Everyday Approaches to Food Safety in Kunming

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Abstract

The article explores how people in Kunming have interpreted and acted upon food-related environmental health threats, particularly within the contexts of everyday food shopping. It is argued that an increasingly intensified, delocalized food supply system and a state-led emphasis on individual responsibility and choice have produced growing uncertainties about food. However, the article takes issue with the claim that new forms of risk and institutional changes have produced "individualized" responses, arguing that many of the practices Kunmingers have developed to handle food-related risks and their understandings of what constitutes "safe" food have been developed within the frameworks of family ties and regional cuisine. Further, shoppers and purveyors of food have forged new ties of trust and re-emphasized connections between people, food and place. Nevertheless, concerns about the food supply are a source of discontent which is feeding into wider ambivalences towards modernization. This is particularly acute among the economically disadvantaged.

Keywords: food safety; risk; trust; food shopping; urban China; individualization

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In an August 2008 interview in her Kunming home, Ms Wang explained that after rinsing vegetables she had bought at the market, she would soak them for a while in water before cooking.

Klein: Why do you soak them?
Wang: Because of the pesticides nowadays.
Klein: Oh.
Wang: There could be some residues and that.
Klein: Oh.
Wang: Once I bought some cabbage (*baicai* 白菜). When I got home I put it in water and immediately it emitted a thick smell of pesticides. At first I didn't think much of it. I just felt the odour was weird. But still I boiled it. When we ate it, it just stuck in our throats, so we stopped eating it. I was so angry that time. This was cabbage I had bought at Zuanxin 篆新 [one of the largest covered markets in the city]. That time I even called "315" to complain [to the Yunnan Consumers' Association].
Klein: Really?

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Wang: I don't think it made a difference. But since that event I have become especially careful when choosing vegetables.

Ms Wang's experience is part of what has been described as a growing concern with food safety among Chinese urban consumers.[1] This article investigates how urban Chinese have interpreted and acted upon food-related environmental health threats, particularly in the context of food shopping, and considers the ways in which concerns with food safety have shaped people's everyday life practices and impacted on their experiences of recent social change.

Ulrich Beck's depiction of a "risk society" may help us to understand experiences of food safety risks in China.[2] According to Beck, modern risk society is marked by a pervasive sense of uncertainty arising from hazards produced by technological industrialization itself. In China, the nature of food safety hazards has changed since the 1980s. In addition to long-standing problems with microbial contamination, prevalent problems now also include pesticide poisoning of farmers and consumers, heavy metal pollution from industries, the misuse of dangerous veterinary drugs, fungicides and other additives in animal feed, the use of harmful food additives, and animal-borne illnesses.[3] While some have attributed these problems to China's large number of small-scale food producers[4] or to the "fragmentation of regulatory authority among different government agencies,"[5] the country's food safety issues are also typical of a globalizing food system in which food supplies have become ever more divorced from their regional moorings and dependent on long distance trade and intensified production methods.[6] As with other hazards typical of a "risk society," many new food-related public health threats, from SARS to melamine-tainted milk powder, have been geographically dispersed, crossing regional and sometimes national boundaries. These threats have been hard for experts to identify and for authorities to contain, and they have been difficult – if not, following Ms Wang's account, always impossible – to detect with the senses. Thus, food-related risks in China are in many respects similar to those in the industrialized countries that are the focus of Beck's analysis, but are in other respects rather different. In his recent survey of food safety problems in China, Yunxiang Yan draws on and modifies Beck's theory to argue that "risk society" in China is, as elsewhere, characterized by a growing concern with "unsafe food" – for example the chemically contaminated foods typical of industrialized agriculture – but, unlike in industrialized countries, also by persistent worries about far-reaching food hygiene problems (not least in the catering industry), and an increasing focus on what Yan

1 Tam and Yang 2005; Wang, Mao and Gale 2008; Yan 2012; Gong and Jackson 2012.
2 Beck 1992.
3 Ellis and Turner 2007; Ellis and Turner 2008; Hamburger 2002.
4 Xiu and Klein 2010.
5 Tam and Yang 2005, 10.
6 Mintz 2006; Broughton and Walker 2010.

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calls "poisonous foods" – the deliberate contamination of food by unscrupulous producers and traders.[7]

According to Beck and others, the uncertainty produced by technological industrialization is exacerbated by "individualization," a process by which people have become divorced from the institutions, cultural frameworks and authorities that had once provided some assurances in the face of risk.[8] According to Ms Wang's description, she must choose, soak and taste each vegetable for signs of pesticide residues. Although she has some recourse to a consumer watchdog, it is up to her to make the complaint. Bryan Tilt, writing in this symposium, argues that Chinese people in the reform era are indeed facing environmental health risks in a context of "individualization."[9] Tilt draws on the work of Yunxiang Yan, who maintains that this process has been led by the Party-state, and has involved the "untying" of the individual from collective institutions such as kinship groups and socialist work units.[10] Thus, under radical state socialism, the state organized the production and distribution of food, and was responsible for the adequacy and the quality of the food supply. In the cities, households were usually the main site of food consumption, but state and collective work units were important nodes in the rationing system and also provided many cooked meals, while uncooked food was purchased from state-run shops.[11] However, since the end of the 1970s, market forces have come to play an ever more crucial part in the food system, and since the 1990s, the importance of the work unit has greatly diminished. The responsibility for food safety and other aspects of the food supply have become distributed between the state, the food industries and consumers. New institutions, laws and management systems have been introduced to address food safety within the food industries.[12] At the same time, growing consumer choice has been accompanied by greater personal responsibility over what to eat, as emphasized through information campaigns in supermarkets, food markets, workplaces and residential neighbourhoods. The emphasis on personal responsibility for food safety parallels education campaigns in the areas of nutritional health and child rearing.[13]

Beck's emphasis on universalized uncertainties and individualized responses is a useful starting point which helps to frame some of my informants' experiences and also situates them within broader, global processes. The limitations of the "risk society" framework are suggested by accounts which highlight diversities in approaches to food-related risks. Caplan argues that degrees of distance to

7 Yan 2012.
8 Beck 1992; Giddens 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernscheim 2002.
9 Tilt 2013.
10 Yan 2009. In a recent discussion of food safety in China, Yan examines the impact of food safety problems on social trust, but he does not elaborate on the relationship between "risk society" and "individualization." See Yan 2012.
11 Croll 1983.
12 Wang, Mao and Gale 2008; Tam and Yang 2005.
13 Jing 2000; Gong and Jackson 2012.

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food producers informed consumer responses to BSE in the UK,[14] while Kjærnes, Harvey and Warde highlight the importance of national institutional contexts for shaping different degrees of trust in food across Europe.[15] Writing on China, some have argued that awareness of food safety risks and willingness to pay a premium for certified "safe" foods are shaped by levels of income and education.[16] An important recent study by Veeck, Yu and Burns on consumer approaches to food-related risk in four eastern cities emphasizes the significance of Chinese historical memories of food insecurity, and contends that amongst urban Chinese the "goods" of increased dietary abundance outweighed the "bads" of food safety risks.[17] Yan, by contrast, argues that the coexistence in China of different types of food safety problems, and especially the prevalence of "poisonous food," was contributing not only to a "deeply felt sense of insecurity,"[18] but significantly also to a "rapid decline of social trust."[19]

As these studies highlight, the way people make sense of and act upon risks related to food cannot be assumed, but needs to be investigated empirically. Here, I will compliment these approaches with a more localized attention to regional food culture and experiences of urban change. As a "risk society" approach would anticipate, people in Kunming did describe increasing uncertainties about food, and many viewed this as a result of a delocalization and intensification of the food supply. Further, in their daily food shopping practices, Kunmingers displayed limited trust in existing regulatory systems, relying instead on their own skills and experiences. Nevertheless, this article takes issue with the "individualization" argument. Shoppers did not interpret and act upon food safety threats as "untied" individuals. Instead, their approaches were informed by ties with family members and by cultural understandings of food. I complicate Yan's description of growing social distrust and argue that in the process of dealing with food safety risks, forms of trust reliant on new connections with people and to place have emerged. However, in contrast to the optimism of Veeck, Yu and Burns, I suggest that in Kunming concerns about the food supply were feeding into wider ambivalences about modernization and that this was especially acute among the economically disadvantaged, whose access to desired foods was being limited by stricter regulation of urban space.

Households

I carried out four months of ethnographic research in Kunming between 2006 and 2009.[20] Research included conversations and observations in food markets,

14 Caplan 2000.
15 Kjærnes, Harvey and Warde 2007.
16 Wang, Mao and Gale 2008; Gale and Huang 2007.
17 Veeck, Yu and Burns 2010.
18 Yan 2012, 717.
19 Yan 2012, 707.
20 Fieldwork was funded by small research grants from the British Academy (SG-43053 and SG-50545), with additional support from the Universities' China Committee in London (UCCL) and from the SOAS Internal Research Grants scheme.

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shops, restaurants, and at "ecological" farms. My discussion relies especially on material collected through household food studies, mostly in the summer of 2008. These consisted of interviews with members of 25 households about food shopping, cooking and eating. The main shopper of the household was interviewed, and in many cases more than one person from the household took part. Most, but not all, principal shoppers were women, and in some households shopping was regularly undertaken by two or more members. Interviews took place in people's homes, at workplaces, cafes or restaurants, and lasted between 50 minutes and two hours. All but two of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. Follow-up meetings were arranged wherever possible. In 18 of the households the main interviewee completed a one-week food diary in which she or he recorded what they ate, where and with whom, what foods they bought and how much they spent on these.

Households were met through contacts and snowballing. My research assistant, Ms Miao Yun 缪芸, was instrumental in contacting most of the households, and she was also present at most of the interviews. Roughly half of the interviewees might be described as "middle class" in that they worked at, or had retired from, or were married to a person who worked at, jobs such as journalists, university professors, entrepreneurs and government bureaucrats. Many of these people resided in the city's new upmarket residential neighbourhoods.[21] The other interviewees included migrant workers, poor pensioners, laid-off workers and housewives married to manual workers. Household size and composition ranged from three single-person households living in shared accommodation to one household where four generations lived together under one roof. Eleven of the households had a child (and in one case, two children) under 15. Nine of the interviewees had recently moved to Kunming from the countryside or from other cities; the others were born and raised in Kunming or had lived there for 20 years or more. Some of the interviewees' names have been changed. The household studies were initially designed as part of a project on "ecological foods," and sought to situate such foods within patterns of consumption. For this reason, I sought out households where "ecological" foods were regularly consumed as well as those where they were not. Eight of the households included frequent shoppers of "ecological" foods, while many others occasionally purchased such products. In the interviews, I did not ask questions about "food safety" unless the topic was raised by the interviewee. Nevertheless, uncertainty about the food supply emerged in every single interview.

The majority of the households studied were nuclear and joint family households. In these households, shoppers articulated food choices and worries largely in terms of other family members, especially children. This sentiment was addressed in a billboard in a Kunming suburb which advertised "ecological" garden plots for rent. The billboard showed two children smiling at delicious-looking

21 On the relationship between housing and class in contemporary Kunming, see Zhang 2008.

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vegetables. The caption read: "Don't let your children eat any more vegetables fed on pesticides and chemical fertilizers" (*Bie rang nin de haizi zai chi nongyao huafei weida de shucai* 别让您的孩子在吃农药化肥喂大的蔬菜). The billboard voiced parents' concerns for their children's health, but the smiling children also highlighted the significance of good food as a source of family happiness. Among the families I met, enjoying good food together was considered to be an important part of family life, and on weekends and public holidays, family members, often from several households, would gather around food. Indeed, the garden plots advertised on the billboard were tended to by labourers during the week, and visited at weekends by middle-class families who would pick vegetables from their plot and often cook and eat them on the spot. Commensality has long been crucial to Chinese notions of family,[22] and as Yan has argued, in China "individualization" has not led to the demise of the family. On the contrary, with the dismantling of larger collective institutions, the family has become a key site for personal fulfilment and emotional attachment.[23]

Arguably, the centrality of food for the health, happiness and identity of the family has added to the seriousness of growing uncertainties surrounding the food supply, as suggested in the billboard described above. Certainly, the importance of food in family life contributed to the anxieties of food shopping for women such as Ms Ao, who described the difficulties of catering to the tastes and dietary needs of her husband and son on a limited budget. In other households, as mentioned, responsibilities were shared by two or more people, and in many households even everyday food shopping was a topic of shared discussion. While shared responsibility and debate could lead to conflicts,[24] it also meant that knowledge about food and shopping was not entirely "individualized." Ms Wang, for example, explained that while food shopping was a constant source of tension between the generations in her household, it was her live-in grandmother who taught her the many skills she used to choose, clean and cook food.

Cuisine and Urban Change

Shopping was done mostly in open-air or covered food markets, and at supermarkets. Most of the households I interviewed, including the low-income households, frequented both. They reported shopping daily or several times a week at food markets to purchase fresh food, and making occasional (monthly or weekly) visits to supermarkets to stock up on non-food items and on staple foods such as rice and cooking oil. On their trips to the market, shoppers used a number of methods

22 Stafford 2000, 99–109.

23 Yan 2003.

24 In their study of parenting practices in Chengdu in the wake of the 2008 melamine-contaminated powdered milk scare, Gong and Jackson argue that the feeding of infants was a frequent source of conflict between generations, contributing to the anxieties experienced by new mothers in particular. See Gong and Jackson 2012.

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for choosing "safe" vegetables. Ms Yang, a recently retired university librarian married to a professor, would look for leafy vegetables with insect holes, reasoning that if insects ate them they could not contain pesticides. Ms Liang, an office worker in a city government bureau, argued that cauliflowers should not be too white: "It feels like they have chemical fertilizers in them, that they exceed [prescribed limits]. You must choose the ones that are from the mountains, they are slightly yellow. They don't look pretty." Similarly, she told me, tomatoes should not be evenly red, as it suggests that they have been grown in a plastic greenhouse. Once home, both Liang and Yang would soak their vegetables in water before cooking them.

These strategies might be described as "individualized" in the sense that they had been developed by food shoppers aware that they were themselves responsible for ensuring the safety of their foods. However, such strategies also reflect knowledge, values and discussions about food shared both within and between households. They were informed by a "cuisine," in Mintz's sense of "the ongoing foodways of a region, within which active discourse about food sustains both common understandings and reliable production of the foods in question."[25] Cuisine in this sense is not static – indeed reliable production is not always sustained. Nevertheless, in Kunming changes to the food supply were mediated by everyday culinary practices, values and discourses on food.

The extent to which "food safety" strategies and discussions were embedded in regional cuisine was evident in the kinds of food people spoke about when discussing food safety concerns. Thus, while interviewees did mention concerns with a range of foodstuffs, including milk, oil, rice and dried goods, nothing was talked about as much as fresh vegetables and fresh meat, especially pork but also chicken and eggs.[26] A majority of the households ate pork two or more times each day, and it was a crucial food at most festive occasions. Chicken was the main ingredient in regional "signature foods"[27] like "steam pot chicken soup" (*qiguoji* 气锅鸡). Kunmingers often highlighted with satisfaction that their mild climate allowed them to eat fresh leafy greens all year round, and many households reported regularly eating two or more vegetable dishes with midday and evening meals. Often, leafy greens were boiled in stock or simply in water, and served in the soup with a side dip of spices. This method was meant to bring out the "sweetness" of the vegetable itself and to achieve a mouth-melting texture, known in the local dialect as *pa*.

Not all foods important to the cuisine were regarded as equally risky. Rice is Kunming's main grain staple, and people hold strong opinions about its proper taste and texture, but the rice available in the city was rarely mentioned as a

25 Mintz 1996, 107.

26 Most of my household interviews were conducted prior to the nationwide melamine milk scandal in September 2008. See Gong and Jackson 2012 for an account, based on focus group discussions, of how Chengdu families with infants responded to the scandal.

27 Mintz uses the term "signature foods" to refer to foods which come to stand for a region. See Mintz 1996, 95.

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health risk. While recent migrants complained about the taste of the rice in the city, most native Kunmingers I spoke with agreed that the rice had become softer and more fragrant in the last 30 years. Kunming has, in fact, depended on imported rice since the 18th century.[28] By contrast, green vegetables, pork, eggs and chicken have until recently been supplied entirely locally, often from within the greater municipality. Thus, discourse on "food safety" reflected concerns with the disconnection of people from place.

The significance of cuisine was apparent also in the kinds of risks that people highlighted in conversations. Thus, although the majority of food safety incidents in China have involved microbial contamination resulting from poor hygiene practices,[29] and although hygiene was the main focus of public information campaigns, my interviewees rarely talked about these risks in relation to food shopping. Instead, they talked about risks associated with the industrialization of food production. All of the Kunmingers I spoke with expressed concern about the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides in vegetable production. Other frequently mentioned concerns had to do with the use of growth hormones and chemical additives in animal feed.[30]

When it came to the health risks posed, few specified the dangers of particular chemicals or pollutants or distinguished between different kinds of agrichemicals. People talked in general terms about an increase in "cancers" or "illnesses" since the 1990s, and linked this to changes to the food supply. Informants claimed that foods had all become "polluted" (*wuran* 污染) and "unnatural" (*bu ziran* 不自然). By this, they referred not only to contamination by industrial pollution, agrichemicals or additives, but also to the increasing presence of non-seasonal vegetables, either imports from other regions or vegetables grown closer to the city but in plastic greenhouses, often called "greenhouse vegetables" (*dapeng cai* 大棚菜). For older informants in particular, eating seasonal foods underpinned the connection between people and the places where they lived, and was considered crucial to maintaining bodily balance between "heating" and "cooling." Mr Jia, a retired mechanic, argued that it used to be that every season had its proper vegetables, but now everything was "muddled" (*luantao le* 乱套了). Furthermore, "greenhouse vegetables," "feed pork" and other industrialized foods were described as having a bad taste and "mouth feel," and this was perceived to be connected to their healthiness. Ms Wu, a retired accountant who had recently become an enthusiastic customer and volunteer at a certified "organic"

28 Lee 1982, 741.

29 Ellis and Turner 2008, 17.

30 The industrialization of the food supply in China has been a partial and uneven process. For example, according to one report, while concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), promoted since the 1980s, accounted for over 75% of the country's chicken production and 68% of its eggs in 2005, the same report placed CAFO-produced beef and pork that year at around 30% and 37%, respectively, of domestic production. See Ellis and Turner 2007, 20. Yunnan is widely regarded as having less intensified food production than the eastern seaboard . However, pesticide use in the province more than doubled from 10,000 tons in 1990 to 25,000 tons in 2001. See Zhongguo nongyao fazhan baogao bianweihui 2005, 75–76.

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(*youji* 有机) farm near the city, explained that since they had started buying organic food, her husband had not only begun to enjoy eating vegetables, but had also been cured of his back pains and sleeping problems.[31]

Kunmingers' approaches to "food safety" were shaped in a social context of shared discourses on food, in which taste, health and place were interlinked. These discourses focused on foods that were important to everyday and festive diets and that were markers of regional identity. These were also foods which until recently had been supplied exclusively from the immediate surrounding countryside. Fears of ingesting residues of pesticides or growth hormones were conflated with generalized concerns about intensified production methods, described as "unnatural" or "polluted" because they defied what was perceived to be the proper order between food, people and place. Thus, concerns about the safety of foods were embedded in discussions about quality, taste and health.

Nevertheless, while "cuisine" provided a framework for approaching food safety hazards, the importance of cuisine could itself contribute to uncertainties over food. For example, while shoppers wanted to buy "natural" foods, they also valued "freshness" (*xinxian* 新鲜). Freshness was regarded as a determinant of taste and healthiness, and it was the reason informants gave for taking daily or near-daily shopping trips to the market. Marketplace vendors insisted on the freshness of their produce and did their best to keep their vegetables looking bright, clean and pretty. However, there was a tension between these practices and the notion that vegetables that were too pretty contained too many agrichemicals. Furthermore, the attachment to region as a source of tasty, healthy foods itself contributed to feelings of disconnection. Thus, while people I met rarely spoke about concerns about fish, this was because fish had ceased to be an important part of their diet as a result of recent environmental degradation. Kunming is situated on the northern shores of Lake Dian (*Dianchi* 滇池). When people did talk about fish in relation to food safety, they mentioned that they used to eat more of it, but that now nobody dared to eat the fish from the polluted Lake Dian. Many recalled with nostalgia stories of catching and eating fish from the lake and from local streams.

The connection between food and place suggest that Kunmingers' experiences of changes to the food supply cannot be isolated from their experiences of wider social and spatial urban change.[32] A late developer, Kunming has been rebuilt since the mid-1990s in an effort to "catch up" with the eastern seaboard. It now boasts shopping malls with international chains and garden-style residential neighbourhoods for the new middle class. State-led modernization has included attempts to sanitize urban spaces, as in the 2009 campaign to transform Kunming into a "city of hygiene" (*weisheng chengshi* 卫生城市). Such campaigns, involving government bodies such as Kunming's city management bureau (*chengguanju* 城管局) and its hygiene bureau (*weishengju* 卫生局), have

31 On the connection between taste and efficacy in Chinese medicines and dietary therapies, see Lo 2005.
32 My discussion of these changes draws on Zhang 2006.

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included food safety education and inspections of the city's food markets, as well as efforts to "cleanse" the city of street vendors, including farmers from nearby villages selling their own goods. With an official urban population of over three million, the city has doubled in size since the mid-1990s, encroaching on the surrounding countryside and exacerbating pollution and land conflicts. Increasingly, Kunming is marked by social divisions between the new rich and the urban poor, and between urban residents and rural migrants.

The ongoing significance of a regional cuisine provides Kunmingers with a cultural framework in which to interpret recent changes to the food supply. At the same time, the cultural importance given to food in connecting people with place contributes to the sense of rupture caused by rapid urban modernization.

Trust and Place

In response to the uncertainties surrounding the food supply, food providers, the state and consumers themselves have developed numerous strategies to increase trust in food. Government agencies have carried out visible and publicized controls in markets, and have backed a number of food certification schemes. Supermarkets use food safety messages in their strategies to attract customers, participate in government campaigns, construct conspicuously hygienic retail environments, and carry foods certified by government-backed schemes. The latter includes vegetables labelled as "organic," "green foods" (*lüse shipin* 绿色食品) or "no public harm" (*wu gonghai* 无公害).[33]

Interviewees often expressed some trust in supermarkets' claims to be selling safe foods. However, although some claimed to buy "no public harm" pork or "green foods," when they described concrete shopping decisions, it was often not the certificate they looked for. Instead, some interviewees put their trust in particular brands whose products were sold in the supermarkets. Ms Gong, a reporter who lived with her husband, two children, mother and a live-in maid in a gated villa community in the north of Kunming, told me that she used to buy pork from privately run stalls in the market but now regularly bought Shen Nong 神农 brand pork. For her, the fact that it was certified as "no public harm" was not irrelevant. More important, however, was the brand itself and the taste of the pork. She claimed that it was very popular and that if you wanted to buy tail bones for making soup you had to go very early. She explained:

> Compared to those market stalls that don't have any names, [the Shen Nong brand] feels like a bit of a guarantee. When it comes to eating, it's like that meat from the market stalls, sometimes it seems like it has water in it, that it is pork that has been injected with water.

33 There were quite different requirements surrounding these "ecological" certifications, as discussed by Sanders 2006. In supermarket displays – and in popular discourse – the categories tended to get confused. No one I met commented on what the label "no public harm" might have implied about the rest of the food supply.

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Others put their trust in the supermarkets themselves. The supermarket sector in Kunming at the time of the interviews was dominated by multinational retailers, including Carrefour and Wal-Mart. One man in his 30s claimed to trust the supermarkets because they were not Chinese.[34] Another interviewee, Ms Li, who hailed from a village in nearby Shilin 石林 county, lived in the north of Kunming with her husband and their four-year old boy. She ran a small clothing shop near the city centre and often shopped at Wal-Mart. She bought pork there rather than in the food markets: "I feel like I don't have to worry…because foods that get into the supermarket need to be inspected first." She was aware that some of the pork in the supermarkets was certified as "no public harm," but she felt that this pork was too expensive and she did not believe that it was any better than the pork that was not certified. For her, all of the pork available in the city was about the same in taste, and was inferior to that from her home village.

Despite their stated trust, few of my interviewees claimed to purchase vegetables in the supermarkets more than occasionally, as these vegetables were not seen to be sufficiently fresh. Instead, they went to food markets. The "standardized" (*zhenggui* 正规) markets have fixed stalls and are often covered. Vendors at these markets are mostly specialized retailers who supply their stalls from wholesale markets. By contrast, the "informal" or "spontaneous" (*zifa chengxing* 自发成形) markets are open-air markets situated in low-income areas. Vendors at these markets are either middlemen who source their goods from wholesale markets or directly from farmers, or farmers selling their own produce. Informal vendors also operate on the peripheries of the standardized markets and in alleys near or inside residential neighbourhoods.

Generally, informal vendors' prices are lower than inside the standardized markets. The low-income households in my study regularly shopped in the spontaneous markets or from other informal vendors, and cited the lower prices as a key reason for doing so. However, price was not the only factor that determined where people shopped. While some informants were distrustful of the spontaneous markets owing to their lack of government inspection, others preferred to buy directly from farmers rather than from middlemen. Mr Xu and his wife, Ms Jiang, had recently retired from the city's environmental protection bureau and were now running an environmental consultancy firm. Although they often drove their car to farmers' markets in the countryside, when in town they preferred to buy from informal vendors who were more likely to be farmers selling their own produce. Less well-off shoppers similarly described shopping from farmers rather than from middlemen. Auntie Liu, a retired textile worker, shopped at the spontaneous market outside her former work unit, arriving early to shop from farmers selling their own goods since, she explained, the

34 In their study of Chengdu families' responses to the powdered milk scandal of 2008, Gong and Jackson report high levels of loyalty to foreign supermarkets and department stores, as well as to foreign infant formula brands. See Gong and Jackson 2012, 562–64.

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middlemen also operating at the market "are a bit cheaper, but they sell greenhouse vegetables and those are not good to eat."

In her study of food markets in Nanjing in the 1990s, Ann Veeck argues that Nanjing shoppers displayed an open lack of trust in food vendors, who were regarded as transient outsiders, and rarely entered into long-term ties with them.[35] In Kunming in the 2000s, I found a similar ambivalence towards vendors. However, there were signs that relationships of trust were being forged and that concerns over both being cheated on price and on food safety had something to do with this. Ms Yang, the retired librarian, lived within walking distance of an informal market in the north of the city where many of the vendors were farmers. When shopping at this market she would buy from vendors with whom she had become familiar. She felt she could trust them to sell her good quality, fresh vegetables, and that she did not need to haggle. Ms Liang had for several years been doing most of her shopping at one of the largest standardized markets in the city. She explained: "After all these years, [I am] clear about what the [food] is like in each stall. That is why, after shopping, we don't have to worry about eating it."

Among the Kunmingers I met, recreating trust in food hinged less on anonymous, government-backed certification schemes or systems of inspection, and more on faith in familiar brands, shops or individual vendors. Trust in food was inseparable from knowledge or perceptions of the agent providing the food.[36] Moreover, place was often crucial to constructing this trust. Foods that were seen as unsafe, tasteless, unhealthy or not fresh because of being disconnected from the regional food economy and its seasonal cycles were being reconnected by shoppers and retailers. The significance of place was apparent in shopping practices. Ms Yang would always go to vendors from Shalang 沙朗 to buy cabbage. Similarly, Auntie Liu bought vegetables from farmers from Tuanjie 团结 county and Baisha He 白沙河 village, and some vendors at the spontaneous market where she shopped would shout to passers-by: "Vegetables from Tuanjie, no chemical pesticides or fertilizers!" Several shoppers preferred to buy foods from poor, mountainous areas in Kunming's hinterland, reasoning that these had little industrial pollution and that farmers in these areas often could not afford agrichemicals.

For a number of Kunmingers, the kinds of food they desired were no longer available in the city itself. They sought out periodic markets in the countryside or peri-urban areas. While those with private cars could travel some distance from the city and combine these trips with farmhouse tourism, on weekends throngs of ordinary Kunmingers visited rural markets by bus, train or bicycle. Some supermarkets were becoming aware of Kunmingers' attachments to local places. In 2009, Metro introduced a line of vegetables advertised as "Yunnanese," and Carrefour began to sell vegetables they called "directly

35 Veeck 2000.
36 Caplan 2000; Kjærnes, Harvey and Warde 2007.

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supplied by farmers" (*nongmin zhigong* 农民直供) and "local vegetables" (*bendi shucai* 本地蔬菜). I asked a section manager at Carrefour why customers would be interested in these foods. She replied: "Because they are vegetables from farmers' own homes. They use less chemical fertilizer and use farmyard manure instead. This is more natural (*tianran* 天然)." "What is good about that?" I asked. "If it is more natural, then it is healthier!" she replied, echoing a sentiment I had heard from many shoppers.

Social Stratification

Understandings of food were similar among informants of different economic means. However, in contrast to Beck's depiction of modern risks as universal,[37] in Kunming emerging social hierarchies have shaped the ways in which food safety issues are encountered, and the kinds of strategies people develop to deal with them. Observers have noted that rural food shops and markets have been particularly poorly regulated,[38] and some native Kunmingers reported being concerned about the safety of packaged foods when they visited the countryside. Differences were apparent within the city, too. Income was a real constraint on where and what people could buy. The retired textile worker, Auntie Liu, and a migrant worker from Sichuan, Ms Tao, did the bulk of their shopping in the spontaneous markets, and described this in part as an economic necessity. This was particularly the case for Ms Tao, who highlighted the recent rises in food prices. By contrast, Ms Gong, who lived in an up-market residential neighbourhood, did not think twice about paying a 30 per cent premium for Shen Nong-brand pork. Ms Wu, a retired accountant married to a successful entrepreneur, was able to buy all her vegetables from an "organic" farm.

In addition to pecuniary ability, practices of social distinction-making also shaped shopping patterns. I interviewed Ms Liang, the government office worker mentioned above, and her husband in her sister's flat, where they were staying temporarily. This flat was located in a working-class residential neighbourhood that was home to a large informal market. However, Ms Liang claimed to never shop at that market, even though it was just downstairs. Instead, she would walk through the market to get to a standardized market 15 minutes away on foot. Earlier in the conversation, her husband, Mr Gao, had explained that the government had begun to carry out random inspections in the standardized markets to measure pesticide residues in vegetables. Ms Liang now explained that she did not shop at the spontaneous market downstairs because the vendors there were farmers selling their own goods: "They grow them at their own homes, and after that they are not inspected – there are no procedures at all!" she exclaimed. She then added that the people who shopped there were all laid-off workers and poor pensioners. Liang and Gao claimed to avoid

37 Beck 1992, 36–39.
38 Tam and Yang 2005.

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spontaneous markets because they were not inspected, although their trust in government inspections was in fact limited, as suggested by Liang's claims, mentioned earlier, that when shopping in the standardized market she only went to familiar stalls. Their preference for the standardized markets appeared to have as much to do with a mistrust of farmers and a wish to differentiate themselves from the urban poor as it did with a belief in government inspection.

While other interviewees appeared less worried about the spontaneous markets, where and what one shopped for had become a sign of one's social position. In particular, a conspicuous investment in one's own and one's family's dietary health was emerging as a mark of cultivation. Middle-class status, while rooted in income and residence, was increasingly contingent upon the ability to demonstrate refinement and education through consumption.[39] Working-class acquaintances told me that a concern for personal health was a sign that a person had "quality" (*suzhi* 素质). Master Chen, a roadside tailor from Sichuan province married to a Yunnanese, argued that while his family cooked simple foods, wealthy people cared about taste, nutrition (*yingyang* 营养) and hygiene (*weisheng* 卫生).

Nevertheless, although food safety has been described as an "increasingly salient issue for China's rising middle class,"[40] all of the households in my study, regardless of stated income, expressed concerns with "polluted" foods, and all developed practices, according to their means, to access food that they perceived to be safe, healthy and tasty. It could be argued that the link drawn by informants between an investment in dietary health and wealth and social status might be understood as critical commentary, not only on the differences between rich and poor, but also on the growing difficulties for the urban poor to access good-quality foods. Chen's comments were made in the context of a discussion about the impending closure of a major peri-urban market on which he and his family relied for vegetables and pork which, he explained, were both cheaper and fresher than those available in the city centre. Chen and his family had not yet figured out what they would do once the market had closed – they lived and worked in centre of the city but could not afford to buy food there.

The growing restrictions on public food vending were widely associated with Qiu He 仇和, who became Kunming's Party secretary in 2007. In the summer of 2008, informal vendors were regularly chased away from the city centre. In 2009, during the campaign to construct a "city of hygiene," a number of spontaneous markets in the city and periodic markets on the peri-urban fringe were closed down for reasons stated on public information boards which included the claim that these markets were threats to public order, hygiene and "food safety." While Qiu He's "cleansing" of the food markets and the peri-urban areas was popular with some Kunmingers, it was not so for the many urban poor, both recent migrants and Kunming natives, who depended upon these

39 Zhang 2008; Klein forthcoming.
40 Tam and Yang 2005, 7.

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markets, or among other Kunmingers I met who similarly sought out foods that were thought to be fresher and more "natural" because they were sold by the farmers themselves.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored how Kunmingers have interpreted and acted upon food-related environmental health threats. The discussion has been set against the backdrop of an increasingly market-led, intensified and delocalized food supply system on the one hand, and a state-led dismantling of collective institutions and emphasis on individual responsibility on the other. I have argued that while Kunming shoppers have indeed had to rely on their own devices, the practices they have developed to handle food-related risks and their understanding of what constitutes "safe" food has been developed within the frameworks of family ties and regional cuisine. Moreover, while food safety fears may indeed, as Yan argues, "have resulted in widespread social distrust of both food sellers and of the food industry as a whole"[41] and thereby have contributed to a wider decline of social trust, at the same time shoppers and purveyors of food have established relations which have rebuilt at least some trust in food and helped to remake some connections between people, food and place.

According to Veeck, Yu and Burns, in urban China individual strategies to create trust in food, together with the opportunities to enjoy new and abundant food choices in a country shaped by historical experiences of hunger, effectively offset "the fear of potential hazards in the food system."[42] Instead, consumers they studied in four eastern Chinese cities interpreted food safety risks as aberrations resulting from the "profit motives" of farmers and food retailers. In Kunming, too, people often contrasted the abundance of foods available today with the monotonous, often inadequate diets they themselves or their parents and grandparents had experienced. Moreover, distrust of specific foods was certainly often linked to mistrust of the people who sold them, just as trust in food often hinged on knowledge of specific vendors, supermarkets, brands and places. However, in contrast to Veeck, Yu and Burns, here I argue that, in Kunming, recent changes in the food supply were in fact a source of widespread discontent. First, as illustrated by Ms Wang's account at the beginning of the article, the shopping strategies people developed were often not adequate to dispel uncertainty about the food they ate. Not only did they not always prevent potentially harmful foods from being served at home, there was also an unresolved contradiction between a demand for pretty vegetables, which conveyed a culturally valued sense of freshness, and a suspicion of vegetables that were "too pretty," which suggested an overuse of chemical pesticides. Further, despite developing ties of trust with vendors or shops, people would nevertheless carefully check vegetables and

41 Yan 2012, 717.
42 Veeck,Yu and Burns 2010, 233.

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meat for signs of chemicals and attempt to remove residues by soaking vegetables or par-boiling pork. The fact that people still regularly shopped at the markets cannot be read as a sign of confidence in the food supply or in the state's ability to regulate it. As one taxi driver, after lamenting the poor taste of pork and green vegetables in the city, put it to me: "There's nothing to be done. You've still got to eat!"

The cultural understanding of food as central to forging ties between people and place exacerbated the sense of disconnection produced by a rapidly delocalizing food system and a perceived deterioration in the quality of many foods. These sentiments fed into a wider ambivalence in Kunming towards a modernization project which had demolished the old city centre and its bustling street life, caused environmental degradation, and was giving rise to social distrust and polarization. Such ambivalence was particularly acute among the urban poor. While the new middle class had access to emerging types of "ecological" foods and were even using such foods in practices of social distinction, migrant labourers, laid-off workers and pensioners were often dependent on peri-urban periodic markets or informal markets in the city to access sought-after foods. However, as a result of Kunming's modernization project, which as in cities across the world has come to involve policies of "spatial cleansing,"[43] hawkers were being criminalized and informal markets eradicated, but without adequate alternatives being provided.

Nevertheless, few addressed their concerns about the quality of the food supply outside the domain of everyday food provisioning. Occasionally, people like Ms Wang did file complaints about individual traders with the Consumers' Association. However, there were to my knowledge no examples in Kunming of organized attempts to make demands on the state for improved regulation of the food supply. Writing in this symposium on netizen responses to tainted milk powder, Guobin Yang emphasizes that food safety is a politically sensitive issue and that public debate is actively contained by the state.[44] The NGOs and activist-entrepreneurs I have researched in Kunming were well aware of this sensitivity, and have focused on increasing consumer awareness of food-related health threats and encouraging people to buy "alternative" foods, often working in cooperation with government bodies and supermarkets.[45] In doing so, these groups have reinforced notions of individual consumer responsibility for their "food choices," and have helped mostly middle-class people navigate the food system. As mentioned, many middle-class consumers were also able to take their cars to farmers' markets further afield. Among the less well-off people I spoke to in 2009, some had access to peri-urban and informal markets that had not yet been closed, while others, like Master Chen and his family, were

43 Herzfeld 2006.

44 Yang 2013.

45 Klein 2009. Some activists and activist-entrepreneurs I spoke with were privately critical not only of inadequate state regulation, but also of state economic interests in various domains of the food system, but this is not something I discussed with consumers.

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unsure of what to do. If citizen activism in the area of "food safety" was monitored by the state and further contained by the existence of "alternatives" to "unnatural" foods, it remains to be seen what will happen if access to such "alternatives" becomes further limited by the state's own public hygiene policies.

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