

Heritagizing Local Cheese in China: Opportunities, Challenges, and Inequalities

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ABSTRACT: The author discusses the heritagization of local foods in China, based on his ethnographic research into the production, marketing, and consumption of *rubing* or “milk cake,” a goat milk cheese made in Yunnan province in the southwest of the country. The article draws attention to regional and ethnic dimensions to heritagization processes in China, sheds light on the relationship between heritagization and state projects of agricultural modernization, and raises critical questions about the opportunities and challenges for smallholder producers to create and capture value in the growing market for Chinese local heritage foods.

TITLE FOR RUNNING HEAD: Heritagizing Local Cheese in China

Scholars have begun to explore the reinvention of local foods in China as symbols of cultural heritage, a process which researchers working elsewhere have called the “heritagization” of food (Grasseni 2014; West 2016). Across the People’s Republic of China (PRC), products ranging from the ham of Jinhua, Zhejiang province (Wang 2012) to the teas of a holy mountain in Hubei province (DeBernardi 2015) are being packaged, branded, and certified as edible exemplars of the distinctive nature-cultures of their places of production.

Studies reveal how such reinventions of food have affected Chinese local foodways (Tan and Ding 2010; Mak 2014). However, the question of who is, and who is not, able to capture the value created through food heritagization in China has not received adequate attention. Further, scholars have not interrogated the role of the socialist state in shaping unequal opportunities for value creation and capture, or explored how heritagization may

relate to wider state projects vis-à-vis the agro-food system. Additionally, researchers investigating the reinvention of Chinese local foods have concentrated on the economically affluent eastern seaboard. They have paid little attention to the regional dimensions of culinary heritage production in China, or to how the creation of culinary heritage and the unequal access to opportunities that emerge from it may be affected by regional or ethnic divisions and stereotypes (though see Wu 2014).

In this article, I add to the literature that explores how heritagization is affecting Chinese foodways. Further, I draw attention to regional and ethnic dimensions of heritagization processes, address the relationship between heritagization and state projects of agricultural modernization, and explore the opportunities and challenges for smallholder producers to create and capture value in the market for Chinese heritage foods. I aim to encourage a more critical discussion on the heritagization of Chinese local foods and its implications for smallholder farmers, particularly in China's ethnically diverse, often marginalized borderlands. By revealing some of the convergences and divergences between China and both the European Union (EU) and emerging economies such as Mexico, this study also contributes to our comparative understanding of food heritagization processes.

My discussion centres on an ethnographic investigation that I carried out into the production, marketing, and consumption of *rubing* or "milk cake," a goat milk cheese from Yunnan province in China's southwest.¹ Milk cake is made in and around Shilin county, near Yunnan's capital, Kunming, and in Dali municipality in the province's northwest (**Figure 1**). Relatively unknown outside these areas, recently attempts have been made to brand the cheese as a "typical," "traditional," and sometimes "ethnic" local product. I concentrate on *rubing* production and branding in Shilin and on its consumption and marketing in Kunming. *Rubing* from Dali is discussed only insofar as it bears upon the Shilin case.

The study is based on two months of field research on *rubing*, conducted in March-April and July-August of 2012, and funded by the British Academy (SG-111559). It also draws on four months of food-focused ethnographic research I carried out in Kunming between 2006 and 2009. Most of my time in 2012 was divided equally between Kunming and Shilin. In July, I also spent five days studying dairy foods in Dali, and two days in Beijing talking with staff and managers in Yunnanese restaurants. In Kunming and Shilin, I spoke with people in wholesale markets, wet markets (i.e., covered or open-air markets retailing fresh meats, vegetables, and other perishable foods), supermarkets, restaurants, dairy companies, goat breeding companies, and government agencies.

My research in Shilin was facilitated by officials and staff in the Shilin County Veterinary Station. They offered rich insights into goat farming and cheese making, provided access to official reports, and took me on tours of local enterprises. Official contacts are vital for foreign researchers in rural China, and it is undeniably the case that my perspectives and research findings were shaped by these officials-*cum*-veterinarians.

Through contacts built up during previous research in the region, I was also able to meet farmer-cheesemakers independently of the Veterinary Station. I visited five farmer-producers, watching them make cheese and asking questions of them and other villagers on topics ranging from production methods to market conditions to local eating habits. I also interviewed people from seven urban Kunming households, including people I knew from previous visits and new contacts made through snowballing. I asked these, broadly middle-income, interviewees about their current and past practices of shopping, eating, and cooking milk cake. The interviews were informal, lasted from thirty minutes to over an hour, and were not audio recorded. The research language was Mandarin.

Local foods have a long history in China, and attempts to reinvent Chinese local foods as heritage products frequently build on earlier promotions of such foods by states and local elites, and draw on long-standing understandings of the relationship between local soils and water, food, taste, bodily health, and place-based identity (Swislocki 2009; DeBernardi 2015; Tan and Ding 2010). Some of these themes are significant in the case of Shilin milk cake, but to understand the reinvention of this food and its significance for local actors, we need also to have a sense of the forces currently driving food heritagization in the PRC – described in this section – and of the party-state’s attempts to modernize the agro-food system – the focus of the next section.

In part, the current popularity of local foods may be viewed as a response to rapid urbanization and an intensified, semi-industrialized food supply system plagued by food safety scares (Yan 2012; Klein 2013a). Local specialty foods speak to an urban, middle-class nostalgia for an imagined rural past, supposedly marked by greater trust, environmental purity, and dietary health (Park 2014; Wu 2014; Mak 2014). The nostalgic craze for culinary heritage is reflected and furthered in popular media such as *A Bite of China* (*Shejian Shang de Zhongguo*), a seven-part TV documentary series devoted to local foods. The emphasis in the immensely popular series, aired by state television in 2012, is on craft production and the embeddedness of craft foods within local agroecosystems and cultures of commensality.

The heritagization of Chinese local foods also reflects China’s engagement in a global “cultural economy,” in which claims to “heritage,” “tradition,” and “authenticity” are used by producers, state actors, and others to add value to local foods, attract tourists, investors, and prestige, and generate regional and national pride (West 2016; DeSoucey 2010). This engagement is apparent in the scramble by Chinese regional governments to promote their allegedly unique cuisines (Klein 2013b); in China’s signing of UNESCO’s 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage; and in two new geographical indication

(GI) programs, established following the country's 2001 accession to the World Trade Organization.

Like the EU's Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) and Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) programs (De Soucey 2010), Chinese GI schemes seek to legally protect the link between foods and localities, emphasizing (to varying degrees) the sourcing of raw materials from the designated area and the use of traditional production methods, and giving certain producers the right to use place names in their marketing and branding (Wang 2012). China's GIs have often not been recognized by domestic consumers and may have had little positive influence on food quality (*ibid.*; Zhao et al. 2014). Still, they have become popular among local governments as a tool to promote local brands. Unlike in the EU, where a consortium of producers applies for a PDO or PGI (De Soucey 2010), in China local officials often take the lead in applying for GI status, distributing labels to producers, and inspecting production (Zhao et al. 2014). As discussed in the next section, the proactive role of state actors is one of the defining features of food heritagization in China.

HERITAGE FOODS, AGRICULTURAL MODERNIZATION, AND THE STATE

In a recent *Food & Foodways* article, anthropologist Sau-Wa Mak (2014) investigates the heritagization of cheese and other foods made from water buffalo milk in Shunde, Guangdong province. Mak tells us that buffalo milk cheese (*niuru*), long consumed locally as a medicinal food, was now being marketed to gastro-tourists and emigres as a condensed form of Shunde's local traditions and rural landscapes. She maps out the network of actors involved in this reinvention, and describes how dairy consumption and production were being transformed in the process.

Shunde's local government took on a central role in guiding the development of the specialty foods. Mak highlights also that women cheesemakers from "peasant" families were

celebrated as bearers of traditional knowledge by government-backed local TV-stations and a local museum. For many consumers, local women cheesemakers had come to stand for the “authenticity” of Shunde’s buffalo milk cheese. Some of these women actively took advantage of the new opportunities thereby created, for example through *niuru* making performances they put on in their workshops.

Mak’s account resonates with recent accounts of how the heritagization of local foods may be used to promote rural development and create new opportunities for smallholder farmer-producers (Grasseni 2014; West 2016:413-14). In some cases, smallholders have actively (re)casted themselves as “artisanal” or “peasant” producers of local, quality products (*ibid.*). However, the market value created by such heritagization practices has in many cases, including in the EU, been captured by powerful, extralocal actors (Bowen and De Master 2011). As food heritagization as a strategy for rural development and niche market creation begins to take hold in emerging economies, the question of who in these economies can capture value from this trend deserves close attention.

In China, after three decades of rapid urbanization and industrialization, still “roughly half of the population resides in smallholder farming communities” (Schneider 2015:331). While the recent craze for local foods may invoke romantic notions of the smallholder as the bearer of Chinese heritage, dominant discourses on the need to modernize China’s agro-food system represent smallholder production and the “peasant” (*nongmin*) as the root causes of China’s food safety crisis (Schneider 2015).

These dominant discourses are, argues Schneider (2015), reflected in policies aimed at transforming agriculture and building a “new socialist countryside.” Presently, Chinese small farmers enjoy a (debated) degree of land security through a system that combines collective land ownership with privatized land use rights. While the privatization of agricultural land ownership does not appear to be on the cards, yet beginning in the 1990s the

party-state has sought to decenter the role of smallholders in agriculture, encouraging off-farm employment and rural urbanization, and promoting agribusiness-led vertical integration as the ideal model for scaling up and mechanizing food production, and for meeting the food safety and quality standards of domestic and international markets (Schneider 2015; Huang 2011).

Agricultural modernization projects and nostalgia for the rural have created both opportunities and challenges for rural populations. Agribusiness expansion has enabled smallholders to earn income as contract-farmers and workers, but displaces agricultural decisions, and the bulk of potential profits, onto corporations (Huang 2011). Meanwhile, some rural residents, often with the support of local governments, have sought to gain from urbanites' newfound attachment to rural culture, creatively redesigning farmhouses and even entire villages to accommodate heritage, ethnic-, and agro-tourism (Park 2014; Wu 2014). However, it may not be smallholders, but tourism companies and other developers who dominate the reinventions of local cultural landscapes and reap the profits (Bruckermann 2016). In other cases, farmers struggle to meet the demands of urban agro-tourists, who romanticize the peasantry's traditions and "simple" foods, but simultaneously castigate farmers as backward, ignorant, and unhygienic (Park 2014). It was within this contradiction-filled landscape that makers and sellers of milk cake in Shilin and Kunming were operating.

RUBING (MILK CAKE) IN SHILIN AND KUNMING

Shilin, formerly Lunan, is a predominantly rural county in Kunming municipality, located about 80 km east of the capital. In 2004, 89.2% of the county's population of 230,548 was classed as farmers (Lunan 2007:8,69). The growing of crops is often combined with the raising of goats for meat and/or milk. Farmers pasture their goats in the hills and on the rocky, dry lands that make cultivation difficult in many parts of this limestone karst region.

Most of the goat milk is used to make *rubing*. For smallholders throughout the county, *rubing* making can be an important sideline income. Farmers sell their cheeses for local consumption or to traders who supply markets outside the county, especially in Kunming.

One such smallholder-cheesemaker is Mrs. Bi, whose household I visited several times in 2012. The household, comprising Bi, her husband, son, daughter-in-law, and grandchild, relied on income from both farming and wage labor. Like many Shilin farmers, their main cash crop was tobacco, and they also grew maize, broad beans, some paddy rice for their own consumption, and other crops. The household kept a herd of around 20 goats, fed on a combination of pasture and maize. Other family members helped look after and milk the goats, but Mrs. Bi was the sole cheesemaker in the family. She made *rubing* in her kitchen twice every day, after morning and evening milking. She slowly brought the milk to the boil, at which point she carefully mixed in a coagulant, either soured whey or vinegar. Once the curds formed, she ladled them out into a cloth, deftly folded and pressed them, often several times, and formed them into rectangular cuboids (**Figures 2 & 3**).

Rubing is made in this way in villages throughout Shilin and in several nearby counties. The fresh cheese is cooked and served with meals. In rural Shilin, milk cake is typically pan-fried and sprinkled with salt, and sometimes also ground Sichuan peppercorns (**Figure 4**). It is popular at annual festivals, at which times the cheese is both eaten and gifted. My first visit to Bi's village coincided with the spring Tomb Sweeping Festival (*Qingming Jie*), and some of Bi's cheese was used at village banquets and as offerings at her husband's surname group's ancestral graves. But apart from during festivals, Bi and her family told me they rarely ate *rubing*. Other villagers, however, and residents in the county town, reported that although not long ago *rubing* would only be eaten at festive periods, in recent decades they could eat it year-round. In Bi's village, one man said that he no longer enjoyed eating *rubing*, because it was not so special now.

Shilin is, at least in quantitative terms, the province's foremost *rubing*-making county. According to one study, in 2007 there were nearly 180,000 dairy goats in the county, producing about half of the goat milk in Yunnan province, the bulk of which was used to make *rubing* (Hong et al. 2009:2). The county with the second largest number of dairy goats in Yunnan, neighboring Luliang, had fewer than 80,000, while Jianchuan county in Dali had fewer than 5,000 (*ibid*). Some researchers argue that the cheese originated in Dali and spread to Shilin with migrants (Allen and Allen 2005). In Shilin, however, there was a widespread belief that *rubing* making had begun in their county. One official in the Veterinary Station pointed out that *rubing* making had a documented history of over 300 years in Shilin/Lunan (see also Lunan c.1990; Hong et al. 2009). He argued that the art of making milk cake had been spread by Shilin goat herders during their winter sojourns, pointing to an internal government report, which stated that, prior to the end of transhumance following the collectivization of goat herds in the 1950s, herders used to take their flocks as far south as Jianshui (Lunan c.1990). A similar story was told to me by a farmer in Bi's village, although the farmer claimed that transhumance was in fact still being practiced by some goat herders in the county's mountainous peripheries. Regardless of *rubing*'s actual origins, the popular local belief in Shilin/Lunan as the original site and contemporary centre of goat milk cake making is relevant to the story of *rubing*'s current heritagization.

Many natives of urban Kunming, too, thought of *rubing* as their local specialty. Cooking methods in the city were more varied than in Shilin, although simple pan-frying or "water-frying" (*shuijian*) – where a bit of water is added – was popular here, too. A self-styled "Old Kunming" family, who in 2009 treated me to what they described as a real Kunming style home meal, included two popular milk cake dishes on the table of eight dishes: *rubing* steamed with ham (*huojia rubing*) and "frogs holding stone slates" (*qingwa bao shiban*), or diced milk cake sautéed with broad beans and carrots (Klein 2013b:215).

The cheese has probably been a part of the city's foodways for some time. Writing in the 1930s and 1940s, the chronicler of Republican-era Kunming life Luo Yangru (Luo 1996:86) lists "ham with *rubing*" (*huotui rubing*) as a typical item in the city's "fried dish halls" (*chaocaiguan*), an apparently rather simple class of establishment run by native Yunnanese. By contrast, *rubing* is not mentioned in his descriptions of the higher-end, "banquet halls" (*jiuxiguan*) run by Yunnanese, or of the many eating establishments operated in the city by Sichuanese, Cantonese, and other migrants from outside the province (1996:80-87). According to Luo, "pan-fried *rubing*" (*jian rubing*) was also served to accompany local spirits in the city's many "drinking halls" (*sujiuguan*) (1996:518). *Rubing* appears to have been a popular food associated with the locality, but perhaps not fit for upscale banquets.

Interviewees in Kunming described *rubing* as a nutritious food, high in protein and fat. It was now available year-round and affordable to most households, but people recalled that during the planned economy and into the 1980s it had been an expensive, seasonal treat, eaten especially at the Chinese New Year, when for many it was a must-have food. Reminiscing on her childhood in the 1980s, a female shopkeeper in her thirties exclaimed that for her, *rubing* was the "taste/smell of the New Year" (*guonian de weidao*).

In Kunming, the transformation of the cheese from a seasonal treat to a more ordinary food item was accompanied by a concern that the quality of *rubing* in the markets had deteriorated. One chef in his forties, Master Shen, exclaimed that it no longer had any "milk fragrance" (*naixiangwei*). Mr. Jia, a retired mechanic, explained that in the past you didn't have to use any oil to fry it, you just put it in the pan and the fat would ooze out.

The most common explanation for the (perceived) loss of quality was that milk cake was being adulterated by unscrupulous producers, who would substitute cow milk for the more expensive goat milk. For Kunmingers, real *rubing* had to be made with goat milk, described as being more "fragrant" (*xiang*) than cow milk and easier to digest. This fear of

adulteration by cow milk, part of wider anxieties about declining food quality and social trust, affected the heritage branding of *rubing*, as discussed below.

FROM *RUBING* TO “*SHILIN RUBING*”

Unlike established Yunnanese local specialty products, such as Xuanwei ham and Puer tea, historically *rubing* appears to have been little known outside the province. This has something to do with limits to the transportability of this fresh, unsalted cheese, which often begins to sour after two or three days. But even within Yunnan, milk cake has not been firmly established as a specialty of Shilin. In Kunming, Shilin – as Lunan – is famous for its fermented tofu (*lufu*). But although some Kunmingers I spoke with knew that *rubing* was made in Shilin most did not specifically associate *rubing* with Shilin. There may be several reasons for this. Vendors in Kunming were often from Luliang, not Shilin. In the city’s markets I asked vendors where they sourced their milk cake, and found cheeses made in Shilin, Luliang, Mile, Yiliang, and Luxi counties. Until recently, the cheese was not sold packaged or branded as a product of Shilin/Lunan or any other county. Kunmingers I met were more likely to associate *rubing* with Dali than with Shilin, even though it was nigh impossible to find Dali-made *rubing* in Kunming’s markets. The association between *rubing* and Dali may have had something to do with the way milk cake was presented in the city’s markets, where it was sold together with *rushan* (“milk fan”) – a dried, cow milk cheese well-known to be a specialty of Dali. In conversations, Kunmingers would frequently pair the two cheeses together, and sometimes even conflate them.

Producers, restaurants, and officials were attempting to increase the recognition of *rubing* as a specialty product of Yunnan province and Shilin county. It was being packaged and branded, and its circulation extended to upmarket venues and beyond the areas of production. Milk cake has been promoted in government-backed campaigns to construct a

“Yunnan cuisine” (Klein 2013b), and it is served in the stylish “Yunnan restaurants” that have opened in Kunming, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong. Restaurateurs I spoke to in Beijing bought their *rubing* from suppliers, who airfreighted it from Kunming twice weekly. Milk cake could also be bought in Kunming’s supermarkets, including in international chains like Wal-Mart and Carrefour, and from gift shops in Shilin and Kunming’s international airport.

The sale of *rubing* to geographically more distant markets and its entry into more upmarket venues were enabled by changes in production. Since 1997, entrepreneurs have established companies specializing in *rubing*, making the cheese in small factories with milk they bought from farmers. The largest *rubing* enterprise in the county, set up in 2007, employed ten people and made 60 tons of cheese per year, mostly for Kunming’s supermarkets. In 2012 there were four such enterprises in Shilin.

The methods used in these *rubing* enterprises were close to those deployed by farmhouse makers. Yet unlike small-scale producers like Mrs. Bi, who formed and pressed the cheeses in her hands, enterprises used wooden molds and stone presses, and then air-dried them on racks. This extended the shelf-life to about ten days, although it did require roughly 25% more milk to make a kg of cheese. The factory-made cheeses were also vacuum-packed, further extending the shelf-life to 30 days, 60 days if refrigerated. Vacuum-packing also allowed for further value to be added through gift-packaging, certifying, branding, and making semi-prepared products. One company sold vacuum packs of sliced *rubing* layered with slices of Xuanwei ham, ready for steaming.

The new enterprises enjoyed a close relationship with the Shilin government. All had received support for purchasing equipment. Three of the companies, although privately owned and run, had been set up at the initiative of officials in Shilin’s Bureau of Agriculture and Animal Husbandry and its Veterinary Station. Officials had also begun to use China’s

new GI schemes to protect Shilin's *rubing* enterprises against competitors. Veterinary Station officials were adamant that it was makers in Luliang and Yiliang counties, not Shilin, who were adding cow milk to their *rubing* and passing it off as "goat milk cake." In 2011, China's Ministry of Agriculture established a GI for "Shilin *rubing*," following an application from the Shilin Veterinary Station. This stipulates that only *rubing* made within the county and with pure goat milk can be called "Shilin *rubing*." At the time of my research, the GI was new, and the labels were not being used systematically by *rubing* enterprises. Consumers I met in Kunming did not mention GI labels. Two did claim to look out for the QS (Quality Safety) label when buying packaged milk cake. QS certification, a legal requirement for companies making dairy products (and many other foods), was supposed to guarantee compliance with food safety regulations. The government-backed milk cake enterprises in Shilin were QS-certified. Officials hoped that the new GI label would also become more established.

The extended shelf-life and packaging made the factory-made *rubing* attractive to supermarkets and tourist gift shops, and allowed it to be transported greater distances from sites of production, increasing recognition for the product in cities like Beijing or Hong Kong. The branded "Shilin *rubing*" was denser, firmer, and drier than the unpackaged farmhouse cheeses sold only in the wet markets. And it was more expensive. In Kunming in 2012, vacuum-packed *rubing* cost around RMB 50 per kg in the wet markets and up to RMB 70 in the supermarkets, while the unpackaged product retailed for RMB 30-35/kg. Nevertheless, even in Shilin some local interlocutors reported that they would sometimes buy the packaged, factory-made cheeses, particularly as gifts. At a tourist-oriented restaurant situated a stone's throw away from a goat cheese-making village, the manager claimed they sourced their *rubing* from a company based in the county town, arguing that the quality was better.

RUBING, MODERNIZATION, AND SMALLHOLDER FARMERS

That the promotion of milk cake as a traditional, local product coincided with changes to production methods is not surprising (Mak 2014; West 2016:421-2). What makes the Shilin case noteworthy is that such changes were partly a deliberate outcome of the promotion. Local government backing of the new enterprises was embedded in national projects, discussed above, aimed at modernizing the agro-food system. Officials in the Shilin Veterinary Station and in the Kunming Municipal Agricultural Bureau advocated what they termed the “corporatization” (*qiyehua*) of milk cake. They aimed to move commercial *rubing* production out of the hands of farmers and into the control of the new enterprises, arguing that the latter produced a more standardized cheese, whose production complied with food safety and animal hygiene regulations (see also Hong et al. 2009). It was, they argued, impossible for the authorities to inspect the myriad of small farms. Officials told me that, ideally, *rubing* companies should either keep their own herds, or buy up milk through contracts with specialized farmers with large herds kept in feedlots. Company-led vertical integration, they claimed, was crucial to gaining the trust of consumers in Kunming and new markets.

The “corporatization” of *rubing* production built on attempts to “modernize” goat farming, which began in the early 1980s with the dismantling of rural people’s communes. The commune-owned herds were distributed to households, and farmers were encouraged to sell *rubing* on the market. Since then, farmers have been urged to milk twice per day and to supplement pasture with feed, especially silage made from maize grown on the farm. Local governments have provided subsidized loans for the construction of indoor pens and silage pits, and have expanded veterinary services. While most smallholders’ goats continue to be

fed on a combination of pasture and feed, some of the households designated as specialist herders now rear their goats entirely indoors (Lunan c.1990; Hong et al. 2009).

These changes to goat rearing have gone hand in hand with the introduction of new breeds (Lunan c.1990; Lunan 2007:83-5; Hong et al. 2009). The native Guishan breed, named after Shilin's Guishan Mountain, was adapted to the rugged terrain and to the needs of a mixed farming-pastoral smallholder economy. This black, long-haired goat was used for its milk, meat, hides, and wool. However, compared to pure dairy goats its lactation cycle is short and its milking capacity low (Yang and Yang 2002:181-3). Beginning in the 1980s, Guishans have been cross-bred with dairy goats, including white-haired Saanens, a Swiss breed introduced via Australia. The cross-breeds have a typical lactation cycle of nine months – up to two months longer than pure Guishans – and produce around 35% more milk in a year (Yang and Yang 2002:182-3). That said, the fat and protein content of the milk from Guishans (5.69% and 5.08%, respectively) is much higher than that from second-generation crossbreeds (4.23% and 2.90%) (Yang and Yang 2002:182). Farmers told me that, depending on the season, it takes seven or eight kg of milk from a crossbreed to make one kg of *rubing*, compared to around five-to-one from a pure Guishan. Nevertheless, by the mid-2000s around 70% of the *rubing* produced in Shilin was made from cross-breeds' milk (Hong et al. 2009).

Rural development policies from the early 1980s, advocating intensified rearing and higher-yielding goats, paved the way for the year-round availability and decreasing prices reported by informants in Kunming and Shilin. They are also possibly connected to reported changes in the cheese's taste and texture. In Shilin it was widely perceived that *rubing* made from the milk of cross-breeds fed on feed was inferior to that made from the milk of pure Guishan goats and fed exclusively on pasture. Two Kunming informants similarly told me that the best *rubing* was made from the milk of "black goats."

Although the cheese was allegedly no longer as good, decades of policies promoting market-oriented goat farming have benefitted smallholders like Bi, whose household has enjoyed access to higher-yielding goats, support for building a goat pen, and veterinary services. However, government support for *rubing* making, including subsidies for production and packaging equipment and the use of QS and GI labels was available only to the new enterprises. Government plans to scale up *rubing* production built on previous attempts to “modernize” household goat farming, but also deviated from the latter insofar as the focus was now on enterprises taking on production, packaging, and marketing, and specialized farmers acting as suppliers of raw milk.

At the time of my research, this enterprise-led modernization had not come far. While their preference was to work with larger, specialized milk suppliers, companies reported relying heavily on smallholders as providers of milk. In 2007, fewer than 25% of the county’s goat herding households had more than 15 goats, and 90% of its *rubing* was made by smallholder farmers as a sideline (Hong et al. 2009). Veterinary Station officials and enterprise managers confirmed that this had not changed much by 2012. The bulk of the county’s *rubing* was made by smallholders, who sold it to small-scale middlemen, themselves often from farming families. The latter transported the cheeses to urban wet markets, where they were sold in stalls often operated by their kinsfolk. The small number of links in the chain from producer to consumer, and the avoidance of packaging and supermarkets, helped keep prices affordable for lower-income urban families, and helped ensure that profits were retained by rural-based farming and trading households.

Far from supplanting the *rubing* made by small farmers, enterprises were adding a new product to the market. Some smallholders were even able to participate in the making and selling of this reinvented local cheese. One of the four government-backed *rubing* enterprises was run as a “specialty cooperative” (*zhuanye hezuoshe*), an organizational form

that has become popular among farmers as an alternative to private enterprise-led vertical integration, as profits may be shared more equally among smallholder producer-members (Huang 2011). The cooperative was set up in 2010 at the initiative of five village households, in a village where 80 of the 90 households were designated specialized goat herders. The coop collected villagers' milk twice a day from a milking parlor located in the heart of the village, and three villagers were employed to make *rubing* at a newly built factory nearby, where the cheese was also packaged and labelled. According to one of its leaders, the coop sold exclusively to buyers supplying high-end shops and restaurants in Kunming, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong.

The village cooperative stood out from the other enterprises not only because of its organizational form, but also for being the only one to be owned and managed by members of the Sani ethnic group. This is striking, as people in Shilin county associated goat herding and milk cake making with the Sani. As discussed in the next section, ethnicity plays a complex part in the attempts to establish this dairy food as a local specialty.

DAIRY, LOCALITY, AND ETHNICITY

The recent rise of milk drinking notwithstanding, China is not usually regarded as having a tradition of dairying, and an attachment to dairy foods has been viewed by many Chinese, at least among the Han majority, as a sign of cultural Otherness, associated with pastoralists (Wiley 2011). However, there are numerous, centuries-old Chinese dairy foods (Mak 2014:324-6). These are found, not only in regions with pastoralist traditions associated with Tibetans, Mongolians, Kazakhs, and other non-Han peoples, but, as in the case of Shunde's *niuru*, also in parts of "Inner China" typified by Han majority populations and intensive agriculture. Still, the heritagization of dairy foods like *niuru* does not mean that dairy is now everywhere regarded as unambiguously "Chinese." In Yunnan, the meanings of dairy foods,

and the ways in which these foods were being branded, reflected and challenged existing ethnic inequalities and the complex relationship between ethnic and regional identities.

Shilin is a Yi Nationality Autonomous County. 65% of its population is classified as belonging to the Han ethnic group or “nationality” (*minzu*), and 35% as members of the Sani “subgroup” of the Yi nationality (Lunan 2007:8-9). Milk cake is made and eaten by both Sani and Han, but people in the county regard Sani as having a special connection to *rubing* making and goat herding. A Sani farmer explained to me that “wherever there are Sani, there is *rubing*.” A second-generation *rubing* maker from a Han village conceded that “Yi make more *rubing* than Han.” In urban Kunming, by contrast, where milk cake was not widely associated with Shilin, it was also not generally regarded as a Sani or Yi product.

The attempts to create a firmer connection between “milk cake” and “Shilin” sometimes involved presenting the cheese as a traditional product of the Sani/Yi. This was simultaneously an attempt by *rubing* makers to market their products by drawing on the county’s existing renown as a tourism destination. Shilin is famous throughout China for its spectacular karst formations, known as the Stone Forest. Opened to international tourism already in the early 1980s, it is now part of a UNESCO world heritage site. In 1997, the county officially changed its name to Shilin, i.e. “Stone Forest.” Stone Forest tourism is combined with ethnic tourism focused on Sani textiles, dance, and festivals, and images of the Sani cultural heroine, Ashima, are widely used to promote the county (Swain 2002). Reflecting this tourism, certain images were commonly used on gift packages for *rubing*: The Stone Forrest, the Sani (often represented by Ashima), and goats (**Figures 5 & 6**). When I asked at *rubing* companies why Ashima was used in their marketing, I was told that she had been a goat herder. The images suggested that real *rubing* came from the famous Shilin landscape, and was made from pure goat milk, by traditional Sani goat herders.

Yet while *rubing* marketing made use of the touristic fame of the Stone Forest and the Sani, the use of *rubing* in Shilin's ethnic tourism industry was surprisingly limited. Unlike Shunde, there were no tourist trails for local foods, and cheesemakers were not celebrated in the media or invited to give public demonstrations. Some tourist-oriented restaurants offered milk cake as a "traditional Yi" food, but they tended to feature goat meat dishes as their main attraction. Farm guesthouses (*nongjiale*) in the county often did not even serve *rubing*.

In Kunming, the packaging used by *rubing* enterprises did not always feature imagery of the Sani Yi. In supermarkets, milk cake was instead typically packaged in the style of certain mass-produced "Western" cheeses, in part perhaps because customers were assumed to be locals willing to pay a premium for food safety, rather than exotica-seeking culinary tourists. Upmarket, "Yunnan-style" (*Dianwei*) restaurants in Kunming invariably served *rubing* dishes. Yet the menus in these restaurants – unlike some Yunnan restaurants in Beijing – made no mention of either Shilin or the Sani. The manager at the head branch of a well-known, Yunnan-style restaurant chain informed me that he sourced their milk cake from Dali's Jianchuan county, claiming that the most "authentic" (*zhengzong*) *rubing* was from Dali, and that people in Shilin had only just learned to make it!

Thus, while ethnicity was at times used to market goat milk cake, in other contexts the Sani connection was ignored or denied. I suggest that this had something to do with a self-consciousness in Kunming, where the majority is Han, surrounding *rubing* as a marker of local identity. To be sure, for many Kunmingers enjoying *rubing* was a sign of being a real local. Some claimed that while Yunnanese find milk cake "fragrant" (*xiang*), outsiders from elsewhere in China (*waidiren*) abhor it as "stinky" (*chou*) or "smelly like mutton" (*shan*). But while some acquaintances made a point of treating outside visitors to this regional specialty, others were reluctant to do so. As one chef in his forties put it to me: "Perhaps people from Inner Mongolia, Qinghai, or Xinjiang would like it, but not other outsiders."

The ambivalence surrounding *rubing* had something to do with the fact that it was a dairy food, but more specifically that it was dairy from Yunnan – a borderland region, famous in China not for a refined, regional cuisine, but for its ethnic minorities and their “strange foods” (Klein 2013b).² While recent celebrations of Yunnan food have attempted to embrace the region’s historical marginality and ethnic diversity as a resource (*ibid.*), discourses that contrast “Han civilization” to the cultural “backwardness” of ethnic minorities remain influential. Wu (2014) tells us that in Yunnan, some ethnic minority farmhouse tourism hosts attract Han urban tourists with promises of “ecological,” ethnic foods but then conceal their more unusual foodways from the tourists, in order not to be ridiculed by the latter as outlandish eaters of “stinky” foods.

Even where Yi/Sani ethnic traditions were being used to brand the cheese, it was not necessarily Sani who were able to take advantage of this. As mentioned, three of the four *rubing* factories were owned and run by Han entrepreneurs. The limited possibilities for Sani entrepreneurs was embedded in a broader ethnic-geographic division in the county. People in the county have long made a distinction between the plains (*baqu*) in the west and the mountains (*shanqu*) centering on Guishan Mountain in the east (Swain 2001). The plains, populated by a mix of Han and Sani, were the site of the county town and the Stone Forest tourist park, and received most of the investment into tourism, infrastructure, and industry. The four *rubing* enterprises (including the Sani coop) and the new goat breeding companies were all located on the plains.

Guishan, by contrast, was predominantly Sani, and was considered poor, backward, and remote. Some Han in Shilin held the view that Sani living on the plains were not “real” Sani, but were “Hanified” (*Hanhua*). The goat milk cake from Guishan was also considered to be better, as it was more likely to have been made by (“real”) Sani and with milk from pure Guishan goats. According to Veterinary Station staff, attempts to modernize *rubing* making

and improve milking goats through cross-breeding were focused on the plains, as populations there were deemed to be of a higher “quality” (*suzhi*), and therefore more receptive to such improvements. Instead, government-backed efforts to preserve the native Guishan goat, which since 2006 has been designated a national-level protected heritage breed, have concentrated on the eponymous area. Farmers there are encouraged by local government to raise Guishans for meat, but not for milk as this is seen as commercially unviable. Some Guishan farmers do sell their *rubing*, but the scale of the trade is limited – when I visited Guishan town in the morning on a busy market day I found only two *rubing* sellers, and no traders buying *rubing* for other markets. So, partly as result of the local government’s differentiated development policies within the county, not much Guishan *rubing* circulated outside of Guishan itself.

Yet the use of “ethnicity” and “place” to brand local cheese was not entirely restricted to the government-backed enterprises. Small-scale *rubing* traders were aware of Kunming consumers’ fears about adulteration by cow milk, and they were also aware of the growing importance of “place” in the sale of local foods. Some were creating their own heritage branding, which seemed to mimic that of the larger enterprises. In one Kunming market, vendors sold vacuum-packed cheese and gift boxes with the image of a herd of black goats and the Stone Forest in the background and a text claiming that this was “farmhouse milk cake” (*nongjia rubing*) from “black goats” (*hei shanyang*). The *rubing* was not from any of the enterprises supported by the Shilin government, and it did not carry a QS mark, GI mark, or company name.

Like many *rubing* traders, this group of vendors were Han from Luliang county. There were some Sani *rubing* vendors in Kunming, and a few were using ethnicity and place to attract customers. One Sani vendor had a sign advertising “Ecological (Green) Ethnic Specialties: Cured Beef from Ludian, Milk Fans from Dali, Milk Cake from Shilin.” In

another market, a Sani woman had a fabulous sign on her stall, with black goats in the foreground and the Stone Forest in the background. The text read: “Authentic Shilin Black Goat Ecological Superior Quality *Rubing*. Ingredients: 100% Fresh Milk from Black Goats.” When I asked if I could photograph her sign she refused, explaining that she did not want people to steal her brand!

CONCLUSION

Had Mrs. Bi been a *niuru* maker in Shunde, she might have been celebrated by the local media and government as a bearer of tradition. Born into a Sani household in a mixed Sani-Han village on the Shilin plains, she had received only one year of schooling but had been singled out by elders in the village for her potential for making *rubing*. She was highly regarded in the local market; always the first to sell her cheese and go home, some buyers would wait in the market until she arrived.

However, Mrs. Bi was not known beyond her local market, and my hosts in the Shilin Veterinary Station did not take me to see how *rubing* was made on smallholder farms like hers. Instead, they took me to visit *rubing* companies. The emphasis in these tours was on hygienic and technological modernity. *Rubing* enterprises displayed their vacuum packaging equipment, milking machines, pasteurisers, and other stainless-steel equipment. Yet the images on the gift bags of milk cake we received on these visits told another tale: one of cheese making embedded in local landscapes and Sani ethnic traditions of goat breeding and dairy food production.

These factory tours draw attention to a number issues raised in studies of the heritagization of food. One concerns the uses of culinary heritage in constructions of ethnic and regional identities. As in Europe, North America, and Japan (Di Giovine and Brulotte 2014), in this Chinese case culinary heritage contributed to such constructions. Enterprises

sought to produce or strengthen consumers' awareness of a connection between milk cake and Shilin, and often used Sani ethnic imagery to signify such a connection. In doing so, they simultaneously participated in the construction of Shilin as a place and the Sani as its representative group.

However, the use of milk cake in Shilin's gastro-tourism industry was tentative, and in Kunming there appeared to be only a limited recognition of "Shilin *rubing*" as a concept. This contrasts to the jubilant celebration of traditional dairy foods in Cantonese-speaking Shunde (Mak 2014). Despite widely held stereotypes in (northern) China about the allegedly extreme omnivorousness of the Cantonese, such stereotypes are not likely to dent local pride in traditional dairy foods in Shunde and the Pearl River Delta, being not only one of the wealthiest regions in China, but also one recognized for its refined cuisine. By contrast, Yunnan is still widely perceived in China to be a wild, underdeveloped region, whose culture is shaped by its large populations of ethnic minorities. Despite challenges to such perceptions, the latter continue to inform varying degrees of self-consciousness among Yunnanese about dairy and other supposedly "strange" foods in the region. Thus, while this study of milk cake lends support to the work of scholars who argue that the heritagization of food may be bound up with the "revitalization" (Di Giovine 2014) of regional identities, it also reminds us that locals themselves may be ambivalent about these identities and the use of certain foods to represent them, and that such ambivalences may be rooted in deep-seated regional and ethnic hierarchical divisions.

A second issue reflected in the enterprise tours I was taken on concerns the specific way in which "the marketing of specialty commodities as 'artisanal' or 'traditional' [was] imbricated [...] in global industrial production processes" (Heath and Meneley 2007:594). As in other cases of culinary heritagization (e.g., West 2014), the emerging heritagization of *rubing* was connected to changes in the production methods, taste, and texture of the food.

Some buyers, even in Shilin, were now willing to pay a premium for the new, more compact milk cake. In contrast to Meneley's (2007) Italian producers of "artisanal" olive oil, who upheld "traditional" craft as exemplary and attempted to conceal the industrial processes on which their products relied, in the case of *rubing* the newer, more industrialized product was for some setting a new standard of "quality." As Tracy (2013) shows in her discussion of the packaging of Inner Mongolian liquid dairy products, in Chinese contexts the linking of food quality to specific landscapes and ethnicities has often been compatible with the celebration of modern, industrial processes. For those consumers convinced by the dominant rhetoric that food adulterations were a consequence of China's continued reliance on peasant farming, evidence of industrialization could add to the value of place-based foods.

A third issue indexed by the *rubing* producer visits I was taken on pertains to the relationship between companies, government, and state projects of rural modernization, and what this might tell us about who is, and who is not, able to capture the value created through heritagization – industrialized corporations, or the farmers, ethnic minorities, and rural localities celebrated on the packaging? Elsewhere, some small-scale producers, such as cheese makers in the French Auvergne (West 2014) and the Italian Alps (Grasseni 2014), have actively participated in food heritagization. In emerging economies, such opportunities may be more restricted. Bowen (2010) demonstrates that the GI for Mexican tequila has been manipulated by large tequila firms for their own benefit, while disempowering agave-producing peasant farmers. She argues that the disempowerment of Mexican agave farmers was connected to the retreat of the state from the rural sector, and that the lack of state intervention is a key barrier to the potential for GIs to benefit small farmers throughout what she calls the "Global South."

In the PRC, the opportunities for smallholders to capture value from reinventing food may be (even) more limited than in the EU, but perhaps less so than suggested by Bowen's

generalization about the “Global South.” Rather than retreating from the rural sector, the Chinese state has supported the reinvention of local products as part of wider interventions in rural development. Studies of Shunde’s buffalo milk foods (Mak 2014) and teas in southern Fujian province (Tan and Ding 2010) indicate that state-backed heritagization has contributed to the scaling up of production and the growth of capital-intensive businesses, but also that small farmers have benefited economically, and that spaces have emerged for some farmers to take an active part in celebrating local products. In the case of Shilin milk cake, government actors were proactive in food heritagization, but in ways that sought to further the position of agribusinesses and limit the role of smallholders in processing and marketing.

That said, although the explicit, long-term goal of Shilin’s Veterinary Station leaders and their higher-ups in the municipal Agricultural Bureau officials was to “corporatize” cheese production, at the time of my research most of the county’s *rubing* was made and sold by small-scale actors. Indeed, new opportunities were emerging for the latter to profit from the expanding Chinese markets for local specialty foods. These opportunities came not only in the form of supplying raw goods to the new enterprises, but also of making and selling their own cheeses. Some farmer-producers and rural-based traders became “heritage entrepreneurs” (Grasseni 2014), creating their own, unofficial brands that celebrated their cheeses as exemplars of locality and ethnicity, and sometimes of “farmhouse” production. This is an example of overlap between formal and informal networks in heritage making (Di Giovine and Brulotte 2014:6). While smallholder farmers lacked access to certification, or subsidies for packaging equipment, the more formal, state-backed heritagization of “corporatized” milk cake produced models that could be emulated and an environment in which informal practices of local specialty food marketing could thrive.

Small-scale heritage entrepreneurs did not simply emulate the packaged *rubing* of the government-backed corporations. While the latter commanded value in the marketplace,

some eaters yearned for what they remembered to be a better cheese of twenty-odd years before. Despite the compatibility of “industrial” and “heritage” foods in Chinese imaginaries, the distrust in the cities of small-scale producers and vendors, and the fear among many Yunnanese of being identified with “stinky” ethnic minority foods, there was also another, perhaps growing, sensibility, in which farmer-made, hand-crafted foods and produce from impoverished, mountainous “ethnic minority areas” (*minzu diqu*) were imagined as more “authentic,” “natural” alternatives to industrialized ones (Klein 2013a). In Kunming’s markets, this sensibility enabled certain farmer-producers, including ethnic Sani, to position their “farmhouse” cheese made from the milk of “black goats” in contrast not only to the cheaper, unpackaged *rubing*, often suspected of being diluted with cow milk, but also to the branded, corporate milk cake.

From the perspective of local state actors, the heritagization of milk cake was part of a national project of corporate-led agricultural modernization. Nevertheless, heritagization was also creating opportunities for smallholders. Despite a relative lack of resources, these smallholders mimicked the marketing practices of, and differentiated themselves from, government-supported dairy food corporations. To the extent that *rubing* was becoming more established as a local heritage product of Shilin and the Sani, this was as much due to the work of small-scale traders and farmers as it was to local government offices and the enterprises they backed.

NOTES

1. In this article, I sometimes call this dairy food a “cheese,” but mostly I use its Chinese name, *rubing*, or its direct translation, “milk cake.” This reflects local terminology. *Nailao*, the Chinese dictionary word for “cheese,” normally referred to Western-style cheeses. Some interlocutors described milk cake as being “like your *nailao*.” Producers sometimes used

packaging to highlight similarities between local and Western dairy foods. The text on one package sold by the Pengcheng Company of Shilin read “Pengcheng Milk Cake - Cheese of the East” (*Pengcheng Rubing - Dongfang Nailao*).

2. The reluctance to fully embrace the ethnic branding of “Shilin *rubing*” may have to do not only with Han perceptions of ethnic minorities and their foods in general but of views in Kunming, reported by Blum (2001:154-62), of the Yi as “unsophisticated” and of the Sani as “greedy.” By contrast, among Kunmingers the Bai nationality of Dali are highly regarded, as picturesque yet civilized rice-cultivators and townsfolk (2001:165-173), views which might help explain the greater willingness to associate milk cake with Dali. Indeed, milk fans (*rushan*) were prominent in Dali’s Bai ethnic heritage tourism, and having featured in *A Bite of China* were now famous throughout China.

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This is the accepted version of a an article accepted for publication in Food and Foodways published by Taylor & Francis. Published version will be made available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07409710.2017.1420354>
Accepted version available from: <http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/25066/>

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