

Vegetarianism and the Tofu Company: A Look at the Competition Between Chinese and Western Cultures in Early Republican China Through Dietary Trends

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Abstract: Vegetarianism was popular in the early Republican period, and contemporaries called it “vegetarianism”. In addition to inheriting religious concepts and Chinese vegetarian traditions, this food culture phenomenon was also related to the introduction of Western science and the interpretation of evolution theory by some intellectuals represented by Cai Yuanpei. Contemporaries promoted soy products as outstanding representatives of Chinese food culture. Sun Yat-sen highly praised soy products, and Li Shizeng once opened a tofu factory in Paris in an attempt to export Chinese culture in reverse. By the mid to late 1920s, the vegetarian craze had gradually cooled. “Vegetarianism” returned from the battlefield of Sino-Western cultural competition to the life-style of those who believe in “not killing and protecting life” as well as some literati and upper class people.

1 INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on the so-called “vegetarianism” dietary culture trend that prevailed in the early years of the Republic of China (1910s and 1920s). Although this social trend is dressed up in the guise of dietary culture, it is related to core issues in modern Chinese ideological and cultural studies, such as scientific discourse, evolution theory, and competition between Chinese and Western cultures. This topic has received little attention from academia, so there is room for exploration and interpretation.

This study mainly uses a literature analysis method to connect and analyze relevant statements scattered in various newspapers, magazines, and literary collections from the early years of the Republic of China, with the aim of restoring the direction of public opinion at the time and the views of intellectuals on vegetarianism and the reasons for them.

The ultimate goal of this study is to explain the socio-cultural and ideological factors behind the rise of the “vegetarianism” trend in the early years of the Republic of China, and to provide a clear and comprehensive account of the intricate and interwoven cultural context behind this so-cial phenomenon.

2 TOWARDS MODERNITY: THE VIEW OF DIET UNDER THE NARRATIVE OF “SCIENCE”

In early Republican China, “vegetarianism” was a concept that was “Chinese and Western” and “neither Chinese nor Western”. China has been an agricultural country since ancient times, and due to the limited level of social productivity and the financial capabilities of the general public, the practice of vegetarianism can be traced back to ancient times. By the early 20th century, traditional Chinese concepts of health preservation had been mixed with Western scientific knowledge such as nutrition and hygiene, which together formed the theoretical basis for the “vegetarianism” trend in early Republican China. It is worth exploring for the argumentation of the “vegetarianism” rationality in the almost dominant “scientific” discourse in the Chinese ideological community at the beginning of the 20th century.

In fact, since the late Qing Dynasty, Chinese intellectual circles have been torn between traditional values and foreign ideas from the West, unsure of the way forward. Foreign terms such as “constitutional”, “republican”, “democratic” and “dictatorship” have emerged in turn, dazzling people and leaving them unable to agree. There is only one word that stands

firm and leads the way, and that is “science”. The famous thinker Hu Shi mentioned in the 1920s: “In recent years, there has been a word that has been almost supreme in China. Whether people understand this word or not, whether they are conservatives or reformists, no one wants to publicly express contempt or insult for the word ‘science’ (Ouyang, 1998).”

The promotion of “vegetarianism” in the early years of the Republic made full use of the supreme power of the “scientific” discourse in the diet and living field. At that time, people found two scientific concepts, “nutrition” and “hygiene”, as the two major weapons to support vegetarianism. Newspapers and magazines published a large number of articles discussing the pros and cons of vegetarianism and meat consumption, claiming that from the perspective of scientific knowledge of nutrition and hygiene, vegetarianism is healthier than meat consumption. For example, an article published in “Youth Progress” magazine in 1920 claimed that a vegetarian diet can “reduce the burden on the stomach”; slow down the heart rate, making the heart more “durable”; and keep the brain healthy and prevent insanity. The magazine's editorial claims to “encourage our countrymen with progressive ideas” and “introduce new theories of the East and West,” and much of the content of the articles involves Western scientific theories and technological inventions, which shows that the editor's promotion of a vegetarian diet is almost classified as popular science.

By the end of the 1910s, Zhu Kezhen, a representative figure of modern Chinese science, meteorologist, geographer and educator, also intervened in the great debate on dietary concepts in society. He stated clearly that “the pros and cons of vegetarian and meat diets are really scientific issues, not religious or moral issues”, seemingly further proclaiming that in deciding what to eat and how to eat, the discourse of “science” enjoys dominant power, as in other cultural fields (Fan, 2004).

In summary, in modern times, people tend to treat diet as a scientific problem, quantifying the nutrients in various foods and pursuing a balanced mix to meet international dietary nutritional requirements. It is generally believed that meat contains toxins and excessive fats, cholesterol and other elements, and is easily perishable and breeding ground for bacteria, which is not conducive to human health. In addition, there are vegetables that are rich in protein and can be used as substitutes for meat. Meat is in decline under the shaping of scientific discourse, and a preference for a vegetarian diet has become a nutritional, hygienic and healthy eating style advocated by scientific concepts.

However, the way people at that time conceived of a vegetarian diet did not stop at the present, but rather looked towards the future. Under the influence of social evolution theory, many people adopted a linear view of social development, and the evolution of dietary patterns was no exception. It was also thanks to the influence of evolution theory that the theoretical basis of the vegetarian diet became more solid, and it was elevated from a dietary phenomenon to the height of a theory, which contemporaries dubbed an “ism”.

3 IMAGINING THE FUTURE: EVOLUTION AND CAI YUANPEI'S “VEGETARIANISM”

In the late Qing Dynasty and early Republican period, it was fashionable for the Chinese academic community to discuss evolution. Hu Shi once recalled that since its publication in 1898, Yan Fu's translation of Huxley's “The Evolution and Ethics” had been accepted by the intellectual class. The rich even reprinted new editions at their own expense to spread it more widely. At the time, people thought that “its application in politics and society is a stimulus that is in line with the development trend of the times for a nation that has long felt inertia and the stagnation of Confucianism.” (Ouyang, 1998).

When the theory of evolution was first introduced in China, the most widely circulated and most influential slogan was “survival of the fittest”. It was applied to the natural world and then to human society, with both countries and their citizens being told to change and strive for progress, or face the fate of elimination. Many people believe that the development of human society presents a single, linear, phased, teleological model of evolution. The rise of “vegetarianism” is an inconspicuous but quite interesting example of the many cases in Chinese society influenced by the theory of evolution. Cai Yuanpei's relevant discussions can be used as a basis for discussion.

Cai Yuanpei was a vegetarian for twelve years. In his autobiography, he recalled: “I was also a vegetarian at the time, and it was under the influence of Mr. Li that I became one while in Leipzig. ... In the tenth year of the Republic, while in Beijing, I was advised by a doctor to eat meat due to a foot ailment, and I deeply felt that I was not as determined as Mr. Li.” (Cao, 1984) The “Mr. Li” here refers to Li Shizeng, who at the time was running a tofu factory

in Paris and was known as the “Tofu Doctor”. Cai Yuanpei wrote at length about his understanding of “vegetarianism” in a letter to the mathematician and educator Shou Xiaotian in 1910, much of which involved the theory of evolution: he believed that the gradual spread of vegetarianism in the world was influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution, and that the so-called “same ancestors for humans and animals” and even “the same as humans and animals” was the result. Cai Yuanpei even believed that with the further development of the theory of evolution, perhaps one day plants could also be shown to share a common ancestor with humans or other animals. At that time, plants would become inedible, and vegetarianism would become “inorganic materialism” (Gao, 1984).

The change of human diet from meat to vegetables, and from vegetables to inorganic substances, not only conforms to the development of natural science, but also to the principle of human aesthetics – or the day when humans can survive by eating inorganic substances. At that time, the digestive and excretory organs of the human body will shrink or even disappear, so that the waist of the human body will become slim, and the human body will no longer excrete annoying excrement. If this is really the case, the current vegan trend is only the beginning of the evolution of human diet. Cai Yuanpei said: “What is generally recognized is only Darwin's theory of biological evolution, which can only be the starting point of the era of meat-eating and vegetarianism. Others cannot be denied by future generations.”

Cai Yuanpei regarded the vegetarian diet as a “doctrine” based on the theory that “man and beast share a common ancestor” and thus are equal. This idea can be seen in the writings of Zhang Taiyan (1869-1936, Chinese textual critic, philosopher) in the 1890s and 1900s: they envisaged biological evolution as a linear sequence of continuity, inorganic matter – microorganisms – plants – animals – humans; if you reverse it, then “all living things are my kindred” (Zhang 1985). Cai Yuanpei thus argued that eating vegetables but not meat is the practice of benevolence under the guidance of “scientific evolution theory”; moreover, humans still have a long way to go, and plants should also be included in the category of loving things and cherishing life. In the future, once conditions permit, nutrients for survival should be obtained from inorganic substances, and the lives of plants should not be taken. At that time, it will be “monism that exclusively eats inorganic substances.” Thus, human dietary habits, due to the sequence of biological evolution in nature as

conceived by the bench-marking scholars, also present a continuous evolutionary clue, that is, “omnivorous-vegetarian-vegan”. And the chronological order of following this clue, from ancient times to the present and the future, shows an increasingly “progressive”, “civilized” and “moral” trend. And the “vegetarianism” of exclusively eating vegetables has become an important part of mankind's progress towards civilization.

4 “VEGETARIANISM” THE CHINESE SOLUTION: REPLACING MEAT WITH SOY FOOD AND STARTING A TOFU COMPANY

In fact, at that time in China, one thing that could not be ignored was that meat was both scarce and expensive. It was difficult for ordinary families to have money left over to buy meat, and they could only fill their stomachs with vegetables and grains. According to the diary of gentry Liu Dapeng, on August 15, 1923, “the sales of pork and mutton in the market were extremely high. The meat that was prepared was not enough to sell, and more was slaughtered, but it was still not enough. It can be seen that there were a lot of meat eaters.” (Liu, 1990) This shows that, due to the economic level of traditional Chinese agricultural society, if it was the time of the year for a festival, every household wanted to buy some meat to improve their diet, but the supply of meat was seriously insufficient. The lack of meat led to a serious lack of protein intake among the Chinese, which in turn led to malnutrition.

In order to solve this problem, some people proposed the solution of “replacing meat with soy products”. Even Li Shizeng (1881-1973), the son of Li Hongzhaohao, a senior official in the late Qing Dynasty, established a tofu company overseas to try to promote tofu and other soy products – as excellent representatives of Chinese food culture and excellent ingredients that meet modern nutritional standards – to the world. In 1908, he opened a “Chinese Tofu Company” in the town of Colombes, northwest of Paris, in an attempt to combine traditional Chinese craftsmanship with the fruits of the Western industrial revolution to produce tofu using machines. Domestic reports described it as “the tofu company that is unparalleled on the planet” and called tofu “the great craft of the 20th century that is extremely beneficial to life all over the world.” (Agricultural and Commercial News, 1908)

According to the *Agricultural and Commercial News*, Li believed that “the nourishing power of common Chinese foods such as tofu and soy milk is not inferior to that of milk and meat, and is unprecedented in European countries.” Therefore, he wrote an article, arguing that “the benefits of importing tofu to Europe are that it is better than milk, which is commonly eaten by Westerners, and has a hundred benefits and no harm.” It was published in major daily newspapers in Paris and was very popular. Li and several of his classmates therefore decided to apply for a patent in France, return to China to raise capital, and prepare to open a company. Soon after, the “Paris China Tofu Company” was officially established. Even Sun Yat-sen, the revolutionary and father of the Republic of China, visited the tofu company in 1990 and spoke highly of it. In May 1919, Li invited Chinese people from all walks of life in France to visit the factory. Not only were various types of snacks made from soy products such as soy flour on display, but also new machines for various purposes, such as spreading, mixing, rolling, forming and printing (*Morning News*, 1919).

Unfortunately, despite all the efforts, tofu was ultimately unable to enter the international market because it did not suit the French palate. A 1946 report in Shanghai's *Hai Guang Bao* newspaper stated that “the French initially thought tofu was delicious and many people bought it to eat. Later, they felt that it was not very good and no longer visited tofu shops with pleasure.” However, the reporter did not think that this was because tofu itself was not good, but that the French diet only emphasized taste and not nutrition, and did not understand the benefits of tofu. The implication is that the failure to export tofu culture is not blamed on Chinese tofu culture itself, but rather the image and status of tofu is vigorously defended. In any case, it is believed that tofu is still an excellent representative of Chinese food culture.

Li's tofu company served a dual purpose of promoting national industry and culture. It was an attempt to industrialize food production and commercialize food sales, to revitalize national enterprises and establish a national brand, and to export Chinese food culture abroad. During the era when Western trends swept through modern China, intellectuals in the late Qing and early Republican periods, while absorbing Western learning, also explored what their own culture had to offer to compete with the West. Against this backdrop, soybean food was transformed from a traditional food for the common people into a representative of Eastern culture and a pioneer of the food industry.

This shows the urgency of Chinese culture hoping to find a place in the tide of Western learning.

5 A GLIMPSE INTO THE VEGETARIAN PREFERENCES OF “MODERN” CHINESE FROM “SHANGHAI GONGDELIN”

After the repeated emphasis on nutrition and hygiene in the scientific concept of the 1910s, and attempts to export tofu culture overseas, since the late 1920s, vegetarian food has ceased to be a scientific or moral belief, but has become a symbol of “modern life” and a way for businesses to market themselves. Many vegetarian restaurants across the country are doing a thriving business, and scholars and elites, as well as the upper classes, have become their guests of honor. One of the most typical examples is the world-famous vegetarian restaurant “Shanghai Gongdelin”.

Although the name “Shanghai Gongdelin” suggests a close connection with Buddhist culture, it was actually founded in 1920 as a commercial and marketable success story. The reason for its success is, firstly, its frequent use of dairy products and its expertise in cooking “vegetarian meat” dishes. Facing the Shanghai catering market where Western food culture is prevalent, it not only sets milk tea, buttered bread, and milk-based dishes such as cauliflower as regular dishes, but also vigorously creates various “vegetarian meat” dishes, such as vegetarian chicken, vegetarian duck, and vegetarian ham, making vegetarian dishes look like meat, healthy and full of flavor. This approach has gradually made vegetarian food a sought-after “commodity”.

Secondly, this restaurant established itself as a place for the upper classes to gather and socialize. Many cultural celebrities such as Yu Dafu (modern Chinese short story writer and poet), Zheng Zhenduo (Chinese journalist, writer and scholar), and Rabindranath Tagore (Indian Bengali polymath), even if they were not used to vegetarian food, would patronize this elegant restaurant. Many “modern” people who considered themselves celebrities and refined people regarded dining here as fashionable and extraordinary. In fact, the prices of the dishes at Gongde Lin are quite expensive. At the beginning of its opening, the standard was “20 yuan for a full course, 16 yuan, 12 yuan, 10 yuan, 8 yuan, 6 yuan, 4 yuan for shellfish, 2 yuan for vegetable dishes, 1 yuan for Western dishes, 70 cents for Chinese dishes, and a detailed price list for various kinds of noodles and

Chinese and Western pastries". High prices did not affect business, but rather consolidated its consumer base, which was mainly upper class, and its high-end status and modern image in the eyes of the rich and famous. Many upper class people even chose to hold important banquets there. For example, in 1925, the second son of cultural celebrity Ding Fubao married the sixth daughter of Huang Hanzhi, who had served as the Governor of the Ou Hai Customs, and the wedding banquet was held at Gongdelin. In 1926, Wang Yiting, a celebrity in the painting and calligraphy circles and social activist, invited Gongdelin to cater his 60th birthday banquet (Shen Newspaper, 1922).

At this point, perhaps eating strictly according to the principles of vegetarianism is still only an option for a small minority in society, but at least in Shanghai, going in and out of high-end vegetarian restaurants and banquets with literary and elegant guests is completely an upmarket, trendy way of life.

6 CONCLUSION

This article focuses on the "vegetarianism" trend in China from the 1910s to the 1920s and the cultural competition between China and the West behind it, discussing the figures of the Republic of China related to "vegetarianism". The advocacy of vegetarianism is faintly discernible in the various statements of literati and newspapers, but there is still a relative continuity and resonance. Under the influence of the blending of Chinese and Western cultures, people were keen to introduce Western scientific concepts and used nutrition and hygiene knowledge to "package" the ancient tradition of vegetarianism. A small number of intellectuals, represented by Cai Yuanpei, interpreted evolution as "man and beast having the same ancestor" and used this to champion vegetarianism. From a practical level, people introduced bean curd in an attempt to compete with Western meat dishes and to promote it internationally to demonstrate the superiority of Chinese food culture. By the end of the 1920s and thereafter, the various cultural meanings that had been attributed to vegetarianism, such as scientific, in line with evolution, progressive, and so on, gradually fell into disuse. Vegetarianism returned to being a simple way of eating. Figuratively speaking, vegetarianism has retreated from the front line of competition between Chinese and Western cultures, from the forefront of national culture to the realm of everyday eating where it belongs. Looking again at the people who often choose to eat at high-end

vegetarian restaurants, most of them are scholars and gentlemen. In the 1930s, vegetarianism had become a modern lifestyle.

In summary, this study mainly shows the development trend and theoretical support of the "vegetarianism" trend in early 20th century China. The conclusion is that the rise and popularity of "vegetarianism" is closely related to the social and cultural trend of China at that time, from learning from the West and introducing Western theories, to advocating tradition and trying to compete with Western concepts. Compared with previous studies on the direction of food culture, this paper uses new historical materials, opens up new ideas, and provides a fresh and interesting perspective on how to view the impact of Western thought on modern Chinese society.

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