

# Tasting a Good Life

Narratives and Counter-Narratives of Happiness in the Documentary *A Bite of China 2* (2014)

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay mainly examines the documentary *A Bite of China 2* (2014), which presents culinary culture as everyday practices displaying an “authentic” Chinese way of perceiving and pursuing happiness. This is a media artefact produced by CCTV, a cultural institution of postsocialist China, whose duty of promoting state ideology, drive for profit, and the various cultural positionings of its employees negotiated with each other in shaping this audio-visual text characterised by fissures and incoherence. In this text, narratives and counter-narratives of happiness interweave. Their reception is further complicated by an audience made up of various interpretive communities with different social and cultural backgrounds as well as cultural competence. Both the text and its reception reveal that the notion of happiness is complex and contested in such a drastically changing country as China.

**KEYWORDS:** Happiness, *A Bite of China*, CCTV, Desire, Neoliberal Ethos, Interpretive Communities.

## Introduction

Between 2012 and 2014, two seasons of the documentary *A Bite of China* (*Shejian shang de Zhongguo* 舌尖上的中国, hereafter *A Bite*) were produced and broadcast by the Documentary Channel of the state-owned China Central Television (CCTV 9). Each season contains seven episodes, each lasting around 50 minutes. The first season, broadcast without fanfare from 14 to 22 May 2012, unexpectedly turned out to be an immense hit in mainland China, reaching an average rating of 0.5% for each episode (He and Fan 2012). Building on this success, the second season achieved a rating of up to 2.72% and an audience share of up to 6.93% (third episode), making this one of the most viewed documentaries in the history of CCTV.<sup>(1)</sup> Whereas the first season (*A Bite 1*, 2012) focuses largely on procuring and processing food, the second season (*A Bite 2*, 2014) shifts its attention to human relations embodied in food and foodways.

This essay aims to address the following questions: How are the notions of happiness and wellbeing presented in this documentary, and how are they received—or contested—by its audience? What do these perceptions of happiness and behaviours of pursuing happiness in and outside diegesis reveal about the specific political, cultural, and socioeconomic conditions in the Chinese context of postsocialism and neoliberalism? To answer these questions, I adopt the methodology of cultural studies that combines close (audio-visual) textual reading with an observation of online audience reception. The first section draws upon Lisa Rofel’s (2007) anthropological exploration of “desires” in postsocialist China and Ann Anagnost’s (2013) theorisation of “neoliberal ethos” to situate the notion of happiness at the intersection of structural, political, and economic conditions and individual experience and subjectivity. The interpretations of happiness in the documentary, I then argue, should be examined in terms of “interpretive communities” (Fish 1980; Radway 1984; Schroder 1994), which considers likewise the intersection of macro politico-economic factors and the individual viewer’s social and cultural positionings as well as private history in forming one’s strategies and habits of meaning production. The second section, citing media studies on television documentaries in mainland China by Chris Berry

(2007, 2009), Lu Xinyu (2010), Zhu Ying (2012), and Gotelind Müller (2013), argues that *A Bite* should be seen as a media artefact produced by CCTV, a postsocialist cultural institution whose multiple agendas negotiated with each other as well as with its media professionals’ agency to shape this audio-visual text characterised by fissures and sometimes incoherence. The analysis of the documentary *A Bite of China*—mainly *A Bite 2*—in the third section shows that narratives and counter-narratives of happiness interweave in this audio-visual text, which allows its audience to read the notion of happiness in a heterogeneous way, as demonstrated in online discussions in popular virtual communities such as Douban Movies (*Douban dianying* 豆瓣电影) and Tianya Forum (*Tianya luntan* 天涯论坛). These discussions, in turn, attest to the existence of a variety of interpretative communities, whose various cultural positionings and competences are manifested in their diverse reactions to the major ideological discourses of desire and neoliberal ethos.

## Desiring happiness: Meaning production at the intersection of the collective and the individual

In November 2012, Chinese president Xi Jinping proposed the Chinese Dream (*Zhongguomeng* 中国梦) as the slogan of his government.<sup>(2)</sup> While the content of this Dream is still forming, *Beijing Review*, the Chinese government’s foreign language news magazine founded in 1958, posted seven key phrases about the Chinese Dream in 2013: national strength, happiness of the people, moderate prosperity, great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,

1. Feng Yingjie, “操盘手陈晓卿如何打造中国最受欢迎的纪录片” (*Caopanshou Chen Xiaoping ruhe dazao zhongguo zuishouhuanying de jilupian*), How did the producer Chen Xiaoping bring out the most popular documentary in China, *南方人物周刊* (*Nanfang renwu zhoukan*, Southern People Weekly), 9 May 2014, [http://www.nfpeople.com/story\\_view.php?id=5380](http://www.nfpeople.com/story_view.php?id=5380) (accessed on 19 October 2017).
2. For possible origins of the Chinese Dream, or the China Dream, see a report on Peggy Lui: “Building a Vision of the Chinese Dream,” *The Guardian*, 24 October 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/peggy-lui-building-chinese-dream> (accessed on 17 July 2017); or Thomas Friedman, “China Needs Its Own Dream,” *The New York Times*, 2 October 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/03/opinion/friedman-china-needs-its-own-dream.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/03/opinion/friedman-china-needs-its-own-dream.html?_r=0) (accessed on 17 July 2017).

sustained growth, deepening reforms, and transforming the pattern of growth.<sup>(3)</sup> It is perhaps the first time in the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC) that the happiness of the people—albeit formulated within the framework of (rejuvenating) the Chinese nation—has been put on the agenda of the state. This indicates that the Chinese ruling party is aware that the happiness of the people plays an important role in its political legitimacy.

"If socialist power operates on the terrain of 'consciousness,'" Rofel (2007: 6) observes, then "postsocialist power operates on the site of 'desire.'" By "desire" Rofel (2007: 3) refers broadly to "a wide range of aspirations, needs, and longings." Desires are legitimised and affirmed in postsocialist China because universal human nature and life-enhancing practices (in contrast to self-sacrifice) are acknowledged (Rofel 2007: 3-4). By examining the production of desire and the desiring subject, including the disciplining of—namely, defining the "proper manner" of expressing or embodying—desire (Rofel 2007: 5), Rofel identifies desire as the nexus of subjective perception, social norms, and the exercise of state power in postsocialist China. She further points out that "the production of desire" in China "lies at the heart of global process" by engaging with "arguments about the relationship among liberal politics, neoliberal economics, and the formation of new subjectivity" (Rofel 2007: 1).

Ann Anagnost's (2013) theorisation of "neoliberal ethos" explores the close connection between the formation of the desiring subject and economic neoliberalism. She argues that the implementation of neoliberal thought in government and economic globalisation should be understood "not just at the level of political strategy but also as a pervasive ethos that deeply informs the subjective formation of ordinary individuals living in conditions of neoliberal globalisation" (Anagnost 2013: 4). This neoliberal ethos features and advocates, among others, self-reliant and risk-bearing individuals as empowered subjects (Anagnost 2013: 12-13). Stefanie Duttweiler, on the other hand, reveals the circular logic in the neoliberal discourse of happiness in her analysis of advice books on happiness in Germany: one has to possess the capacity for happiness (*Glücksfähigkeit*) in order to achieve his/her own goal of being happy. And this capacity, together with other qualities relating to the enterprising self, such as optimism, independence, and flexibility, belongs to the criteria for social and economic inclusion (Duttweiler 2007: 24).

Rofel observes that the practices of desire in postsocialist China take on the neoliberal tone, most notably its emphasis on individual risk management and self-enterprising subjectivity. Yet Aihwa Ong's (1999) observation of neoliberalism in some Asian countries, quoted by Rofel (2007: 18), perhaps describes the neoliberal ethos in China more precisely: the government encourages its citizens to be both self-reliant and "dependent on the culturally sanctioned collectivity represented by the state." In other words, this neoliberal ethos demands individual aspiration and self-management on the one hand, while on the other hand channeling these traits into a cultural identification that cements the legitimacy of the state. The notion of happiness in the Chinese Dream seems to have a similar function. It taps into the private desire of pursuing happiness in order to guide individual aspirations towards cultivating self-reliant and risk-bearing subjectivities of economic neoliberalism; meanwhile, it also appropriates this private desire to develop a sense of collective wellbeing.

One's perception and pursuit of happiness can therefore be situated at the intersection of larger political, economic, and social contexts and the individual's subjective feelings, life experiences, and everyday practices. In

this sense, food and foodways offer particularly suitable sites to manifest the ways of producing meanings of happiness. Following Stuart Hall (1980) and Stanley Fish (1980), I consider the documentary as an audio-visual text with encoded message, while the audience made up of various "interpretive communities" negotiate their reading—decoding—of the message from their own positionings and with their different cultural resources. It should be noted, meanwhile, that this text itself is a result of negotiation among various forces, including CCTV's task of spreading ideological discourses, its pursuit of high ratings (hence considering the taste of the audience), and its media practitioners' professional ambition of documenting an "authentic" everyday life of the Chinese people. Thus the encoded message is not without fissures and incoherence. Fish considers the agency of the reader in developing meanings of the literary text in his theorisation of "interpretive communities." Whereas by "community" he emphasises a set of similar interpretive strategies and norms, it nevertheless suggests the existence of groups of readers holding them. This allows the researcher, from the interpretive strategies and habits deployed, to trace the social groups involved in literary and cultural consumption and further explore their use of interpretations, as Janice Radway (1984) does in her analysis of the reception of popular culture (romance). In the words of Kay Richardson and John Corner (1986: 485), one asks not just "what does this mean," but also "how does it come to mean this." K.C. Schroder (1994: 339) argues that each individual viewer holds "multiple 'membership' of a number of primary interpretative communities." As a result, specific readings of the materials "originate both in macrosocial factors (class, ethnicity, gender, age, and so on) and in the microsocial or situational/interactional relations which serve their own social and discursive functions in addition to serving as mediating and inflecting filters of the macrosocial relations." Both Radway and Schroder, then, call attention to the agency as well as limitations in readers' use of their cultural resources to make sense of cultural products. Thus the concept of "interpretive communities" is useful for analysing the comments and active discussions in virtual spaces such as Douban Movies and Tianya Forum. Its focus on interpretative strategies and norms largely solves the thorny problem of the anonymity of Internet users, while at the same time allowing me to demonstrate the existence of social groups with different social identities, political positionings, and cultural competence.

To understand the audience reception of the documentary *A Bite*, the filmic genre itself also deserves attention. As discussed in the next section, documentary in the PRC has been popular with audiences since the 1990s due to its generic presumption of being "real." In the case of *A Bite 2*, the documentary works with food and foodways, an everyday practice of the audience that readily stirs up the most immediate and bodily memories and emotions leading to a sense of identification. This makes the audience feel that it tells "our stories." Technological infrastructure in the digital era allows the audience to participate in meaning production more actively and in a variety of ways: they are motivated to write about their experiences of food and talk about local lore about dishes; visual products parodying or imitating the documentary are circulating widely.<sup>(4)</sup> In the era of media con-

3. "Realizing the Chinese Dream," *Beijing Review*, 2013 (date not indicated), [http://www.bjreview.com/special/realizing\\_the\\_chinese\\_dream.htm](http://www.bjreview.com/special/realizing_the_chinese_dream.htm) (accessed on 24 October 2017).

4. For example, the video "舌尖上中国-方便面篇" (*Shejian shang de sushu: fangbianmian pian, A bite of dormitory: Instant noodle*), *YouTube*, 26 May 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KaMSvruF9m8> (accessed on 3 October 2017); or a TV documentary on local food: "舌尖上的重庆" (*Shejian shang de Chongqing, A Bite of Chongqing*, 2012).

vergence, we may even consider the cross promotion of the media text and the foods mentioned in it (see next section) as part of the audience reception.

This essay thus combines the literary method of close textual reading with the qualitative method of observation (online discussions). It acknowledges the limitation of this approach, which is unable to process a large quantity and spectrum of data to come to a generalised conclusion. It hopes, however, to be able to explore the audience's production and reproduction of meaning—in our case, the notion of "happiness" in the documentary—on multiple, interweaving levels in order to achieve a nuanced understanding of how people make sense of their life and experiences in such a constantly and drastically changing country as China.

### **A Bite of China: The CCTV documentary as media artefact**

For a long time the filmic genre of documentary had served as a visual means of science education and political propaganda in mainland China. In the 1980s, CCTV produced several multi-episode documentaries on China's geographical and cultural landmarks—some were co-production with the Japanese (Müller 2013: 12)—such as the Great Wall, the Yangtze River, and the Grand Canal, to introduce the nation's glorious civilisation—instead of revolutionary tradition—to its audience. The controversial six-episode documentary *River Elegy* (*He shang*, 1988), using a new documentary mode of interviews to replace the God-like didactic tone (Müller 2013: 12–13), highly critical of Chinese civilisation, and banned after 1989, was produced for the similar purpose of "enlightening" viewers. Chu Yingchi (2007: 6), Berry (2009: 73), and Lu Xinyu (2010) show that significant changes in the genre took place in the 1990s, when television rose to be the dominant medium of entertainment and information for the Chinese population and for producing and showing documentary. Examining documentary filmmaking and programs at the intersection of television, film, and digital video, Chu argues that documentaries in today's China display "a polyphonic diversity in terms of subject matter, presentational mode, and speaking positions" (Chu 2007: 9). Lu Xinyu's examination of the rise of the independent documentary movement in the 1990s shows that its relation to the official television system is rather that of "overlaps and interactions, where the liveliest and most creative documentary making happened alongside experiments within the television system" (2010: 31).

In the early 1990s, CCTV hosted several programs of documentary features, for example, the documentary news magazine *Oriental Horizon* (*Dongfang shikong* 东方时空, 1993-) and the investigative reporting program *Focus Interviews* (*Jiaodian fangtan* 焦点访谈, 1994-). Their "watchdog journalism" was popular with the audience, not only winning CCTV high ratings but also inspiring about 60 similar programs all over the country by the end of the 1990s (Berry 2009: 74). One segment of *Oriental Horizon* is *Life Space* (*Shenghuo kongjian* 生活空间), whose intention of "telling ordinary people's stories" echoes that of *Documentary Editing Room* (*Jilupian bianjishi* 纪录片编辑室, 1993-) by Shanghai Television, both winning good ratings in the 1990s—and the latter sometimes achieving a high audience share of over 30% (Lu Xinyu 2010: 30; Berry 2009: 77). The documentary channel of Shanghai Television was founded on 1 January 2002, which is considered by Berry "as symbolic of a shift in Chinese television away from being a pedagogical tool of the party-state

apparatus to interacting more complexly with the market economy and ideas of public participation" (2009: 71).

It was also in the 1990s that CCTV transformed itself into a highly commercialised institution. The "producer system" was introduced in the mid-1990s to give media professionals more authority in designing programming and managing financial and human resources. Despite the fact that the state cut its subsidies for cultural institutions, CCTV was able to quickly transform its cultural, political, and human capital—profoundly rooted in its socialist past—into economic gain. From the late 1990s onward, it has thrived on its abundant advertising revenue and has duly paid taxes to the state (Hong, Lü, and Zou 2008: 43–44). In recent years, audience research has also become more professionalised, done mainly by two companies: the China branch office of AGB Nielsen Media and CVSC Sofres Media Ltd. (CSM). The latter is a joint venture between the French media research company Taylor Nelson Sofres (TNS, now known as Kantar TNS) and the Chinese enterprise CTR Market Research, which itself is indirectly subordinate to CCTV (Schneider 2012: 133–134). Therefore, despite its ownership by the state and its expected function as an ideological apparatus, CCTV possesses a strong drive for profit and abundant resources to realise it. It thus should be seen as part of the "newly commercialised media industries" in postsocialist China, which have strived to produce shows that are "ideologically inoffensive and commercially successful" (Zhu 2012: 3).

The Documentary Channel CCTV 9 was founded on 1 January 2011, seeking to "tell the world of a true China from multifaceted perspectives and through multiple ways of presentations" (Luo et al. 2012: 6). This indicates that its target group includes both domestic and international audiences. Chen Xiaoqing (b. 1965), the executive director of the documentary channel and the producer of *A Bite*, has been working for years in CCTV on documentaries—often having to negotiate between his own creative instinct, tight financial resources, and the ideological restrictions of CCTV. Such pressure proved testing for him as an individual: he suffered bouts of depression and had to be treated clinically (Zhu 2012: 135). While Berry observes self-censorship exercised by the New Documentary Movement in 1990s mainland China (2007: 126) and by television journalists who are highly aware of their boundaries and the economic consequence of censorship (2009: 82), Chen complains that the pressure of ratings has led to his self-censorship (Zhu 2012: 130; Chen 2014).

The success of *A Bite 1* allowed CCTV to develop a series of business models to cash in on the high expectations, and later the high ratings, of the second season. Episodes of *A Bite 2* were released on consecutive Fridays for seven weeks (18 April to 30 May 2014). During the week, the episode was rotated on different channels of CCTV in order to attract more viewers. *A Bite 2* garnered an impressive advertising revenue of more than 100 million yuan (around US\$15.2 million) (Feng 2014). Meanwhile, CCTV as a content provider sold rights for the documentary to domestic and international broadcasters as well as video websites. Each episode of *A Bite 1* sold for around US\$40,000 on the international market, and the increasing reputation of the documentary brought the price up to US\$60,000 for each episode of *A Bite 2* (Zhou 2014: 52). Domestic video websites such as IQIYI (*Aiqiyi* 爱奇艺), Youku (*Youku* 优酷), and TV Sohu (*Souhu shi-ping* 搜狐视频) bought the broadcasting rights of *A Bite 2* for about 400,000 yuan (around US\$60,000), which permitted them to release every episode simultaneously online (Wu 2014: 130; Zhou 2014: 52). The website Douguo Gourmet (*Douguo meishi* 豆果美食), which offers its users a virtual space to share and discuss cooking recipes, has collaborated with *A Bite* since its first sea-

son. Mobile phone apps and various online activities were developed centring upon the content of the documentary.<sup>(5)</sup> The e-commerce collaborator Tmall Food (*Tianmao shipin* 天猫食品) was authorised to launch the culinary specialties mentioned in every episode on the same day that it was shown on TV. Market research shows that 50% of the orders were placed—mostly via mobile phone—during the broadcast.<sup>(6)</sup>

On a workshop devoted to *A Bite 1*, Wang Danyan, deputy director of the publicity department of the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT),<sup>(7)</sup> declared that the documentary reflected “the national television network’s new perception of the masses’ rights of cultural choice and its new, successful performance in spreading and expressing mainstream culture” (Luo et al 2012: 7). This somewhat cumbersome expression articulates the state’s advocacy for new, flexible propaganda strategies that integrate the changing taste of the domestic audience, who, as Müller (2013: 179) sees, has a much more “globalised ‘viewing experience’” than earlier generations. Chen Xiaoqing explained that the documentary uses the plainest (*qianxian* 浅显) narrative to tell the stories of food for two target audiences: “On the one hand, we have to consider the reception of the general audience; and on the other hand, this documentary is supposed to introduce China to the international audience” (Luo et al 2012: 9). Chen’s words also suggest that this documentary as a CCTV media product has the intention of building China’s “soft power,” that is, to present China as attractive and to persuade the target audience to shape a positive view of the country.<sup>(8)</sup> Michael Keane (2013: 31) tells us that the term “soft power” entered the political lexicon of the PRC officially in October 2007, when Hu Jintao called for stimulating “the cultural creativity of the whole nation” and enhancing “culture as part of the soft power” of the country. Fan Yang (2015: 420), more specifically, detects in *A Bite 1* a “Chineseness” packaged “in the global-friendly media format of nature documentary.”

Yang sees the purpose of this Chineseness as contesting “the globally dominant, industrialized mode of (food) production” (Yang 2015: 420). I would add that it also concerns itself with constructing China’s soft power by exploiting a culture of everyday practices. Food and foodways are presented in the documentary to demonstrate an “authentic”—and attractive—Chinese way of life, embodying, among others, its perception and pursuit of happiness. This assumption of authenticity could not be better suited to the specific genre of documentary, which operates on the assumption of veracity. What, then, are the relations between the documentary and the reality of everyday life? In discussing the “documentary impulse” in Chinese film, Zhang Zhen (2007: 18) argues that such cinematic representation does not provide “a transparent window onto reality but rather a form of interrogation of the ‘truth’ value of both its referent and its image and their indexical rapport.” In other words, Zhang sees that this filmic method foregrounds the gap between the filmic text and its referent.

Chinese documentary filmmakers, however, seem to worry less about the epistemological challenge than about social engagement. Their interest in grasping and showing “the real” is directly related to their attempt to “open up new public spaces for discussion of social problems and dilemmas in the post-socialist era” (Berry and Rofel 2010: 10). The so-called “on-the-spot realism” (*jishi zhuyi* 纪实主义) of independent documentary movement filmmakers in the 1990s distances its realism from orchestrated socialist realism (*xianshi zhuyi* 现实主义) through its emphasis on spontaneity, but this spontaneity concerns itself less with an epistemological approach to “the real” than with offering social and

political commentary (Berry and Rofel 2010: 5-10). In other words, the veracity of on-the-spot realism is oriented to social practices: making an argument, bringing social change, and helping the needy who appear in the documentaries.

As a trained media professional, Chen Xiaoqing does not harbour the naïve dream of presenting “reality” as it is in his documentary work, either. He understands his work as conveying ideas, that is, “to use the force of reason and legitimate techniques of audio-visual narration to get one’s points across” to the audience resistant to overt propaganda. As mentioned above, Lu Xinyu argues that independent documentary filmmakers in the early 1990s had close and reciprocal relations with their colleagues in the official television system, not only in terms of equipment and funding resources but also in matters of aesthetic choice and related techniques as well as their “humanistic concerns” of including ordinary people in the writing of history (2010: 28-32). Claiming himself to be under the influence of the Chinese neorealist literary movement in the 1980s, the Dutch documentary director Joris Ivens (1898-1989), as well as the French Annales School that rejects “great man” accounts of history, Chen—like his independent documentary peers—turns his camera to ordinary Chinese, “consciously recognizing them as part of the living history of China” (Zhu 2012: 128-132).

Therefore, the documentary *A Bite* does not predicate its veracity on real-time, real-life documentation, but rather uses “strategies of authentication” (Müller 2013: 186) specific to the genre of documentary to convey ideas. That is why its chief director Ren Changzhen was unperturbed by the controversy over the fact that she asked a Tibetan girl to dig out the precious matsutake, or pine mushroom, that the team buried beforehand in order to save shooting time. Chen Xiaoqing himself cut out a story about a special breed of bamboo shoot in Guangxi Province because it involved a “not so beautiful” area of drought.<sup>(9)</sup> Ren stressed the goal of the documentary as conveying “positive energy” (*zheng nengliang* 正能量), that is, a positive, active attitude towards the world.<sup>(10)</sup> Chen, however, was somewhat critical of the documentary as a mainstream media artefact in an interview on *A Bite* in 2014. He pointed out that it tended to beautify things. The result, according to him, is that the pains and the toiling lives of the people in the documentary are forgotten, and their longing for fairness and freedom are not felt by the audience.<sup>(11)</sup>

5. In June 2014, however, CCTV International Network Co. Ltd. sued Douguo for broadcasting the documentary film through its mobile app, a right not authorised by CCTV. For a brief description of the case in English and Chinese, see “News and Cases from China: November 2015,” *ROUSE The Magazine*, 15 December 2015, <https://www.rouse.com/magazine/news/news-and-cases-from-china-november-2015/?tag=enforcement> (accessed on 23 October 2017).

6. Feng Yingjie, “How did the producer Chen Xiaoqing bring out the most popular documentary in China,” *op. cit.*

7. Since 2013, SARFT was restructured into SAPPRFT, namely, State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television.

8. For the origin of the term “soft power,” see Joseph S. Nye (2004): *Soft Power: The Means To Success in World Politics* (NY: PublicAffairs). Beng Huat Chua (2012: 119) has shown, for example, that popular culture from Japan and Korea has functioned as a means of soft power among Asian countries to “positively influence the opinions and attitudes of transnational audience in the export destinations.”

9. Feng Yingjie, “How did the producer Chen Xiaoqing bring out the most popular documentary in China,” *op. cit.*

10. Chen Bo, “陈晓卿：纪实类纪录片衰败非为政治原因” (*Chen Xiaoqing: jishilei jilupian shuaibai fei wei zhengzhi yuanyin*, Chen Xiaoqing: The decline of realistic documentary is not due to political reasons), 搜狐文化 (*Souhu wenhua*, Sohu Culture), 8 February 2014, <http://cul.sohu.com/20140208/n394594001.shtml> (accessed on 19 October 2017).

11. Brook Larmer, “Inside a Chinese Test-Prep Factory,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 31 December 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/04/magazine/inside-a-chinese-test-prep-factory.html> (accessed on 19 October 2017).

## Narratives and counter-narratives of happiness in *A Bite of China 2*

The various—sometimes conflicting—agendas and attitudes in the production of *A Bite* manifest themselves in the audio-visual narratives of the documentary. How does *A Bite 2* describe happiness? How and when are the narratives of happiness in diegesis put into question, which then creates its counter-narratives? How do viewers respond to these (counter-) narratives of happiness? This documentary presents, first and foremost, time and again, that food connects family. Family values are depicted as the major source of happiness, stretching across regional, social, and ethnic differences and incorporated into other social relations, especially work. In the face of drastic political, economic, and social changes, however, the role of food in helping people work out the meanings of their individual lives also goes well beyond family. Such narratives of happiness are therefore constantly complicated and undermined. What, for example, does one do when one's desire for social and financial upward mobility intersect with family relations? What role does (the making and consumption of) food play in these situations? How does food help people endow their individual lives with meaning and choice in relation to collective memory and social changes?

### Happiness rooted in family values and work ethic

The seventh episode of *A Bite 2*, entitled "Three Meals," opens with breakfast in the home of a Tibetan family in Qinghai Province. It then proceeds to state that for more than two thousand years, since the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), three meals a day, meeting the needs of both life and economic production, has been the practice exercised in most areas within the territory of today's China. The combination of visual and textual narratives therefore maps a national history of China with families of various ethnic groups sharing the same practice of eating three meals a day.

For Li Xi, cooking three delicious and nutritious meals for her daughter Gao Yaxin, who is preparing for the national college entrance exam, the so-called *gaokao* 高考, has been her only life goal for months. Yaxin attends Maotanchang High School in Anhui Province, known as the largest "Test-Prep Factory" in China,<sup>(12)</sup> and the mother rents a room near the school in order to devote herself to caring for her girl. Boasting a (mostly rural) student body of 20,000, the school has gained fame for its high rate of college admission and notoriety for its cramming exam-prep training and boot-camp-style management. The students have only half an hour for lunch. Yaxin is lucky enough to have lunch with her mother, while most children have to eat theirs in the classroom or outside the school. The documentary presents an idyllic picture showing Li Xi collecting wild crown daisies in springtime to prepare for Yaxin's favourite snack. Li's happiness lies in two interrelated facts: she considers the ten months spent solely with her daughter the happiest time in her life; and she is happy to contribute to her girl's future: good meals bring good grades and consequently a good future.

In Tianya Forum, a post that received more than 27,000 hits argues that this story is told mainly from the mother's perspective. Claiming that both parents and students have been brainwashed by the utilitarian ideology of the *gaokao*, it accuses the mother of sacrificing the child's youth and individuality for upward social mobility. The 52 responses that follow, however, offer different views. One argues that precisely because the *gaokao* is such a gruelling—yet inevitable—experience, the food cooked by the mother with love brings comfort to the child. Another appreciates the depiction of

the life of ordinary people and the atmosphere of "home" in the story, even though they live in a cramped rented room.<sup>(13)</sup>

The comforting power of food implies the stability of "home," or family relations. Yet not all mothers can afford the choice of devoting their time solely to taking care of their children. The puny girl Li Jianying in Guangxi Province, one of 61 million rural "left-behind" children (*liushou ertong* 留守儿童) whose parents have to leave home to find jobs somewhere else, looks forward to her parents coming back home for two weeks. The reason that the parents take the time off from their workplace in Guangdong Province is that they have to harvest corn in the field and repair the roof of their house in their hometown. Holding a mirror laughingly for her mother Yu Gaoli, Jianying witnesses how the mother remakes her hair from a simple ponytail typical of female migrant workers into an elaborate hairstyle of a mother of the Miao ethnicity. The joy of the family reunion, for the children as well as for the parents, is shown visually in the preparation of the local delicacies Rice Flower Fish (*daohua yu* 稻花鱼) and fish jam (*yujiang* 鱼酱). The process of procuring food material (catching fish), with fish splashing and children laughing in the rice paddy, seems more like a parenting activity in a natural environment. The making of Rice Flower Fish and fish jam, both involving fermentation processes, takes exactly two weeks. This means that by the time they are ready, the parents will have to leave again.

The parents leaving in the early morning, similar to Li Xi mentioned above, communicate their love and attachment through food—by making food for their children and by asking them to eat more. Instead of living with their children, however, the parents opt for leaving them behind in the inland village in order to work at the assembly line of a garment factory in another province. With this hard decision, the parents prioritise improved financial status on their way to pursuing their family's happiness and future. The difference between their choice and Li Xi's bespeaks different family financial situations as well as uneven regional economic development. Whereas Li can afford the choice of completely focusing on her role as a mother, Yu has to reclaim her role as a mother by changing her hairstyle self-consciously so as to relocate her everyday life from the assembly line back to the Miao village with her children. On the website Douban Movies, a viewer published a short essay on Yu Gaoli with a rhetorical question as its title: "Why should I have to live somebody else's life?" This question reveals Yu's situation of displacement and alienation by foregrounding her multiple identities and living spaces, which do not reconcile with one another. In other words, her everyday life is neither familiar nor familial due to the fissures in these identities and living spaces. The choice of migrant workers, as one of the more than 30 responses comments, reveals "the high price paid by ordinary people that makes this nation appear strong and prosperous."<sup>(14)</sup>

12. "导演全方位揭秘舌尖上的中国：展现普通人" (*Daoyan quanfangwei jiemu Shejian shang de zhongguo: zhanxian putongren*, The director reveals the secrets of *A Bite of China*: showing the life of ordinary people), Tencent Entertainment, 29 May 2012, <http://ent.qq.com/a/20120529/000093.htm> (accessed on 23 October 2017).

13. Huang Xinliang (黄鑫亮), "《舌尖上的中国2》：吐槽年代的意淫狂欢" (*Shejian shang de zhongguo 2: tucao niandai de yiyin kuanghuan*, *A Bite of China 2*: The power of imagination in the era of discontent), 3 June 2014; Shisanlan9656, response to Huang Xinliang's post, 5 June 2014; kingdixin, response to Huang Xinliang's post, 6 June 2014. *Tianya Forum*, <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-filmty-480482-1.shtml> (accessed on 21 October 2017).

14. Taipingtu (太平兔), "我为什么要去过别人的生活" (*Wo weishenme yao qu guo bieren de shenghuo*, Why should I live somebody else's life), 19 April 2014; LagaZhang, response to Taipingtu's post, 17 May 2014. *Douban Movies*, <https://movie.douban.com/review/6639381/> (accessed on 19 October 2017).

In the so-called Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi report (2009), research on life satisfaction led by renowned economists Joseph E. Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, and Jean-Paul Fitoussi, work as part of personal activities constitutes a dimension of bringing life satisfaction. Respect for and pride in work is an essential theme of the documentary. It shows, for example, fishermen working on ice enjoying their freshest trophies; or bamboo farmers tasting the most delicious bamboo shoots, the quality of which deteriorate quickly over time. These idealised portrayals of ordinary people enjoying the fruit of their labour may evoke the socialist ethic that "labour is glorious"; most stories in the documentary nevertheless show the postsocialist demand on ordinary people to be responsible for their own happiness through work. In the case of Chinese migrant workers, the way that work brings happiness lies largely in the fact that it improves the financial status of the family or the individual—often at the cost of family, especially parent-child, relations. If migrant workers demonstrate the self-enterprising, risk-taking spirit of economic neoliberalism, then the stories of restaurant owners in *A Bite 2*, particularly those with family heritage, perfectly interweave family values with the neoliberal work ethic.

The career path of Ah Zhe from Guangdong Province is a case in point. He studied Business Administration at a university in Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong, and would like to stay on there. His father, who used to be a chef in renowned restaurants, operates a family restaurant, cooking local snacks—fried oyster (*haolao* 蚝烙)—and catering for local banquets. After a couple of jobs, Ah Zhe decided to come back home to help his father in the family restaurant. The only son among five children, Ah Zhe learns his trade through the father-son line, which, according to the voiceover, is a "natural" thing in Chinese society. Speaking to the camera, Ah Zhe claims that carving a nice carrot flower is no easier than solving an advanced math problem, and that his work brings happiness because he improves his cooking skills every day and enjoys the positive feedback from clients.

The documentary tells Ah Zhe's story in such a way that it shows not only work bringing a sense of satisfaction but also culinary legacy and work ethic being passed down in everyday practice—indeed, through the male line of the family—as tradition. Yet given Ah Zhe's university education, one cannot help wondering: Did he choose to work in the family restaurant voluntarily? Is his happiness mixed with a sense of resignation? In my view, his career path raises questions about to what extent university admission, the goal of Maotanchang High School students such as Yaxin, can bring social and economic mobility to China's younger generations. A short essay in Douban Movies, on the other hand, displays uneasiness about the gender issue in Ah Zhe's story. It asks: is it so "natural" that the boy is the one who is expected to carry on the family restaurant? It garnered about 60 comments, many of which did not see this as necessarily a problem of the documentary. This filmic genre, as several viewers argue, should present problems and problematic views existing in society, which then provokes discussion and reflection. <sup>(15)</sup>

### Culinary nostalgia: Efforts to be happy

Mark Swislocki (2009: 1) defines culinary nostalgia as "the recollection or purposive evocation of another time and place through food." The story of Dong Cuihua, one of the thousands of "educated youth" sent from Shanghai to Xinjiang in the 1960s to build state farms, shows how displacement of the time and space of food helps her and her peers come to terms with their socialist past in the postsocialist era of desire and consumption.

At the age of 16, Dong was sent to Shihezi in northern Xinjiang. "Xinjiang is where I grew up and spent my best time," Dong told the documentary team of *A Bite 2* after nearly 45 years. Xinjiang has a long history of being a trading centre for spices and foodstuffs. During the period of China's High Socialism, millions of people went to Xinjiang, which, according to the documentary, has enriched the local culinary culture with its own tastes and foodways. In September 2013, Dong Cuihua and 700 of her peers rented a train to visit their "second home," Xinjiang. <sup>(16)</sup> They went back to Shihezi in a pink tourist bus and enjoyed many Xinjiang local delicacies there, including Big Plate Chicken (*dapan ji* 大盘鸡). The voiceover declares it a typical dish of Xinjiang, which attests to the encounter between various ethnic groups and local cultures: red chilly produced in Shawan (Sawen) county near Shihezi, Sichuan pepper, the potatoes preferred by locals in Gansu Province, the special broad noodle from Shaanxi Province, and the stir-and-stew cooking method of central China. Coming back to Shanghai, Dong, a Han woman who spent her tender years in Xinjiang during China's socialist era, cooked Big Plate Chicken for her reunion party with other "educated youth" because it evokes "their shared culinary memory," so explains the voiceover, a dish connecting their two "homes" with 4,100 km in between.

The documentary records the emotional moments of tears and laughter during Dong's revisiting of Shihezi with a comment: "History is only stories for onlookers, but for those who have experienced it, it means joy and sadness at first hand." While moving many, this comment is questioned by one user on Douban Movies, who wonders about the gap between Dong's passionate words about Xinjiang and her choice to return to Shanghai. <sup>(17)</sup> And how does Big Plate Chicken fit into the Xinjiang experiences of Dong and her peers? China in the 1960s was known for its deficiency of food. According to a short report of the Shawan People's Congress, the dish Big Plate Chicken did not come into being until the 1980s. It is a variant of a local dish called Chilly Chicken that caters to travellers on National Route 312, China's key east-west highway (Zhao 2014: 33). In other words, Dong and her peers, by evoking their life experience and a tangible object (a dish), have nevertheless reinvented their culinary memory in relation to Xinjiang. As a viewer wryly comments: "The encounter of food and politics can indeed produce a magical taste." <sup>(18)</sup>

As to the authenticity of experience, Duttweiler (2007: 30) states, "Experience depends fundamentally on the meaning-making [processes] within historically specific power and knowledge formations," <sup>(19)</sup> a thinly veiled rewriting of Michel Foucault (1985: 4): "[E]xperience is understood as the

15. Tulading xiaohuang (图拉丁小黄), "《舌尖上的中国》第二集：真的没人觉得这集政治很不正确吗。" (*Shejian shang de zhongguo di er ji: zhende meiren juede zheji zhengzhi hen bu zhengque ma ...*), *A Bite 2*, episode 2: Isn't there anybody who also thinks this episode is politically very incorrect ... ), 26 April 2014; responses to Tulading xiaohuang's post, Ziming xiaoxuan, 26 April 2014; Wang xiaoming, Abao zai douban, Zhuangzhuang zaici, 26 April 2014; Nuanguo, Ku'ansen, 27 April 2014; Amiao, 28 April 2014; Jo, 30 April 2014. *Douban Movies*, <https://movie.douban.com/subject/20502514/discussion/57456530/> (accessed on 19 September 2017).
16. This trip was recorded in three documentaries. In addition to *A Bite of China*, Shanghai television and Xinjiang state farm satellite television also made documentaries out of it. See Lu Hao (2016: 201).
17. Dingdingpeng (丁丁彭), "舌尖上的中国第二季第5集的讨论" (*Shejian shang de zhongguo di er ji di wu ji de taolun*, Discussion on *A Bite 2*, episode 5), *Douban Movies*, 19 May 2014, [https://movie.douban.com/subject/20502514/episode/5/?discussion\\_start=10#comment-section](https://movie.douban.com/subject/20502514/episode/5/?discussion_start=10#comment-section) (accessed on 20 October 2017).
18. Hengxing tianxia (衍行天下), "舌尖上的中国第二季第5集的讨论" (*Shejian shang de zhongguo di er ji di wu ji de taolun*, Discussion on *A Bite 2*, episode 5), *Douban Movies*, 16 May 2014, [https://movie.douban.com/subject/20502514/episode/5/?discussion\\_start=70#comment-section](https://movie.douban.com/subject/20502514/episode/5/?discussion_start=70#comment-section) (accessed on 20 October 2017).
19. "Erfahrung ist fundamental abhängig von Bedeutungsproduktionen innerhalb historisch spezifischer Macht- und Wissensformation," Duttweiler, *Sein Glück machen*, 30.

correlation between fields of knowledge, types of normativity, and forms of subjectivity in a particular culture.” In other words, experience is neither purely subjective (ahistorical) nor unmediated. Dong and her “educated youth” peers repurpose Big Plate Chicken from a dish they tasted as tourists to one associated with their past experience in socialist China. In doing so, they manage to construct a romanticised memory that melds together nostalgia with their youth spent in Xinjiang and their pleasant tourist trip decades later, a memory displacing the dish in time and place yet helping them to make sense of—and come to terms with—their individual pasts in relation to larger historical changes. Their culinary nostalgia thus exemplifies its function as “a valuable framework for articulating both ideology and utopia, and for learning how to live with the consequences of the one or the absence of the other” (Swislocki 2009: 5). Such nostalgia implies their desire to reconcile their socialist past with the postsocialist present, which bespeaks their self-conscious efforts to showcase their capacity for happiness.

### Wheat harvesters: Happiness unattainable

While many viewers are amazed by the culinary products and traditions shown in *A Bite 1*, one sees instead people’s hard lives:

It seems that no one’s life is easy. They leave their hometown, doing extremely heavy and tedious work. (...) For them, the greatest happiness is the family reunion after a whole year of hard work. Yet their incomes are so meagre in comparison with what they do for it. <sup>(20)</sup>

If Ah Zhe and Dong Cuihua managed to find personal solutions to come to terms with their lives, then the story of the seasonal wheat harvester (*maike* 麦客) Ma Wanquan, a Chinese Muslim in his 50s from Ningxia Province, ends with no solution but many questions. The term *maike*, literally meaning the guest of [harvesting] wheat, sounds almost poetic. Yet his life is anything but poetic, because “guest” does not just imply hospitality received, but also alienation and hardship. *Maike* usually come from Northwest China such as Ningxia and Gansu provinces, travelling south to harvest wheat that ripens earlier than their own. A short story entitled “Seasonal Wheat Harvester” (1984) describes their life: in addition to backbreaking manual work with low pay, *maike* also suffer social prejudice due to their poverty and migrant status. <sup>(21)</sup>

*A Bite 2* follows the trip Ma Wanquan and his friends make to the Qinling mountain area in Shaanxi Province. There they can still get work harvesting wheat in small fields on mountain slopes, where machines cannot work. In the documentary, they are treated kindly by the old couple who hires them: the grandpa distributes the payment immediately after their toil, while the granny cooks “belt noodles,” a Shaanxi specialty that tastes best with the “sweet” new wheat that the *maike* themselves have just reaped. A closer look, however, reveals a less cosy picture. In this documentary made in 2013, Ma toiled for ten hours and harvested more than one *mu* (around 100 square meters) of wheat, while only earning 200  *yuan* (around US\$30). And for the whole trip of more than ten days, he earned less than 1,000  *yuan*. When Ma Wanquan and his friends leave the wheat fields in the last shot of their story, the voiceover sighs that they are probably the last group of *maike*, because unfortunately “in terms of efficiency, *maike* do not belong to this era,” and this “ancient profession and its long-time legends are being terminated step by step by machines.”

Blaming machines for the tragic fate of the *maike* is sentimental and simplistic. When working in the field, Ma Wanquan says he is happy to earn some money to buy nice things for the children, to pay back some debts, to spend some on eating and drinking, and to save some money. He said exactly the same thing more than a decade ago to the camera of a NHK (*Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai*, Japan Broadcasting Corporation) documentary team. Their 2002 documentary *Seasonal Wheat Harvesters – China: Conflicts between the Iron and the Sickle* (*Mai ka – Chū Goku Geki Totsu su ru Tetsu to Kama*, 麦客 – 中国 激突する鉄と鎌) follows the trip of two groups of *maike* to Henan Province, the major location of China’s wheat production. One group consists of Ma Wanquan and his friends using the sickle; while the other group is made up of peasants from Hebei Province, who became wealthy by growing vegetables and drove their combine tractors to Henan. <sup>(22)</sup> As can be expected, Ma Wanquan and his friends face particularly gruelling working conditions. After a long trip, which they made by hitchhiking and bargaining for rides as well as illegally riding on a coal-transporting freight train, they found work was hard to get and prejudice against them was everywhere. At some point in the documentary, they were so frustrated by and ashamed of their pathetic existence that they refused to be filmed by the Japanese team. In the end, one *maike* nevertheless regained hope and invited the documentary team to visit them again in three or five years. Back in 2002, Ma Wanquan earned about 45  *yuan* for handling more than one  *mu* of wheat. Taking into account the rise in salaries and prices in China between 2002 and 2013, it is safe to say that Ma’s earnings have not changed—and perhaps even declined.

Viewers quickly spotted Ma Wanquan’s appearance in both documentaries. One posted the information on the website of Douban Movies immediately after the episode was released, <sup>(23)</sup> but responses to it digressed onto the issue of Muslim food. A post in Tianya Forum, meanwhile, caught eyeballs with its title: “The protagonist in *A Bite of China 2* has shown up in a Japanese film! What a slap in the face!” What initially appears to be a nationalistic post turns out to be reflective and interrogative.

In the past 12 years, (...) China’s GDP has jumped from the sixth to the second place in the world and many Chinese indulge in their dream of the Rise of China. Yet, *maike* or peasants like Ma Wanquan are still hovering in wheat fields, struggling to survive in poverty, and their lives remain basically unchanged. The mud house of Ma remains the same as 12 years ago in the [NHK] documentary. Why can’t such hard-working Chinese get rich? Why can’t they benefit from economic development? The sickle of Ma Wanquan is a slap in the face of the

20. Duandi wujiang (短笛无腔), “有央视特色的诚意” (*You yangshi tese de chengyi*, Sincerity with CCTV characteristics), *Douban Movies*, 2 June 2012, <https://movie.douban.com/review/5450738/> (accessed on 18 October 2017).
21. Shao Zhenguo (邵振国), “麦客” (*Maike*, Seasonal Wheat Harvesters). *当代* (*Dangdai*, Contemporary Literature Bimonthly) No. 3 (1984): 205–216+162. The text can be found online (posted on 29 April 2010): <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/759361363> (accessed on 20 October 2017).
22. “刘庆云：《麦客—中国：铁与镰刀的冲突》” (*Liu Qingyun: Maike – Zhongguo: tie yu lian-dao de chongtu*, Liu Qingyun: seasonal wheat harvesters in China: Conflicts between the iron and the sickle), *Doc China*, 11 June 2015, <http://www.docchina.cn/news/detail/432> (accessed on 11 October 2017).
23. Wuyun® (巫云®), “有没有人注意到那个麦客，12年前的一个纪录片中有他的身影” (*You meiyou ren zhuyi dao nage maike, shi'er nian qian de yige jilupian zhong you ta de shenying*, Has anyone noticed the seasonal wheat harvester, he appeared in a documentary 12 years ago), *Douban Movies*, 19 April 2014, <https://movie.douban.com/subject/20502514/discussion/57377684/> (accessed on 19 October 2017).

Chinese people. If one only cares about delicious food [in the documentary], what is the difference between [him/her] and an animal? <sup>(24)</sup>

The post included screenshots of Ma Wanquan in the two documentaries for comparison. It has attracted more than 18,200 hits and 122 replies—not very impressive figures, but the debate is fierce. Some attribute Ma's fate to the system (*tizhi* 体制, a catch-all term for the state, its political system, economic policies, and so on), suggesting structural problems. <sup>(25)</sup> Others do not like the way the post judges the happiness of other people: "Do not use money to measure the happiness of others. I see in his eyes the satisfaction of a simple life"; <sup>(26)</sup> or "It is good to have money, but you cannot measure their happiness by the amount of money. Money cannot buy everything!" <sup>(27)</sup>

Most responses, however, resort to the rationality of economic neoliberalism to argue that the dire situation of the *maike* is the result of their own failure to adapt to China's changes:

We are in a radically changing China. To survive one has to keep learning. One cannot adapt to this changing world very well if one only has the knowledge and skills learned in earlier days. <sup>(28)</sup>

Some quote directly from a Party slogan:

Move forward with the time (*yushi jujin* 与时俱进)! So says President Hu Jintao. <sup>(29)</sup>

With a neoliberal ethos that values self-improvement (as human capital) and self-reliance, another viewer declares: "The happy life of the people is created by the people themselves, not bestowed by the government." <sup>(30)</sup> Correct as it sounds, this statement seems to forget the precondition would be that the government does not intervene in economic life, either. Last but not least, the post's strong sentiment and interrogative tone seems offensive to those who would rather see the documentary as a depoliticised work:

I feel you have the potential of turning into a Red Guard. (...) This is only a nice documentary on culinary culture. The way you voice your criticism reminds me of the Cultural Revolution! <sup>(31)</sup>

Even viewers aware of the NHK documentary do not pay much attention to the so-called "iron *maike*," those equipped with combine tractors. Choosing a 31-year-old male peasant Li Xinjian and a 36-year-old female peasant Miao Yanping from Hebei Province as their representatives, the NHK documentary shows the equally brutal conditions under which they work: they had to drive their tractors to Henan, fixed their machines themselves, bargained the price with local peasants, hired drivers to harvest the wheat, and took care of complaints and disputes on the spot. They slept about two to three hours a night in the open air and worked in the smothering dust of chopped wheat stalks. The work was so intensive that several of them decided not to do it again. By presenting side-by-side the trips and work of these two groups of *maike*, the NHK documentary explores the unbalanced economic development in China's rural areas in different regions, and possibly among different ethnic groups. It also demonstrates, however, that the tragic fate of Ma Wanquan cannot be sentimentally attributed to the advent of the machine, or reluctance to change. The "iron *maike*" fit quite nicely the profile of the neoliberal work

ethic: they work hard, learn new skills, invest their money to improve efficiency, manage their own risks, and rely on themselves. Yet like traditional *maike*, they suffer inhuman working conditions. Neither group obtains satisfaction or happiness from their work, or even from the money they worked for.

## Conclusion

In *A Bite of China 2*, food and foodways embody human relations and thereby function to produce meaning, including that of happiness. When discussing *A Bite 1*, Fan Yang (2015: 422) calls for considering "the semiotic contingency that are afforded by the televisual medium itself." This essay proposes to read the fissures in the narratives of "happiness" in the audiovisual text of *A Bite 2*, which shows it to be a polyphonic media artefact produced by the postsocialist CCTV. In this text, culinary culture as everyday practice is used to define China and "authentic" Chineseness. Food and foodways are presented to showcase an attractive, non-political Chinese way of perceiving and pursuing happiness. This media product appropriates individual desires for and perceptions of happiness, which are often rooted in family values and work ethics, into a form of collective wellbeing (happiness of the people) in order to champion the political legitimacy of the ruling party and to display the soft power of the nation. Meanwhile it promotes the self-reliant, self-enterprising subjectivity of the neoliberal ethos that, in a circular logic, demands one's capacity for happiness in order to be happy. By putting the stories in diegesis into dialogue with each other and examining the online discussions of the audience, my analysis above shows that the notion of happiness is complex and contested by various interpretive communities, who possess not only very different backgrounds but also cultural resources, especially in terms of their competence to reflect on major ideological discourses and their own positionings.

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24. Xiaotan fengyun du yinjiu (笑谈风云独饮酒), "《舌尖2》故事主人公, 曾演日本片!! 打了谁的脸?" (*Shejian 2 gushi zhurengong, ceng yan riben pian!! Da le shui de lian?*), The protagonist in *A Bite of China 2* has shown up in a Japanese film! What a slap on the face?, *Tianya Forum*, 22 April 2014, <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-worldlook-1091949-1.shtml> (accessed on 20 October 2017).
25. Wei chu youcai wu weisheng (惟楚有才吾为盛), and Volcano2012, responses to Xiaotan fengyun du yinjiu's post, *Tianya Forum*, 22 April 2014, <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-worldlook-1091949-1.shtml> (accessed on 20 October 2017).
26. Jingdi you zhi wa (井底有只蛙), response to Xiaotan fengyun du yinjiu's post, *Tianya Forum*, 22 April 2014, <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-worldlook-1091949-1.shtml> (accessed on 20 October 2017).
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30. mylcn, response to Xiaotan fengyun du yinjiu's post, *Tianya Forum*, 25 April 2014, <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-worldlook-1091949-2.shtml> (accessed on 20 October 2017).
31. Nuankai haha (暖开哈哈), response to Xiaotan fengyun du yinjiu's post, *Tianya Forum*, 25 April 2014, <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-worldlook-1091949-1.shtml> (accessed on 20 October 2017).

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