

“Factory Food, Modernization, and Race”

By Maris Boyd Gillette

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Note to readers: The author of this chapter, anthropologist Maris Boyd Gillette, conducted her field work in Xian during the mid-1990s. During that time she interviewed many Hui Muslims from Xian's Muslim quarter. The following represents some of the research she did on the impact of consumption and modernization on the Hui in Xian.

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Children's Food in China

Foodways in China have undergone significant transformations in the wake of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms (see Jing 2000). One obvious effect of the reform policies has been the appearance of new foods on the market, including a wide variety of mass-produced, packaged snacks such as chocolate, chips, puffed rice balls, biscuits, ice cream bars, and various types of candy. These foods have had a profound impact on nutritional intake in China, most particularly that of children (see Guldán 2000). Equally dramatic have been the sociological consequences of these new foods. Examinations of the consumer practices surrounding these products reveal that the balance of power between older and younger generations in China, especially parents and children, has shifted (see Guo 2000, Chee 2000; see also Stafford 1995 for a discussion of shifts in intergenerational power relations on Taiwan).

Both of these changes were found in the 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 reveals that he ate mass-produced snacks similar to those that Aifeng purchased for her granddaughter on a daily basis. Xin, 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 ate far more of these snacks than his brother did, both in June 1997 and before that time. The level of Peng's consumption was by no means extraordinary; it matched that of many other children I observed.

Peng was able to snack on the new factory foods because his parents provided him with a de facto allowance of about 3 yuan per day—a fact that they had not been fully aware of until we examined his food diary together. When we totaled his snack expenditures, Peng's parents and his brother realized that Peng was the first member of their family to receive a regular, daily allowance. A qualitative (and quantitative) shift had occurred in Peng's family relationships: Peng directly influenced the household budget and even completely controlled a small portion of it. Peng's parents, and many other residents, believed that this kind of child-directed input into the family's affairs was completely new.

Consumption of mass-produced snacks also evidenced an ideological and behavioral shift in residents' Islamic observance. The combination of religious devotion and unthinking disregard for

qingzhen [clean and pure food under Islamic dietary law] seen in Aifeng [an elderly Hui woman], Peng and his family, and most other Xi'an Hui reveals that local standards for dietary purity were not entirely applicable to the new foods. Residents used a different set of standards to evaluate mass-produced industrial foods, largely because these foods represented something that most Xi'an Hui desired: modernization.

Non-qingzhen Food

The foods that Aifeng bought for her granddaughter and that Peng consumed were diverse in flavor and ingredients. Most were recent arrivals to the area; residents said that the vast majority of these mass-produced snacks had only been available for ten years. Soda was the exception to this rule. Mingxin, a butcher, remembered seeing Chinese-made sodas for sale in the quarter during the late 1970s. At that time soda cost eleven *fen* per bottle, a price no ordinary person could afford, so only the children of government officials and important people drank it.¹ Nevertheless, although soda had been present in the quarter for a longer period, Mingxin placed it in the same category as candy and chocolate: all were "foreign" (*guowai de*) foods, made by "foreign" machines in "foreign" factories. He pointed out that although many Chinese factories now produced such foods, they had "learned about them from the West."

Even though Mingxin characterized the new foods as "foreign," the majority of mass-produced snacks that residents ate were made in China. Few imported foods were available in Xi'an, and their prices tended to deter most residents from buying them. However, a number of foreign-brand foods were produced in Chinese factories, some even in Shaanxi Province. For example, popular and well-known products such as Coca-Cola were made and bottled in Shaanxi. When local production of Coca-Cola began in 1997, it caused the price of a can to drop from eight yuan to one and a half yuan.

In addition to industrial production techniques, media representations also caused the factory foods to be perceived as "foreign," and more specifically Western. Residents called a number of foods "Western" because they saw them served and consumed in media images of the United States, Canada, and Europe. Television programs, both those made in the United States and those made in China, played an important role in disseminating ideas about "Western" cuisine (and other aspects of "Western" life) to residents of the quarter. One such show was "A Beijinger in New York" (*Beijingren zai Niuyue*), which aired during the early months of 1994. This program was extremely popular throughout Xi'an and occasioned much discussion about American society. Television, movies, magazines, news clips, and articles published in newspapers 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.

Residents also learned about "foreign" foods from the products available in Xi'an's department stores, wholesale markets, convenience stores, and supermarkets. Many of the products available in such shops were specifically marketed as "Western." They included beverages such as Coca-Cola, Sprite, Tang fruit drink, Nestle powdered milk, and Nestle instant coffee and foods such as Snickers, M & Ms, McVitie's Digestive Biscuits, and several kinds of Keebler cookies and crackers, many of which (for example, mango-flavored sandwich cookies) were designed specifically for the Asian market. They also included a variety of Japanese and Hong Kong imitations of these foods and others that were produced in the PRC. Khong Guan and Garden biscuits and crackers were particularly popular among the Hong Kong brands and tended to be cheaper than the comparable American and European goods made by Keebler and McVitie's. Cheapest of all were the PRC-made spin-offs, which included carbonated drinks, crackers, crisps, cookies, ice cream bars, and candy made in Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Tianjin, and Shaanxi. It is worth noting that supermarkets (*chaoji shichang*) themselves were a foreign phenomenon and had only arrived in Xi'an in January 1994. A Hong Kong company called the Seastar Overseas Company (*Haixing Haiwai Gongsi*) had newly opened two supermarkets near the city center when I arrived; by the time I left in August 1995, they had opened at least two more stores. One of these supermarkets was quite close to the

Muslim district, and some residents patronized it.

Another reason residents considered the mass-produced foods "Western" was because of the ingredients such products contained. From a Chinese perspective, butter and milk were typical ingredients in Western food. The use of dairy products in many of the Chinese-made snacks, coupled with advertising, processing techniques, and media stereotypes, gave them the aura of Western-ness. Dairy products also made these foods luxury goods, at least from the perspective of Hui who were in their 30s and older. Because very few milk products had been available in China before the 1980s, many adults associated them with prosperity. For example, Mingxin remembered craving milk as a child, but little was available for consumption and his family was too poor to buy it. Mingxin attributed the high price and small quantity of milk to low levels of milk production in China during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. However, he said, since the market reforms, China's cows had been "scientifically modernized" (*kexue xiandaihua*), causing dairy products to become readily available and affordable.

Several enterprises in Xi'an sold foods such as fresh yeast bread and cakes that residents and other urbanites associated with the West. Like the mass-produced foods, residents had seen yeast bread and cake in media representations of the United States and Europe. They knew such foods were made with ingredients they considered typical of Western cuisine, and they regarded the food preparation techniques that produced these foods, such as baking in an oven, as Western. Between 1992 and 1998, the number of restaurants and bakeries in Xi'an that made and sold these foods increased rapidly. Residents of the quarter refused to consume most of these products; they limited their consumption to the fresh yeast bread and cake that Hui produced locally. They avoided the Han bakeries; the Chinese fast-food chains that sold such Western-style foods as hamburgers, hot dogs, pizza, and fried chicken; and the American fast-food chain Kentucky Fried Chicken. Residents also abstained from carbonated beverages that came from soda fountains rather than cans or bottles. They justified these practices on the grounds that the locally produced Western-style foods that were not prepared by Hui did not meet the Islamic criteria for dietary purity; only the yeast bread and cake baked by Hui qualified as *qingzhen*.²

Residents ate the "foreign" foods that were industrially processed and that Hui produced. The Western-style food made by Hui was *qingzhen* according to local definitions: it had been prepared by a believer and a member of the Hui nationality. The factory-produced Western-style snacks, on the other hand, were not made by Muslims or by members of the Hui nationality. Residents ate them because of three closely related factors. First, they were not made with pork. Second, they were not, conceptually speaking, "Chinese" (which was of course related to the absence of pork). Third, they were the product of industrial production techniques that residents associated with the West and with modernization (both of which contributed to the perception that the snacks were non-Chinese). Because of these factors, most residents did not apply the normal *qingzhen* rules to the factory snacks.

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Consuming Modernization

The mass-produced snacks that Hui children and adults consumed were pork-free, non-Chinese, and machine-made. They contained ingredients that residents regarded as Western, and their association with the West was strengthened by media representations that depicted Westerners eating such foods. They were the product of industrial processing techniques that epitomized advanced technology and modernization. All these factors played a part in rendering Western-style mass-produced snacks attractive to local residents. By consuming these foods, residents made the West, prosperity, advanced technology, science, and modernization their own.

Most adult Hui did not like the taste of ice cream (and had trouble digesting it), soda, chocolate, or chips, but they liked to think of themselves and be thought of as modern, progressive, and sophisticated. As previous chapters have demonstrated, they created such an image through

consumption practices related to housing, mosques, education, and religious observance. Purchasing Western-style foods, giving them as gifts, keeping them around the house, serving them to honored guests, and feeding them to children also gave residents access to modernization and helped project an image of themselves as modern.

Mass-produced Western-style snacks were more suitable for this task than the locally made Western-style food. Residents could use the yeast bread and cakes made in the quarter to convey messages about their modern tastes, but the limited quantities and highly perishable nature of these foods made them less attractive. Only two families in the quarter made Western-style foods, and their products were limited in variety and could keep for only a few days. Furthermore, even though at least one of these families advertised their products as Western by the posters of blonde-haired women dressed in the American flag that they hung in their store, the foods were obviously locally produced. This may have caused them to lose authenticity in the eyes of consumers. Residents who wanted to use the contents of their pantry to participate in modernization could most effectively do so by buying factory-made products.

Modernization, along with its corollaries science and technology, was enormously influential in mid-1990s China. Residents saw modernization as the future for themselves and their children. As parents, Xi'an Hui were particularly concerned that their children be equipped to live in a modern society. They wanted their children to ascend higher on the social ladder than they had, to enjoy a more comfortable life, and to have wider opportunities. This desire was clearly manifest by the discourse surrounding "culture" and education that existed in the quarter, the efforts that parents who had the resources made to get their children into good schools, and the preference for children who did attend high school and college to study science, which parents saw as the key to their children's success... Western-style mass-produced foods were another, easier way for parents to prepare their children to live in a modern, technologically advanced, developed society. These snacks helped parents to instill in their children the taste for modernization.

Bourdieu writes that "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (1984:6). Residents of the quarter wanted to be classified as modern. Their pursuit of secular education, their enthusiasm for living in high-rise apartments, their preference for Qur'anic education that used modern technology, their efforts to achieve economic development and exposure abroad, and their consumption of Western-style factory foods all demonstrate that residents saw modernization as desirable. Their consumption of mass-produced foods and the other commodities of modernization suggests that Bourdieu's model of taste, in which taste is in "logical conformity" to social position and people choose goods and services that express their existing social class, requires rethinking (1984:471; see also 1990). Hui consumption of Western-style mass-produced foods was an instance of people exhibiting a taste and inculcating a taste in their children for what they wanted to be: technologically advanced, prosperous, modern.

The Government and Mass Production

For residents of the quarter, what made industrial food edible was what it contained—pork products or no pork products, dairy products or no dairy products—and what it represented the cuisine of the "modern" West or of "traditional" China. Government officials, however, took a different position; they recast Hui consumption of factory foods in racial terms. The state created a policy for classifying mass-produced food as qingzhen and, in so doing, acted to limit and direct residents' access to the taste of modernization. During the summer of 1996, the Hui official Liangxun told me that the provincial Religion and Nationality Affairs Commission (of which he was vice-director) was debating a policy for certifying factories as qingzhen. Officials had decided upon four criteria for qingzhen factories: (1) the cook must be a member of the Hui nationality (Liangxun did not elaborate upon who, in the factory production process, would be considered the "cook"); (2) the ingredients must not contain pork or pork products; (3) the heads of the factory must belong to the Hui nationality; and (4) at least 25 percent of the factory workers must be members of the Hui nationality. This last point was revised during the week I was visiting; a few days after our initial

conversation Liangxun 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 nationality employees. When I returned to the quarter in June 1997, the policy had passed through all the necessary administrative channels. Details had been published in the Xi'an newspaper, but no further actions to implement the policy had been taken.

Factory Foods and Hui-Han Sociability

Although the government's policy functioned to separate Hui and Han, as the situation stood in the mid-1990s the mass-produced snack foods increased the opportunities for Hui and Han to eat together. Whereas residents rejected the food that Han made locally and the Chinese-style industrial products, they ate and encouraged their children to eat the factory-made Western-style foods. These new snacks were also extremely popular among Han Chinese, and for many of the same reasons that Xi'an Hui consumed them: they were associated with modernization, the West, science, and social advancement (see the articles in Jing 2000 for examples). As the mass-produced foods became a regular part of Hui children's diet, they made it easier for residents to interact with Han by providing a common ground for Hui and Han to eat together. Although the consumption of mass-produced snack foods provided more such opportunities children than for adults, the industrial Western-style foods also broadened the possible scope of interactions for Hui adults in Han settings. Residents who visited Han households could accept a can of soda where they rejected tea served in cups. In so doing, they acquiesced to Han hospitality and made Hui-Han relations bilateral rather than unidirectional. Hui and Han shared the taste for modernization, and this brought them together. When the state created regulations to define qingzhen factory food, however, it acted to separate the two "races" and keep the Hui in their proper "traditional" position.

1. A fen is 1/100 of a yuan.
2. As of June 1998, no Hui families ran Western-style fast-food joints, so none of my informants had ever eaten hamburgers, hot dogs, pizza, or American-style fried chicken.

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