

Eating Potatoes Is Patriotic: State, Market, and the Common Good in Contemporary China

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Abstract

The article explores recent materials, including cookbooks and a television documentary, backed by the state to promote the potato as a Chinese staple food. These materials attempt to convince would-be eaters that the tuber is a highly nutritious food, suited to modern lifestyles and health concerns, and that it is both cosmopolitan and embedded in Chinese regional food traditions. They articulate a moral economy of food in which the market is a key mechanism for achieving the greater good of national grain security and a healthy population, and in which state and citizen are jointly responsible for “nourishing the people.” Consumers are encouraged to purchase potatoes and potato foods not only to cultivate their own health, but also out of a duty to the well-being of the country. In framing potato-eating as a patriotic act, potato campaigns chime with emerging practices in China of “ethical food consumption.”

Keywords

Potato promotion, moral economy, ethical consumption, food security

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Introduction

In 2015 the Chinese state launched a strategy for “transforming the potato into a staple grain” (马铃薯主粮化, *malingshu zhulianghua*) and “a staple food” (马铃薯主食化, *malingshu zhushihua*). Spearheaded by the Ministry of Agriculture, officially the main (but not the only) reason behind the strategy was to enhance “food security” (粮食安全, *liangshi anquan*), which in Chinese state discourse refers primarily to national self-sufficiency in grain (Christiansen, 2009). Lauded for its ability to thrive in different ecological conditions, to withstand drought and frost, and for allowing farmers to “save on water,” “save on fertiliser,” “save on pesticides,” and “save on labour,” the potato is heralded as an important supplement to rice, wheat, and maize in the effort to achieve national grain security (Li et al., 2015; Zhongguo Nongye Xinxiwang, 2016). The strategy was the culmination of a growing interest since the 1990s. Before then, state attention to the Andean tuber had been sporadic by comparison to rice, wheat, and maize, which since the 1960s have been the objects of major efforts into scientific research and propagation (Schmalzer, 2016). Still, China had by the turn of the millennium become the world’s largest producer of potatoes, and state actors began to explore the potential for increasing its role in the nation’s diet.

Self-sufficiency in grains, particularly of rice and wheat, is an important policy goal, not least for reasons of national sovereignty. Food security, in a sense including but not limited to national self-sufficiency, is also a popular concern in China. While commentators celebrate an alleged shift in Chinese food culture from the pursuit of “eating one’s fill” (吃饱, *chi bao*) (in the 1970s) to “eating well” (吃好, *chi hao*) (in the 1980s and 1990s) to “eating for health” (吃出健康, *chi chu jiankang*) (since the 2000s) (Li et al., 2015), many Chinese are still haunted by memories of recent famine and severe hunger (Lora-Wainwright, 2009; Oxfeld, 2017; Thaxton, 2008). Moreover, “eating one’s fill” and “eating well” are persistent concerns, particularly in inland areas. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation puts the number of undernourished people in China for 2015–2017 at 124.5 million (FAO et al., 2018: 131).

Departing somewhat from the editors in their introduction to this special issue, in this article questions of food security rather than food safety form my entry point into a discussion of moral economies of food. Although the current ideal of national self-sufficiency in grain was first established during the Republican period (Lee, 2011), the idea that the state should be committed to ensuring food for the people is much older. For millennia, the ability to “nourish the people” (养民, *yangmin*) has been regarded as a moral imperative for Chinese rulers. A moral economy in which, in theory, popular loyalty was given in return for protection from famine, lay at the heart of the relationship between ruler and ruled, and was the ideological foundation for imperial state interventions in water conservancy, agriculture, and grain markets (Li, 2007; Will et al., 1991). Governmentality, in Foucault’s (2006) sense of the well-being of the people constituting the aim of state rule, was thus an important aspect of imperial and especially late-imperial statecraft (Swislocki, 2011). Such understandings of state responsibility have not gone away. The contemporary Chinese state takes this imperative seriously, not least against the backdrop of Great Leap Forward famine of 1958–1962, a catastrophe involving the

loss of tens of millions of lives and which had potentially devastating consequences for the Communist Party–state’s legitimacy to rule (Dikötter, 2010; Thaxton, 2008). The party–state’s near-obsession with grain production and self-sufficiency in grain and its considerable investment into agricultural science since the 1960s needs to be seen against this backdrop. The pro-market reforms and family planning policies that were introduced in the late 1970s and early 1980s attempted to address the recent failures and persistent problems of food availability (Ash, 2006).

In certain respects, then, recent potato promotions are embedded in a long-standing moral economy of food based around the concept of “nourishing the people.” As in late imperial times, the contemporary Chinese state intervenes in agriculture and food markets in order to improve conditions for the population, on which the legitimacy of the state depends. At the same time, my analysis in this article of state-backed materials used to promote potato-eating points to an articulation of a national moral economy of food, which partially diverges from its late imperial precedents. In this current articulation, the market takes a more central role. In line with the reform socialist ideology of the post-Mao Communist Party–state, the state plays a guiding role in the food system, but the market is imagined as a crucial mechanism for achieving the greater good of national grain security and a well-fed population. Citizens are actively encouraged to purchase potatoes and potato foods, often lauded as uniquely nutritious, in order to drive forward production and food industry development.

However, citizen-consumers are not only asked to act out of self-interest. They are, I will demonstrate, also encouraged to consume potatoes because it is their patriotic duty to look after their own health and to help the country achieve food security. In this party–state articulation of the post-Mao national moral economy of food, the relationship between rulers and ruled is one of co-responsibility. This is similar to spheres such as healthcare and education, in which citizens have been encouraged by the state to assume responsibility to look after and cultivate themselves, in the aim of improving the corporeal and mental “quality” (素质, *suzhi*) of the Chinese population in an era of international competition (Greenhalgh, 2011). In the potato campaigns, eating potatoes is implicitly and explicitly framed as an ethical, patriotic act. In this sense, the potato campaigns and the moral economy of food that they reflect contribute to the construction of Chinese citizens as ethical food consumers, for whom food markets may be conceived as sites not just for the buying and selling of goods but also for moral practice.

Potato promotion campaigns involve a wide range of activities and are variously and in some cases simultaneously targeted at primary producers, agri-food industries, and consumers. Here, I concentrate on promotions aimed at consumers, which have included the dissemination of potato cookbooks and popular science books, public expositions, a television documentary, and supermarket information campaigns. My main sources for this article are, first, a popular science book called *The Potato – Staple Grain, Staple Food* published by the China Agricultural Publishing House in 2015 and written by Li Jichen, Li Qun, and Tang Yuhua.

My second main source is a cookbook entitled *The Versatile Potato – Everyday Recipes for the Home*. Compiled by Zhang Hong, it is also published in 2015 by the

China Agricultural Publishing House, as part of the publisher's "Potato Staple Food Processing Book Series" (马铃薯主食加工系列丛书, *Malingshu Zhushi Jiagong Xilie Congshu*).

My third key source is a China Central Television (CCTV) documentary from 2015. Entitled *A Bite of Potato* (舌尖上的马铃薯, *Shejian Shang de Malingshu*), it is modelled on the hugely successful documentary series *A Bite of China* (舌尖上的中国, *Shejian Shang de Zhongguo*), which celebrates China's diverse regional cooking practices, local craft food production, and agro-ecosystems. Directed and co-scripted by Zhou Zuo, it was produced for CCTV 7 at the China Agricultural Film and Television Centre.

In order to contextualise these texts and visual media I draw on historical and ethnographic materials, including my own food-focused ethnographic fieldwork carried out for a year in Guangzhou (1999–2000) and six months in Kunming (2006–2012), and data collected during a couple of brief visits to Beijing in 2018. However, the discussion here is based on my analyses of the aforementioned texts and films, not on ethnographic research on their reception or on consumers' potato practices since the beginning of the policy.

As a food crop of relatively recent foreign origins not typically regarded as a Chinese staple food, the potato poses certain challenges to its promoters, which may be quite different from, say, those facing promoters of high-quality rice from China's Northeast (Zader, 2011). I begin my discussion with a brief account of the history of the potato and its place in Chinese food culture, in order better to identify the challenges faced by would-be promoters. I then go on to consider some of the ways in which these challenges are addressed in the promotional materials, before returning to the moral economy of food that is articulated in these potato promotions.

The Potato in Chinese Foodways

The white potato (*Solanum tuberosum*) was one of many New World food crops, including maize, sweet potatoes, peanuts, and capsicums, to be introduced during the late Ming and Qing dynasties. These came to have wide-ranging effects on Chinese economic and social life, including on diets, culinary practices, farming, population growth, and migration patterns (Ho, 1955; Mazumdar, 1999; Wang, 2015). Although introduced in the seventeenth century, the potato probably did not become a significant crop in China until the nineteenth (Anderson, 2014: 247; Zhou and Li, 2009). Its distribution was regionally specific. Well-suited to drought- and frost-prone conditions, and less labour intensive than most grains, it became an important crop in many parts of China's inland, in an arc from Yunnan in the Southwest, to Gansu in the Northwest, across North China and into the Northeast. These are still the main potato-producing areas (Sui et al., 2008). In coastal Southeast China, where the white potato was an insignificant crop, late imperial farmers often grew sweet potatoes for their own consumption, which allowed them to concentrate their labour, water, and other resources on rice and other commercial crops (Mazumdar, 1999). Similarly, in inland areas the white potato and maize were attractive

not only to existing highland populations but also allowed lowland farmers to expand into marginal lands and highland areas, while in some cases continuing to grow rice or wheat at lower altitudes (Anderson, 2014: 247–248; Wu, 2011; Zhou and Li, 2009).

In addition to its standard, Chinese dictionary name, *malingshu* (马铃薯, “horse bell tuber”), the white potato is known by a variety of regional names, including “earth bean” (土豆, *tudou*), “foreign tuber” (洋芋, *yangyu*), and “earth egg” (地蛋, *didan*). Particularly in the main potato-growing areas in the inland, the white potato has become integrated into Chinese regional cuisines as an everyday food. Today, typical dishes from the Northeast include “potatoes stewed with pork ribs” (土豆炖排骨, *tudou dun paigu*) and “three fresh flavours of the earth” (地三鲜, *di san xian*), a dish of sautéed potatoes, aubergines, and green peppers. Across the North and Northwest, one finds a range of variants of stir-fried potato slivers (炒土豆丝, *chao tudousi*), which in restaurant kitchens are typically allowed to stand in water to extract some of the starch before frying to produce a crunchy mouthfeel. Popular dishes in Yunnan include “potato slices with pickles” (酸菜洋芋片, *suancai yangyupian*) and “granny’s potatoes” (老奶洋芋, *laonai yangyu*) – in the latter dish, the potatoes are boiled, cubed or mashed, and then stir-fried with chillies, soft enough even for a toothless granny to chew.

In the dualism of *fan* (饭, cooked grains) and *cai* (菜, side dishes), described by Chang (1977) as the elementary structure of the Chinese meal, the use of potatoes in *cai* has clearly become well-established in many regional cuisines. Moreover, outside of grain-based meals, potatoes have also been popular in street foods and snacks (小吃, *xiaochi*). Indeed, Watson (1997) and his associates noted over two decades ago, the French-fried potato (炸薯条, *zha shutiao*) was the food most readily accepted by early Chinese visitors to McDonald’s, and like other foods served at the fast-food chain it was perceived to be a snack item, not part of a meal.

However, the acceptance of the potato as a staple food (*fan*), the starchy foundation of the everyday family meal, has been more problematic. In Guangzhou in the late 1990s, French fries and mashed potatoes were popular snack foods and were served in Western-style cafes and fast food restaurants. Regional Chinese potato dishes like the ones mentioned above were offered in establishments specialising in the cuisines of China’s inland, which had proliferated in the wake of post-Mao waves of internal migration (Klein, 2006). But white potatoes figured little in the cooking of native Cantonese and were often associated with Western foods. When I told Cantonese friends that I had grown up eating boiled potatoes as a staple food, they would react with a mix of incredulity and pity. Many did not believe that a person could eat one’s fill on potatoes.

By contrast, in some parts of China’s main potato-growing regions potatoes have also been eaten as a core staple. For example, in Zhaotong Municipality in northern Yunnan, an area famous for its spuds, roast or barbecued potatoes (烧洋芋, *shao yangyu*), a popular street food, are sometimes eaten as a staple food, as are “potatoes stewed with rice” (洋芋焖饭, *yangyu men fan*) (Jin and Gao, 2000). The anthropologist Xu Wu (2011), writing about rural Enshi in Hubei Province, tells us that villagers often took steamed potatoes or rice steamed with potatoes (洋芋饭, *yangyufan*) as their core staple food. However, in such regions the potato typically has a low status – it is seen as a “coarse

grain” (粗粮, *culiang*) compared to “fine grains” (细粮, *xiliang*) such as rice or wheat. Wu (2011: 131) writes:

In the late 1970s, [...] villagers usually spent three or more months a year eating potato as their staple food. At that time few households were able to put a rice layer on top of the potato when steaming, so rice was highly cherished.

Although Wu does not spell this out, to me it seems relevant that rice was steamed *on top* of the potato, arguably signifying the greater value placed on rice than potatoes and even concealing the latter from sight even if only with a layer of rice.

During my own fieldwork in and around Kunming, people have often told me that they were “raised on maize and potatoes” (吃包谷洋芋长大的, *chi baogu yangyu zhangda de*) to indicate that they had grown up in an impoverished, mountainous, rural area. Others associated potatoes with hardships they endured during the “three difficult years” (三年困难时期, *san nian kunnan shiqi*) of the late 1950s and early 1960s, that is the Great Leap Forward famine, or as sent-down youth during the Cultural Revolution. Today, lowland and urban populations in Yunnan rarely eat potatoes as a staple – a reliance on potatoes is synonymous with being poor and being rural. During a recent conversation I had with a Chinese food historian who had grown up in rural Chongqing, also in Southwest China, he told me that his elderly father still refused to eat potatoes, so reminiscent were they to him of the poverty and hunger he had endured in his youth.

In sum, the “foreign tuber” has become indigenised into Chinese cuisines, particularly in the inland areas. Potatoes are widely appreciated in *cai* and snacks. However, attitudes toward the potato as a potential staple food are both regionally specific and ambivalent. In coastal regions potatoes are seen by many as a Western food and their potential as a staple food is nearly unthinkable. In inland regions, where people are often more familiar with the idea of eating potatoes as *fan*, actually doing so may be rejected. It is associated with backwardness and poverty. For some, as with sweet potatoes in Eastern China (Thaxton, 2008: 303–304), potato-eating carries painful memories of hunger and famine conditions.

The Potato as Superfood

As suggested to me by the editors of this special issue, the attempt to expand the potato from the categories of snack foods and side dishes to the category of staple food can be described as a shift in moral economies. Consumed as a side dish and, especially, a snack food, eating potatoes carries little moral weight. Eaten as a staple food, however, it would be perceived as a potential building block of the family and, in the context of the recent potato campaigns, a matter of national concern. These campaigns aim for the production, circulation, and consumption of the potato to enter the national moral economy of food, alongside such well-established grains as rice and wheat. Effecting such a moral shift is no easy task. As outlined in the previous section, promoters of the white

potato as a staple food for the Chinese are faced with the challenge of addressing regional diversities in foodways and deeply ambivalent perceptions about the potato-as-staple.

The authors of recent promotional materials appear to be aware of the potato's low status as a staple food. In the introductory, "general knowledge section" (常识篇, *changshipian*) to *The Versatile Potato – Everyday Recipes for the Home* it is emphasised that eating potatoes produces a strong sensation of repletion in the stomach (饱腹感, *baofugan*) and that potatoes have no "strange smell" (异味, *yiwai*) (Zhang, 2015). In the *fan-cai* dualism, a proper starch staple must not only provide an embodied sense of being full but should also be relatively neutral in taste and smell as it is the *cai* that should be flavourful, helping the eater to "down the *fan*" (下饭, *xiafan*) (Anderson, 1988; Chang, 1977). The fact that these claims need to be made as part of "general knowledge" about the potato suggests an awareness that intended readers may be prone to scepticism on these points. The claim that the potato produces an unusually strong sensation of repletion is also made several times in *The Potato – Staple Crop, Staple Food*. The authors of this book are open about their readers' potential scepticism, conceding that many of their compatriots have a "lack of belief that it can be eaten as a staple" and view the potato as playing only a "supporting role" rather than a "lead role" in diets.

As with state-backed potato promoters in eighteenth-century Europe discussed by Earle (2018), central to the attempt to convince potentially reluctant, would-be potato-eaters is that potatoes are good for health. The "general knowledge" section in *The Versatile Potato – Everyday Recipes for the Home* provides some detail on the nutritional values of the potato and highlights its nutritional benefits as a staple food (see Zhang, 2015: 3–6). The authors point out that the potato is an excellent source of energy, a superior source of protein to rice and wheat, a "complete" source of vitamins C, A, and B, and a veritable treasure store (宝库, *baoku*) of minerals, not least iron and potassium. Further, according to the text potatoes can prevent constipation and can help diabetics to regulate blood sugar levels. Because they provide a strong feeling of repletion and release energy slowly, the potato can help prevent snacking and thereby help people keep slim. However, the authors tell us that this slimming effect works only if the potato is eaten as a staple food, not when eaten as side dishes.

Health claims are also central to the message of *The Potato – Staple Grain, Staple Food*. Chapters elaborate on the potato's alleged health benefits, and one chapter explains the nutritional consequences of different cooking methods, demonstrating for example the benefits of eating unpeeled potatoes and of steaming over deep-frying. The health claims made in this book are numerous and far-reaching. In addition to those listed in *The Versatile Potato*, Li Jichen and his co-authors, drawing on languages of both biomedical nutrition and Chinese medicine, inform the reader that eating potatoes can strengthen the immune system, keep one alert and in a good mood, protect against the cold, cure headaches, lower one's blood pressure, and even prevent certain cancers, such as bowel cancer. The potato's ability to help a person keep slim derives not only from producing feelings of repletion, they tell us, but also from its starches, which absorb dietary fats and help eliminate them from the body.

In short, the potato is presented as a kind of superfood, or more than a superfood – a complete food. As Li et al. (2015: 10) repeatedly tell us, the potato is “a grain, a vegetable, a fruit, and a medicine” all wrapped up in one. It is important to highlight the historical specificity of the health claims being made here. In the eighteenth-century European treatises discussed by Earle (2018), the potato is lauded for its ability to provide “nourishment” for labouring bodies. The recent Chinese texts suggest that the potato is not merely a useful source of energy for physical labour. Rather, the complex nutritional messages made in these books attempt to demonstrate the relevance of the potato to contemporary concerns, not least among often more sedentary, urban populations – concerns to do with stress, tiredness, overweight, diabetes, hypertension, and cancer. In other words, the nutritional characteristics of the potato make it a suitable, healthy food for all Chinese, be they rural farmers or urban office workers.

Foreign and Local, Urban and Rural

While health messages are central to potato promotion, they are not the only strategy used to convince Chinese consumers to adopt the potato as a staple food. Another set of strategies is specifically concerned with addressing the Andean tuber’s ambiguous state as a food often associated, on the one hand, with Western eating habits and people and, on the other hand, with rurality, poverty, and backwardness. Writing on culinary “creolisation” in the Caribbean, Wilk (2006) discusses “substitution” as one of many processes through which new elements are mixed into a cuisine. He describes substitution as “[a] special form of mixing [which] replaces one of the normal ingredients in a recipe with something new. Sometimes renaming the dish marks the substitution, but often the whole purpose of substitution is to simulate or deceive” (Wilk, 2006: 116). This is the strategy deployed by Wu’s Enshi villagers when covering steamed potatoes with a layer of rice. Substitution allows some or most of the characteristic flavour, texture, or appearance of the potato to be concealed. Thus, the Ministry of Agriculture encourages the industrial development of a diverse range of processed foods that use potato flour to make popular staple foods normally made from wheat or other flours, such as steamed bread (馒头, *mantou*), rice noodles (米粉, *mifen*), wheat noodles (面条, *miantiao*), and bread (面包, *mianbao*), as well as local products like flatcakes (煎饼, *jianbing*), nans (饅, *nan*), sticky rice dumplings (粽子, *zongzi*), and sticky rice cakes (年糕, *niangao*) (Zhongguo Nongye Xinxiwang, 2016: 2). Numerous companies have taken up the challenge. In my visits to Beijing markets and supermarkets in 2018, I noticed that potato noodles (土豆粉, *tudoufen*) were a common product. Substitution is also at work in some cookbooks, such as *Nothing Tastier than Potatoes* (Gerun Shenghuo, 2016), which includes recipes for using mashed potatoes to make noodles (*miantiao*) – here potato is mixed with wheat – and steamed breads like *mantou*, *mo* (馍), and *wowotou* (窝窝头) – the first two involve mixing potatoes with wheat and in the last potatoes are mixed with maize flour.

Strategies of substitution are attempts to make the potato more palatable as a staple food by concealing it within traditional forms. It is not only its organoleptic differences from wheat, rice, and other grain staples but also its potential associations with both

foreignness and rural backwardness that are incorporated into these more familiar Chinese staples. Conversely, some potato promotions celebrate potato-based foods from China's inland regions. Instead of concealing the "foreign" tuber, they uphold its Chineseness and praise the potato cultures of China's often impoverished inland areas. Like *A Bite of China*, the popular series that inspired it, the 2015 CCTV documentary, *A Bite of Potato*, investigates local traditions of food. In this 45 minute film, the viewer is taught about three potato-growing areas in China's inland: Wuxi County in Chongqing Municipality in the Southwest, Zizhou County in the North of Shaanxi Province (Shaan Bei) in China's Northwest, and Dingxi City in Gansu Province, also in the Northwest.

In each area, we follow the food trails of local potato specialities from production to processing to consumption (albeit not necessarily in that order). We are introduced to farmers, small-scale processors, street stall operators, restaurateurs, chefs, and customers. The film depicts the skill, dedication, and ingenuity of the people who produce the potato specialities. The opening scene portrays Yuan Jincui, who with the help of her cousin makes potato pancakes (洋芋丝粑粑, *yangyusi baba*) in a market stall in a town in Wuxi. The camera lingers on Yuan's cousin's hands as she skilfully slices potatoes in them. Later, in Zizhou, we meet Auntie Liang, who makes steamed potato dough balls (洋芋馍馍, *yangyu momo*) and potato flatcakes (洋芋煎饼, *yangyu jianbing*) to sell at a nearby market. To make the latter, she grounds potato slices she has dried, insisting, according to the narrator, on using a traditional, mule-drawn grindstone in order to achieve an "authentic Shaan Bei flavour" (地道的陕北味道, *didao de Shaan Bei weidao*).

The film highlights not only people's craft but also their emotional attachment to their local potato foods, including as staples. In Wuxi, we meet a family of potato farmers who celebrate the harvest with a meal including "potato starch chunks" (粉坨坨, *fen tuotuo*) as a *cai* and whole cooked potatoes as a staple. In Dingxi, Gansu, we witness a farming family enjoy a meal based around "potatoes boiled in an iron wok" (铁锅煮洋芋, *tieguo zhu yangyu*). In Zizhou, Feng Xiaoyan, an entrepreneur known as "Sister Potato" (土豆姐姐, *Tudou Jiejie*) for her love of the tuber (and something of a minor national celebrity following her involvement in numerous potato promotions), leads a traditional-style *yang'ge* (秧歌) dance to celebrate the potato harvest. This is followed by a joint preparation and shared meal of steamed grated potatoes mixed with wheat flour (洋芋擦擦, *yangyu caca*). We are told by the narrator that "people's tastes carry memories" and that whatever else may change, potatoes are a "grain staple (粮食, *liangshi*) that people in Shaan Bei cannot do without."

It is frequently emphasised in the film that such attachments are shared by both rural and urban people in these potato-growing areas. The narrator informs us that in Wuxi, hotpot with dried potatoes and cured pork (干洋芋腊肉火锅, *gan yangyu larou huoguo*) is adored by the "mountain people" (山里人, *shanliren*), who make the dried potatoes, and by "city people" (城里人, *chengliren*) alike. Also in Wuxi, a customer of Yuan Jincui's declares that "a bowl of soy milk and a potato pancake can make a meal." In Chongqing City, we are told by the narrator that a bowl of hotpot potato noodles (土豆火锅粉, *tudou huoguo fen*) for lunch fits perfectly into the busy lifestyles of the "office worker" (上班族, *shangbanzu*) and is "in no way inferior to a bowl of wheat noodles."

In Lanzhou, in Gansu, people start queueing outside Ma Shigang's restaurant by 11 a.m. for a lunch of his boiled potato slices (洋芋片, *yangyupian*). In other words, rather than marking divisions between city and country, affluent and poor, as suggested by my Yunnan informants, in the film attachment to potatoes as a staple food cuts across such divisions.

These messages seem particularly targeted at urban viewers, who are repeatedly reminded not only of the dependence of urban foodways on surrounding rural areas and producers, but also of how well potato-based foods fit into urban lifestyles and tastes. This is similar to the health messages in *The Potato – Staple Crop, Staple Food*, which, as mentioned above, appear to be especially aimed at urban consumers and others concerned with overconsumption, stress, and sedentary lifestyles. Indeed, although *A Bite of Potato* highlights culinary delights more than health, there is also some overlap with the health messages of *The Potato – Staple Crop, Staple Food*. For example, we are told that “Chongqing beauties” (重庆美女, *Chongqing meinü*) keep slim (苗条, *miaotiao*) with the help of hotpot potato noodles, while one customer declares of a bowl of potato noodles (马铃薯粉条, *malingshu fentiao*) from Zizhou that they are “so elastic (筋筋的, *jinjin de*) and smooth; eating them gives you a comfortable feeling in your belly.”

That said, the intended audience of *A Bite of Potato* appears to be not only (urban) consumers but also (rural) producers. The potato farmers featured in the film are presented as successful entrepreneurs, who often combine farming with processing or vending. For example, in Wuxi, Xie Jingxuan and his family not only grow potatoes, they also make dried potato slices (干洋芋, *gan yangyu*) for sale to hotpot houses in nearby cities. In Zizhou, Aunt Liang and others sell their local specialties in nearby markets and even in the provincial capital, Xi'an. Ran Jiping and her husband in Dingxi grow potatoes and serve them to the tourists in the guesthouse (农家乐, *nongjiale*) they have set up on their farm. The narrator tells us that they have raised a family and sent their children to university on potatoes. Others, like Yuan Jincui in Wuxi, who according to the narrator has “raised a family” on potato pancakes, and Ma Shigang in Lanzhou, are small-town entrepreneurs with successful businesses. Many of the rural entrepreneurs are women, reflecting perhaps the feminisation of agriculture in many areas. In other words, if *A Bite of Potato* sets out to raise the awareness and pride in and taste for Chinese local potato specialties, its producers also aim to create new opportunities and ideas for would-be potato entrepreneurs. This is in line with Ministry of Agriculture documents, which uphold expansion of the potato sector as part of a state strategy of alleviating rural poverty, especially in Western areas (Zhongguo Nongye Xinxiwang, 2016).

A Bite of Potato might be described as “gastronationalist” (DeSoucey, 2010), in that the filmmakers use national symbols to promote specific foods and use local foods to further national sentiments. In places, however, the film instead pursues a strategy of “gastro-transnationalism,” which I define here as the active diffusion of foods and culinary techniques, technologies, knowledge, and ideas across national borders. In these scenes, the tuber's associations with Western food are used to mark it as cosmopolitan and contemporary. Three scenes in the film focus on Western-style foods. While most of

the film is set in villages, small towns, and inland cities, and at snack shops, market stalls, and noodle chains, representations of Western-style potato foods are set in opulent, grand restaurants, in two cases in the nation's capital. In one scene, the viewer is invited to view the Russian potato dishes prepared in the restaurant kitchen of Beijing's sixty-year-old Moscow Restaurant, where according to one chef 80 per cent to 90 per cent of the meals served include potatoes. In another, she is introduced to Zhang Aiguo, an elite chef in Beijing, who uses potato flour to make traditionally wheat-based Chinese staples such as steamed bread (*mantou*), noodles (*miantiao*), and boiled dumplings (水饺, *shuijiao*). The narrator tells us: "Northerners are attached to wheat staples, and Zhang is transforming customers' taste buds." Zhang also makes pizza, with a base of mixed potato flour and wheat flour and with toppings that include sliced potatoes. In the film, Western-style potato foods are presented as compatible with Chinese dining styles, and Chinese diners comfortable with these foreign-style foods. The customers filmed at the Moscow Restaurant are Chinese-looking, not foreign, and the narrator highlights the familiarity of Beijinger's with the restaurant, telling us that they refer to it as "Lao Mo" (老莫, Old Moscow). Zhang Aiguos's pizza is carefully domesticated into Chinese forms of commensality. At the end of the section, Zhang, his wife, and his daughter sit down together at a round table and use chopsticks to serve and eat slices of the pizza. At another fancy Western-style restaurant, in the final story of the film, a young chef shows off two of his creations, which draw on both Chinese and Western cooking styles and ingredients: a savoury cake made from a mix of mashed potato and tofu, and a potato hollowed out, stuffed with bacon, and baked.

Similar juxtapositions and combinations of the local and the foreign can also be found in some cookbooks, for example in *The Versatile Potato – Everyday Recipes for the Home*. Recipes from around China include potatoes stewed with pork ribs, sour-hot potato slivers (酸辣土豆丝, *suanla tudousi*), and "granny's potatoes." But the cookbook is not arranged according to region or country of origin, so recipes for local Chinese dishes are listed alongside recipes for Western-style foods such as potato salads, French fries, home-made crisps and mashed potatoes. The book also includes two recipes for potato curry. Of the thirty-four recipes in the book, sixteen are clearly of foreign origin. They are often marked as such through names and images of foreign implements such as forks and table settings including coffee cups. But they are also localised – sometimes explicitly, for example in the recipe for potato and beetroot soup described as both Russian and Italian, but from which the butter is removed "to suit Chinese tastes" (Zhang, 2015: 30). The mashed potato dishes typically combine multiple ingredients – for example, salad cream, ham, peas, and sweetcorn – in ways that may be uniquely Chinese; at least I have not seen such combinations in European cookbooks, menus, or homes. One recipe for a Uyghur dish, popular in many northern Chinese cities and known in Chinese as "platter chicken" (大盘鸡, *dapanji*), is included in the book. It is arguably "Hanified" through the non-Halal use of beer to make the sauce. With the help of this cookbook, the home cook will be able to choose dishes that fit in with their own personal preferences and those of family members, be they culturally conservative or more adventurous and cosmopolitan. Perhaps Western-style one day, Chinese the next

– or why not combined in one meal? As in the film, *A Bite of Potato*, the potato is presented as both rooted in local soils and culinary cultures and as foreign – but in ways that have been domesticated for Chinese tastes.

Cuisines, as Wilk (2006) has argued, can be understood at two different but interactive levels – at the level of everyday practice, and at the level of public representations and symbols. At the level of representations, *A Bite of Potato* celebrates the potato in all forms it is eaten in China, be they foreign or Chinese, urban or rural – including as steamed core staples in the rural inland. The cookbooks I have seen also disseminate both Chinese and foreign-style potato preparations. However, these cookbooks do not include recipes for traditional Chinese, potato-based staple foods such as those presented in *A Bite of Potato*. These practical guides to introducing new foods into daily routines include various recipes for staple foods, such as for Western-inspired mash (but often without butter or cream!) and for incorporating potatoes into traditional, wheat-based staples – but there are no recipes in these books for potatoes steamed with rice, roast potatoes, potatoes boiled in an iron wok, steamed shredded potatoes with wheat flour, or other traditional Chinese ways of preparing potatoes as a staple food. It is as if cookbook writers simply do not expect Chinese (urban) home cooks to accept the potato as a staple food in a Chinese-style meal, unless the potato is concealed through techniques of substitution.

Perhaps, then, the widespread adoption of the potato as a core staple, if it is to happen, will depend on the ingeniousness of the food and restaurant industries to develop acceptable industrial foods, which substitute potato flour for wheat and rice. Promoters themselves seem to think so – as mentioned, the Ministry of Agriculture promotes the development of such processed foods. Indeed, the introduction to *The Versatile Potato* informs the reader that “in the traditional culinary structure of our country, except for a few areas where small amounts of potato are directly eaten as a staple, over 95 per cent of potatoes are eaten as a fresh vegetable,” and then bemoans the lack of variety and popularity of processed potato-based foods in China (Zhang, 2015: 5). Similarly, Li et al. (2015: 67–69) contrast China’s limited consumption of potatoes as a staple food with the West. They associate the widespread adoption of the potato as a staple food in Western countries with the alleged popularity there of processed potato products and argue that China must adopt foreign methods to diversify its range of processed potato foods. Alongside the gastronationalist representations in *A Bite of Potato*, here it is implied that a gastro-transnationalist approach will be needed to achieve the patriotic goals of transforming the potato into a staple food.

State, Market, and Ethical Consumption

The historian Earle (2017, 2018) has recently argued that the promotion of potatoes in the eighteenth century by European agronomists, scientific academies, and rulers reflected new ways of thinking about the state, the population, and the economy. From Spain to Sweden, from England to Russia, elites enthusiastically embraced this South American tuber in ways that reveal a growing belief that the strength of a nation is

predicated on the dietary well-being of its population. Alleged to be easier to cultivate than wheat and infinitely more nourishing for working bodies, the potato was hailed as a vital instrument in these nation-strengthening endeavours. Importantly, the potato was not to be forced upon European farmers and workers. Instead, it was subtly promoted through the dissemination of health advice, recipes, and agricultural treatises. As with the “invisible hand” of the market invoked in *The Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith – himself a proponent of the potato – individual choices based on “free will” and motivated by self-interest would in aggregate come to benefit the common good. Earle (2017) concludes one of her discussions by drawing parallels with the Chinese state’s current enthusiasm for the potato. Noting that this enthusiasm has coincided with a time of market-oriented policies, she suggests that the official embrace of the potato in China may reveal similar reconfigurations within Chinese public discourse regarding the relationship between state, market, and the common good to those occurring in Enlightenment Europe.

Much of what I have presented in this article would confirm Earle’s suggestions. Under the “high” state socialism of the 1950s–1970s, the party–state’s control of the food system enabled it to shape diets to a considerable degree. Of course, such control was far from complete, not least because of the unreliability of food production and distribution. The state encouraged frugal eating and at various times touted the consumption of particular foods in the national interest – for example, during the “three difficult years,” sweet potatoes, white potatoes, and so-called food substitutes (代食品, *daishipin*) including various stalks, roots, and barks (Dikötter, 2010: 136; Gao, 2011). But the key mechanisms for shaping food consumption were centralised planning of production, rationing, and strict household registration policies, which linked a person’s food availability to their assigned, rural or urban, residence and place of work. Choices were severely constrained.

By contrast to the period of high socialism, and similar to the eighteenth-century European shift discussed by Earle, “consumer choice” is now meant to play a driving role in China’s food system (Veeck, 2000). In a context of increased variety and market competition, people cannot be compelled to eat potatoes. Rather, softer tools including various media – such as a TV film that both hails China’s rich heritage of traditional potato foods and celebrates the cosmopolitan outlook of the country’s chefs and diners, recipe collections, and popular science books – are used by state actors to encourage citizens to embrace the potato as a national staple food and increase the role of the potato in their daily food routines. Above all, Chinese are to be convinced of the potato’s merits as a healthy food for themselves and their families, spurring on the market through their self-interested decisions. As Li Jichen and his colleagues put it in the introduction to *The Potato – Staple Grain, Staple Food*, citing the Deputy Minister of Agriculture at the time, Yu Xinrong: We must “firmly establish the rationale of allowing nutrition to guide consumption, and consumption to guide production” (Li et al., 2015: 2).

Yet at the same time, potato promoters in China seem unwilling to rely completely on the Smithian logic that rational self-interest will contribute naturally to the common weal. Rather, potato promoters in China today encourage citizens to eat potatoes not

only on the basis of self-interested health concerns, but also out of an ethical commitment to the greater good, particularly toward the nation. Most obvious is the message that consumers might be motivated by their concerns over the country's food security. This is evident in the first two chapters of Li Jichen's co-authored book, the first unambiguously titled "Making the potato a staple grain will help strengthen grain security." The authors outline several features that make the potato important in achieving grain self-sufficiency – ranging from its versatility as a food, its nutritional richness, and its ability to withstand droughts and thrive in nutrient-poor soils – and also remind the reader of the national importance of the goal of grain security itself: "Especially as our country has 1.3 billion people, we must supply our own grain base. Others will not manage to feed us – or, alternatively, they will control us" (Li et al., 2015: 7).

Li et al. (2015: 6–10) further attempt to reverse the negative associations of the tuber as a staple food of necessity by reminding readers of the heroic role played by the potato in providing for the people during the nation's difficult years of the early 1960s, a role which they claim earned the tuber the reputation as a "life saving treasure" (拯世之宝, *zheng shi zhi bao*). In other words, the potato should be enjoyed as a national saviour, not spurned as a poverty food. As the authors put it: "We must do our best to develop and utilize [the potato] in order to fully realize its functions, to allow it to do even more to develop humanity and strengthen our nation" (Li et al., 2015: 10). Thus, before readers learn much about the possible individual health benefits of the potato, the focus of several subsequent chapters, the authors first establish that eating potatoes is a moral duty to humanity and, above all, the nation.

Their appeals to readers' patriotic sentiments are also made in somewhat more subtle ways. Li et al. (2015: 68) claim:

With the strengthening of people's health consciousness – from eating one's fill (*chi bao*) to eating well (*chi hao*) to eating for health (*chi chu jiankang*) – the eating of potatoes is undergoing three transformations: from supplementary food (副食, *fushi*) to staple food; from raw material to a series of industrially processed foods; and from consuming for subsistence (温饱消费, *wenbao xiaofei*) to consuming for nutrition and health. Potatoes are becoming part of the staple food environment and atmosphere of the dining table.

The implication for the reader seems clear: by regularly eating potatoes as a staple food for health one is keeping up with modern times. Moreover, by eating potatoes as a staple food, readers will not only improve their own dietary health and follow the trend for healthy eating. They will also contribute to the overall health of the nation. The authors write:

Dietary nutrition is the material foundation of people's health. As with the statement "drinking a glass of milk will make a nation strong", making the potato a staple food, eaten with every meal, three times a day, will certainly raise the health standard of the Chinese people. (Li et al., 2015: 68–69)

The authors' allusion to the milk campaigns of the 2000s is thought-provoking. Despite the prevalence of lactase imperistence among Chinese populations and several food safety scandals involving dairy products – most famously, the melamine milk scandal of 2008 – the state-backed milk campaigns have been hugely successful in terms of increased consumption, especially in urban areas, and the development of the domestic dairy industry (Wiley, 2011). Wiley (2011) attributes these successes to the associations made in nutritional campaigns between milk and modernity and with children's physical growth, aligning the interests of the state with those of (often singleton) parents (see also Gong and Peter, 2012; Jing, 2000). It is not, therefore, surprising that Li et al. (2015) would wish to draw on the successes of the milk campaigns and the high status enjoyed by milk as a feature of modern diets to further their potato promotion.

Similarly successful have been the state-backed campaigns to promote “quality” rice from Northeast China, partly on the argument of the alleged health benefits and food safety of this rice (Zader, 2011). The potato campaigns share with the milk campaign and “quality rice” campaign a concern with improving the “quality” (*suzhi*) of the population. This “quality” is not just about bodily health, growth, and strength, but also about people's practices and understandings of hygiene, health, and “quality” food (Wiley, 2011; Zader, 2011; see also Greenhalgh, 2011). As Jing (2000) has demonstrated, nutritional knowledge is disseminated alongside access to healthy foods and medicines. Nutritional consciousness is thus not simply reflected in changing dietary practices but is also furthered through the state-backed campaigns themselves. This appears to be true of the potato promotions, too – books like *The Versatile Potato* and *The Potato – Staple Grain, Staple Food* can be seen as attempts not only to promote the potato on the basis of its alleged health benefits but also as part of a wider state project to spread nutritional thinking and further the attitude of “eating for health.”

The campaigns promoting the consumption of fluid milk have been especially successful in urban areas (Wiley, 2011, 22). Similarly, Zader (2011) argues that the urban middle class has been specifically targeted for consumption of “quality” Northeast rice. Zader sees no contradiction between this targeted promotion and the wider state attempt to improve “population quality.” Indeed, as Tomba (2009) has argued, in the reform era the middle class (or “stratum”) has been held up as an exemplar of modernity and quality for others to emulate. Attempts to convince urban and middle-class citizens figure in the potato campaigns, too, as I have suggested in relation to claims made about the tuber's particular health benefits and its suitability to urban tastes and fast-paced lifestyles. However, the challenges facing potato promoters are different from those facing promoters of milk and rice, and the class dimensions of the potato campaigns may be somewhat different as a result.

Rice-eating enjoys positive symbolic associations with Chineseness and, especially in the South, the ability to regularly consume cooked rice as the basis of one's daily meals has long been a sign of affluence and well-being (Lee, 2011; Oxfeld, 2017). Fluid cow's milk has for centuries been regarded as a health tonic and its associations with modernity and well-being were established already during the Republican period (1912–1949) (Sabban, 2014). By contrast, the potato has a low status as a staple food of poverty

and it would be difficult to deny its rootedness in many mountainous, inland areas. To the extent that the urban middle classes have been targeted it has been about convincing them that the tuber crosses boundaries between rich and poor, urban and rural, Chinese and foreign – a message equally relevant to rural and working-class groups in Western China who may need convincing that continuing to eat potatoes need not mark them as “backward.” This is attempted partly by emphasising its associations with the “modern” West, including with the latter’s alleged reliance on industrial foods, while at the same time also embracing (and possibly even exaggerating) rather than denying the potato’s importance in China’s rural inland. This is particularly evident in *A Bite of Potato*. Appealing to the growing interest among China’s urban middle class in rural tourism and local craft foods (Mak, 2014), the film reinvents inland potato preparations as heritage foods, markers of local and national tradition. Although *A Bite of Potato* contains little in the way of practical advice, it may help raise the status of the potato by contributing to the idea that it is a “national” food.

Conclusion

As pointed out by a reviewer of this article, Chinese official statistics suggest that the contribution of the potato to China’s grain security may be limited. For example, in 2017 the total output of tubers (potatoes and sweet potatoes) was 28 million tonnes, actually down from nearly 37 million tonnes in 2000 and (even unconverted to grain equivalent) just 4.2 per cent of total grain output (National Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Yet at the same time, reports suggest that some impoverished counties in inland China, encouraged by government to grow more potatoes, are struggling to find markets for their produce (Hornby and Zhang, 2019). That said, the purpose of this article is not to assess the success or otherwise of the strategy to transform the potato into a staple, but rather to examine the rhetorical strategies deployed by state actors in their attempts to encourage Chinese consumers to eat more potatoes, situate these in cultural and historical context, and consider what they might tell us about the contemporary relationship between party–state, people, food, and morality.

The rhetorical strategies deployed by potato promoters reflect an important difference between the contemporary state construction of a national moral economy of food and its late imperial equivalents. While the contemporary state is as committed as its precedents to “nourishing the people,” it takes a much closer interest in the motivations and practices of ordinary eaters, who are now seen not just as recipients of state protection but as sharing responsibility with the state for ensuring national food security. In part, this interest in eaters’ practices reflects the centrality of the market in China’s contemporary food system, including to contemporary techniques of food governance. In a context of increasing variety and abundance of foods, arriving through transregional and transnational supply chains, and a plethora of commercial messages about good food, party–state actors use every available argument, including gastronationalist appeals, to convince people of the merits of the potato over other foods.

The state's interest in eaters' practices and tastes also has to do with the idea, which emerged during the Republican period, that people did not necessarily know how to eat well, and that the furthering of the people's well-being therefore required the dissemination of knowledge of nutrition as well as the use of nutritional science to monitor and measure the health and strength of the Chinese population (Swislocki, 2011). Post-Mao food campaigns such as those for milk, "quality" rice, and potatoes build on and deepen this "nutritional governmentality," as Swislocki (2011) calls it, at a national scale, reflecting the current concerns with constructing a "quality" population of healthy, strong, self-governing subjects who are able to compete in a globalised market economy (Greenhalgh, 2011). Such self-governing subjects are also by definition ethical subjects in the sense that they have a moral obligation to their own well-being and personal development which, by extension, will strengthen the nation. Seen in this light, potato promoters' numerous messages ranging from the tuber's supposed links to Western cuisines, modern trends for healthy eating, and Chinese heritage, to its alleged benefits for personal health, national strength, water resources, and food security, are not only opportunistic attempts to appeal to as many consumers as possible. They are also messages that articulate the personal tastes, identities, and interests of individual eaters with wider ethical goals. State-backed potato promotions can therefore be understood alongside the recent proliferation in China of popular movements such as those promoting vegetarianism, Community Supported Agriculture, and organic farming (e.g. Klein, 2017; Si et al., 2015). Similar to state campaigns for the potato, such movements may further the notion in China of "ethical consumption," encouraging citizen-consumers, particularly in the cities, to base their food choices in the marketplace on moral evaluations, linking personal well-being to a commitment to the greater, often national good. Whether promotions of the potato as "healthy" and "ethical" will manage to convince Chinese eaters to embrace this "foreign tuber" as a staple food is another matter.

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