Food Shopping in Urban China in 1996 and 2006: Homogenization and Stratification

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The myriad changes in food consumption behavior in urban China in recent years lead to a number of questions related to how this transformation of the marketplace is being experienced by consumers. Based on food shopping observations and interviews of urban residents in China in 1996 and 2006, we explore consumer response to a changing food landscape, including the extent that individualization in food shopping is emerging and the ways that the increasing stratification of society is mirrored and enhanced through food-related tasks. We find increased heterogeneity in food shopping patterns which accents emerging social stratification even as it accommodates changing lifestyles.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Over ten years ago we first collected data related to the wide-sweeping changes in food consumption behavior that had occurred in urban areas of China in the post-reform years (Veeck 2000; Veeck and Burns 2005). Since that time, in response to state reform policies and market mechanisms, changes related to the food provisioning of families have been, if anything, even more rapid. These myriad changes lead to a number of questions related to how this transformation of the marketplace is being experienced by consumers.

Since food shopping and other food-related tasks are highly social experiences (Lupton 1996; Valentine 1999), as well as serving individual, task-driven needs, a primary question involves how new shopping patterns alter and absorb roles and identities. Are these changes in food provisioning behavior reflecting, or even contributing to, a breakdown of social systems and the rise of individualization that is frequently associated with modernity (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991)?

As urban dwellers become farther removed from the sources of their food, they are relying on increasingly distant and complex chains of production, distribution, and processing to deliver their food. Some researchers have associated the shroud of mystery that accompanies modern food systems with an environment of distrust (Fischler 1980; Mennell, Murcott, and Van Otterloo 1992). This leads to the question of how Chinese urban consumers evaluate new food options and ensure the safety of food that they serve to themselves and family members.

Another important question involves the extent to which emerging social distinctions are being defined and altered through food-related tasks. A growing disparity in China in occupational mobility, access to resources, and, simply, life opportunities has been well-documented (e.g. Bian 2002). Given the primacy of food-related activities in defining relationships and establishing roles and identities, the food retail environment in Chinese cities is an important place to examine the ongoing stratification of society.

The data from this research are based on two sets of food shopping observations and interviews, conducted in 1996 and 2006 in urban areas of China. In both studies, we asked each of the participants to allow us to accompany them as they conducted a routine food shopping trip, starting and ending at their homes. Following the shopping trips, we conducted an interview with the participants in their homes and surveyed their cooking and dining routines. 1996 food shopping observations and interviews were conducted in Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin. In 2006, observations were conducted in Beijing, Shanghai, and Wuhan.

The most striking difference we found in our food shopping trip observations between 1996 and 2006 was in how much more diverse in 2006 the behavior of our participants was, including choice of retail venue, time spent shopping, amount of food purchased, and money spent. In 1996, every one of our observations of shopping expeditions involved a trip by foot to a neighborhood food market featuring multiple food stalls. In 2006, we observed shopping trips to diverse food venues, including four morning markets, one outdoor food market, five enclosed food markets, four supermarkets, and one small family-owned grocery store. The diversity in the 2006 shopping options is a testament to both the variety of options now available for purchasing groceries and the wide-ranging life styles that are accommodated by these options.

In this period of economic and societal change in Chinese cities, consumption activities are a particularly important tool for developing and reaffirming important relationships. We found the social dynamics of traditional food markets in which the shoppers frequently encountered and spoke to neighbors and engaged in relatively protracted transactions with the vendors to be quite different than the relative anonymity of the modern supermarkets in China. However, the most important relationships affirmed through food transactions—that is, the nurturing of family members—remained equally salient to respondents between 1996 and 2006.

Through this research, we also wished to explore another outcome that has been associated with modernity in contemporary society in the West: the notion of a “risk society,” (Beck, 1992; Giddens 1991) in which advanced technologies lead to a public that is increasingly aware of and consciously avoids risk. In fact, we found that, while consumers are not necessarily more concerned with the safety of the food supply than they were a decade ago, the source of their fears had altered due to the changes. In particular, newer forms of food handling, such as modern agricultural techniques and manufacturing are generating concern related to safety. At the same time, other newly-available food options, such as purchasing trusted brands and organic foods, serve as a tool used by some consumers to feel more secure about the food they serve their families.

The increasing heterogeneity of food purchasing behavior resulting from the stratification of society suggests the potential for feelings of alienation related to the inequality of consumption opportunities. Our research found that consumers are more likely to rejoice in the wide availability of new choices than feel resentful of the growing inequities (Davis 2005). Still, it bears watching to see if disenchantment grows as social stratification expands.

In this transitory period of food retail expansion, the repertoire of choice available to each Chinese consumer should be monitored. This may well be a “golden period” in the food supply, in which, in the intersection between traditional food suppliers and modern food retailers and manufacturers, consumers are experiencing the best of both worlds. The changes that occur in the food retail environment in the next few years may determine if the retail landscape continues to provide a variety of options for most urban consumers, or if the options recede to the homogenization often associated with supermarkets in the West (Clarke et al. 2002). Furthermore, it will be important to monitor to what extent the opportunity of choice in food consumption is available to all urban residents.

References