

China's food fears

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In 2003 the German literary magazine *Lettre Internationale* launched a new literary prize, the "Lettre Ulysses Award for the Art of Reportage" [1], to recognise and honour a valuable but underrated form. In its first year, the prize was won by the Russian writer Anna Politovskaya for *Chechnya: Russia's dishonour*. In 2004, the Chinese writers Chen Guidi and Wu Chuntao carried the prize for their seminal work, *A Survey of Chinese Peasants*, and last year it was British journalist Alexandra Fuller's book *Scribbling the Cat: Travels with an African Soldier*.

Over the coming weeks, **openDemocracy** will publish excerpts from the finalists for the 2006 award. The winner will be announced in Berlin on 30 September.

The short list:

- **Karl-Markus Gauss** (Austria): *The Dog Eaters of Svinia* [2] (Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 2004)
- **Linda Grant** (Great Britain): *The People on the Street: A Writer's View of Israel* [3] (Virago, 2006)
- **Juanita León** (Colombia): *Country of Bullets: War Diaries* [4] (Aguilar, 2005)
- **Li Datong** (China): *The Story of "Freezing Point"* [5] (Guangxi Normal University Press, 2006)
- **Erik Orsenna** (France): *Journey to the Lands of Cotton: A Brief Manual of Globalisation* [6] (Fayard, 2006)
- **Manjushree Thapa** (Nepal): *Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy* [7] (Penguin Viking India, 2005)
- **Zhou Qing** (China): *What Kind of God: A Survey of the Current Safety of China's Food* (Reportage Literature, 2004)

To read extracts from last year's list, [click here](#) [8].

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Extract from *What Kind of God: A Survey of the Current Safety of China's Food* (Reportage Literature, 2004)

Translated from Chinese by Flora Drew

Perhaps the biggest difference between food in the west and in China is that Chinese people like to eat lots of little snacks whereas westerners prefer one 'main meal'. In the west, restaurants and fast food outlets produce standardised meals, where quantities are strictly

regulated. But the Chinese have a long history of eating snacks [9]. Traditionally an agricultural country, when farmers went out onto the fields, they would bring snacks with them to eat and to share with friends, or would swap them with farmers from neighbouring villages. The quality of the snack was important - it would indicate how skilful the wife was in the kitchen and help the family to maintain their 'face [10]'. So over the centuries the quality of these snacks became better and better, so that gradually, all over China, one could find snacks that were both delicious and safe.

I think that when people eat snacks, their trust in what they are eating and the need to 'keep face' is more important than the actual eating of the snack itself. But now these snacks that have such a long and glorious history strike terror [11] in people's hearts. Let's just look at pickled vegetables [12]. Although pickled vegetables were first made in Sichuan [13], there is hardly anyone in the whole country who hasn't tasted this delicious snack. But now when you visit Sichuan, your friends will say to you: 'Do you like pickled vegetables? There's a factory in Chengdu that pickles the vegetables in DDVP [14].' In the past everyone in Sichuan would have pickled vegetables with their meals, but now the managers of some pickled vegetable factories say that, 'We don't eat any of these pickles in Sichuan, we sell them to people from other provinces.'

After some secret interviews, I finally uncovered the truth about this business. The most important part of the pickling process is the soaking. I noticed that the salt [15] used in the pickling was not only whiter than most salt, but the grains were finer. So I asked, 'How come it's so white?' The manager said, 'This salt is bought on the black market. It's cheaper by fifty yuan a jin.' Later in the yard outside, I saw printed on the bags of salt the terrifying words, 'Industrial Salt', and 'Not for human consumption.'

The workers of this factory showed me in another yard neatly arranged piles of this industrial salt. I asked, 'Have you always used this salt?' They said, 'Yes.' I said, 'Do the other factories use it?' And the workers all nodded in reply. A few days later I returned to the factory, and noticed lots of little insects crawling around the vats of pickled vegetables, and I asked why there were so many insects. The manager said, 'When we soak the vegetables there are always a lot of insects, but when we add the chemicals they all disappear.' A little later, a worker started adding chemicals to the vats. I asked what the chemicals were and the worker replied that they were insect killers. He also said that to ensure that no insects got to them, the pickles would be sprayed with insecticide every two or three days until they left the factory. When I asked exactly what kind of insecticide it was, both the manager and the workers said that they didn't know. Because there was no label on the bottle of the chemical they used, I took a small sample of the red liquid, put it in a sealed container and sent it off to be checked by the China Food Import Export Investigation Centre, and was told that this chemical was 99% strength DDVP . . .

Only about a third of the pickles produced in Chengdu [16] meet with the regulations imposed by the Chengdu Quality Inspection Department. On 16 June 2004, the Chengdu Quality Inspection Department announced the results of its survey into pickled vegetables. Of seventy batches of products produced by fifty-six factories, only sixteen batches made the grade, which is a pass rate of just 22.86%. Seventeen batches had levels of additives above the maximum allowed. It was also discovered that 9 batches did not have as much product as labelled and forty-eight batches had labels that were inaccurate or had insufficient information. The Quality Inspection Department has requested that all those companies that didn't make the grade rectify their mistakes.

In Guizhou [17] there is a saying that 'If you don't eat something sour for three days, your legs will go soft'. The Guizhou restaurants have become famous for their sour fish soups [18], but recently 215 of them have developed some serious problems. On 16 June 2004, it was found

that in 215 restaurants, there were high levels of opiates [19] in their soup and flavourings, and the authorities have ordered these restaurants to be closed down. Zhang Xin, deputy head of Guizhou's Anti-drug team, told me that the Anti-drug team joined forces with the disease prevention centre and the food quality inspection department to launch a campaign against the addition of opiates to food products. A combined investigation team carried out research in to 2642 restaurants in Guiyang, Bijie and Liupanshui, and found that in 215 restaurants, the food sold contained traces of opiates in varying quantities. During the campaign, 3,200 grams of opiate seeds and 1,700 grams of opiate shells were confiscated. The relevant authorities have closed these 215 restaurants, and ordered thirty-six other restaurants whose problems were a less serious to undergo retraining. It is said that many Guizhou restaurants that specialise in beef, lamb, dog, and spicy soups add opiates to their food so as to encourage their customers to return. Wei Tao, the deputy head of the Guizhou Disease Prevention Office, told me that some of the soups served at the restaurants contain traces of morphine, some in rather high quantities. He said that if the customers drink this soup over a long period of time they can become addicted to it, and their dependency might even drive them to take harder drugs.

Again in Guizhou, a recent survey undertaken by the National Hygiene Authority discovered that of the thirty street stalls selling fried dough sticks that they inspected, the levels of aluminium [20] in the sticks all exceeded the national standards. Not one made the grade. One of the stalls even sold sticks that had aluminium levels 11 times higher than those allowed. The reason for this was that the street traders had little knowledge of food safety, and during the cooking process added too much alum to the dough.

According to one food producer, the restaurants that serve 'oil boiled fish' tend to use the same oil over and over again. What usually happens is that after the fish has been eaten, the waiters pour the remains through a sieve so that the left over oil collects in a steel container, then at night they remove the water from the oil. When they use this oil again they have to add large quantities of chillies so as to disguise the fact that the oil isn't fresh. This is how 'oil boiled fish' has now become 'saliva boiled fish'.

'Cold Skin' is a famous snack from Shanxi's Guanzhong district. With the success of various Shanxi comedians, these snacks have become popular all over the country. But recently some terrible facts were found about some cold skin that was sold in Beijing: it was discovered that one illegal manufacturer made cold skin by kneading the dough with their feet, and adding urine and saliva to the mixture.

'Cold Skin' noodles are famous throughout the country, and women especially like to eat them in the summer. But on 18 June 2004, a seventeen-year-old worker in a cold skin factory in Chaoyang [21] District told a reporter the disgusting way in which this snack was made. He said that they kneaded the dough as though they were washing some heavy coat, sometimes when they were too tired to mix it by hand they would get into the container and knead the dough with their feet. If any dough dropped onto the dirty floor, they would just pick it up and fling it back into the container. They would never bother to clean any of the implements they used at the end of the day. After they went to the toilet, they would never wash their hands. Seeing this, the boss would just laugh and say, 'Don't let anyone else see you do that!' On three or four occasions, when the workers had been sworn at by their boss or had had their pay reduced, they would even piss into the dough, and on one or two occasions the worker also saw an angry colleague spit into the container of boiling noodles. The young worker also said that there were more than ten other children working in the illegal factory with him. The boss had brought them over with him from Shanxi, the youngest was only fourteen years old. They had no health certificates, and many of the children didn't even have identity papers.

The Duanwu Festival [22] is traditionally a time when the Chinese public pay their respects to the concepts of compassion and justice. The quality of some of the bamboo rice parcels that are traditionally given as offerings to the ancient hero Qu Yuan have recently also been the cause of great concern. For the illegal traders who lack any sense of morality, each new festival is just another chance to make money.

On the Duanwu festival of 11 June 2004, the Beijing departments of Town Management, Industry and Commerce, and Hygiene went to inspect an illegal factory in the Jinding Road area that was producing bamboo rice parcels. They confiscated five tonnes of parcels, and a batch of illegal ingredients, with a total value of 180,000 yuan. This illegal factory didn't comply with any of the basic hygiene regulations, there was rubbish everywhere, the four workers working there had no health certificates or right to work. It was a completely illegal operation.

On the same day another discovery was made about tofu [23] production. Since 1 July 2003, the production of tofu has been systemised, and the sale of unpackaged tofu has been banned. But in some suburban markets, some traders are still selling this unhygienic, unpackaged tofu. Usually this unpackaged tofu is sold directly to hotels, restaurants, companies and school cafeterias. Because it is cheap, and the rules against it are loosely implemented, this unpackaged tofu is still being bought and sold. This illegal tofu is now also being seen for sale in markets, although its sale there is more covert. This 'black' tofu is often sold at times when the inspectors are known not to visit, or sometimes the tofu is delivered straight to the customers' homes.

According to one tofu manufacturer, they once followed an illegal tofu producer from his factory to the Baliqiao market, and saw that they had changed the 5am delivery time to 2 or 3am. Another person in the know told me that these factories had very low running costs - 2000 yuan at the most. The only equipment they would have would be an electric grinder, an old petrol barrel and a rubber tube.

First they pour the yellow beans [24] into a cloth bag, without bothering to check for any grit or stones, then they dunk this bag into some water and start grinding the beans up. Then the mixture is rinsed in a sieve and pressed down for a couple of hours and that's it. The man told me that this kind of tofu has a protein content of just 4%, whereas tofu produced by the legitimate factories have protein contents of 70 to 80%. 'To tell you the truth,' he said, 'these illegal traders aren't selling tofu, they're selling water!'

The Chinese have been eating tofu for thousands of years. Apparently there are many Chinese people living abroad who are trying to promote tofu as the healthiest food for the 21st century. But stories like these will inevitably damage the reputation of tofu abroad.

We are seeing more and more of these famous snacks being destroyed before our eyes: the Guanshengyuan mooncakes [25] filled with rotten ingredients, the DDVP pork legs from Jinhua, the poisonous minced meat from Taiqiang, Pingyao's toxic beef. Then there was all the news about pork contaminated with 'lean pork powder', and poisonous beansprouts. Guanghai salted fish is one of the most famous products to come from Taishan in Guangdong Province. Recently news broke out that the Guanghai salted fish was in fact preserved in DDVP. A reporter visited a salted fish factory in Wanglong village - where most of these factories are to be found - and was told by a worker there that the manufacturing process was very simple. First the fish was covered in salt, then cleaned, dried, packed in a box and sold. The most important step of this process was the washing of the fish. The reporter saw that when the fish was being washed, some liquid was added to the wooden vat, and as soon as it was added, white foam started to rise from the surface of the water. The worker explained that this was an agricultural chemical - DDVP - and it was used as an insecticide. The floor was covered with salt. The workers would

walk back and forth across it. There were even droppings in it from the chickens that lived in the yard outside. Although it was produced in this shocking way, the salted fish sold very well. People would travel down from the North to buy it. Most of the customers came from Guangzhou, Jiangmen, Huidong, Huizhou, and some even came from Hunan and Guangxi.

In the past we used to say that 'Food is the people's God', but now, following all these food scares [26], the people have lost all sense of trust in the food that they eat. It might not be too much of an exaggeration to talk about a 'food hygiene fear': rice is polished with metals, noodles are filled with additives, fruit are covered with chemicals that speed up the ripening process and increase their growth, and vegetables are covered with pesticides . . . Who can remain calm when faced with such a frightening situation?

Below is a selection of reports that have come out recently on the safety of our food.

On 5 July 2004, the China Youth Daily reported that a survey had discovered that 82% of the public are afraid about the safety of China's food, and that 90% of people interviewed had encountered a problem with food safety. More than half of the people felt were afraid about the food that failed to meet the government standards, others were afraid about the fake food products and food sold beyond its sell-by date. This survey was carried out in May and June of this year in 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities.

Poisonous lily stalks are now for sale in markets all over the country. On 13 March 2004, the Hygiene Inspection Team of Shenyang discovered seven truck loads, a total of 24.5 tonnes, of lily stalks contaminated with levels of sulphur dioxide that were 200 times higher than those allowed. Then it was discovered that in the areas where most of the lilies are grown - Pingxing County in Henan and Dengdong County in Hunan, this 24.5 tonnes was just the tip of the iceberg. According to the Hygiene Office of Hengyang City, the 24.5 tonnes discovered in Shenyang came from Dengdong, but also Shanxi and Fujian, indicating that the addition of sulphur dioxide during the production of this product was common throughout the country. Yang Wu, president of Hunan's Yang Wu Lily Stalk Company, told me that 'There are more than two or three thousand tonnes of poisonous lily stalks produced this year.'

The toxicity of these lily stalks is caused by the additive 'Jiaoya Powder'. 30% of this additive is sulphur dioxide [27]. According to China's 1992 'Safety standards for food additives', it is illegal to add sulphur dioxide to lily stalks, whether it's to act as a preservative or a whitening agent.

A food stall holder from Dengdong told me that in 1992, Pingxing County in Henan Province started cultivating lily stalks. They borrowed the production techniques from Dengdong, adding sulphur products during the processing. As soon as the lily stalks were picked, the farmers would tip them into large plastic bags, then add sulphur powder. Every 100 jin [28] of stalks would have about fifty-six jin of sulphur powder. Working on the basis that eight jin of fresh lily stalks produces about one jin of dried flowers, then every twenty-five jin of dried stalks would have about one jin of sulphur dioxide in them.

'We are not eating lily stalks, we are eating sulphur dioxide!' Li Yingwu said. This is only the first step. Sulphur products are added during the drying and other processes as well, so that by the time they reach the dinner plate, the stalks are bound to have sulphur dioxide levels that are hundreds of times higher than those allowed.

According to the research, if people consume high levels of sulphur dioxide they will develop symptoms of poisoning - dizziness, nausea, diarrhoea, lethargy, stomach aches etc, and in the long term will suffer liver and kidney damage. Sulphur dioxide consumption can also lead to cancer. The presence of high levels of sulphur dioxide in lily stalks is a time bomb waiting to

explode. But the farmers are unaware of this problem, and they themselves eat their crops every day.

Poets and philosophers in the west have used salt as a metaphor for love [29] and friendship, and the Chinese have traditionally regarded salt as one of the seven things you must remember to buy when you go out shopping, but now salt is poisoning us too. In China, 403 people have been poisoned by the salt they have eaten, and two people have died. In this year's warning issued by the Department of Hygiene, people were advised to buy salt only from reputable sources, and on no account buy milk on the black market.

'Sulphur salt [30]' has additives added during processing to maintain the salt's colour. This additive is very poisonous. If you consume three grams of it you will die. Serious poisoning leads to such symptoms as: headache, dizziness, chest aches, breathlessness, palpitations, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea etc. At higher levels, symptoms included loss of concentration, restlessness, loss of consciousness, breathing problems and even death.

A report from the department of Hygiene also said that Wanjiadenghuo Restaurant in Puzhong, Shanxi Province poisoned 168 people, and that Chunfaengteng in Gan County, Shaanxi Province, illegally used sulphur salt, which poisoned 115 people. 117 people were poisoned by illegal stall holders using sulphur salt in Changchun, Jilin Province. In Xianning, Hubei Province, three people in one family were poisoned by consuming the salt, two of them died . . .

On 11 June 2004, the Beijing authorities warned the public not to eat raw salmon, so as to avoid listeria [31] poisoning. At the same time, Beijing's Department of Industry and Commerce warned people to eat only in moderation dried vegetables, fruit and nuts, as 87.1% of these products did not meet with the regulations regarding sulphur dioxide content. Again, on the same day, the Department of Industry and Commerce named forty-three products that contained illegal amounts of additives. On 21 July, Beijing's Office of Hygiene and Food issued a warning to the city's residents not to eat sea snails. Because on 13 July Yinchuan city had discovered a serious case of toxic sea snails - fifty-five people were poisoned and one person died. The sea snails themselves weren't toxic, it was the poisonous substances they had eaten that made them so lethal.

It is dangerous to eat vegetables in the summer. During the summer there are many insects on the vegetables, and farmers use more chemicals than at any other time to kill them off. The worrying thing is that these insects become resistant to the chemicals over time, and so as to kill them off, some farmers secretly use highly toxic pesticides and chemicals that the governments has forbidden to be used on vegetables. And few farmers wait the full 15 days after the application of pesticides before taking the vegetables to market. In the recent case of poisoned green vegetables in Wuzhou, Jiangxi Province, the farmer had taken the vegetables to market just five days after spraying them with pesticides.

There have been many other cases of serious poisoning of food products. At noon on 8 June 2004, fifteen staff members of Beijing's Yuxi Solar Energy Company were poisoned by unripe beans. On the same day, the canteen of the Luoyang Office in Beijing added twenty-eight grams of sulphur salt to eighteen jin of chicken, causing sixteen people to be poisoned. And on 6 May, during a wedding feast in Dahe village, in Hunan [32] Province, a hundred people fell sick. The County Department of Hygiene suspected that the problem was with the chicken legs that were served. On 19 May, more than 100 students of Changchun University fell sick after eating egg fried rice served in the canteen. The poisoning was caused by the addition of sulphur salt. On the 17 and 18 May, pupils at a primary school in Shicheng County, Henan Province, suffered from food poisoning, forty-seven of them were taken to hospital. The cause was found to be that the food was dirty and full of bacteria. On 18 July, nine employees from a company in Beijing's

Chaoyang District ate at 'Guandong Duyipin' Restaurant, and ordered the restaurant's speciality dish: tripe. After the meal, the nine people felt nauseous and light-headed, and the hospital diagnosed that they had been poisoned by sulphur salt.

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