

Ellen Oxfeld, *Bitter and Sweet: Food, Meaning, and Modernity in Rural China*

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Food is central to Chinese people's life and China's culture, as Ellen Oxfeld, author of this book, quotes archaeologist Kwang-Chih Chang: "few other cultures are as food oriented as the Chinese." A great many scholarly studies have contributed to an understanding of Chinese food culture. Since the Reform and Opening in 1978, Chinese society has experienced remarkable transformations as China embraced a market economy. Despite these social changes, Oxfeld is determined to argue that food is "an essential building block of social relations and a source of value" (3) by drawing on her periodical field research for almost twenty years in Moonshadow Pond (anonym given by the author), a small village in Northeastern Guangzhou Province, which is populated by the Hakka, a linguistic and ethnic minority group. For non-Chinese readers, especially North Americans, who are interested in food and diet culture in rural China, Oxfeld's detailed and vivid depiction, as well as her deep understanding of the social relationships within Chinese families and China's rural communities, will prove to be of considerable value.

The book begins by introducing the research theme and how the author will proceed with the analysis. Oxfeld briefly recaps the transitions of food production and consumption in China during three developmental stages: pre-liberation (before 1949), the collective (1956–76), and the reform era (1978 onward). A more localized focus in Moonshadow Pond follows as a way to introduce the field research site. Oxfeld then explains the analytical framework that the research adopts, which combines

Mary Douglas's symbolic approach and Sidney Mintz's historical approach. The concept of value is borrowed from Jean Baudrillard and adjusted by the works of David Graeber and Karl Marx to refer to both objects and actions. In the following chapters, the value of food as an instrument, commodity, symbol, sign, focal point of action and intention, and as a medium of value transformation is elaborated upon in everyday details through the categories of labor, memory, exchange, morality, and conviviality.

Each chapter focuses on one aspect of the rural community and the centrality of food in shaping people's everyday lives. Chapter 2 examines "the work of producing food and preparing meals in Moonshadow Pond" (34). Oxfeld explores the division of labor shaped by generation, gender, and class in agricultural production and finds that "the present day is characterized by a large divide between generations" (47) more than between genders, with the increasing migration of the rural young to the cities. The older generation is the main farming labor in both subsistence agriculture and market-based agricultural production. However, the discussion of agricultural classes was restrained to a brief period after the liberation (48–49). The neglect of class differentiation in contemporary rural China is a flaw that runs through the book and impairs the analytical vigor of the research, especially when it comes to how the meaning of food will shape the future pathways of China's agriculture.

In chapter 3, "Memory," Oxfeld examines the connection between food (local culinary traditions or industrial food) and memory. The memory that food invokes is dichotomized between two narratives—a "scarcity narrative and the narrative that expresses nostalgia for earlier foods and food customs" (76). In discussing several regularly consumed foods, Oxfeld finds that memory is not only related to historical consciousness, which is gained by those who have lived through "historical changes and social transformations" (95), but is also "tied to labor, exchange, social relations, and moral obligations" (93). Chapter 4 focuses on the exchange and circulation of food in Moonshadow Pond. Food is examined both as a commodity and an item of barter in a commodified market economy, as well as through gift exchanges where food can be used in everyday exchange, as formal gifts, and as offerings to gods and ancestors. By elaborating on the role of food in exchange and circulation, Oxfeld argues that "we should not assume that the increasing commodification of the Chinese economy has eliminated other forms of exchange, but rather that new forms are being added to the mix, even as market exchange assumes prominence" (126).

Chapter 5 further examines the significance of food in fulfilling moral obligations, its centrality in discourses about morality, and "whether certain food might somehow embody higher moral values than others" (155). Inspired by Edward Palmer Thompson's work on eighteenth-century food rioters in England, Oxfeld distinguishes three kinds of morality, each of which is connected with different economic systems. Her use of "moral economy" and "political economy" might raise controversies when the readers think of the definition that James C. Scott famously gives to the former and Karl Marx's classic works on the latter. Such controversies aside, Oxfeld in fact argues that the morality embedded in food today echoes the traditional, mutual, interpersonal reciprocity, which is "an alternative to both state collectivist and purely market-based regimes" (157). Before the concluding chapter, Oxfeld uses the examples of two banquets in Moonshadow Pond to discuss the role of food in "creating sociality, fellowship and emotional ties" (158) in chapter 6.

By way of the conclusion, Oxfeld returns to the main theme of the book, as stated in the subtitle, “food, meaning, and modernity in rural China.” Using food as a lens to view the transformations that China has experienced, Oxfeld attempts to show that neither China’s socialist past nor contemporary globalization has completely cut off the continuity of the social, emotional, and spiritual connections that food maintains. The stress on continuity is partly achieved by treating the collective era of China as an interruption, which is particularly clear in the discussion of food and morality in chapter 5. Citing Chris Hann, Oxfeld agrees that the collective regime “obstructed villagers’ attempts to fulfill basic moral obligations to kin, lineage mates, and ancestors” (156), while the reform-era market economy “has enabled villagers in many areas to revive traditional rituals of reciprocity” (157). Such a view toward socialist China is not unusual in the post-socialist era. However, the reciprocity discourse overlooks the increasing agricultural capitalism and class differentiation in rural China in both the pre-liberation era and the reform era, which obstructs the analysis of what the future holds for Chinese agriculture and rural society and leads to the conclusion of “only time will tell what the future portends” (190).

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