

SESSION 4: TO EACH HIS OWN MILK

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The Rise in Dairy Consumption in China Today: a Historical Perspective

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At the very end of the 1970s began an unprecedented opening up of the People's Republic of China that has since made this country a large industrial power. Among the industrial sectors to grow rapidly, the dairy industry, which had remained on a very small scale, experienced an exceptional boom, leading to a considerable increase in milk production in the space of just a few years, and its doubling between 2000 and 2005. This development went hand in hand with a rise in demand and a considerable increase in consumption, despite strong disparities between urban and rural areas. Although average annual per capita **milk consumption was barely 1kg in 1975, it is over 25kg today**, if official Chinese statistics are to be believed. China is the world's fourth largest milk producer today, behind the United States, India and Russia.

Such an upheaval in a sector that was extremely weak only 30 years ago, together with the ever-rising increase in consumption, would not have been possible without the political determination of the Chinese government and without considerable foreign aid. In the years 1982-1983, several contracts were signed with foreign companies to strengthen the existing dairy infrastructure in China and especially help to build a modern dairy industry in this country. France, Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, and Australia all took part in this development. These countries contributed financing, sometimes without demanding reimbursement for certain capital investments, e.g. Sweden for the establishment of a Swedish-Chinese dairy industry training center in 1985 north of Beijing. In addition to this aid, between 1984 and 1988 came a program to set up powdered milk processing units as well as a program for supplying dairy products to the World Food Program (WFP). Out of these initial experiences large regional Chinese industrial groups grew, bringing together foreign and Chinese capital. These later took over and since have engaged in cutthroat competition to control the domestic market.

This industrial success combined with the high growth in consumer demand for dairy products was until recently viewed by analysts as a sign of China's admirable dynamism, it being finally freed from the weight of a paralyzing economic policy. However, when the Chinese adulterated milk scandal broke out in the aftermath of the September 2008 Olympic games, the spell was broken and admiration for Chinese accomplishments transformed into doubt, even fear. All the more so since many countries had already accused China of exporting foodstuffs that did not offer sufficient safety guarantees. But this time the damage, before affecting foreign countries via the export of dairy raw material, reached the deepest layers of the Chinese population. According to official figures, approximately 300,000 children were victims of milk formula contaminated by melamine, a synthetic resin normally used in the manufacture of objects and furniture. A half-dozen infants died and nearly 900 children suffer permanent damage from the contamination.

This unfortunate episode, the full details of which have yet to be totally elucidated despite a highly-publicized lawsuit, calls forth a detailed analysis of the conditions that enabled China to set up a successful dairy industry so quickly. In fact, until then China had never been considered to be a country with a dairy tradition, livestock breeding never having occupied a significant place in its agricultural economy.

How, then, can this Chinese milk craze be explained when most specialists would have defined the population rather as lactophobic? A generally accepted view portrayed Chinese civilization as being a "vegetal civilization" that had always shown a preference for cultivation, particularly cereal growing, over animal husbandry. Until the mid-1980s, this was moreover reflected in the Chinese diet, 90% of it being made up of starch.

¹ According to figures given in a memo from the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States (<http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/gyzg/t269872.htm> : January 9, 2006)

² *Chine : Commerce Extérieur*, 1990, n° 10 pp. 46-47.

³ "Most tainted milk victims' family compensated," *China Daily*, 24/01/2009



This view was further confirmed by nutritionists, with a caveat and a teleological scientific explanation: like other Asian population groups, the large majority of Chinese had a lactase deficiency that made them intolerant to the main ingredient of raw milk, lactose, which if ingested caused digestive problems.

Thus a circular type of reasoning, this being explained by that – the Chinese had not practiced animal husbandry because they could not digest milk – justified the aversion and distaste that “real” Chinese supposedly had to dairy products.

The question is thus raised as to how a people in the space of a few years developed a taste for a product for which they had heretofore shown nothing but repulsion, whereas anthropology teaches us that as regards food tastes and dislikes, changes are rarely as swift and radical, especially when it comes to animal products. Was the Chinese government’s voluntaristic policy in favor of increased dairy consumption enough to overturn an age-old trend? This is unlikely, despite its weight. Can history enlighten us and help us resolve the contradictions? Were the Chinese all that unfamiliar with dairy products prior to the 1980s?

Actually, even before China opened up in the early 1980s, milk had its adepts and a place in the inventory of edible foodstuffs. Alongside mother’s milk, milk from dairy-producing animals was recognized as a nutritional food due to some of its proprieties; it was part of the traditional pharmacopoeia. It was produced in very small quantities, being reserved for children, the elderly and the sick that might be in need of it. Northern China, moreover, had its own dairy tradition. The capital has thus always been supplied by a small-scale production system of honey-flavored yoghurt, sold daily in little shops in the alleys of traditional neighborhoods. Packaged in returnable clay pots topped with a simple piece of paper fixed with an elastic, this yoghurt was eaten, and still is, on the place of sale. It is eaten through a straw that is used to poke a hole in its paper cover. This is a traditional specialty of “old Peking,” which remains one of the little symbols of life in Beijing.

China in fact was never entirely preserved from foreign influence, whether from bordering countries or much more remote places. Thus western powers were present inside its borders from the mid-19th century in the form of international concessions established in various ports opened up after the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842 and the Treaty of Tianjin in 1858. The milk and heavily meat-based diet of the western inhabitants of these particular neighborhoods made a strong impression on their Chinese neighbors until some of them later developed a taste for it in turn.

Several documents moreover attest to the existence, in ancient times, of dairy product manufacturing and consumption, albeit in specific areas and certain circles, but in reading the chronicles of the capitals of the Northern and Southern Song dynasties (960-1279), dairy products were highly appreciated on a fairly vast scale.

Can one really infer the current Chinese craze for milk and certain dairy products from these historical facts?

The answer to this question is probably not as simple as it seems. Several factors must be taken into account: the land’s heterogeneity with very diverse local situations; the influence of non-Han population groups that have pastoral and dairy traditions; dairy consumption patterns of the imperial court; changes in breast-feeding practices; the situation of Chinese women on the job market. One conclusion must nevertheless be drawn: China is perhaps not the virgin territory it has too often been imagined as regards animal husbandry, dairy production practices and knowledge.

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She has published many articles on the history and anthropology of food, in particular in China. Her book *La pasta. Storia di un cibo universale*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2000, (in conjunction with Silvano Serventi) has been translated into French (*Les pâtes. Histoire d’une culture universelle*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2001) and English (*Pasta. The Story of a Universal Food*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2002). She co-edited (with Maurice Aymard et Claude Grignon) *Le temps de manger. Alimentation, emploi du temps et rythmes sociaux*, Paris, Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme – Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique, 1993 and (with Frédérique Audouin-Rouzeau) *Un aliment sain dans un corps sain – Perspectives historiques*, Collection “À boire et à manger,” n° 1, Tours, Presses Universitaires François Rabelais, 2007.