

# PROSPERITY VERSUS PATHOLOGY

## A SOCIAL HISTORY OF OBESITY IN CHINA

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Thirty years ago most Chinese people celebrated plumpness as a sign of prosperity and robust health. Many businessmen of my acquaintance worked hard to put on extra body weight, consciously eating calorie-rich meals at every opportunity. Similarly, plump babies were much admired as symbols of good luck and were depicted as such in popular art and religious iconography. The opposite condition—thinness—was avoided at all costs, given that an emaciated body represented bad luck, illness, and early death. Chronic food shortages were imprinted in the living memories of most adults who lived in the New Territories in Hong Kong (the site of my anthropological research) during the 1960s and 1970s. The Chinese famine of 1958-60, known euphemistically as the “three bad years,” killed more than thirty million people and was directly responsible for a huge influx of refugees into Hong Kong.

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The stigma of emaciation was such that even during affluent years thin people had difficulty finding marriage partners. It was assumed that they would not live to bear or support children. If special bulking diets did not help, villagers consulted shamans (*wenmipo*) to determine if supernatural forces were causing a secret affliction. The culprits usually turned out to be aggrieved ancestors who were “eating” the health and vitality of a descendant in retaliation for neglect or mistreatment. Plumpness, by contrast, was perceived as a clear indication that the person so blessed was in harmony with the supernatural world.

Until recently, therefore, ordinary people in China worried more about increasing their body weight than reducing it. Obesity did not become a recognized pathology in popular consciousness until the late 1980s; prior to this

time, in fact, it was rare to see individuals who fit the modern clinical guidelines of obesity. As Georgia Gulden, a nutritionist at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, has shown, this is no longer true, especially for Chinese children. Gulden notes that among certain subsets of Beijing (male) children the rate of obesity exceeded twenty percent in 1995; twenty-one percent of Hong Kong eleven year olds were obese in the mid-1990s. It also comes as a shock to learn that Hong Kong has the world's second-highest level of childhood cholesterol, trailing only Finland. The Chinese government now recognizes obesity as an emerging health crisis and launched a propaganda campaign to encourage exercise; in May 1998 twenty-three hundred children (aged three to six) performed "kid-friendly" calisthenics in Tiananmen Square for a national television audience.

In one respect the epidemiological transition from under to over-nutrition marks a major achievement in Chinese history. The specter of famine is no longer a major concern for ordinary people, at least among urbanites. How did China reach this point? The answer, Gulden argues, lies in the dietary implications of rising affluence. In only two decades (dating from 1978, at the beginning of Deng Xiaoping's reforms), China moved from a diet rich in grains and vegetables to one laden with red meat, sugar, and edible oils. During the hey-

day of socialism (1949-1978) the state provided urban residents with mountains of low-grade cabbage for cooking, pickling, and storage. Often there was little else to eat during the long winter months. By the early 1990s the consumption of cabbage had dropped sharply and other, more expensive vegetables and fruits were



Obesity is no longer just a Western problem



readily available in urban markets. At the same time, the proportion of meat and edible oils in the diet increased dramatically. In spite of these dietary improvements, however, many Chinese parents still believe that their children are not getting enough to eat. These anxieties fuel a national craze for appetite stimulants such as Wahaha, the saga of which is outlined by Zhao Yang in chapter eight of *Feeding China's Little Emperors*.

Does this mean that the battle against obesity is lost before it begins? Are recent trends among American children any guide to China's culinary future? In both societies young people increasingly dictate their own diets and control their own food money. Formal meals (breakfast, lunch, dinner) are irrelevant to many American teenagers who eat whenever, and wherever, they wish. Market researchers note an important linguistic shift in the United States: for most young people a "home meal" refers to any food that has been heated in a microwave or a toaster oven. One cannot help but note similar developments in Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Taipei, where the market in convenience foods and take-out cuisine has exploded in recent years.

Medical researchers are keenly aware that childhood obesity is a predictor of serious illness among future generations of Chinese adults. Rising rates of heart disease, diabetes, and hypertension are the most obvious afflictions that correlate to early eating disorders. Who will pay the medical costs for a generation of

aging, ailing, and complaining retirees? Will China's "boomers" be as demanding—and as politically powerful—as their counterparts in the United States? Will the Chinese government be forced to create a realistic (i.e., expensive) social security system, or will the family continue to be the primary source of old age support? China's political and economic future depends upon how well Communist Party leaders handle this generational crisis. ■