

Coralie Roads: Has rural-to-urban migration degraded local food culture in China?

China's rapid urbanisation has had significant impacts on its traditional culture. After watching the documentary 'Dai's Garden', I was intrigued whether rural-to-urban migration has degraded local food culture in China. As rural-to-urban migration is an increasing event in China, it is important to analyse the effects it has on culture and how this will manifest in the future. The consequences of the industrial food system are significant and consequential for China's rise for reasons such as the link between industrialisation and public health amongst urban citizens; China's important part in the international agricultural market; and the vital part that food plays in Chinese traditional culture.

Dai's Garden documentary:

'Dai's Garden' is a 2017 documentary centred around Dai Jianjun, a Chinese slow-food movement pioneer. Dai is an inspired citizen determined to revive traditional Chinese culture in an era of rapid urbanisation and modernisation. This documentary is based on the belief that food in the city has lost its original flavour because of industrialisation. In the cities, "vegetables may not be vegetables, thus people are less human." It focuses on Dai's non-profit farm-to-table restaurant in Hangzhou, where all the profits go towards building a green utopia in a remote village 200 miles away. The restaurant is about more than eating food, but consuming and preserving culture, surroundings and indulging one's senses. This project's second aim is to make farmers feel secure without having to resort to migrant work in the cities.

Personal reactions:

This documentary reminded me of my own tenuous experience leaving a small, rural idyll to live in a big city. Leaving the beaches of Cornwall to move to Manchester was a culture shock for me. I felt apprehension from my community in moving so far away where the way of life would be vastly different. Although, unlike in 'Dai's Garden', where local farmers had to migrate to the cities due to economic hardships, I freely choose to live in Manchester. The documentary aroused my emotions by reminding me how I felt arriving in an urban environment for the first time. It is a scary but inspiring endeavour, where your senses are overwhelmed.

Relevance of issues raised:

"Dai's Garden" references the Slow-Food Movement, a belief that food reflects the social and cultural ecosystem of a place (Willink, 2019). Dai is a slow-food pioneer who therefore believes that rediscovering the flavours of Chinese food is essential in preserving its traditional culture. The

importance of preserving culinary culture relates to my research question because it highlights how this issue impacts Chinese citizens personally; degrading their villages and leaving their communities culturally regressed. This documentary increased my understanding of these tensions and suggested that they are apparent because of industrialisation and internal migration. Food is a core part of culture and modernisation, and homogenisation is changing its importance.

Has rural-to-urban migration degraded local food culture in China?

A challenge confronting China's rise today is the public health effects of rapid urbanisation, such as a changing diet that accompanies rural-to-urban migration (Lam *et al*, 2013). As rural-to-urban migrants are exposed to more diverse and convenient foods, their nutrition intake adapts so does Chinese food culture (Sun, Li and Rahut, 2021). The degradation of Chinese food culture began with the country's economic growth and rapid industrialisation that led to great urban development.

Since the 1980s, China has been undergoing urbanisation, driven by global capitalism (Ye, 2018). With this, an ongoing transfer of people from rural to urban areas has shifted workers from the agricultural to industrial sector. For example, Yucheng City, in the north-west Shandong Province, had an urbanisation rate of 51.06% in 2015 and therefore had rapid migration into urban areas (Ge *et al*, 2020). The speed and scale of rural-to-urban and west-to-east migration within China is one of the greatest in modern history (UCIL 7.5). As a result, one of China's major demographic groups are rural migrants, meaning they have significant influence over China's societal circumstance. In China, internal migration occurs because of economic pushes away from rural areas. For example, livelihoods can no longer be met by farming a small plot of land, forcing citizens to migrate to urban areas for work (Ye, 2018). Ye (2018) highlights the exception to this as women who stay 'behind' due to structural forces, such as the traditional culture of gender division and economic coercion. Statistics show that the number of migrant peasant workers in Chinese cities is continuing to rise, having already reached 169 million in 2015 (Ye, 2018). More than half the population resides in urban areas, compared with less than 20% in 1980 (Lam *et al*, 2013). This has led to stark inequalities between countryside and city dwellers as well as between eastern, coastal provinces and inland, western provinces (UCIL 7.5). Figure one presents the gap between rural and urban incomes. This highlights how rural-to-urban migration has encouraged the decline and increasing isolation of rural areas.

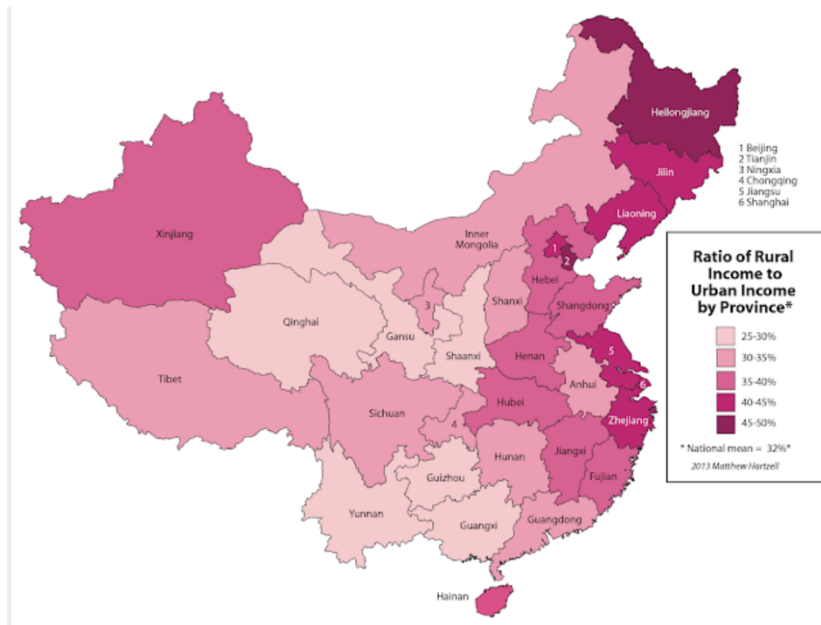


Figure 1: Rural income as a percentage of urban income, by province (Source: Hartzell, 2013).

This has led to the deterioration of traditional Chinese cultural values. Rural-to-urban migration has led to rapid modernisation, driving changes of lifestyle (Ye, 2018). The influx of people into Chinese cities attracted western societal influence, providing a new sense of cultural identity and therefore a rapid rise of individualism (UCIL 8.6). Yan (2015) suggests that the new residents adapt to food habits in the cities, for example, fast-food restaurants like KFC and McDonalds. KFC became popular among the Chinese in 1987, when it opened its first location in Beijing as China's first ever quick service restaurant (UCIL 3.5). KFC exemplified the new curiosity amongst the Chinese of western democracy and both Chinese consumers and American investors profited from the mixing and blending of food cultures (UCIL 3.5). In this example, food culture in China has not degraded but rather, diversified.

The introduction of western food shifted dietary habits. Since rapid modernisation in the 1990s, China has seen dramatic dietary shifts, including an increase in the consumption of animal products (Lam *et al*, 2013). Figure two presents the rapid change in Chinese citizens' diets.

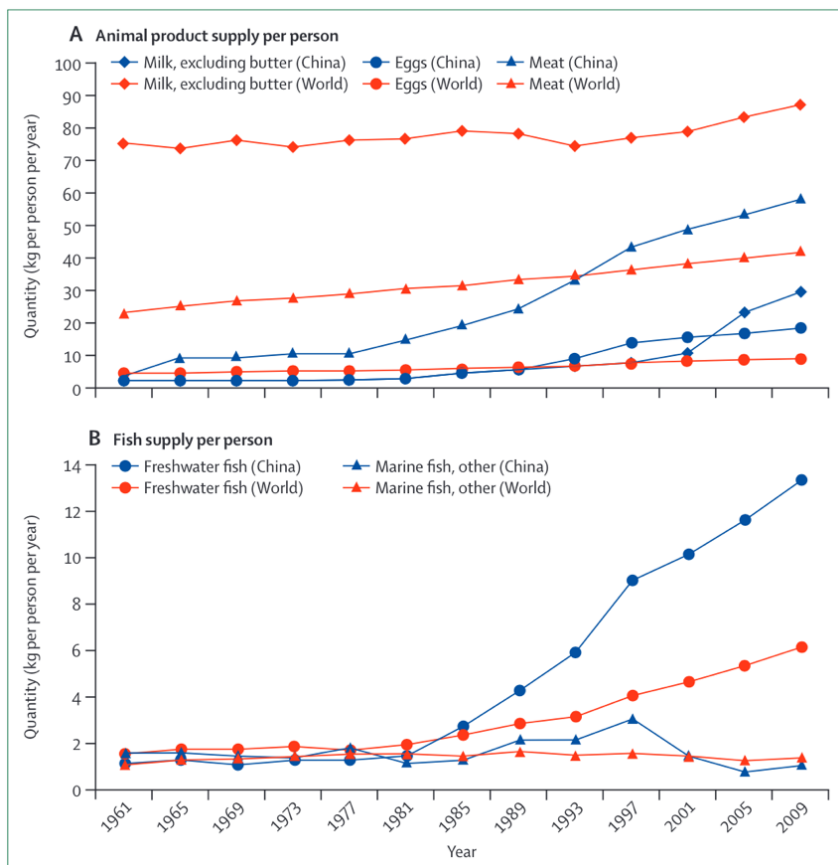


Figure 2: Temporal trends in the supply of animal products worldwide and in China (Source: Lam *et al*, 2013, p.2047).

This is an example of how urbanisation has increased the heterogeneity of diet. Gendler (2014) suggests that the urban environment promotes obesity by providing a convenient and inexpensive palette. Diet-related problems are associated with the adoption of a western-style diet, which is prevalent in modernising Chinese cities (Gendler, 2014). As rural-to-urban migration increases, China's food environment will continue to change. Lam *et al* (2013) highlights how China's population size is another factor affecting food paths in China. China's large population, which is anticipated to peak at 1.4 billion in 2025, has led to challenges surrounding food supply (Lam *et al*, 2013). This, in combination with challenges of rural-to-urban migration, is "fundamentally reshaping rural and urban populations alike" (Lam *et al*, 2013, p.2047).

However, despite threats to its food culture, China has rich culinary history and has a deep appreciation for food. The traditional understanding of food in Chinese culture is embedded in the composite character 糧, meaning food in Chinese (Lam *et al*, 2013). Food is an integral part of the Chinese culture and as Lam *et al* (2013, p.2046) states, "to people, food is heaven". China's food habits

are diverse, with income and geographical location as the main influencing factors (Yan, 2015). Figure three presents the diversity of tastes across Chinese provinces through their agricultural preferences.

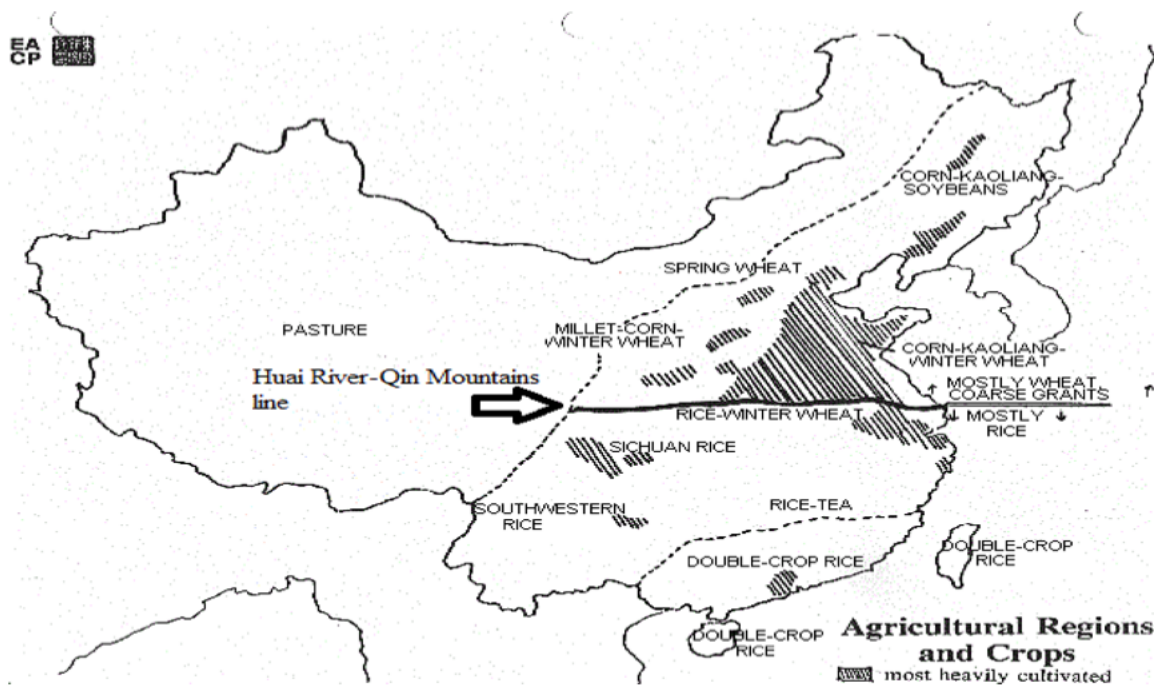


Figure 3: China's agricultural map (Source: Yan, 2015, p.15).

Food habits in Chinese culture are significant, for example baijiu and beer are central to business meals because they believe toasting to excess creates interpersonal bonds needed for future cooperation (UCIL 8.6). However, today, food in China is perceived as an ordinary, commercial commodity for profit making (Lam *et al*, 2013). Lam *et al* (2013) suggests that the degradation of food culture in China is attributed to food producers prioritising profit and have therefore altered the public's trust in food safety. For example, in a 2011 survey, food safety ranked first in the top five safety issues that worried the Chinese population (Lam *et al*, 2013). The consequences of the industrial food system even began in the 1990s, where dishes and flavours that are central to Chinese culinary culture showed signs of disappearing (Willink, 2019). Willink's (2019) experience of Chinese food in New York revealed that patterns of migration are interlinked with food and most Chinese people no longer regard food as their prime want. This supports the belief that the Chinese food industry has become market-driven, accepting food choices from western countries (Yan, 2015). However, as Lam *et al* (2013) note, there has been a gradual shift in focus from food supply to food safety in China, largely due to the rapidly growing Chinese economy and per-person income, which increased nine times from 1990 to 2008. As people's disposable income increases, their interest in food quality simultaneously rises. This is evidence that their food culture is prevailing.

Has rural-to-urban migration degraded local food culture in China? 'Dai's Garden' influenced me to ask this question because Dai's passion for the preservation of local food culture in his country was inspiring. He illustrated that it was important for him and his rural community, persuading me to research this topic. In conclusion, although internal migration does have influence on Chinese culinary culture, urbanisation and the subsequent westernisation of Chinese cities is a more influential factor for China's food habits. The impact of urbanisation on rural-urban migrants' nutrition intake is significant and the western influence on food today is due to industrialisation. Although food does constitute a core part of Chinese culture, it has shown signs of degrading and becoming homogenous with western cuisine. In relation to China's future trajectory, as the Chinese population continues to increase, further strain will be placed on their national food supply. Due to the size of China's food production, this would place substantial strain on global markets for agricultural products, with the potential to destabilise global food security (Lam *et al*, 2013). Furthermore, due to China's global economic importance, China's food supply and food safety issues will be of major interest to international markets and trading partners (Lam *et al*, 2013).

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