

The Value of Food in Rural China

AFTER A THREE-YEAR ABSENCE, I was returning to Moonshadow Pond, a village in southeastern China, where I have periodically undertaken field research for almost twenty years.

As soon as I entered the house of my hosts, Songling and Baoli, they cut open a local pomelo, a citrus fruit resembling a grapefruit. It was late May, and Songling had zealously saved it for my arrival; the date for storing pomeles had long since passed, and the fruit would have spoiled had I appeared any later. Soon afterward, several neighbors stopped by with tasty treats in hand. Miaoli came to the house with a dish of fermented rice flour pasta that she had stir fried with scallions (*weijiao ban*). Songling's sister-in-law Yinglei brought over some Qingming buns (*ban*), sweet, steamed buns made from chopped and boiled wild grasses mixed into a batter of glutinous rice flour and sugar.¹ The following day, Songling slaughtered one of her chickens and cooked another local specialty made up of chicken and ginger braised in homemade glutinous rice wine (*jijiu*).

Such food exchanges were exemplary, or not unusual, in Moonshadow Pond. First, food was given to me to celebrate my return visit and to reconstitute warm social ties. In addition, many of these dishes contained seasonal, ethnic, and other symbolic references, and also embodied very specific medicinal qualities. For instance, the chicken-and-wine dish that Songling made for me was more commonly prepared on two occasions—either for new mothers to consume after childbirth or for everyone to enjoy during the celebrations of the Lunar New Year. The use of this dish in a postchildbirth diet stems from the ingredients, wine and ginger, as well as the braised preparation, all of which are viewed as conducive to the production of ample breast milk because of their “heating” qualities (more on this below). Moreover, the

particular chicken used in this dish must ideally be raised at home and be large for it to impart its nourishing qualities to the mother.

Yinglei's Qingming buns were also not simply sweet treats. These are usually made during the Qingming Festival (Clear Bright Festival)—a time of year near the spring equinox when people clean their ancestors' gravesites. The green color of the buns is based on a homonym—although the character *qing* in the word *qingming* means “clear” or “pure,” it is the same sound as a different character that means “green.”²

These dishes were additionally associated with a particular ethnic identity, the Hakka, the Han Chinese linguistic and ethnic group that lives in Meizhou, an area in northeastern Guangdong Province, where Moonshadow Pond is located. And they can be used to distinguish the Hakka from other Guangdong ethnic groups, such as the Cantonese. As one friend said to me regarding the custom of making special food for women after childbirth, “We Hakka make *jijiu* [ginger chicken and wine], but the Cantonese prefer making pig's feet in ginger!”³

Certainly, the use of homegrown or even foraged ingredients, and the gifting of food that occurred that day, was not atypical. In Moonshadow Pond, food circulates constantly because it reaffirms old and creates new social ties. Indeed food is an important medium of social communication in the village. It is a constant focus of effort—from agricultural labor, to cooking, daily provisioning, gift exchange, worship, banqueting, and celebration of yearly holidays. It has great value and creates value in numerous domains of activity.

This book attempts to understand the value of food in rural China, or at least one small place in rural China—the village of Moonshadow Pond. That food is valuable in any society, not to mention China, or rural China, is certainly obvious. After all, food is vital to human biological existence. Further, a cursory look at food in almost any culture will show that it is implicated in many dimensions of social life beyond mere survival—from relationships among people within and outside the family to health, from economic and ecological systems to notions of morality and constructions and reflections of ethnic, religious, class, and national identities.

Given the universal salience of food in all cultures, therefore, why write a book about food in one small corner of rural China? One answer is simply that most people who have lived or even traveled in China will quickly agree that, while food is important in all societies, it is a highly charged focus of interest there. As the archaeologist K. C. Chang rather famously said about

food in China, “That Chinese cuisine is the greatest in the world is highly debatable and is essentially irrelevant. But few can take exception to the statement that few other cultures are as food oriented as the Chinese. And this orientation appears to be as ancient as Chinese culture itself.”⁴

From China’s extremely varied and elaborate cuisine to memories of starvation and want, food assumes a central place in Chinese life. There is certainly no dearth of writing that focuses on food in China: cookbooks and even novels; academic studies encompassing everything from the history of food and agriculture in China⁵ to analyses of social and cultural rituals, such as banqueting;⁶ and investigations of the rapid development of fast food and the explosion of concern over food safety issues.⁷ In what follows, however, I hope to provide something different. Instead of looking at a particular issue with regard to food—banqueting, fast food, health, or food scandals, to name a few—I aim to understand the role of food in one community as it shapes people’s everyday lives.

The very fact that, in the late 1950s, less than a half century ago, China experienced a cataclysmic famine means that the experiences of older people in rural areas relative to food have incorporated everything from misery and extreme want to relative abundance. On the other hand, because China is rapidly industrializing, and so many young rural people are migrating to cities for work, the connection between food and agriculture is attenuated for many members of the younger generation, who have left behind the back-breaking exertions of peasant agriculture. Such divergent generational experiences are developments that make highlighting the role of food in rural China particularly interesting now.

As we shall see, despite these rapid transformations, food in Moonshadow Pond is an essential building block of social relations and a source of value within, but also well beyond, the market economy. The reform and opening (*gaige kaifang*) of China’s political economy began in 1978 with the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. It had momentous consequences as China opened up its labor markets to the global capitalist economy and de-collectivized agriculture. Food has certainly been drastically affected by this change. Diets have improved and China is now a donor, and not a recipient, of international food aid. Noting rising living standards, changing sexual and family practices, and the migration of tens of millions of rural migrants to the city, scholars have also pointed to moral and ideological shifts, such as the rise of a new individualism in China.⁸

A focus on food, however, can give us a different framework for thinking about these transformations. Certainly the role of food in society has partially reflected the stunning rapidity of social and cultural change in China; trends such as the expansion of the commodity economy and rising individualism can be indexed through changing foodways (for instance, the growth in fast food outlets in cities). But in other respects, food's role as a measure and source of value in China, certainly in rural China, has defied oversimplification. Indeed, the production and consumption of food in rural culture also create spaces for community, connection, and meanings beyond commoditized values.

In recent years in North America, there has been a renewed interest in our own food practices. Much discussion in academic circles and in the larger public has focused on the ecological toll of a highly industrialized food system, one that depends on petrochemical inputs and entails long distances between farm and table, factors that contribute to both pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. The ever-expanding supply of highly processed and fast foods has been associated with adverse impacts on human health, such as obesity. Meanwhile, the use of pesticides and other chemical inputs on crops has raised fears about their links with cancer and other illnesses. Along with the development of fast foods, China is itself also undergoing a rise in industrialized food production.⁹ Many of the same ills associated with these practices in the West are now emerging in China. Rather than fear of famine, the Chinese must contend now with fear of food itself; food dangers currently range from the deliberate adulteration of food for profit to the longer-term health and environmental impacts on the food supply of pesticides; herbicides; nitrogen-based fertilizers; and, finally, soil and water pollution from industry and mining.¹⁰

To grasp some of the changes that have occurred in China's food situation over the last century, particularly in rural China, let us compare peasant livelihoods before the Communists came to power in 1949 (referred to as Liberation), during the following collectivized period, and after the implementation of reforms in 1980. A few examples can give us a sense of the changes in China's food and agricultural system.

For instance, between 1929 and 1933, the economist John Lossing Buck and his colleagues at the University of Nanjing undertook a vast survey of Chinese villages and families (over 38,000 families in 168 localities in 22 provinces of China). Their picture of the Chinese peasant's diet and agricultural system at that time is fascinating and also grim. In densely populated

rural China, Buck noted, relying on a predominantly vegetable diet enabled peasants to use less land to support more people; very little energy, no more than 2–3 percent of total calories, came from animal products.¹¹ Most animals were used not for meat but for draft purposes,¹² and most crops went directly to human food rather than to feed.¹³ Because of the uncertainties of life, such as high infant mortality rates and crop failures caused by weather disasters, over half the rural population died before reaching the age of 28.¹⁴ Indeed, peasant informants in Buck's study remembered an average of three famines in their lifetimes.¹⁵ When these famines occurred, portions of the population were reduced to eating tree bark and grass, relocated, or even starved to death.¹⁶ Land tended to be divided into numerous small parcels. Tenancy rates were higher in the south, where tenancy was as high as 32 percent of families.¹⁷

These data were gathered in the 1920s. But after Liberation in 1949, Chinese agriculture entered a period of whirlwind change. The rapid collectivization efforts of the Great Leap Forward (1958–61) led to what was probably the greatest famine in world history, with estimates of deaths directly attributable to famine varying from thirty to as high as forty-five million.¹⁸ After that, a gradual increase in consumption occurred, but per capita food availability did not surpass 1958 levels until 1974.¹⁹

Changes after 1980 were dramatic. Vaclav Smith estimates that by 1984 the per capita food supply in China rose to within 5 percent of Japan's mean.²⁰ Between 1980 and 2000, a "dietary transition" occurred, in which the consumption of eggs and fruits increased sixfold, the purchase of pork tripled, and the consumption of pulses, once a dietary staple, declined by two-thirds.²¹ All of this occurred while China's population was increasing by leaps and bounds, from 660 million in 1961, to 870 million in 1972, and to over 1.2 billion today. In the context of the growing population and the use of formerly agricultural land for industrialization and urbanization, this dietary transition is even more stunning, since it has occurred in a rapidly growing population using less land for agriculture.

Still, despite a marked dietary transition in China as a whole, dietary patterns in China today do vary depending on place of residence. Compared with rural residents, urban dwellers consume fewer grains but more meat, poultry, fish, fruits, eggs, dairy, and even vegetables than their rural counterparts.²² Dietary consumption also varies by region. For instance, rural residents of the southeast, where Moonshadow Pond is located, have a much more varied diet than those in the north and west, where growing seasons are

short and economic development and expansion have not occurred as rapidly.

Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that the Chinese dietary regime today is not a replica of North American or European ones. For instance, entering the twenty-first century, Americans ate over a hundred grams of meat or chicken each day, while the Chinese consumed less than twenty-five.²³ The share of animal products, sugars, and sweets in the Chinese diet is certainly growing and is estimated at between one-fifth to one-third of the diet. But this is still not as much as in the United States, where fat, sugars, and sweets make up over 40 percent of American diets.²⁴ China, with fewer than ninety-nine tractors per thousand persons in the agricultural population (as compared to over a thousand tractors per thousand people in the agricultural population of the United States), also remains behind in the mechanization of agriculture.²⁵ And while under 10 percent of the American population is engaged in agriculture, the percentage is about 50 percent for China.²⁶

In approaching my project, I wondered how all of these developments might affect the role and significance of food in a specific community. In addition to the important issues of food safety and health, very basic questions of meaning also arise. Scholars such as Sidney Mintz have long pointed out that “modernity” in food systems—that is, the rationalization of food production and consumption, and its increasing uniformity over vast reaches of time and space—has led to the demise of food as a signifier of meaning in particular times and spaces. In other words, food is no longer a language in a local symbolic system²⁷ because it is becoming increasingly commoditized and is exchanged over ever-larger geographical areas. Might not the my earlier examples of food being used as a specific and locally significant symbolic language become increasingly rare, even in rural China, as food turns into a mere commodity that is uniform over great distances?

Writing about food as a local symbolic system in a somewhat isolated rural community of rural North China, Xin Liu called it both a “social institution and a system of values”²⁸ and remarked, “Day by day, occasion by occasion, individuals must learn rules and conventions of preparing and presenting food in order to communicate with others and become full members of the community. As a social institution, food—like language—is a kind of collective contract that one must accept in its entirety if one wishes to survive in the community it dominates.”²⁹

Indeed, the importance of food as a means of symbolic communication has a history of several thousand years in China. Speaking about ancient

China, historian Roel Sterckx states, “Culinary activity governed not only human relationships but also fermented the communication between humans and the spirit world. Cooking, the offering and exchanging of food, and commensality were among the most pervasive means of social and religious communication in traditional China.”³⁰

Food has been central to ritual occasions, as offerings to ancestors and gods, and to banquets, from ancient China until the present. But as rural China is now experiencing an ever-more freewheeling and unregulated market economy, following directly on the heels of several decades of a collectivized agriculture, asking if these historical developments have influenced the role and meanings of food at the local level makes sense.

In examining foodways in contemporary China, however, extending our focus beyond the issues of globalization and modernity is important. A singular focus on modernity can unwittingly produce new forms of Orientalism, by which we evaluate China as moving in a straightforward trajectory toward “modern,” albeit Chinese-inflected, orientations. (Ironically, such a focus can cause us to overlook the continuing importance of “nonmodern” practices in North America or Europe.)³¹ Thus, before we assume that China is moving in a straight line toward a food modernity of industrialized, generic foods and food practices, dis-embedded from local meaning systems, we must also consider that modernity itself has always generated strong countercurrents. Further, modernity in its present incarnation of globalized capitalism is absorbed in different degrees and ways, even as it continues its spread throughout global space.

THE FOOD UNIVERSE OF MOONSHADOW POND

To understand how food practices and meanings really work in people’s daily lives, we have to move from examining the big picture to a more localized focus.

The southeastern Chinese village of Moonshadow Pond, which I have been visiting periodically since 1993, is a good place to look more deeply at the significance of food in one place. Moonshadow Pond is actually my pseudonym for the village. The village and its neighboring village make up an administrative district that was a production brigade during the collective era. Together with twenty-one other administrative districts, they constitute a township of about forty-thousand people. And this township is located within Meixian, a county in northeastern Guangdong Province.

Meixian in turn is part of a much larger area comprising six counties that are now called Meizhou.³² The residents of the Meizhou area of Guangdong are Hakka, a distinct ethnic and linguistic group in southeastern China that is nevertheless considered to be ethnic Chinese or Han. They believe they originated in north central China many hundreds of years ago. In addition to the Hakka, two other distinct linguistic and cultural groups of Han reside in Guangdong Province—the majority Cantonese, who inhabit the Pearl River Delta, and the Chaoshan people, who live on the coast in the northeast of the province. The residents of Moonshadow Pond in particular trace the establishment of their village to one ancestor, who migrated there at the end of the seventeenth century. Ancestral records go further back to an even more distant ancestor, who lived in Jiangxi Province (northwest of Guangdong) in the eleventh century.³³

Since first arriving in Moonshadow Pond in the summer of 1993, I have returned several times. I lived there from 1995–96, during the summers of 1997 and 2006, for five months in the spring of 2007, and during visits in the spring of 2010 and in the fall and winter of 2012.³⁴ Because I had established relationships with residents over many years, it was a good venue for studying food in rural China. My visits from 2007 onward were explicitly focused on local food culture, and I was also able to comb through earlier field notes to find relevant information.

Moonshadow Pond was the ancestral village of a friend, who had introduced me, and each time I returned I lived with the same family—her closest relations in the village. My hosts, Songling and her husband, Baoli, were a middle-aged couple when I began my fieldwork in the mid-1990s. Living in Songling and Baoli's house, I shared meals; witnessed relationships between and among families; and participated in festive occasions, attended banquets, and took part in important yearly and life-cycle rituals. I also gained an overview of key parts of the agricultural calendar, including rice planting and harvesting, as well as seasonal changes in produce. Additionally, I conducted surveys and did much informal visiting, keeping notes on over fifty families.

Songling and Baoli had come of age during the collective era, had spent their entire lives in the village, and had participated in the agricultural life of the collective during the Mao era. After the Communists came to power in 1949, China transitioned rapidly to a system of collective agriculture. In 1958, the Great Leap Forward began. Communes, often with as many as twenty thousand people, were organized as the basic units of production and



MAP 1. Meizhou's location in Guangdong Province and within the People's Republic of China.

distribution throughout the country. Eating was also collectivized; family kitchens were abolished. Grain harvests were often left to rot in the fields because peasants were urged to spend their time trying to smelt iron from their personal cooking pots and pans in "backyard furnaces." All of these activities were supposed to fuel the country's industrial revolution and to enable them to catch up with the West in fifteen years. However, no iron was successfully produced from this effort, and after peasants ate their fill in collective canteens for a few months, food started to run out. Further, local

officials often overstated their production in order to appear successful to higher-ups, resulting in even less food being available for peasants to eat after state procurements. Procurements were determined on the basis of a percentage of total production, and if production was exaggerated, even more would be taken away. Thus, of the grain actually produced, little remained in the countryside. The result was massive starvation.

In Moonshadow Pond, Songling and Baoli lived through these terrible times and, like many others, remember resorting to “famine foods” in order to survive. They made buns by grinding the indigestible husks of rice, mixing these with water and steaming them, a practice to which Songling attributed her continuing digestive problems. Other villagers tried to make a similar steamed bun using the ingredients from the top of banana tree roots. They also tried to create a feeling of fullness by mixing starch from rootstock plants, such as cassava and edible canna, with boiling water. The resulting brew was a bit thick, like drinking cornstarch and water, but it had little caloric or nutritional value.

The disastrous results of the Great Leap led China to reorganize communes into smaller, more manageable units in 1962. The canteens quickly fell apart, and cooking returned to family kitchens. Though labor was still organized on a collective basis, it was through production teams of twenty-to-thirty families each, and payment systems were roughly geared to the amount of effort or type of work one did. For instance, Moonshadow Pond was organized into six production teams and, together with its neighboring village, formed a single production brigade. Significantly, private garden plots were created for each family during that time so that families could grow their own vegetables, and these have continued to the present.

From the end of the Great Leap to the late 1970s, diets slowly improved, and famine was no longer part of the picture. Statistics from the Meixian Gazetteer paint a picture of steady increases in the consumption of basic grains and production of meat from the end of the Great Leap to the early years of the reform era.³⁵ Still, until the reform period, daily fare continued to be simple, and meat was a rarity. “Through the 1950s, 1960s, even into the 1970s,” Baoli told me, “we had sweet potatoes for one or two meals per day, and then congee [*zhou* or rice porridge] was for the other meals. We never had *fan* [dry cooked rice].”

But during the reform and opening initiated in 1978, dramatic changes were implemented. The reforms opened China to the world market and to capitalist modes of production, which also meant the end of collective

agriculture. In Moonshadow Pond, as elsewhere in rural China, villagers were given use rights in collective land, including rice paddy land and dry land, which could be used for other crops. They also retained their garden plots. Productivity and crop diversity increased because peasants had much more latitude than in the collective era about what to grow and how (see appendix A, figs. A.1–A.8, for more details on changes in agricultural productivity from 1949 through the reform era in Meixian.)

Initially, however, peasants still had to pay a tax in grain on the land they used, and this meant that, in Moonshadow Pond, they still had to produce a certain amount of rice. Later, peasants had a choice between paying the tax in grain or in money. A cash assessment on rice production did not fall heavily on villages like Moonshadow Pond. With the loosening of regulations about rural-to-urban migration in the reform era, many younger villagers began migrating to cities to work for wages, supplementing family incomes. With wages rising, and the younger generation leaving the countryside for work, families could always come up with the cash to pay the tax, even if they did not produce grain from their land. However, in the hinterlands of China, where families were less likely to have wages from outside work, the taxes, both in kind and in cash, were much more burdensome. Ultimately, these factors may have been one of the reasons the national government eliminated taxes on family rice production in 2005.³⁶ Villagers could now make decisions about what to cultivate according to their own needs.

By 2012, Songling, now in her late sixties, still maintained a large vegetable garden and raised her own chickens. Until recently, she had grown her own rice. By contrast, Songling and Baoli's three married children (two daughters and a son) and their four grandchildren spent most of their time in the county capital, a bustling center of 380,000 that was not far from Moonshadow Pond. In the capital, their son, Yanhong, and his sister Meiying owned a small store that sold bedding materials. Their younger sister, Fengying, operated the same type of business, which she jointly managed with her husband. Fengying was quite successful as a businesswoman, both running the bedding material business and also collecting rent on some other properties.

Daughters in rural southeastern China are traditionally expected to “marry out” of their natal homes, and into their husband's homes. Sons are customarily expected to bring their wife “in” to their household. But, work schedules and job situations may mean that the family members do not always live and eat together. Thus, as Yanhong had a store in the county capital, he and his family (his wife and son) usually spent most nights in

quarters above the store instead of in the village at his parent's home. From their abode in town, Yanhong's wife spent less time commuting to her factory job, and their son could cycle to middle school more quickly.

But despite all of Songling and Baoli's adult children moving to the county capital, coming and going between village and city were constant; on weekends and holidays, one or more grandchildren would stay over in Moonshadow Pond. Songling and Baoli could also visit the county capital fairly easily now by hopping on a public bus; and by 2012, two of their three married children had cars.³⁷ So family members traveled back and forth, and food always accompanied their travels. If Songling were going to town to visit her children, she would bring fresh pork from the village or vegetables from her garden. If Fengying were coming to Moonshadow Pond, she might bring her parents a special snack, associated with another region of Meizhou, that was unavailable in the village. No one ever came or went empty handed.

Songling and Baoli's family situation was hardly an unusual one in Moonshadow Pond, where most of the younger population worked and lived outside the village, or at least worked outside the village. Not only is the local county seat a location of employment but the metropolises of Shenzhen and Guangzhou are also sites of much labor migration from the village. These are several hours away by bus—too far to commute on a daily basis. Thus, by 2007, 24 percent of all households in Moonshadow Pond had at least one family member who had migrated beyond Meixian for employment.³⁸

In Moonshadow Pond, therefore, a food transition took place that is not unlike the ones experienced in many other rural localities in China, as growing numbers of young and even middle-aged people work for wages and are inevitably less involved in the world of agriculture. Hence, although the population of Moonshadow Pond has hovered around eight hundred persons since I started my fieldwork in the mid-1990s,³⁹ at first glance the number of people engaged in agriculture and their commitment to it seem to have diminished.⁴⁰ In 1997, the majority of Moonshadow Pond families relied on a mixture of agriculture and wage labor. While only 10 percent of households earned their livings *entirely* from farming, just 14 percent of families did *no* farming. Ten years later, the majority of families still combined agriculture with wage labor. However, the number of families who did not farm at all had grown to 33 percent, while the number who earned their living only from agriculture had dropped to 6 percent.

However, a caveat needs to be added to this picture of a decline in farming. In Moonshadow Pond, "farming" is identified by the word *gengtian*,



FIGURE 1. In the garden plot.

which literally means to “plow the fields.” Local residents understand *gengtian* as referring to those who still grow their own rice. (The particular significance of growing rice for Moonshadow Pond residents will be explored more deeply in later chapters.) Growing vegetables, however, is an activity that is engaged in much more extensively—even by those who are no longer considered to be farming, and even by those who have outside employment (see fig. 1). Essentially, we might think of this activity as gardening, and there are few families in Moonshadow Pond that do not maintain a minimal garden for vegetables, even if they have abandoned rice cultivation.

Indeed, the variety of cultivated plants in Moonshadow Pond is huge. Leafy greens and cabbages of many types; tubers and root vegetables, such as taro, sweet potatoes, carrots, and daikon radish; rhizomes, such as ginger; a large variety of gourds; garlic green onion varieties; corn; fava beans and other legumes; eggplants; and peanuts are just some of the varieties of plants that are cultivated by villagers in their gardens. Villagers also own individual banana trees (again, there are several types) and papaya trees (see fig. 2). Many items, furthermore, have multiple uses. Daikan radish (*luobo*) is boiled in soup, stir fried with meat, dried to use in congee, and dried even longer as a cure for the digestive system. Papaya can be eaten raw, but it can also be stir fried.



FIGURE 2. Fresh bananas.

Most families in Moonshadow Pond, therefore, fall between the two extremes of having abandoned agricultural activity altogether and self-provisioning all their own food. The majority still use the land allocated to them to cultivate their own rice and vegetables, but they also rely on wage labor or the small business activities of some family members to augment their livelihoods, using the cash income to purchase food they do not self-provision. Additionally, about 17 percent of households in 2007 engaged in market-based agricultural production, such as raising chickens or pigs for sale; fish farming; raising goats to produce milk; and tending fruit orchards of pomeelos, mandarin oranges, and oranges. Some individuals butcher and sell fresh pork, or produce value-added agricultural products such as fresh tofu.

Food provisioning is crucial to the subsistence of Moonshadow Pond residents, but it is viewed as more than simple provisioning. Villagers often speak about the “sweetness” of local vegetables as opposed to the “bitterness” of vegetables that have been exposed to pesticides and herbicides, which they might buy in city markets. As one village resident said to me disparagingly about vegetables in the market, “Those are sold by people who want to earn money, and schoolchildren have been sickened by the poison in these, but we grow our vegetables to eat for ourselves, so we prefer these whenever possible.” Another villager told me she had visited a relative abroad in Indonesia, where she ate what she described as very “bitter” vegetables that had clearly been adulterated with farming chemicals. Young migrants who returned to the village for holidays from the metropolises of Shenzhen and Guangzhou often comment both on the “sweetness” of the village vegetables and on how much they miss these when they are away. Once when relatives from Guangzhou came to visit Songling and Baoli, they spoke excitedly not only about how fresh the vegetables tasted but even about how good the rice was. In fact, one relative said, “The rice is so good you don’t even have to add anything to it!”

It is not the market *per se* that brands some foods as more dangerous or less tasty than others. Food originating from the village, even if it is sold by local vendors, is usually viewed as better in almost all ways—tastier, healthier, and less fraudulent! Small-scale local producers in Moonshadow Pond play up their differences from larger factory farmers outside the village. For instance, in describing his business raising chickens, one villager explained how much care must be taken in feeding chickens, and also in ensuring that the chickens have room to run around. He emphasized that the chicken droppings from his operation were sold to local people for cultivating fruit trees so that nothing was wasted. The “circle of good things” (*liangxing xunhuan*) was his description of this self-contained system. He also boasted that the chickens he raised for sale, while not quite as good as those he raised at home, were certainly much better than “factory chickens” (*gongchang ji*). Similarly, villagers who raise and sell pigs on the local market also often point to this circle of good things. A Hui, who is the eldest son of my neighbor in the village, raises pigs, manages a small pomelo orchard, and tends two fishponds. He told me that his pomelo trees were fertilized with pig manure, and that the pig manure could be used to fuel his stove. Like many people, he spoke of the dangers to one’s health from “farm chemicals” (*nongyao*).⁴¹

Negative attitudes about *nongyao* does not mean that villagers always practiced organic agriculture in every domain. While no villagers used farm

chemicals on their gardens, many used nitrogen-based fertilizers on rice. What might explain this seeming contradiction between villagers' love of their unadulterated vegetables and some villagers' choice to use chemical fertilizers on rice? Such chemical fertilizers were viewed by villagers as increasing productivity; rice production is now primarily the work of middle-aged women, who view these fertilizers as a labor saver, since it enables them to produce more per acre.⁴² Nonetheless, villagers were cognizant of the dangers of overusing such chemicals. In a survey I conducted in 2007, over half the respondents reported using no chemical fertilizers on their rice fields, or at least reported attempting to keep their use to a minimum.⁴³

As *gengtian* essentially refers to growing rice, it should not be surprising to learn that rice remains a staple for all. The distinction between rice and trimmings (*fan/cai*) is a basic element of the Chinese dietary regime, especially in southeastern China. Nowadays, Moonshadow Pond families typically consume dry rice as their staple for two meals each day, while consuming rice porridge or congee as their staple for one meal, usually breakfast. Of course, a bowl of rice that was not watered down as congee was a real luxury in the past. But at a bare minimum, a bowl of congee with salted vegetables can define a meal, as even this is made up of the crucial *fan/cai* combination. What is more, rice is not only a staple but is seen as a part of "Hakka" identity. For instance, Songling often stated that part of being a "real Hakka" was to desire and eat rice.⁴⁴ (With the rise in the standard of living, noodles, such as rice or wheat noodles in soup, can occasionally substitute for rice, especially in breakfast dishes or can be served as an accompaniment to soup.)

It should be kept in mind, however, that the *fan/cai* distinction pertains to ordinary meals and not banquets. Unlike the structure of ordinary meals, the foundation of banquets is not based on rice. The Hakka use the same verb, "to eat," for both ordinary meals and banquets. However, ordinary meals are referred to as "eating rice" (*shifan*), while banquets are literally referred to as "eating spirits," or "eating liquor" (*shi jiu*). Thus, while the ordinary meal is glossed as a combination of rice and trimmings, the banquet is characterized as a combination of these trimmings or dishes with wine or liquor. If rice appears at a banquet, it is usually as fried rice served toward the end of a whole series of dishes. Occasionally, the option of getting up and serving oneself white rice is also afforded at a banquet, but, if so, it occurs only toward the tail end.

Referring to banquets as eating liquor does not mean that everyone at a banquet drinks alcoholic substances. Indeed, while work-related banqueting

in China can entail profuse alcohol drinking,⁴⁵ not all banqueting in Moonshadow Pond, particularly around family- and lineage-related events, does. For instance, at a wedding or at other banquets in Moonshadow Pond, men drink and toast ostentatiously, while women and children tend to confine themselves to nonalcoholic beverages, such as sodas or peanut milk. Women may also toast with homemade glutinous rice wine; once it is cooked, its alcoholic effect is neutralized. Subsequent chapters will explore banqueting in more detail, but the distinction between ordinary meals that are categorized by eating rice versus banquets that are categorized by eating spirits is important to keep in mind.

As for ordinary meals, in addition to rice, there are a few other non-negotiable elements in the Hakka cuisine of Moonshadow Pond. Clear soups are customarily served with lunch and dinner—they are usually made with pork bones and may contain dried medicinal grasses or preserved vegetables, beans of various types, or root vegetables. These soups are typically consumed after the rice/trimming (*fan/cai*) combination. If you are a guest at a family meal and have already eaten one bowl of rice, the host may ask you, “Would you like soup or more rice?” So while rice and trimmings go together, soup usually finishes off the meal, though it can also substitute for a second bowl of rice.

Greens and other vegetables, either fresh or dried, are also part of every meal; as stated above, despite changes in the economy, gardening is still the main source for these.⁴⁶ While preserving vegetables through drying or pickling is still practiced in the village, dried and pickled vegetables are no longer as central to the diet as they were in the less prosperous past. Nowadays, dried vegetables are more likely to show up as an optional condiment with congee for the morning meal, or as an ingredient in one particularly famous Hakka dish consisting of braised pork and dried salted greens (*meicai kourou*). Meanwhile, the variety of vegetables that is cultivated has expanded greatly as the standard of living has improved and as people have started cooking vegetables that need more oil to prepare, or those (such as cilantro) that are delicious but not necessarily filling.

One common staple of the past that has almost disappeared is the humble fava bean. I rarely saw it consumed in the 1990s or 2000s. Fava beans are quite filling and were often cooked along with dried salted vegetables in order to enhance their flavor. Most likely, one reason for the decline of this pulse has to do with the great rise in meat consumption (as pulse production in all of China has declined dramatically with the rise of meat). Moonshadow



FIGURE 3. Purchasing local pork in early morning.

Pond villagers in their thirties and forties can remember the fava bean from their childhoods—which dates its commonplace consumption through to the end of the collective era. Indeed, the county gazetteer confirms this impression—the hundreds of thousands of acres of land in all of Meixian that were once devoted to fava cultivation had declined by the late 1980s to under 6,000 acres (see appendix A, fig. A.9).⁴⁷

As the standard of living has increased in the village, meat (which usually means pork in this context), poultry, or fish can now be found in most people's daily fares. Villagers rely much more on the market for these items than for rice and vegetables,⁴⁸ but they also go to great lengths to procure their meat from local sources (which, as stated above, are presumed to be more trustworthy). Pork is purchased primarily from local butchers (there are several in Moonshadow Pond), and village residents often emphasize that meat from locally slaughtered pigs is preferable to the meat sold in city markets, for reasons of both taste and safety (see fig. 3).

Other meats are also eaten but much less commonly. Some people raise dogs for meat, but this is not daily fare—though dog may find its way onto a banquet menu, or be used for addressing particular health conditions, such

as back pain. Beef is only available from the county capital and is not raised locally (although it is slaughtered locally because people in Meixian are reluctant to purchase meat that is shipped from far). Goats are raised in the village for milk, but goat meat and lamb are usually eaten only during a small space of time during the winter solstice.

Pork, which is what really counts as meat most of the time, is also used in numerous ways. It is stir fried, its bones are used for soup stock, and it is also used to make a popular morning soup called the “three-levels” soup (*san ji di tang*) that always accompanies a simple fried-noodle dish with scallions and garlic. The soup is made from small pieces of fresh meat, liver, and intestines, and because of its freshness, it actually tastes sweet. The soup also contains dried red yeast rice (*hong qu mi*), a byproduct of making one’s own wine at home from glutinous rice. The “three levels” refers to the three highest levels of examination that a candidate for the imperial court had to pass if he wanted to become a high-level bureaucrat at the emperor’s court—the highest mark of meritocratic success during the imperial era. The implication is that this soup is nourishing enough to fuel the highest levels of scholarly success.

“This is just our Hakka dish,” Songling used to tell me. Baoli was so fond of it that, whenever my husband and I spoke about how we would miss the fresh food from the village when we returned home, Baoli would excitedly exclaim, “Over there, you won’t be able to get the three levels!”

Almost every day, during my morning walk at the crack of dawn, I would see a gathering of villagers around one or more local pork vendors. These men usually placed their fresh pork meat on a flat of wood draped across the back of their motorcycles. In 2012, the local regulations changed, and pork vendors were directed to purchase their meat from a city slaughterhouse, a regulation put in place to control fraud; but most vendors preferred to make their own arrangements with local pig farmers so they could sell meat that was only a few hours old. Villagers considered the route from village pig farmer to city slaughterhouse and back to the village for sale too time-consuming to yield fresh meat. (If a government inspector were suddenly to enter the village, someone would usually call up the vendor on a cell phone and tip him or her off; the vendor would disappear before the inspector could find him and return after the inspector had left.)

As for poultry, most families raise their own chickens and ducks. Yet while these animals are almost always slaughtered for specific festivities, such as the Lunar New Year, or for special purposes, such as making chicken in

glutinous rice wine for a new mother, at other times poultry may be purchased from a vendor.⁴⁹

In addition to meat and vegetables, fruit and eggs are now commonly eaten, and milk is beginning to be a more frequent part of the diet in a minority of families.⁵⁰ Citrus fruits, particularly pomelos, are not only grown for sale, but have become a very important part of the daily diet and social ritual. If you visit a family during the many months pomelos are available, your hosts will probably break open a pomelo to share, as Songling did when I returned to the village in the incident discussed at the beginning of this chapter. In fact, the pomelo has become such an exemplary part of social ritual that, when visiting dignitaries come to Meixian, they are almost always presented with a pomelo!

Milk in the diet does not necessarily mean powdered milk (which has been made famous by recent scandals) but rather fluid milk. Indeed, local goat milk has recently become popular. Two families in Moonshadow Pond raise goats and deliver milk twice a day, primarily either to families with elderly people who think it buttresses their health or to families with very small children (more on this in chapter 2).

During my early morning walks in Moonshadow Pond, I would usually bump into a group of four or five elderly women (all over 80), who were also taking a morning walk. On these occasions, it was not unusual for one of these women to pick out something that looked to me like a blade of grass or even a twig to bring home and use for medicinal purposes. The wild environment indeed remains a source of sustenance, but village elders undoubtedly have the richest knowledge of this environment. Often the wild grasses and twigs they gather are boiled and then used topically, or ingested to treat everything from scratchy throats to cuts and abrasions.⁵¹ Wild plants have also found their way into soups⁵² and even into seasonal treats, such as the Qingming buns referred to at the beginning of this chapter.

Among foraged items, water is one item that is particularly worthy of note. Older villagers remember a time when the river that flowed through the village was considered a source of pure drinking water. But that time passed with the rise of nitrogen-based fertilizers and other contaminants; now the river water is considered unsafe for drinking. All village houses now have wells, and, if this well water is boiled, it is considered safe for drinking (as long as it is not too close to rice paddy land). However, the taste of water is very important for many people. This is true for water used for cooking in general, but it is especially the case for water used to make tea. The market for

high-status tea has grown with greater wealth, and more attention than ever is paid to the quality of the water used for brewing tea.⁵³

Indeed, tea is ever present in the life of Moonshadow Pond. Serving tea is the minimal gesture of hospitality when guests, or even neighbors, walk into the house. But it was not always so. As our neighbor Aihua reminded me, many people were so poor in the past that they could offer only boiled water to guests. Now, however, tea and tea-making implements are essential features of all Moonshadow Pond homes. In each house, a public room is generally arranged with a tea table surrounded by seating; a teapot, small tea cups, and either a thermos to store hot water or an electric water heater to boil water are always present.

Serving tea in Meixian, and in many parts of China, is a much more social experience than merely pouring tea into a large cup or mug as it might be in the United States. The host must continuously pour boiling water onto the leaves in the teapot and then refill tiny tea cups for each guest. This tea ritual can be highly informal, as when someone enters a shop and the shopkeeper makes a cup of tea for her in a tiny plastic disposable cup, or very formal, as when one visits friends and relatives during the Lunar New Year, when the tea will be accompanied by many special treats.⁵⁴

For the sake of cooking and tea drinking, therefore, many village residents will go to great lengths to procure water from natural aquifers (see fig. 4). One such place is a rock at a cliff's bottom near the village. Villagers may travel weekly to this aquifer by motorcycle, or even by car (now that car ownership has begun to spread), in order to collect water and bring it home in large containers. Water from this source is so popular that people may have to queue for hours if they go to collect it during daylight. So people have started to travel late at night to avoid the rush. In this case, we see not so much the continuation of an old custom with regard to foraging but a new development born out of modern concerns about the taste and purity of water.

The concern with purity is part of a larger focus on food's influence on one's health, and on the particular qualities of food as it affects specific parts of the body. Such concerns are not merely those of specialists in Moonshadow Pond but are also a part of daily food practices. People will effortlessly talk about the appropriate foodstuffs to counteract particular health conditions and to favorably affect one's *qi*, understood as a vital energy, vapor, or breath that circulates through one's body. All foodstuffs are seen as having a quality (*xing*). They can be cold, cool, hot, warm, dry, or neutral. For instance,



FIGURE 4. Collecting pure water from a natural aquifer.

pineapple and mango are viewed as heating, whereas pomelo is cooling. Some greens, such as sweet potato leaves, mustard greens, celery, cucumber, pumpkin, and Chinese cabbage, are neutral. Other greens, like Chinese chives, scallions, and garlic stems, are heating, and still others, such as bitter melon and green cabbage, are cooling. Of the many different medicinal soups made from grasses and twigs (*yaocai*), each is seen as having different properties. Medicinal soups are also used for their positive effects on specific organs (e.g., lungs, kidneys, liver) or for treatment of various conditions (e.g., inflammation, coughs, thirst).⁵⁵

As Vivienne Lo states, “While the term *wu wei* (the five flavors) may refer in a general sense to the pleasures of eating, medical historians have preferred to translate *wei* as ‘savors’ to emphasize the medical rather than culinary virtues of the term.” And she continues to tell us that by the eighteenth century, “Every foodstuff, like every drug, had a savor associated with the pentic system, a *qi*, a relative potency, and was associated with healing different parts of the body. This *qi* in a medical context indicated thermostatic qualities: hot, warm, neutral, cool, and cold. The five flavors were each associated with an organ: the lungs, spleen, kidneys, liver and heart.”⁵⁶

Such ideas clearly permeated society over time, and in Moonshadow Pond they are part of everyday approaches to food. When my husband suffered

from an upset stomach after a trip to a tea plantation in 2007, our neighbors said his illness was the result of getting a cold wind on the mountains during the day, then consuming excessively “hot” dishes when we ate dinner at a restaurant in the county capital that evening. This, they said, created an imbalance in his system. One of the reasons Moonshadow Pond residents disdain fast foods such as Kentucky Fried Chicken (that can be found in the county capital) is that they believe these foods to be excessively “heating” and to negatively impact digestion.

As we can see from this brief overview, the “food universe” of Moonshadow Pond is a complex mix of cultivated and foraged, self-provisioned and purchased, the locally available and the more distantly procured (see fig. 5). It is fair to say that villagers share a common food culture. Sidney Mintz describes a “common cuisine” as one that is shared by a community of people who eat it “with sufficient frequency to consider themselves experts on it. They all believe and care to believe, that they know what it consists of, how it is made, and how it should taste.”⁵⁷

Within this food universe, eating out is not routine for daily meals. There are a few items, such as bean curd and fish and meat balls served in soup, that cannot be made at home. These are made daily by local businesses and sold in the village. Also, two roadside restaurants in the village have recently been upgraded and are now three-story banquet halls. The clientele for these restaurants is primarily white-collar workers from the nearby county capital. But rural dwellers also use their services for special occasions, such as weddings and other banquets. Recently, a few villagers have opened roadside noodle shops on the highway that passes through the village. These serve popular breakfast noodle dishes, mainly for travelers and commuters heading to work on the heavily trafficked highway to the capital.

For most Moonshadow Pond residents, eating out is reserved for celebratory events. As one Moonshadow Pond resident said of the banquet halls, “We villagers don’t eat at that kind of place unless there is a wedding or something like that. We eat at home. These kinds of places are for *ganbu* [cadres], people with a *danwei* [office work unit], and other people who are not spending their own money.”

The preceding provides a cursory description of the foods that are produced and consumed in Moonshadow Pond, as well as some of the social and cultural contexts of consumption. The chapters that follow will look more deeply at “food in action,” or, rather, the ways in which people use food to organize their work; communicate meanings about the present and

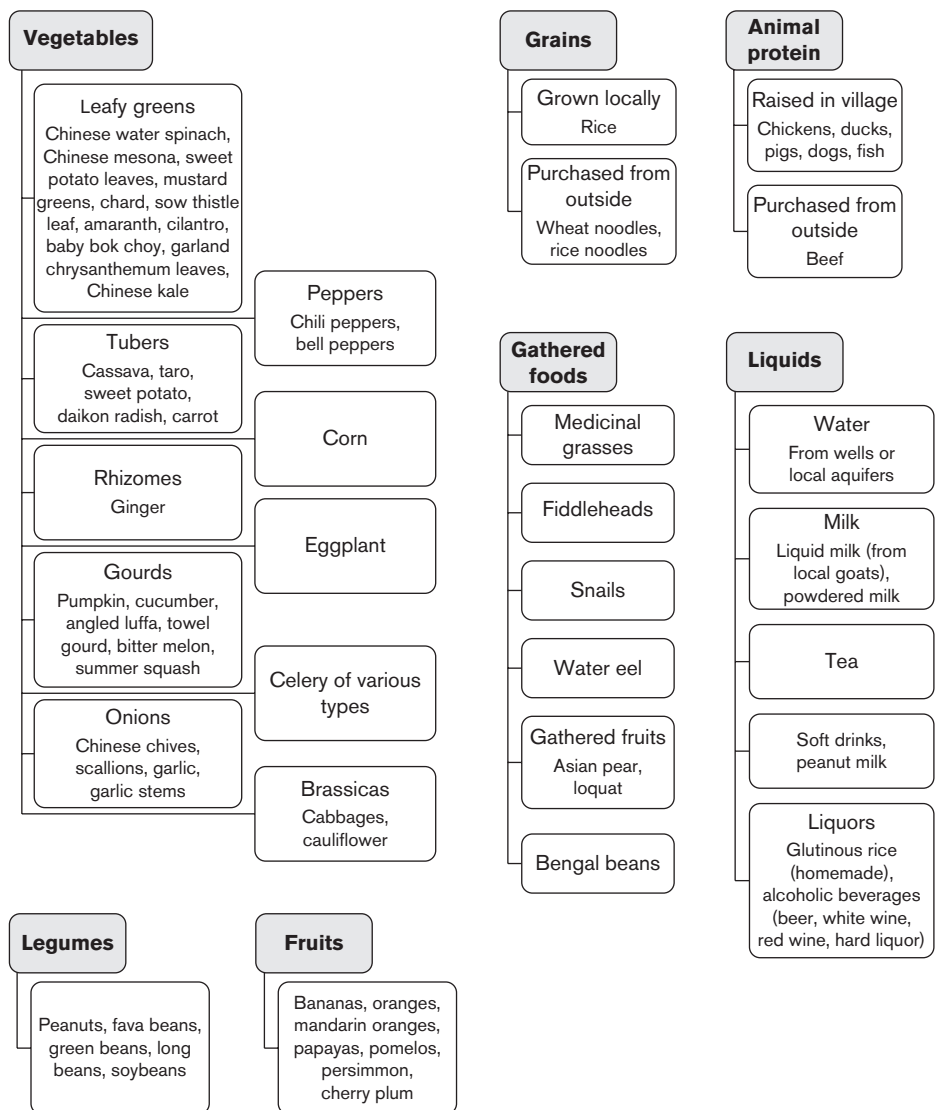


FIGURE 5. The food universe of Moonshadow Pond.

the past; create, shape, and sustain relationships; and communicate moral values.

FOOD AS A CULTURAL SYSTEM

Food has always had a dual nature. It is a necessity for biological existence, but in all cultures it has also been invested with a range of meanings. But in discussing the specific relationship of food to culture, analysts have often fallen into two camps. Those who emphasize deep structure, or long-lasting meanings of food that transcend particular shifting contexts, are applying a semiotic or meaning-based approach to understanding the role of food in culture. Others, while also looking at the meanings attributed to food, choose to emphasize historical and contextual elements of the relationships of food, culture, and society.

Two anthropologists who have written widely on food, and whose work illustrates these frameworks, are Mary Douglas and Sidney Mintz. It was Mary Douglas who so famously articulated the idea that food is a “system of communication”⁵⁸ that encodes messages about social relationships, including degrees of hierarchy, inclusion, and exclusion.⁵⁹ A model for this kind of meaning-based approach is Douglas’s analysis of dietary rules in the Old Testament’s book of Leviticus.⁶⁰ As she pointed out, the notion of *holiness* in Leviticus was equated with wholeness, perfection, and completeness. Hence, animals that were considered “whole,” or pure, were allowed, while those defined as incomplete (such as the cud-chewing, cloven-footed pig) were considered anomalous and were prohibited. These rules about food define a particular community within which the rules apply, hence creating boundaries between insiders and outsiders. For Douglas, therefore, no part of a food system can be understood in isolation from other parts, or from an overall cultural-meaning system. In this particular case, perfect whole animals are considered analogous to the perfection of the temple altar, and these examples of wholeness and perfection are ultimately analogized with the need or desire to preserve the territorial integrity of the promised land itself.⁶¹

Douglas perceived food as being not merely symbolic but as having a language, with both a syntax and a grammar, that expresses core cultural meanings.⁶² Approaching food as a language entails carefully observing such things as the order of elements within a meal, and the relationship between meals (in a day, over a week, or in a year), as these relationships themselves

constitute meanings. One example of how these “syntagmatic relations” constitute meanings is simply illustrated in her example: “It can’t be lunchtime, I haven’t had breakfast yet!”⁶³

Additionally, within this linguistic system, the individual elements of each meal can function as signs or paradigms for one another. So, for instance, in the British working-class food system of the 1970s, a biscuit with icing and a jam center might function in a small meal as a desiccated, condensed substitute for plum cake with sweet custard in a more elaborate meal.⁶⁴ As Douglas famously put it, “On the two axes of syntagm and paradigm, chain and choice, sequence and set, call it what you will, . . . food elements can be ranged until they are all accounted for either in grammatical terms, or down to the last lexical item.”⁶⁵

Interestingly, this “grammar,” or language, of food is one reason, according to Douglas, that innovation is often difficult to accomplish within food systems. There simply is no way to easily insert elements for which there is no conceptual space. For instance, there was no place for whole raw fruits within the meals of the working-class British families she studied—fruit could only be inserted into a meal as a sliced decorative topping for cake, cooked into a pudding, or spread as jam on a biscuit or toast.⁶⁶ And, seemingly more limiting, each of these elements can occur only within specific courses in particular meals. For these reasons, one can examine cultural categories and distinctions to answer the question, for specific contexts, “What is it that makes a meal a meal?”⁶⁷

Douglas, and others who used her approach,⁶⁸ was able, through the analysis of food as a meaning system, to expose cultural categories that are not always readily apparent on the surface. But if one looks at food systems *only* as enclosed meaning systems, one can encounter difficulties explaining significant global transformations in diet. For instance, Douglas cited neither external factors, such as economy or ecology, nor specific historical circumstances when discussing cultural meanings of food and their impact on social relations.

Here the approach of Sidney Mintz, who emphasized the role of global political economy in changing dietary patterns, is illustrative of a different framework for thinking about the relationship of food to culture, society, and history. Mintz’s work on sugar was pathbreaking in bringing changing political and economic relations into the analysis of the relationship between food and culture. He examined the role of sugar in Europe and the Americas as it shifted over several centuries, from an elite spice and condiment in medieval Europe, to an ingredient in the artfully constructed deserts of the

nobility, to the cheap dietary energy of tea and jam consumed by the industrial proletariat in England. Indeed, Mintz's depiction of the diffusion of sugar makes the case that it fueled the industrial revolution in England every bit as much as coal. And its role has now expanded to become a ubiquitous substance throughout the modern food system.

Certainly the omnipresence of processed foods in the modern diet would have been impossible without an exponential rise in the consumption of both fats and sugars, and according to Mintz, these transformations have ultimately broken down some of the very conceptual regularities that Douglas spoke about in her work. Citing Douglas in the conclusion of his study of sugar, Mintz concluded that "The whole momentum of modern life has been away from any such 'lexicon' or 'grammar,' and the analogy is not a good one. Describing the foods in a meal in linguistic terminology hardly 'accounts for' them, because the structural constraints on ingestion are not comparable to those on language; we can eat without meals, but we cannot speak without grammar."⁶⁹ Mintz went on to explain that, in the world of mass-produced fast food, "The 'paradigm' of the meal, the 'syntagm' of the meal schedule, and time restraints on eating may all be considered as obstructions to the exercise of individual preference."⁷⁰ "Ingestion," he wrote, has become "individualized and noninteractive."⁷¹

Mintz's historical approach and Douglas's symbolic approach need not be viewed as incompatible. A number of theorists have combined materialist and symbolic or semiotic approaches.⁷² I have found both perspectives useful in approaching the relationship between food and culture in Moonshadow Pond. For instance, it would be impossible to ignore the Douglas-inspired framework of food as a meaningful symbolic system. As subsequent chapters will show, the exchange of food in Moonshadow Pond is certainly a "language" that can be used to manipulate social relationships, create distance or closeness, and advance hierarchy or greater equality. Further, many core cultural concepts inform food consumption and production in Moonshadow Pond, not only medicinal notions, such as hot versus cold foods, but also ideas about the proper components of a meal. Food is also a moral instrument that expresses and acts out core cultural values such as filiality. What Douglas would call the "syntagmatic relations" of food is also clearly relevant here—because food structures both short and long cycles of time, from the rhythm of the day to yearly ritual cycles. Thus, despite the fact that the villagers possess greater wealth, and a diet far richer than most ordinary villagers consumed in the past, many customary meanings have retained their relevance.

Yet an approach informed with an eye toward historical transformation is also necessary for examining the relationship between food and culture in rural China, as it has experienced profound transformations over the last fifty years. As noted earlier, older residents of Moonshadow Pond have lived through civil war and revolution in the 1930s and 1940s, the establishment of the Communist government in 1949, large-scale collectivization followed by famine from 1958–61, a modified version of collectivization in the 1960s and 1970s, and finally the era of “reform and opening” that began in 1979. As subsequent chapters document, many of these historical developments were experienced and are remembered through food—as periods of relative food security or dearth and even famine, and also as changes in the organization of food production itself. At the same time, nowadays many young people have never experienced food through a participatory relationship with agriculture. To wonder if and how these historical transformations have influenced the role and meaning of food in their lives is not farfetched.

In looking at both long-lasting and deep-rooted cultural categories as well as at historical contexts, I have found a focus on the concept of value to be particularly useful. I turn to this issue below.

THE VALUE OF FOOD IN MOONSHADOW POND

In Moonshadow Pond, the value of food is expressed and appreciated daily, not only in words, but in the actions and interactions of people within the family, in the village and in their connections with the outside world. Indeed, it might not even be a stretch to say that in Moonshadow Pond daily life is experienced as a series of events and transactions around food.

On entering the village, visitors might be brought to the boundaries of the old village to make food offerings to the local gods who protect it; they might also be brought to the local ancestral temple to offer the “three sacrificial meats” (*san sheng*)—pork, chicken, and fish—to the lineage ancestors as well. As guests, they might be at the receiving end of generous hospitality centered on food, not only during banquets, but in attempts to ply them with as many delicious local specialties as possible during each meal. They might also learn how these different foods affect health—and which ones they should eat to strengthen weak areas of their constitutions. If the outsiders stay longer, they would start to notice that all kinds of exchanges take place daily between family members, kin, and neighbors, from sharing vegetables grown in their

own gardens to elaborate gifting practices accompanying more formal events. They would also observe that despite these exchanges, which take place outside the domain of the market, food is also an important commodity, and the relative prices of different food items are a frequent topic of conversation. For instance, it would not be unusual for our guests to hear a visitor from a different part of Meixian and a local from Moonshadow Pond engaged in a heated discussion about the prices and quality of pig intestines in their respective areas.

Surveying the village landscape at different times of year, these guests would discern that much food production now falls to middle-aged and older women, who are responsible for the bulk of rice cultivation and tend to their family vegetable plots. In speaking with elderly villagers, our visitors would learn that their perspectives on the past are heavily influenced by the villagers' experiences of food scarcity or abundance. They might also catch villagers complaining about the younger generation's lack of commitment to gardening or cooking for their elders! Or observe that class and wealth distinctions are frequently remarked on through the lens of food—as criticism of local cadres who dine at the government's expense is accompanied by vivid descriptions of their consumption of exotic and highly priced culinary fare, from wild animals to elaborate soups with rare ingredients.

If our guests stay longer, they might start marking the passage of time through food. There is a collective dimension to all of this. Most families mark off the parts of the day in similar ways through mealtimes, and the yearly calendar is also distinguished by different holidays associated with special foods.

Finally, while the outsiders might see that much of the activity around food entails intensive labor—from growing to harvesting to cooking—they would not miss the emphasis on food's pleasures, the gusto with which villagers talk about their local produce or critique different dishes, the joy of sociality in large and small banquets, and the ways in which food creates conviviality and mutual good feelings. It would be a rare day, for instance, that someone in Moonshadow Pond would not be heard praising or disparaging the pork ball soup of another locality or the city food he or she ate on a trip. Food is pleasurable, as is talking endlessly about food!

In short, food in Moonshadow Pond is a medium of immense value. It is certainly a commodity, but it cannot be reduced to a mere commodity because it reflects and communicates social identities and creates and maintains social relationships through a variety of exchanges. It organizes time,

from daily activities to the yearly calendar. As a symbol, it embodies the contradictions and tensions of contemporary rural life. As a language, it can be purposely manipulated to convey a range of meanings. It serves not only as a source of sustenance but as a vehicle for action. It is clearly a necessity, but it is also a focus of enjoyment, elaboration, and artistry.

Of course, as noted above, it is not food *per se* that is acting on its own here but, rather, humans who invest in food a vast array of meanings. Jean Baudrillard, in discussing what he called an “ideological genesis of needs,” differentiated four logics of “value” that can be very useful to our project here.⁷³ In Baudrillard’s words, an object can assume “a logic of utility, a logic of the market, a logic of the gift, and a logic of status. Organized in accordance with one of the above groupings, the object assumes respectively the status of an instrument, a commodity, a symbol, or a sign.”⁷⁴

For Baudrillard, any one object can function according to several of these logics at once. For instance, Baudrillard gives the example of the exchange of wedding rings as a symbol of the relationship between the two partners, but the rings are also obtained through market exchange and in that sense are commodities. We might also add, though Baudrillard does not point this out, that according to his own definition a wedding ring can also function as a sign. As he states, a sign “no longer gathers its meaning in the concrete relationship between two people. It assumes its meaning in its differential relation to other people. It assumes its meaning in its differential relation to other signs.”⁷⁵ Here we might think of a wedding ring that is made of a large, expensive, precious stone, which the wearer rather ostentatiously flaunts. In this sense, it is less a symbol of the relationship between the couple than a sign of status.

As with the example of the wedding ring, the value of food in rural China has multiple logics at work simultaneously. We might think here of a banquet. Because it involves relations among people, it is clearly an instance of gift or symbolic exchange. Yet the items may be purchased in the market (part of commodity exchange) or self-provisioned. This self-provisioning, when not related to a banquet, is also motivated by what Baudrillard would call the “logic of utility.” At the same time, however, the particular dishes presented at a banquet, such as a soup with rare ingredients, might also function as signs because they are used to create distinctions from others and to enhance status.⁷⁶

As an embodiment of value, however, food is certainly unusual. Unlike wedding rings or cash, food is perishable. David Graeber has pointed out

that, in most cultural systems, perishable things are usually ranked lower on orders of value, for the very reason that by definition they do not last. Indeed, even something as permanent as money may not be permanent enough, and this is why those who have great monetary wealth often invest some of it in art or in other unique and transcendent items.⁷⁷

How, then, can we reconcile the impermanence of food with its nature as a source of great value in rural China? One possibility is by reformulating our notion of value, and seeing it as inhering not only in discrete objects but in actions, for objects are themselves usually the products of action. Graeber gives an example of value as action: "If one gives another person food, and receives a shell in return, it is not the value of the food that returns to one in the form of the shell, but rather the value of the act of giving it. The food is simply the medium."⁷⁸ As Graeber points out, Marx also had a theory of value in action. For Marx, the effort that goes into producing a commodity is invisible at the time of its consumption—no one sees the worker and the efforts he she undertook in producing it. Nonetheless, despite this invisibility, every object "embodies human intentions."⁷⁹ For Marx, these intentions and the actions that resulted from them were the actual sources of an object's value.⁸⁰ And Graeber also argues that we can use this insight in thinking about value.

How does all this help us to understand the value of food in rural China, and the seeming conundrum of its having great value despite its perishability? As we shall see, much of food's value in the rural Chinese context inheres precisely in its uncanny ability to embody human intentions. While food is perishable, the actions surrounding it can create connectedness and sharing, debts and obligations, even resentments and recriminations. Whether hosting a banquet, or cooking for one's mother-in-law, one is engaged in a value-laden activity. Food in this sense becomes a critical medium through which, in large and small ways, people communicate throughout their lives about what and who really matter.

Additionally, food is particularly useful in what anthropologists call "value transformations" from one realm to the other. Within the ethnographic literature are many examples of such value transformations. For example, Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch explain how money earned through commerce or wage labor, which thus belongs to the realm of "short-term exchanges," can in turn be plowed into a different "transactional order" associated with a "long-term or cosmic order."⁸¹ Examples of this include investing money in sacred ceremonies, making charitable donations, or sharing within one's own family to sustain long-term bonds.

The idioms of cooking and eating are frequently used to speak about such transformations in value. As Parry and Bloch point out, "It is no accident that such transformations should so often be expressed in an alimentary idiom, for everywhere this is one of the most powerful of all possible metaphors for transformation."⁸² Janet Carstens, for example, has examined rural Malay households, where men work as fishermen and women are responsible for most of the rice cultivation. The men provide women with the fish they catch and with their cash earnings, both of which are said to be "cooked" by the women, along with the rice they produce, and shared within the family.⁸³ In this particular context, the women actually do cook the rice and fish. But the idiom of cooking is also used to refer to their management of the household budget as a whole because they transform the men's cash earnings to use-values that can be shared by the family. Similarly, as stated above, food procured through market exchange or self-provisioning can be used in a banquet that functions as a medium of symbolic gift exchange.

We see, then, that food can partake of a variety of different and coexisting logics of value and reveals its value as a focal point of action and intention. It can also function as a medium through which transformations between different transactional orders are effected. The chapters that follow will look more closely at the value of food in Moonshadow Pond specifically. Our analysis begins in chapter 2 by examining food through the lens of labor. The work of farming, food processing, and cooking certainly has great "use-value" and is essential for survival. However, the labor of farming, which is integral to peasant identity and was valorized symbolically in the Mao era, has never been highly compensated on the market. It is now more than ever coded in terms of both gender and generation. Further, the labor of cooking is at the intersection of family dynamics and tensions. Therefore, we need to take a careful look at the complex and conflicting terrain of values in the production and preparation of food.

Food is also a vehicle for evaluating and remembering the past, and memory is an active and ongoing process. Chapter 3 turns to the way in which food—through its production, preparation, and consumption—serves as a powerful means of embodying memory. As a repository of individual and collective memories, food works as a vehicle through which villagers understand and judge the historical transformations of the last half century. But it does more than that: the replication of food practices in daily life and in calendrical celebrations connects people to time. As David Sutton suggests, food is often a medium for "tying past, present and future together."⁸⁴

Foodstuffs move (or rather, people move foodstuffs) through a complex set of exchanges outside and within the market. Chapter 4 examines circulation, both symbolic, or gift exchange, and market exchange, to understand the value of food. The domination of the global and Chinese economies by capitalism has not meant that the logic of market exchange dominates all transactions within the village. Gift exchange is still an important arena for the circulation of food; and an economy of obligations, or “moral economy,” coexists with the market. At the same time, as we shall see, food itself sometimes takes on the qualities of currency. The circulation and exchange of food, furthermore, involve many different kinds of relationships, from hierarchical to egalitarian, competitive to cooperative, and informal sharing to obligatory provisioning.

The issue of obligation is key. For if value emerges in actions, those actions will also be judged. This entails considering food as a moral signifier, a topic taken up in chapter 5, which focuses on the ways in which food expresses and enacts moral obligations and is also a focus of moral judgments. Finally, we will try to understand food as sociality and pleasure in chapter 6. The value of food as pleasure in Moonshadow Pond is inherently social and cannot be attained through solitary acts of consumption.⁸⁵

These categories—labor, memory, exchange, morality, and sociality—are, of course, a way of organizing our study conceptually, but in actual lived experience they are not always easy to separate. In what category, for instance, would we put a discussion of the daughter-in-law who refuses to cook for her elderly mother-in-law after a family dispute? Clearly, this involves the labor of food preparation through cooking, but it also involves exchange and issues of moral obligation. Likewise, banqueting is very much about sociality, but it also involves exchange (both market and gift exchange), requires the labor of food production and preparation, and, through periodic reenactment, is a way of preserving memories. Lately, ostentatious banqueting has also been held up for moral critique.

In disentangling these categories, it makes sense to begin with labor—more specifically the production and preparation of food. Until recently, not only was agriculture the basis of subsistence for almost all the residents of Moonshadow Pond, but it was also the source of their collective identity as peasants. Further, sharing a common stove was a key component in defining family boundaries and thus was a source of family identity. The next chapter elaborates on these issues by examining the production and preparation of food, the labors of tilling the fields and tending the stove.