imply the

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acknowledgement of the political dimensions involved in the act of consumption and the development of “alternative” ways of production and consumption.[15]

Nevertheless, as some authors state, this approach to “ethical consumption” poses a problem based on the presumption that food is already ethical or unethical, ignoring the way food-making, and thus, the social practices associated with food, are transformed into an ethical or unethical fact, that is to say, how culinary practices articulate together with ethical and moral projects.[16]

The discussion I have presented here gives us a glimpse of how the ethical dimension – the feelings about what is right or wrong, good or bad, allowed or forbidden – of the dietary patterns that the settings and players related to healthy eating in Shanghai promote refers more to individual ethics with implications limited to the subjective and familiar plane than to collective ethics with broader political implications.

In China, the severe bromatological and environmental pollution problems have transformed eating, and eating-related issues such as health and nutrition, in a political field par excellence. The healthy eating market in Shanghai is clearly a sounding board for these concerns. The growing commercial success of this kind of market is, mostly, a result of the anguish, fears, and strategies of middle and high classes regarding their nutrition. But this requires, from the perspective of those players involved in the healthy eating market, domesticating the political character of the social problem that is constantly hovering over this field. This domestication process is mainly shown through the aestheticizing of food and eating, and its connection with individual and subjective practices concerning personal well-being rather than with collective and political dimensions.

Thus, eating, defined as a responsibility and a personal lifestyle, also implies a redefinition of the moral status of a person as an individual. Healthy eating marketing in Shanghai is, above all, the marketing of promises of aestheticizing and moralization of individual lifestyles through the consumption of these products. It is about a market that feeds from two social logics that are the heart of the ways in which a person seeks to build “well-being” and “life quality” in China today: strategies to avoid and reduce, at the individual and family levels, the effects of environmental pollution, and the search for social and moral distinction through consumption.

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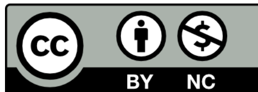

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