

Qing He

Scott Kloeck-Jenson Fellowship report

Summer Travel Award (2013) – Chongqing, China

With the support of the Scott Kloeck-Jenson Fellowship, I spent 10 weeks this summer conducting preliminary research in urban Chongqing, China in order to understand the social and cultural consequences of pervasive food safety problems. This travel was designed to explore how different social classes in China perceive and cope with polluted, poisonous, and fake foods in markets.

Chongqing is a municipality located in southwest China with a socioeconomically stratified population of 30 million. I investigated nine families from three groups—the new rich who obtained their fortunes in recent decades; the urban middle class arising with economic development; and destitute migrant workers, many of whom were driven into the city by the construction of the Three Gorges Dam.

During the ten weeks I carried out two primary tasks. First, I visited these selected families and conducted semi-structural interviews focusing on the perception of food safety/risks. Second, I observed how they (the one who was in family in charge of food, not surprisingly, all of them were women) conducted food shopping, food preservation, meal preparation and so on. In other words, I went shopping with them, watched them preparing meals, and had meals with them. It was also a good chance to taste different culinary arts.

All of these women have been getting food from more than one of three types of locations: super markets (such as Wal-Mart), indoor or outdoor farmer's markets (*nong mao shi chang*) and peasants on streets selling what they grow. These sellers have different features. The quantity of food in super markets is great but the quality is lower: not fresh, not pretty. In the morning, Wal-Mart opens as early as 7 am. When I was there the voice coming over the loudspeakers repeatedly assured that “all the foods in Wal-Mart are safe and all the supply channels are strictly overseen.” However, in 2011 it was found that Wal-Mart stores sold shoddy pork as top-grade “green pork” and 13 stores were temporarily shut down. One woman from the new rich family (her daughter and daughter-in-law ran a big company and they had a live-in caregiver) told me that she liked to shop at Wal-Mart not because the foods were safer there but because if the foods were later discovered to be unsafe she would know who should be responsible for it. On the contrary, the self-employed vendors in a farmer’s market may leave anytime without accountability.

In order to have repeat customers, the vendors in Chinese farmer's markets have to offer good and fresh foodstuffs and keep the quantity offered small to avoid waste. One middle-aged woman from a middle class family told me that "I will constantly go to some same vendors. Although I know every vendor here injects water into the pork to increase the weight, some of them are just not as bad as others." A young woman, Chen, who is a white-collar, bought pork from a butcher in the farmer's market. She didn't bring enough cash with her and the butcher just let her take the pork home and pay for it the next day. She told me that she had been buying meat from that butcher for years and they trusted each other, even though she knew nothing about the personal life of the butcher. Based on long-term interaction, the trust between community and vendors is possible, though fragile.

Peasants who stand by streets sell vegetables produced by themselves. Their vegetables are usually fresh and healthy, but they don't stay in the same place everyday. Therefore, buyers cannot count on them and peasant vendors have few regular customers.

I have to admit that two situations defied my expectations. First, almost all of the interviewees believed that food safety problems had become rampant in China in the last decade and had threatened their safety and happiness. Exposés about unsafe foods on TV, in newspapers, and on the Internet often cause sensations and become intriguing topics of everyday conversation. However, when I observed their daily practice, I surprisingly found no special attention being paid in selecting and preparing meat and vegetables. They just did what they have been doing for years and sometimes even what their mothers told them to do.

The disjuncture between their enthusiasm for talking about this topic and their insensitiveness in practice is understandable in some sense. It is almost impossible for people to discern food contamination or fake food with the naked eye, previous experiences, or existing knowledge. Besides, eating is one of the most basic and frequent practices for survival. It will consume too much energy to scrutinize every scrap of food that goes into your mouth.

Second, to my surprise, I did not find disparities in the perception of and coping tactics with food safety problems across social class. People from different social classes go to same locations for food and act in the same way. That's partially because the definition of "social class" is still unclear. In China the social classes have

been formed only in the recent decades after the Cultural Revolution and economic status does not necessarily associate with education levels and occupation types. In this instance, their social circles are more crucial than their own economic capacity in determining their consciousness of and behavior towards food and health.

Even though all the interviewees seem insensitive in practice, I did meet a group of people who had taken some substantial measures to protect themselves from unsafe foods. In this kind of social circle, most of them have received higher education, obtained American or Canadian green cards, and have children at home. For example, Mei, in her mid-forties, graduated from Stanford University and works as a part-time researcher in Sichuan University. During her half a year's stay in China, her family only consumed organic eggs, milk and vegetables ordered from organic farms in the suburbs. She repeatedly told me that "in China, even if you have money, you don't know where to buy good stuff." In a luxury organic food market, one cucumber or one tomato is separately wrapped by plastic film and sold at a price of US \$4. People tell each other not to believe in any organic certificate because the process of awarding this kind of certificate is usually corrupt and the name always falls short of the reality.

Through Mei and some other friends, I got to know three types of green farms. First, there are informal (or illegal) private gardens. Some citizens take advantage of unused lands in the city to plant vegetables as a dietary supplement. Wang, in his thirties, a professor in a university, carried out a bigger project. In order to supply safe food for his 9-year old son, he cultivated the land on the mountain behind the university. He hacked down tree branches to make fences for his 0.4 acre garden. He planted more than twenty kinds of vegetables and fruits, such as strawberries, eggplants, cowpeas. He carries a bottle of urine uphill to fertilize his land everyday and brings vegetables home.

The second type of green farm is when people hire peasants to produce food exclusively for their families. Xu, a factory owner, hires an old peasant couple to run his farm. He spends about US \$16,000 a year on his farm, including salary and rent. He owns 34 chickens, three pigs, and one acre of vegetables. If his family cannot consume all the foods—for example, he gets about 6,000 eggs a year—he will distribute them among friends.

The third type of green farm is the commercial, profit-making farms owned and managed either by farmers or by entrepreneurs. For example, with the help of NGOs some farmers in An'nong village have turned their heavily-polluted farms into green ones. Lin and his father have 30 regular customers in town and produce vegetables and deliver them to these households every week. But some suspect that if their farm output was too low—in case of drought, floods, or plague of pests—these farmers would probably supply vegetables purchased from the market and profit from the price difference. Although this third type of farm seems the most promising and practical one for middle and upper class consumers, the lack of trust prevents its popularization among citizens.

I will conclude the report with a quote from Mei. “Some friends saw business opportunities from food safety situations and asked me how to invest organic farms. I told them that if you wanted to profit, you probably wouldn't earn much or even had a deficit. Why? Under the circumstance of lack of trust and business integrity, organic farms in China cannot be business, but only charity.”