

Culinary Nostalgia and Chinese Neo-Liberalism: Local Dish Restaurants in Shanxi Province

David L. Wank

Abstract

In the mid-1990s a local dish 地方菜 boom emerged in China's restaurant industry. Restaurants ranging from family-style to luxury establishments started serving local dishes that are self-consciously represented as the foods eaten by the common people of a specific locale in China. Their menus feature coarse grains and wild greens while their décor evokes the culture and history of a locale. The focus of this essay is this "culinary nostalgia" in local food restaurants in Shanxi province, the heartland of Chinese civilization. Drawing on fieldwork the essay illustrates how the consumption of culinary nostalgia constructs a personhood of individuated differences—a Chinese-style multiculturalism—in the emerging national markets, while its production overlaps with the field of state power. Therefore, the culinary nostalgia of local dish restaurants embodies the disjuncture of market and state in China's neo-liberal reform policies that have been transforming the economy since the 1990s.

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In winter 2008 I visited a new high-end restaurant in north China's Shanxi province that specializes in the province's cuisine. Upon entering I was startled at the sight of a large mural of yellow sorghum stalks hanging on the opposite wall. Chinese consider sorghum to be the coarsest of grains 粗糧 and a reflection of North China's poverty. This can be seen in Zhang Yimou's classic films *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou*, which use sorghum as a symbol of economic backwardness and stultifying traditions. When I taught English in Shanxi province in the early 1980s teachers and students invariably mentioned sorghum noodles when regaling me with tales of the hardships of life in Shanxi. No one, they assured me, would eat these pink rubbery noodles streaked with plant fibers if other foods were available.

The above restaurant, however, was part of a local dish 地方菜 boom that has been sweeping China since the mid-1990s. These local dish restaurants serve foods that are represented as the cuisine of a specific locale eaten by common people. In Shanxi the menus feature dishes made from the coarse grains and non-leafy vegetables produced in the province's semi-arid climate and poor loess soil. Restaurant décors display Shanxi's glorious historical past, including its role as the ancient state of Jin 晉 (770 BC-478 BC), a banking center in the Qing 清 Dynasty (1644-1910), and a Communist base area during the War of Liberation (1945-1949).

Local dish restaurants evoke what Mark Swislocki terms cultural nostalgia defined as "the purposive evocation of another time and place through food" (2009:1). He argues that food and its representation have long enabled people to understand social change and their position in it. He traces these shifting understandings in Shanghai. In the late Imperial and Republican eras (late nineteenth century-1949) a culinary nostalgia of foods from ancestral regions enabled the diverse groups pouring into the Shanghai from all over China to comprehend shifting social statuses. In the Maoist era (1950s-1970s) state patronage produced a culinary nostalgia that valorized food as handicraft to imagine China as a proletarian class nation. The current local dish boom valorizes the conspicuous consumption and gangster violence of 1930s Shanghai as a reflection of the unbridled capitalism that has been transforming the city since the 1990s.

This essay examines the culinary nostalgia of local dish restaurants in Shanxi, a place far from Shanghai and the wealthy coastal regions. How does the production and consumption of coarse foods amidst symbols of the province's imperial and socialist past enable diners to understand the current situation? As a starting point I note that the local dish boom is a national trend and that many of the diners in the restaurants that I visited in Shanxi are tourists, conventioners, and other non-locals. The answer that I develop, therefore, emphasizes the positioning of subjects in the context of the national economy. This positioning reflects the disjuncture in

the economy of market and state that has emerged in China through the neo-liberal policies that were introduced from 1979.

This essay is based on preliminary field research conducted in local dish restaurants around Shanxi province's capital city of Taiyuan 太原. The first section shall give an overview of Shanxi cuisine. The second section examines how several restaurants represent culinary nostalgia (Hubbert 2007, Yano 2007). The third section considers the effects of culinary nostalgia on the consumers in imagining a Chinese nation (Anderson 2006). The fourth section examines the production of culinary nostalgia through capital conversions that overlap the field of state power (Bourdieu 1987).

1. Shanxi Cuisine

It is common to conceive Chinese food in terms of regional cuisines 菜系. Usual classifications are the Four Great Cuisines 四大菜系 (see Picture 1), or the Eight Great Cuisines 八大菜系, the latter consisting of Shandong, Sichuan, Guangdong, Fujian, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Hunan, and Anhui cuisines. The inclusion of Beijing and Shanghai cuisines constitutes the Ten Great Cuisines. These so-called great cuisines are often referred to by their classical provincial or regional names, such as Yue 粤菜 for Guangdong cuisine, Xiang 湘菜 for Hunan cuisine, and Min 闽菜 for Fujian cuisine. A dozen or so other regional cuisines, such as Hainan 海南, Hakka 客家, Chaozhou 潮州, and Shanxi, are considered minor cuisines 小菜系. The identification of cuisines reflects a status order: the map in Picture 1 illustrates that major cuisines are concentrated along the wealthy coast.



Picture 1: Cuisine map of China. Shanxi province is west of the Mandarin region. Source: Hillman Quality Publications

Lying west of Beijing and just below Mongolia, Shanxi province is surrounded by mountains with a central plain irrigated by the Fen River 汾河 that flows into the Yellow River at the province's southern boundary. Its arid and chilly climate supports agriculture of such coarse grains as sorghum, buckwheat, millet, and oats, and such non-leafy vegetables as squashes, tubers, and legumes. Many Shanxi dishes have a sour taste imparted by the province's distinct sorghum vinegar. Shanxi is also famous for its noodles, with each locale having distinct noodles and each town along the central valley having a distinct flatbread

餅. The province's best-known dish is knife cut noodles 刀削麵 that are now marketed all over China and increasingly in Japan and elsewhere.¹

Shanxi's cuisine is further distinguished by northern, central, and southern versions, a key distinction being use of fish in the south. The cuisine of central Shanxi, called Jinzhong 晉中, is described by the head of the Jinzhong City Cooking Association 晉中市烹飪協會 Zhao Hongkui:

We now have more than 300 kinds of Jinzhong wheaten food, including noodles, porridge, mush, thick soup, cakes, flour balls, noodles made from bean and potato, round flat cakes, dumplings and steamed stuffed buns, and so on. In addition "cut and shaved" noodles, "cat ears", and "buoyuer" are well-known at home and abroad. There are more than 30 cooking methods, such as rolling, pushing, drawing, picking, baking, peeling, pressing, molding, twisting and smoothing, and so on. Generally speaking, the features of Jinzhong wheaten food are delicate methods involving harmonious combination of vegetables and noodles, a mass of color and sweet fragrances. Thanks to the features above, you can be served different wheaten food everyday in a month. (Zhao 2007: 64)

Shanxi local dishes have long been available in market stalls, government-run cafeterias 食堂, and the small private restaurants that sprouted from the early 1980s. These establishments have served local dishes because of the ready availability of local culinary ingredients and skills rather than from a self-conscious marketing of "local." There are also several venerable upscale establishments serving Shanxi cuisine, as for example, the Jinyang Restaurant 晉陽飯莊 that opened in Beijing in 1959 and the Yingze Guesthouse 迎澤賓館 founded in Taiyuan in 1977. These restaurants are state-run establishments for entertaining officials and visiting dignitaries. When I dined at both establishments in the early 1980s, their dishes were heavy on meat and oil, reflecting traditional conceptions of luxurious dining in China. Their presentations of local food were far removed from the presentation of the new local dish restaurants that emphasize "healthy" foods eaten by the "common people."²

The new restaurants that have emerged in the local dish boom since the mid-

1. Shanxi chauvinists maintain that noodles all over China and even overseas originated in Shanxi. The Taiyuan city government has proclaimed the city as noodle capital of the world and sponsors a Shanxi International Noodle Cultural Festival.

2. When I dined at the Jinyang Restaurant and Yingze Guesthouse in the early 1980s the featured dish was twice-cooked pork 過油肉. In the new local dish restaurants twice-cooked pork is just one of many dishes on the menu. The Yingze Guesthouse and the Jinyang Restaurant have adapted and now serve less oily versions of this and other Shanxi delicacies. When I dined at the Jinyang Restaurant in 2007 its signature dish had become Fragrant Roast Duck 香酥鴨, a dish similar to Beijing Duck but less oily because the duck is steamed before being briefly fried in oil.

1990s are distinguished by strategically converting the “local” into a commodity. The key is not whether something is actually local in the sense of readily available and inexpensive but rather its representation as “local.” In fact, reliance on local ingredients in preparing local dishes is not very profitable and the new local dish restaurants add non-local ingredients to increase the price of dishes. The menus of the new local dish restaurants contain many fusion dishes, as well as dishes from other regional cuisines. Also, the new local dish restaurants feature dishes made from coarse grains and starvation foods, which is unprecedented in high-end restaurants in China. These new restaurants that have emerged in the local dish boom are innovating to appeal to the growing legions of consumers in China.

2. Representing Cultural Nostalgia in Local Dish Restaurants

This section examines how several local dish restaurants evoke cultural nostalgia through the manipulation of symbols of locale and history (Hubbert 2007, Yano 2007). It is based on visits to three restaurants in the greater Taiyuan area in March 2008.³ Each visit consisted of a tour of the restaurant and interviews with the manager, followed by a meal with the manager. The manager arranged the tour and meal at each restaurant and so my experiences reflected the intended consumer experience. Taiyuan residents who accompanied me arranged the visits. All conversations and interviews were in Mandarin Chinese. The three restaurants ranged from family dining to top-end luxury dining.

2-A. *Jinzhong Family Restaurant* 晉中人家: *Central Shanxi Cuisine and Merchant Nostalgia*

Jinzhong Family restaurant is located in the Taiyuan exurb of Jinzhong city. The city is the seat of an administrative region in central Shanxi called Jinzhong 晉中 comprising 11 counties. During the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) the region was the base of extremely wealthy merchant families that conducted national and international trade and served as bankers to the imperial court.⁴ The restaurant, which opened a year before my visit, specializes in Jinzhong dishes. According to manager-owner Song, “the business concept is to serve the kind of food that people liked from when they were very young. This makes people feel as if they are eating

3. I visited six restaurants in total. I would like to thank my research assistants, Wang Liyuan, Liu Kai, and Zhang Xiaofen.

4. For several centuries Jinzhong was the center of a long distance trade of teas and silks between China and Europe through overland routes going through Russia. Capital accumulated from this international trade was loaned within China and the region’s family-owned banks became nationally prominent. The rise of trade along China’s coast with Europe in the nineteenth century killed the overland trade with central Asia and Europe and led to the demise of the Shanxi merchant-bankers.



Picture 2: Entrance of Jinzhong Family. Flanking signs list local specialties.
Photo by David Wank

at home.” He scouted each of the region’s 11 counties to hire cooks specializing in their locales’ dishes.⁵ The restaurant features famous specialties from the counties, such as Pingyao beef 平遙牛肉 and Shouyang dried tofu 寿阳豆腐乾. Some dishes are prepared on-site while others are shipped from specialty makers in the counties. Patrons include local residents, traveling businesspeople, and tourists.

The restaurant occupies the bottom two floors of a five-story salamander-colored building. The restaurant’s name rests in large red characters above a red

tilled roof that overhangs the entrance. On either side are large boards painted with blue-grey colored bricks and red lanterns evocative of Shanxi merchant mansions and signs containing the names of famous Jinzhong dishes from each of the 11 counties. The first floor is a large open space for family-style dining. Its concrete floor, cream-colored walls, and dark wood ceiling create an atmosphere that combines the coziness of a home dining room and the informality of a government-run cafeteria. Just inside the entrance is a gas-burning heater (I visited in late winter). Large dining spaces are marked off by low fences surrounding yellow linoleum-topped round tables and red cloth chairs. Lighting comes from large picture windows facing the street and hanging stainless steel dome lamps. Red lanterns and pictures of Shanxi scenes on the wall give a sense of locality. A large cut-away section of the far wall reveals the cooks at work in the stainless steel kitchen. The kitchen is separated from the dining room by a green marble counter containing wine jugs, pickle vats, hotpots, and dishes of Jinzhong specialties. This layout, characteristic of small establishments that lack space to separate cooking and dining, was a feature of all the local dish restaurants that I visited. It lowers the barrier between customer and cook to impart a lively, performative aspect to food preparation.



Picture 3: Shanxi merchant mansion theme in Jinzhong Family.
Photo by David Wank

The second floor is for private gatherings and small banquets. The main hallway is modeled on the courtyards of Qiaojia Mansion 橋家大院, a restored merchant house located in Jinzhong that has been the setting for Zhang Yimou’s film *Raise the Red Lantern* and countless other films and television dramas. It is lined with red lanterns and brick arches and

5. The cooks are paid RMB 3,500 per month.

windows covered with dark woodcarvings. Off the main hall are half a dozen private dining rooms that resemble Shanxi cave dwellings with their arched ceilings and whitewashed walls. The rooms are uncluttered, each containing only two objects hanging on the walls: a picture of a Shanxi scene, such as the walled city of Pingyao, and a poster describing the health benefits of a Shanxi dish, such as black tofu 黑豆腐.

Of all the restaurants that I visited, Jinzhong Family's local dishes are the most faithful to dishes actually eaten by Shanxi natives. However, the restaurant is the least profitable. Manager Song told me that he cannot set prices too far above actual cost because the menu items are also sold in local stores and many customers know their value.

2-B. *Reconstructed Xigou 今修西沟: Village Cuisine and Socialist Nostalgia*

Xigou is the name of a village in the province's mountainous northwest. The villagers' success in first few years after Liberation to cultivate the poor land led to their national fame as model workers, prompting a visit by Mao Zedong in 1955. The restaurant squats on a busy Taiyuan intersection in a grey building that resembles a socialist-era factory. According to Manager Zhang the restaurant continues Xigou Village's tradition of model worker culture 劳动模范文化: one side of a red and gold couplet framing the entrance proudly proclaims, "A Chinese village reflects model labor culture" (the other side proclaims, "Healthy food is a flower of Jin city").



Picture 4: Reconstructed Xigou is on a busy intersection in Taiyuan. Photo by David Wank

Inside the entrance is the Xigou Culture Area 西沟文化區, a two-room museum of the village's socialist-era history. It is fronted by a statue of Mao Zedong and a plaque of the characters he wrote to commemorate his visit to Xigou Village, "Run a peoples' commune industriously and thriftily, construct the mountain regions." The first room is a rural courtyard lined with the doors of Shanxi cave dwellings. Straight ahead is a bronze colored painting of the first Xigou Mutual Aid Team members. To the left, above a rustic well, are six large photographs of Xigou's model workers alongside photographs of Mao Zedong, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and other Chinese leaders. The second room replicates the inside of a cave dwelling with a traditional platform bed and a spinning wheel. The walls are lined with photographs of Xigou villagers experiencing "happiness in productive labor," and scholars and officials from China and abroad visiting Xigou.



Picture 5: The Xigou culture area contains a replica of a cave dwelling in Xigou village.

Photo by David Wank

The menu features Xigou dishes, and also includes Cantonese and Sichuan-Hunan dishes. Manager Zhang explained that the Cantonese and Sichuan-Hunan dishes are included in the menu as they are standard banquet fare in China. They are served alongside Xigou dishes at banquets. Also, these non-local dishes can command a higher price than the local dishes, thereby overcoming the problem of profitability faced by restaurants that only feature local dishes (as in the case of Jinzhong Family). Reconstructed Xigou also serves some Japanese style food, such as *norimaki* strawberries and bananas with rice.⁶

Local Xigou dishes have two names on the menu: one being the popular vernacular name and the other a culture name 文化名 created by the restaurant. For example, Xigou stir-fried millet 西沟炒小米 is the vernacular name for a dish that the restaurant calls by the Chinese proverb, "The foolish old man who moved the mountain" 愚公移山. Manager Zhang explained the culture name as follows: "The stir-fried millet on a serving plate resembles a small mountain. Each person takes a spoonful and it is gone." Another example is clay-baked chicken 泥巴鷄, which goes by the culture name "Chicken feathers go to heaven" 鷄毛上天. According to Manager Zhang, "This is

6. This could also reflect the memories of Japan in Shanxi's recent history. Japanese advisors and administrative practices played a large role in the government of Yan Xishan 閻錫山, the warlord who ruled Shanxi from the 1920s until the 1949 and is now seen as an enlightened modernizer.

a proverb of Chairman Mao that means small people can do great things,” an allusion to the extraordinary efforts of Xigou villagers to cultivate their harsh terrain.



Picture 6: Ordering food in reconstructed Xigou is a stroll through a market.

Photo by David Wank

Customers order dishes in a vast room on the first floor that has the feel of both a government cafeteria and a rural market. All dishes on the menu are displayed on gold-colored tiers arrayed around the floor. The tiers are arranged by category and include “seafood-flavored dishes,” “Sichuan dishes,” “seasonal wild greens,” “classic Xigou dishes,” “daily specialties,” and “Jin flavors.” At the center of the room is a large tank stocked with fish. Ordering dishes replicates the feel of strolling through a market; customers are accompanied by a waitress pushing a cart who carries a small register to record the order. If customers tire they can relax in chairs along the floor-to-ceiling windows on the room’s street-side.

Running along two walls of the vast room are open kitchens with counters that hold dishes waiting to be served. The cooks are organized into 18 production lines 生產線, a term from socialist-style work organization. Each line has a head cook, second cook, and an assistant who arranges the food on serving plates. Each production line prepares no more than 10 dishes in order to become highly proficient at making them. There are six production lines for Shanxi cuisine, two for Cantonese cuisine, and two for Sichuan-Hunan cuisine, while other production lines specialize in barbecue, noodles, and sweets.

The second floor is the red-carpeted Wedding Hall that can seat 450 diners at tables draped with gold colored tablecloths. The third floor contains spacious and elegant private dining rooms. Each room is entered by a small bridge arching over a stream, a scene that evokes the saying, “small bridge, flowing water, family” 小橋流水人家 that expresses tranquility and longing for the homeland. Each room is named by a nostalgic homeland 鄉 theme of Shanxi as in Vinegar Homeland 醋鄉, Wine Homeland 酒鄉, Coal Homeland 煤鄉, and Noodle Homeland 麵鄉. Each room has theme-appropriate décor and art: for example, the Wine Homeland room features calligraphy by the first president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Guo Moro 郭沫若 entitled “Visit to Xinghuacun,” to commemorate his tour of the village that produces Shanxi’s signature Fen liquor 汾酒.

The fourth floor is laid out to resemble a large village courtyard. At the top of the fourth floor landing is a Large Pagoda Tree 洪洞大槐樹, a symbol of nostalgia for the

homeland.⁷ To the right is a statue of Li Shunda, Xigou village's first leader, topped by the slogan "Uplift the family through labor." Straight ahead is a rustic stonewall with the character for family 家 flanked by the traditional one hundred common family names 老百姓 written in old-style characters. Beyond the wall's entrance is a rural family courtyard with dining tables alongside a pond and large strange rock 怪石. Natural light streaming from a skylight bathes the entire scene. Running around the courtyard perimeter is a frosted glass wall with etchings of 106 Shanxi scenic and historical sites, beginning with Niangziguan 娘子關 in the east and ending with Ciyun Temple 慈雲寺 in the north. A stroll around the courtyard symbolizes a tour of Shanxi province. The glass is punctuated by heavy wooden doors, creating the impression of conjugal family residences leading off from the central courtyard of a stem family compound. Each door sports a protruding metal lion head and opens into a luxurious private dining room. These rooms are named for a city or county in Shanxi followed by the character for family 家, as, for example, "Taigu Family" 太谷家. The dining rooms have traditional landscape paintings of the Hukou Waterfall (on the Yellow River) and Wutai Mountain (a sacred Buddhist site), and other Shanxi scenes.

2-C. Jinyun Mansion 晋韵楼: Jin Cuisine and Imperial Nostalgia



Picture 7: The gray walls and red lanterns of Jinyun Mansion's exterior evoke a Shanxi merchant mansion.

Photo by David Wank

The theme of this vast establishment, which takes Shanxi province's ancient appellation of Jin 晋 in its name, reflects China's imperial history. Its façade, stretching an entire city block, is the characteristic grey of Shanxi merchant mansions. According to Manager Qu the restaurant was awarded a five-diamond designation and voted one of the 10 best restaurants in China in 2007. Hanging above the entranceway are half a dozen plaques of awards to the restaurant.

The cuisine emphasizes dishes from all over Shanxi province. The use of the ancient name of the character Jin 晋 to refer to the cuisine—Jin cuisine 晋菜—embellishes the status of local Shanxi dishes. The menu has many fusion dishes that mix local and non-local ingredients. Innovation is fostered in the restaurant's Research and Development Group that sends cooks to

7. This tree was the site where people gathered for forced migrations in the Ming Dynasty that relocated many rural Shanxi households to other provinces.



Picture 8: Fusion dishes at Jinyun Mansion. Fish has been added to the pumpkin millet soup in the foreground.

Photo by David Wank

other restaurants and farmers markets to discover new dishes. During a monthly Recommendation Day the managers try the invented dishes of restaurant employees. An approved dish is put on the menu and the wage of its inventor increased.

An example of a fusion dish is the addition of mackerel from south China to the venerable Shanxi dish of squash and millet porridge 金瓜黃米粥. Another example is wild vegetable ball 野菜丸子, which consists of wild greens (weeds) and dough shaped into small balls and

deep-fried. The restaurant supplies stories for these local dishes that place them in an historical context. In one such story the Dowager Empress ate the wild vegetable balls as she fled Beijing during the Boxer Rebellion in 1900. To impart this cuisine knowledge to diners, the waiters and waitresses take regular courses on Shanxi history.

Each floor represents a distinct theme from imperial and Shanxi history. Upon entering the restaurant one crosses over a small bridge arching over a stream flanked by a Large Pagoda Tree. To the left is a small store selling Shanxi food products. On the right is a large display of Shanxi dishes and grains, including dozens of Shanxi noodles, pickled vegetables, and cakes, and a display of a traditional grain mills and scales. Beyond this display is a large dining hall covering the rest of the first floor. Its grey brick walls and wooden ceiling beams evoke a rustic courtyard. Numerous woodcarvings and paintings with scenes from Shanxi and Chinese history hang from the walls.

The other four floors consist entirely of private dining rooms. The theme of the second floor is Jinzhong merchant culture. The dining rooms are arrayed along a vast hallway lined with the red lanterns of a merchant mansion courtyard. Each room is named after a Shanxi merchant mansion and contains appropriate décor. On the walls of the Changjia Mansion 常家大院 dining room, for example, hangs a couplet about Changjia, stock certificates, and woodcarvings from Changjia, and pictures of Changjia merchants. The third-floor cultural theme is the fourteenth century chronicle *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* 三國演義.⁸ The main hallway contains an elaborately

8. *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* chronicles the events in the turbulent years near the end of the Han Dynasty and the Three Kingdoms era, starting in 169 A.D. and ending with reunification in 280 A.D.



Picture 9: Noodle display at Jinyun Mansion. Glass jars under display contain different grains grown in Shanxi.

Photo by David Wank

carved enactment of the famous pear garden scene where the general Guan Yu 關羽, a Shanxi native, becomes sworn blood brothers with two other generals. Plates of Shanxi dried dates rest at their sides. The dining rooms are each named after a character from the story and have relevant décor. For example, in the room named for general Meng De 猛得 scrolls of his famous poems as well as those of Mao Zedong who respected him hang on the walls. The fourth-floor theme highlights famous Shanxi personages and the dining halls contain many symbols of poets,

prime ministers, and emperors. For example, one room is devoted to Wu Zetian 武則天, China's first woman emperor and a Shanxi native, who ruled during the Tang Dynasty. The fifth floor emphasizes China's emperor culture. The dining rooms are luxurious apartments with bedroom, study, and living rooms furnished in heavy teak furniture. The use of some of these rooms is restricted to state officials of provincial and national ranks.

Displays and performances abound. Seated in hallways and on stair landings cooks paint historical figurines made from dough and musicians play classical Chinese music. Some floors have large windows onto the kitchens for customers to view the chefs at work. Rare historical artifacts are exhibited with explanations in Chinese and English. One notable artifact is the Nine Lions Mirror made in the Ming Dynasty and abandoned in Shanxi by the Dowager Empress in her flight during the Boxer Rebellion.



Picture 10: Photograph of officials making noodles at Jinyun Mansion.

Photo by David Wank

The restaurant décor also features its own elaborate representations of Shanxi, such as a large steel outline of Shanxi province stuck into a pedestal of Shanxi coal and covered in chains to symbolize the unity of Shanxi people, and a large mural with scenes from the traditional Shanxi merchant banking economy superimposed over a yellow Hukou Waterfall.

Photographs of visiting cultural and political dignitaries who have dined at Jinyun Mansion grace the walls. They show beaming state officials with restaurant service personnel or watching displays of noodle-making. The high rank of the national officials is remarkable: they include trade minister Bo Xi 薄熙, vice chair of the People's Consultative Conference and chair of the China Enterprise Directors Association Chen Jinhua 陳錦華, vice chair of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress Li Tieying 李铁映, and vice chair and secretary general of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress Sheng Huaren 盛华仁 .

3. Culinary Nostalgia and Chinese Neo-Liberalism

How does the production and consumption of culinary nostalgia of Shanxi local dish restaurants reflect wrenching economic changes? The market economy in China was stimulated by economic reforms policies inspired by neo-liberal ideas of individual responsibility and choice, and a free market with minimal state presence. First instituted in late 1979, these reforms deepened considerably after 1992 through such institutions as stock markets and the corporatization of state enterprises (Kwong 2006). While this has created national consumer markets (Davis 2000, Lu 2008) it has also intensified the need for personal ties to state officials and agencies by entrepreneurs (Huang 2008, Wank 1999). This disjuncture between the market and state fields is seen in the local dish restaurants: the consumption of culinary nostalgia is positioned in the field of the market while its production overlaps with the field of state power.

3-A. *Consuming Culinary Nostalgia as Imagined Nation in the Market Economy*

Swislocki has argued that culinary nostalgia is a means for people to imagine themselves and their region in broader processes of social change: to this I would add that it also enables people to imagine the nation. To understand this, it is key to recognize that many consumers of Shanxi local dishes are not from Shanxi. They number many tourists, conventioners, and traveling businesspersons, especially in the larger establishments such as Jinyun Mansion and Reconstructed Xigou that are on national tour itineraries. A trend, not discussed in this essay, is that local dish restaurants also operate extra-locally. For example, a chain of Shanxi local dish restaurants called Shanxi Country Residence 晉鄉居 operates in Tianjin and other cities outside of Shanxi province. The branches of its menus features Shanxi dishes, while its grey walls and arched ceilings are instantly recognizable Shanxi architecture. This patronage of new local dish restaurants by non-local consumers is occurring in regard to other local cuisines as well. For example, Yuxiang Folks 渝乡人家 is a



Picture 11: Branch of Jin Country Residence, a Shanxi local dish restaurant chain in the northern port city of Tianjin.

Source: www.xunv.cn

restaurant chain in Beijing that serves food from Chongqing, Sichuan province. Founded in 1999, its cuisine and décor evoke the “local” and “coarse” foods of rural and common Sichuan people: there are huge earthen vats of pickles, hanging bunches of dried peppers and garlic, and waitresses in rustic clothes.

To understand the experience of non-local consumers in a local dish restaurant I draw on the insights of Benedict Anderson (2006). He explains nationalism as an imagined community that is produced by shared recognition of key symbols that produce boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. This recognition, in turn reflects common experiences of population movement and their subsequent reification in such symbols as map, tomb of the unknown soldier, census, and museum. In a similar fashion, trips to local food restaurants constitute a figurative trip around China. Just as a walk around Reconstructed Xigou’s courtyard is a walk around Shanxi province so visits to local food restaurants are a stroll around China. Just as the 106 scenes are contained within the boundaries of Shanxi province, so are the local dish restaurants of multiple locales perceived as inside China. By traveling around China, literally as a tourist or figuratively as a diner, a person can experience multiple culinary nostalgias as the local cultures and histories of a larger entity that is recognized as China.

The possibility for a national imaginary depends on a homogeneous symbolic medium that can be instantly understood by far-flung persons. For Anderson, this was achieved by print capitalism, which led to the standardization of language. For local dish restaurants, this precondition is the symbolic repertoire of homeland and rural tranquility that are instantly recognizable as “Chinese” and that evoke certain emotions. These symbols, such as the Large Pagoda Trees, arched footbridges, and characters for family 家 and homeland 鄉, abound in the local dish restaurants. Such props as large vats of pickles and liquor and open-air kitchens are recognizable symbols of common salt-of-the-earth people. Other popular symbolic repertoires of wealth, fertility, and good fortune such as peaches, peonies, phoenixes, and the number 8,⁹ adorn the wallpaper, woodcarvings, and paintings.¹⁰ All of the local dish restaurants weave this standard repertoire of symbols into their representation of the “unique” culture of a specific locale.

9. The significance of Jinyun Mansion’s practice of imposing an eight percent surcharge on private dining rooms and a minimum bill of RMB8,888 in its top-of-the-line Tang Pavilion would be immediately recognizable to diners. Likewise, the practices of another restaurant that I visited including the letter “V” and the number 8 in all of its private dining rooms, as in V218, V228, V238 would be immediately understandable. “V” stands for VIP, “2” is the floor number, “8” is a symbol of wealth, while the middle number is the actual room number.

10. Many of these symbols resonate so widely and have such a long history that they should be considered symbols of a civilization rather than the more recent nation.

Dining at local dish restaurants enables patrons to imagine themselves simultaneously as in a place with a distinct history and culture, and also part of China. This has some obvious parallels with the ethnic food boom in the United States where the association of different foods with different ethnic groups constitutes an imaginary “multicultural” nation. Indeed many of the same traits that Americans ascribe to ethnicity, such as accent, dress, occupation, and stereotyped behavior, is attributed to locality in China. The legitimation of a conception of personhood that recognizes individuated differences is a crucial ideological component of market economy that needs to legitimate differential distributions of wealth and while also standardizing consumer behavior in national markets.

The creation of perceptions of unique individuation through a common model is constitutive of modern state and market orders. John Meyer (1986) has argued that the modern concept of personhood through the concept of “individual” assumes a standard definition of an individual possessing specified categorical qualities. Standardized individuation is, Meyer suggests, both a product of and functional for state bureaucratic administration of large populations and for efficiencies of scale in market economies. The culinary nostalgia produced by local dish restaurants positions individuals as consumers who express their individual tastes and choices in the formation of national consumer behavior.

3-B. Producing Culinary Nostalgia as Capital Conversions of State Power

The production of local dish culinary nostalgia overlaps with the field of state power. First, are the capital conversions of the symbols of state power into economic capital (Bourdieu 1987). The larger and more prosperous the restaurant, the greater the profusion of these symbols in representations of culinary nostalgia. Symbols of political power are noticeably lacking in Jinzhong Family. It emphasizes the healthy and local aspects of local dishes and evokes a culinary nostalgia of the Shanxi merchant-bankers. In Reconstructed Xigou there are references to political leaders of the Communist Party but they are circumscribed in two ways. First, symbols of state power are confined to a few locations in the restaurant, such as the Xigou Culture Area. Secondly, the display of state officials foregrounds the local place. For example, pictures of Mao and other leaders document their visits to Xigou village. In Jinyun Mansion, the largest and most prosperous of the restaurants, the representation of state power pervades the restaurant to the point of overwhelming the theme of local dish. Statues and paintings of famous generals and statements are found in many rooms; photos of officials who have dined at the restaurants adorn the hallways; and some dining rooms are restricted to officials above a certain rank. This concern with state power reaches an apex in the Jinyun Mansion’s annex

that features dishes from the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse 釣魚臺國賓館.¹¹ Located in Beijing, the guesthouse is where China's national leaders entertain foreign national leaders. It has no connection with Shanxi: here the theme of state power completely displaces the theme of locality.

Second, the operation of the restaurants as businesses is embedded in the conversions of political capital and social capital, respectively defined as advantages that derive from office holding in the government or Communist Party and from personal ties to office holders, into economic capital. In understanding how the restaurants are able to have choice urban locations on state-owned land, and handle the myriad licensing requirements and other demands of various state agencies, the social and political capitals of the owners and managers are important. Manager Song of Jinzhong Family, a former cadre in the Jinzhong City government, has the lowest ranking connections and his restaurant is the smallest and least profitable. In the case of Jinyun Mansion and Reconstructed Xigou, their connections reach to the central state. The director of the board of Reconstructed Xigou, Shen Jilan 申紀籃, is a legendary "revolutionary woman" and the longest serving member of the National People's Congress since her appointment in the 1950s.¹² Manager Qu of Jinyun Mansion served for 20 years in the People's Liberation Army and then worked in the Shanxi Provincial Government Reception Committee in Beijing in charge of entertaining visiting Shanxi dignitaries and arranging Shanxi-style entertainment for other officials. His social and political capitals have also undoubtedly expanded the restaurants' customer base: Jinyun Mansion is a venue for the Shanxi provincial government to entertain visiting dignitaries.

Thirdly, the restaurants strive to produce the symbolic capital of serving the public good and compliance with state policies. Manager Zhang sees the restaurant as a window 窗口, bridge 橋梁, and school 學校 for rural Xigou village. On the one hand, the restaurant employs youth from Xigou Village: the youth migrate to Taiyuan where they are trained in the service industry and exposed to the outside world. On the other hand, the restaurant teaches non-villagers about the village's glorious socialist past. She avers, "Reconstructed Xigou has become a site of socialist education" and is proud that the restaurant is a village government run enterprise. In the case of Jinyun Mansion, Manager Qu emphasizes its prominent role in the local labor market. The restaurant employs almost 1,000 personnel, including 700 waiters and

11. The annex is located in a separate building across the street from the main building of Jinyun Mansion. It is supervised by a former chef from the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse. The dining hall consists of a large round table laid with Italian silverware and dishes in an opulent room decorated in Chinese patterns.

12. Shen Jilan is famous for founding a pioneering cooperative in 1951 where men and women received equal pay for equal work. In 1952 she became a National Model Worker.

waitresses, and 200 cooks, as well as managers, guards, and janitorial staff. He remarked that the restaurant's history and culture classes raise the "human quality" 素質 of the employees. His use of this term reflects a concern of the political and intellectual elites to upgrade the quality of Chinese people through education (Kipnis 2006).

4. Conclusion

Local dish culinary nostalgia enables persons to imagine a China composed of multiple differences. This Chinese-style multiculturalism has replaced the Mao-era imaginary of a homogenous proletarian class nation (struggling to purge itself of class enemies). It is also fitting that this new imaginary is being produced in business establishments rather than the state-led mass campaigns that produced the proletarian class imaginary. Yet the culinary nostalgia of the local dish boom overlaps with the field of state power. Many symbols of locality valorize state power and the restaurants operate through social and political capital with the state. The culinary nostalgia of local dishes in Shanxi reflects the disjunctive implementation of the neo-liberal economic policies that have created highly competitive consumer markets alongside entrepreneurship embedded in ties to state power.

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