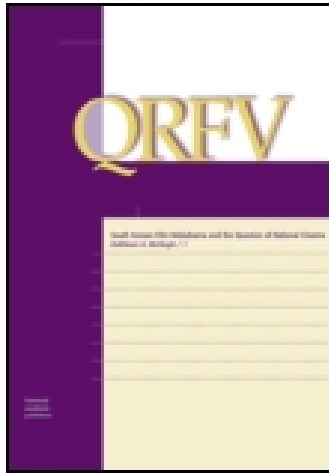


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## ***A Bite of China: Food, Media, and the Televisual Negotiation of National Difference***

FAN YANG

On May 14, 2012, China Central Television (CCTV) began airing *A Bite of China* (舌尖上的中国, *Shejianshang de Zhongguo*), a seven-episode documentary about food, nature, and culture. Despite its late-night showing, the series' ratings soared above many of the prime-time shows, making it one of the hottest-trending topics on the Chinese Internet (Bai 2012). Even the so-called post-90s generation (young people born after 1990), known typically to have deserted television in favor of computer-based entertainment, was reportedly drawn to the program. Online viewing (without English subtitles) quickly reached 20 million on the CCTV website (Ma 2012), an indication that many overseas Chinese or Chinese speakers were perhaps just as immersed in the show. Oliver Thring from *The Guardian*, for example, went so far as to proclaim that it might be “the finest food TV ever made,” having seen only a few of the episodes (2012).<sup>1</sup>

Soon, *A Bite of China* (hereafter *A Bite*) entered the film festival at Cannes. A follow-up print edition of the entire script also ensued. Plans are underway to translate the series into complex Chinese (i.e., the traditional writing system used in Taiwan and Hong Kong), Japanese, Korean, English, and French (Xu 2012). Often celebrated in the domestic press is the idea that Chinese food, a conveyer of culture already quite familiar among foreigners, now finds a perfect union with the audiovisual medium of television, which presents it with a likely more effective means to broadcast Chinese values globally. Even the show's apparent overexplanation of nation-specific details to a domestic audience is justified on the grounds that it is part of Chinese culture's “march onto the world” (R. Zhang 2012). Yet despite the journalistic frenzy, the show's audience reception is by no means uniform. Numerous microbloggers quickly point out that the program is none other than a subtler form of “patriotic education.” The purpose, some argue, is to direct viewers' attention away from ongoing issues of food safety. In deploying “taste buds to summon people's cultural identity,” it aims to “get (people) back on track, shift their focus of life back to eating, and thus return to being truly Chinese” (Y. Sun 2012).

The heated discussions generated by the series, both critical and celebratory, call for a more engaged analysis of the media event itself. “Food and media,” as Laura Lindenfeld argues, “condition the consumption of each other and thus form a locus of struggle and contestation where various kinds of cultural work get done” (2011, 5). Indeed, *A Bite* as a state-endorsed televisual production has given rise to complex configurations of

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“Chineseness” that affirm as well as contest globally hegemonic modes of food production and media representation. Situating this cultural artifact at the intersection of food, media, and globalization, this essay argues that *A Bite* offers a glimpse into the possibilities and limits for negotiating an alternative national imaginary in the changing media environment of postsocialist China. As such, it enacts the tension between homogenization and heterogenization—the twin forces of global modernity that are manifesting themselves, often in contradictory ways, in food and media at once.

### Food, Media, and Globalization

Food has been a familiar lens through which the story of globalization is told, in both its historical forms and its contemporary versions (e.g., Inglis and Gimlin 2009). In part, this focus has to do with the fact that food is not just a “system of communication” (Barthes 2012, 24), a medium of meaning-making, and a marker of identity (Greene and Cramer 2011), but also a leading force in “the spread of mass consumer culture to every single part of the globe” (Wilk 2006, 4). Critical accounts of the global operation of the McDonald’s, for example, offer immediate lessons with regard to globalization’s contradictory effects. Sociologist George Ritzer and anthropologist James Watson are two representative voices in this debate. Ritzer argues that McDonald’s mode of fast-food production, emblematic of an industrial aspiration to efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control, has imposed a sociocultural uniformity on a global scale (2007). Watson and his fellow anthropologists, in contrast, emphasize that McDonald’s global, if not “multi-local,” franchise has produced more contingent outcomes in non-Western locales such as East Asia, where the experience of eating at the restaurant is as varied as the menu items adapted to suit local tastes (2006).

If McDonald’s embodies the simultaneously homogenizing and heterogenizing consequences of globalization in the realm of food, the global transfer of licensed television formats may well be regarded as its parallel in the realm of mass media. The fact that format transfer is a “rapidly growing area of international television” (Moran and Malbon 2006, 12) is evidenced by the success of numerous national adaptations based on shows like *Survivor*. Whereas the “crusts” consist of a standardized set of visual icons, from logos to staging and editing styles, “the fillings” vary from one episode to the next (Moran 1998, 13). In the global television format trade, this is not the only metaphor that has a specific connection to food. Indeed, experts have come to see “TV format as equivalent to a cooking recipe” (Moran and Malbon 2006, 20), the sale of which is based on the promise that it will reproduce success when transplanted to a different national market.

To be sure, television shows with a distinct focus on food have permeated the transnational mediascapes for quite a while (Miller 2002). Whether it is the cooking programs, which are as old as the televisual medium itself (Rousseau 2012, 12), or those of the “food and travel” genre, these shows have long shared common characteristics prior to the advent of licensed programs such as *Masterchef*. However, the recent proliferation of global format transfer bespeaks a trend in media production that Ritzer would perhaps readily identify as part of the more general process of “McDonaldization.” Televisual format, as Keane et al. point out, “is industrial first and foremost” (2007:60). Just as the McDonald’s mode of operation has promoted predictability of the same service standards across the world, so do television formats engender “processes of systematization” (Moran and Keane 2004, 201) that arguably intensify the homogenizing effects of global modernity, despite the seemingly ever-heterogenizing range of ingredients that would make up the contents.

It is within this “McDonaldizing” global media environment that I wish to situate *A Bite*. While the series is not a direct product of licensed television programming, its form and content crisscross the globalization of food and media in unique ways. Since the 1990s, there has been no shortage of food-related shows on CCTV and numerous provincial satellite television channels. What distinguishes *A Bite* from these predominantly cooking-centered programs, however, is its emphasis on “the geographical, historical and cultural dimensions of what Chinese people eat” (Bai 2012). If cooking shows are primarily dedicated to the promotion of food consumption, *A Bite* has paid much greater attention to food *production*, whether it is the gathering, harvesting, and collection of food ingredients from distinct natural surroundings in the first episode, the regionally specific staple foods in the second episode, or the sustainable local food practices in the seventh episode.

While this focus on “human and nature” may be easily linked to a philosophical emphasis on harmony often noted to be of “Chinese” origins, what informs this creative decision is indeed something more global in scope. Members of the production crew, for instance, have openly acknowledged their intent to learn from an “international style of audio-visual narration” (R. Zhang 2012). Feature documentaries from the BBC and *National Geographic* magazines are invoked as key models from which to draw stylistic inspirations. This emphasis on global communicability is directly linked to CCTV’s increased efforts to expand its overseas reach. As Liu Wen, the Director of the Documentary Division at CCTV put it, “documentaries about Chinese reality” will no doubt “play a bigger role in the foreign market” than other television shows because the latter’s “narrative style, editing, and subject matter” often limit their popularity to Asia alone (quoted in R. Zhang 2012, par. 16). For Liu, it is the “problem of cultural difference” that often presents difficulties for marketing Chinese television shows beyond the Asian region (quoted in R. Zhang 2012, par. 16). What Liu implies, then, is that this “cultural difference” may somehow be bridged by the adoption of global-friendly documentary form.

Seen in this light, the choice of food as subject matter is closely connected to the station’s ambition to “bring Chinese culture to the world” (R. Zhang 2012). “A person may speak with a London accent, but his stomach is still a Chinese stomach,” states the series’ creator and producer Chen Xiaoqing (quoted in R. Zhang 2012, par. 26). As Chen’s marketing research team discovered, while both “Chinese food” (Chen, quoted in R. Zhang 2012, par. 26) and “Chinese people” have long traveled beyond China’s borders, there appears to be an unbreakable tie between one’s palate and one’s homeland, since “taste is the most stubborn in one’s memory.” A documentary highlighting the relationship between “the Chinese people and their food” (Chen, quoted in R. Zhang 2012, par. 26) would therefore easily appeal to overseas Chinese as much as to domestic citizenries.

At work in *A Bite*, then, is the deployment of a standardized mode of storytelling for the purpose of showcasing national cultural distinctions within a globalized audiovisual market. When a deterritorialized national identity must be portrayed through an “international language of communication” based on “imageries” (J. Zhang 2012), it also offers new impetus for revisiting the longstanding cultural imperialism thesis, which problematically claims that the global forces of homogenization—in food, media, or otherwise—necessarily erode national differences. As John Tomlinson, among others, has argued, the culture of modernity does not so much invade or “weaken” self-contained national cultures as engender new forms of identities and belongings (1991; 2003). The question, then, becomes what kinds of differences are more readily validated by the

principles of the market place as the national encounters the global in televisual production. After all, the “global popular culture” originating primarily from the English-speaking world still offers a “version of modernity that many people want but sometimes at the cost of what makes them a people” (Miller 2002, 78). More critical attention, then, must be paid to the ideological work that is carried out by a presumably value-neutral, globally popular genre. As I will demonstrate, the influence that the global media market exerts on a major Chinese network indeed manifests the structural inequality that persists in the audiovisual landscape of contemporary globalization.

### Cultural Nationalism in Global Style

In *A Bite*, the influence of a globally dominant visual style is clear from the start. The opening sequence for the first episode, *Gifts from Nature*, is packed with scenic shots that closely resemble Euro-American televisual productions typically seen on channels such as National Geographic. Not only do the flora and landscapes appear in saturated colors, thanks to the skillful use of high-definition cameras, the change in cloud formations and the movement of streams and rivers are conveyed through time-lapse devices. If one mutes the voiceover, the sequence could easily have been taken out of what Martin Roberts calls a “nature film” or “ecological documentary”—“a staple of American television from the *Wonderful World of Disney* films of the 1950s to the Discovery Channel” (1988: 64).

According to Roberts, Ron Fricke’s “wordless” feature *Baraka* (1992) is a film of this kind. It deliberately omits any specific textual references to geographical locales in order to present a “coffee-table globalism,” one that “affirms the human race” as “ultimately part of the same global family” (Roberts 1988, 67). In *A Bite*, what replaces the “global imaginary”—conjured through the absence of linguistic intrusion in *Baraka*—is a “nationalizing” narration that anchors one’s viewing experience. For example, accompanying the opening sequence is the following passage:

China has billions of population. It also has the world’s most abundant and diverse natural landscapes: plateaus, mountain forests, lakes, (and) coasts. The span of geography and climate contributes to the formation and preservation of species. No other country has this many potential primary ingredients for food. People collect, pick up, dig out, and fish, in order to obtain the gift of nature. Across four seasons, we are about to see the stories about human and nature behind the delicacies.<sup>2</sup>

This “national” narrative in many ways sets the tone for the episode, if not the entire series. While the invocation of geographical characteristics, both visually and verbally, serves the purpose of “locating” China, it also foregrounds the nation’s “people” as variously tied to their specific local natural surroundings through food. Despite the regional and ethnic diversity among the “people” featured—which include a Tibetan mother-daughter duo of mushroom gatherers, several bamboo-shoots and lotus-roots diggers in southeastern provinces, an elderly fisherman from the north—they are unified by scenic montages of the natural landscapes, all of which belong to the *national* territory that is China. While none of the characters interviewed enunciate any sense of their membership within the nation-state, their relationship to the mountains, the land, and the water, as the deep (and disembodied) baritone voice reminds us, is what makes them “Chinese.”

To what extent is this particular way of representing “Chineseness” subject to a globalized ideological framework? If films like *Baraka* are “more concerned with the aesthetic or emotional impact of its subjects than with the global political or economic conditions which account for them” (Roberts 1988, 68), *A Bite* also organizes its narrative around ordinary individuals’ actions at the expense of any illustration of the structural forces that condition their struggles. Almost all of the characters featured in the seven episodes are situated within a family setting. Their decision making or expressions of feelings are often motivated by kinship ties, whether between mother and daughter, in the case of the mushroom gatherers, or among parents, grandparents, and children, in several other stories. Market forces are sometimes invoked, but only in terms of a simplified logic of supply and demand. In the words of the Tibetan daughter who collects pine mushrooms that are to be sold at a premium in the markets of Tokyo within days, “before, there were more mushrooms, but the price was lower; this year, there are fewer mushrooms, but the price is higher” (Episode 1, *Gifts from Nature*). The law of nature, in other words, ultimately dictates the invisible hand of the global market, much like the familial ties, which are presented as the foundation of the characters’ social being more than such politicized categories as class, gender, or ethnicity.

The prominent portrayal of ethnic minorities, in particular, speaks more directly to this depoliticized mode of storytelling. For instance, almost all of the non-Han characters featured in the program are immaculately dressed in ethnic garments, even though the physically strenuous activities in which they engage (such as climbing the mountains after a rainy day for mushroom collection) are occasions unlikely to call for these festive attires. In some ways, this “cultural coding” of minorities is in line with long-standing practices of CCTV to showcase ethnic diversity within the nation (Chu 2007), one of which is the costumed song and dance in the widely watched (and increasingly mocked) annual Spring Festival Gala. The privileged representation of ethnicity through visible cultural signs in *A Bite* serves to reinforce a national cultural unity devoid of political struggles, whether ethnic-specific or otherwise.

This absence of politics is also manifested in the nearly complete erasure of the state in the series as a whole, which defies any facile linking of the show to CCTV’s conventional role as the party-state’s mouthpiece. No governmental officials, whether historical or contemporary, are portrayed as social agents. If any of them appear at all, it is through their manifestation in everyday objects, such as a talisman of Mao Zedong hanging in a fishing boat—a common practice among those who hold the belief that the Mao icon has the mystical power to bring blessings for a safe journey. This “obscured” treatment of the state is representative of a “flourishing” trend “within the state-owned television system”—what Lu Xinyu has called the “genre of humanistic documentaries” (2010, 44). Borrowing “the simplification of themes” from “global channels” to “generate profit,” these new documentaries often resort to the production of “empty cultural symbols” at the expense of illustrating “complex reality and locality” (Lu 2010, 46). Even though *A Bite* has deserted “such grand themes as . . . the Yellow River, or the Great Wall,” which typified many CCTV programs in the 1980s and 1990s (Chu 2007, 183),<sup>3</sup> its narrative emphasis on the family (nuclear as well as extended) still heightens the linkage between smaller kinship- and ethnicity-based units and the larger “national family” as a whole. It is little wonder that in the eyes of a veteran television documentary director, *A Bite* presents a new milestone for Chinese documentary in that it is “the best propaganda for China” without a “propagandist tone” (Huang 2012, par. 6).

The popularization of this depoliticized, “humanistic” aesthetic, of course, is inseparable from CCTV’s commercialization in recent decades, which has tremendously

diversified the station's multichannel programming. This diversification is also in line with CCTV's mission to reinvent itself as "China's CNN," part of the broader efforts to "strengthen the position of domestic media vis-à-vis transnational media following China's WTO accession" (Zhao 2008, 151). In this context, even though some Chinese microbloggers still prefer to read *A Bite* as another form of state propaganda (Sun 2012), it is perhaps more important to recognize its working as a cultural production of national identity—neither directly orchestrated by the state nor in complete separation from it. In fact, the show is more accurately seen as a coproduction of national culture by state as well as nonstate actors. The presence of the latter can be easily traced in the show's production team. Institutionally, what made *A Bite* possible was the "producer responsibility system" launched in 1993, which allows "producers to recruit their own crew, outsource projects to freelance filmmakers and manage their own budget" (Chu 2007, 95). The majority of the crew involved in making *A Bite* call themselves freelancers; only two members have official affiliation with CCTV (R. Zhang 2012). These conditions make it difficult to assert that the producers of the show have willingly allowed their ideas to be dictated by the higher-ups within the state's propaganda machine. At the same time, given that all CCTV contents remain subject to final clearance if not procedural monitoring by state officials (Hong, Lu, and Zou 2009, 48), it is equally problematic to presume that state actions are no longer relevant in shaping the show's composition.

More relevant to our analysis is perhaps what Chris Berry has identified as "the hegemony of the party-state apparatus and the marketplace" (2009, 73), which has helped shape this coproduction of the national. As Prasenjit Duara reminds us, the forces of the global market have granted culture a more significant status than that of the state in delimiting the ways in which the nation should appear for the world (2005, 36–8). In the case of *A Bite*, the intended global market and the marketization of a formerly state-subsidized media production system have combined to privilege the construction of a "cultural nationalism" (Y. Guo 2004)—one that is to be distinguished from, but is also in compliance with, "official" or "state" nationalism, the production of which is more explicitly tied to the government and its political agenda.

This is not to say that state media responses to the show do not play a part in shaping the reception of the program. *Renmin Daily* and *Guangming Daily*, among other official media outlets, have commanded *A Bite* as one of the best documentaries made in recent years. Among such praises, the significance of its *commercial* success is one of the merits most often noted—a rather predictable response, given that in recent years a perceived "cultural trade deficit crisis" has prompted "China's senior cultural officials" to promote the production of original contents as a means to break into "regional and international markets" (Keane and Liu 2013, 234). He Dongping, the Associate Editor-in-Chief of *Guangming Daily*, when speaking at a CCTV-held conference, emphatically pointed to the series' potential to project China's "soft power" globally; when combined with "modern means of communication" and "business operation," it is not impossible for Chinese food (and thus culture) to "beat McDonald's, KFC, and French or Italian cuisines" and to achieve leading status in the world (2012).

It is perhaps no coincidence that He invokes "soft power" in the same breath as McDonald's and KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken). The concept, coined by the Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye (2004), has become so influential in recent years that its ubiquity in national governments' policy discourses is no less globally visible than McDonalds' "Golden Arches." Arising from discourses of this kind is a tension between a market imperative to produce sameness based on a globally dominant (read "McDonaldized") model and the desire to present a product of national-cultural



distinction within the audiovisual regime of global communicability. For Chinese (food) culture to become globally dominant, it must be communicated through globally acceptable means; the homogeneity of the form is the condition of possibility for the content to operate as a difference-making force. This is because the rules of the global audiovisual market, much like the discourse of “soft power” itself, are already normalized and naturalized so as to appear as common sense. The ideological workings of the global style are therefore masked as requirements that a national cultural product must heed if it wishes to succeed in global circulation.

Given the unequal power relations embedded in this global system of representation, what is at stake is not whether an indigenization of global forms may undermine the latter’s global hegemony by competing with other already globally dominant media products. Instead, what demands further investigation is whether a globally proffered mode of audiovisual storytelling necessarily prevents a national cultural production from participating in the struggle over meanings. If the national has long operated as a site of hegemonic struggles vis-à-vis the spreading forces of global modernity (Chatterjee 1993) in postcolonial contexts such as India, it is worth questioning whether the global-national contestation may take a different shape in the postsocialist setting of China. As Arif Dirlik cautions us, even though China’s post-reform “valorisation of difference” in the form of market segmentation can hardly be celebrated as a genuine effort to conjure “alternatives to capitalism” (2001, 16–20), the nation’s socialist past, which “held out hopes of creating a new language of modernity” (2001, 24), should not be so easily dismissed. This is why *A Bite* must be more carefully treated as a televisual text caught in a complex process of negotiation, since the multifaceted forces of globalization simultaneously promote and undermine the potential of the national to emerge as a site of difference production.

### Negotiating National Difference, Televisually

Among the many “global” influences for *A Bite*, one particular strand has not been picked up by official responses but is emphasized quite frequently by Ren Changzhen, the head of the production team who also directed the first two episodes. One of the many publications that inspired Ren was *Slow Food Revolution* by the Italian gourmet-turned-activist Carlo Petrini (Xiao Qing 2012). According to Ren, it was the book’s introduction to the connections between gastronomy and botany, physics, chemistry, agriculture, ecology, art, industry, and knowledge, among other fields, that gave her the idea for making *A Bite*. Implicit in many of the segments about food and nature, then, is a critique of the industrialized food system that is gaining visible momentum in various Euro-American contexts (Leitch 2009). In this sense, Ren may be seen as joining forces with such best-selling U.S. authors as Michael Pollan (*The Omnivore’s Dilemma* 2006) and Eric Schlosser (*Fast Food Nation* 2001), whose works have been featured in acclaimed documentaries like Robert Kenner’s *Food, Inc.* (2008) and Morgan Spurlock’s *Super Size Me* (2004). While the pitfalls of global food conglomerates are often the objects of critique in these works, when it comes to conjuring “alternatives” to the current food system, authors such as Pollan often emphasize the agency of the individual consumer more than collectivized actions of workers or citizens (Lavin 2010). Comparatively speaking, this consumer-activist stance, itself symptomatic of neoliberal globalization, is not highlighted in *A Bite*. If anything, it is the food producers rather than consumers who take center stage. The meticulously detailed sequences of their manual labor in the harvesting, collection, or production of food have become some of the most talked about by the show’s viewing

public. These highly stylized segments are also marked by an intricate interplay between images and narratives that invites more nuanced readings, particularly with regard to conjuring a different imagining of the national.

One such segment appears in the second episode (*The Story of Staple Foods*), which features *zongzi*—sticky rice with various fillings wrapped in bamboo leaves. *Zongzi* is commonly referred to as a “people’s invention” to commemorate the poet Qu Yuan from the third century bce. Qu, a patriot of the Chu state, committed suicide by jumping into the Miluo River to protest the invasion of his homeland by the Qin state. This background is reiterated in the opening scenes of the sequence, which portray the residents of Jiaxing (a town in Zhejiang province famous for its *zongzi*) consuming the festive-turned-daily food in restaurants and making it at home. Accompanying this sequence is a folk tune played on a *pipa*, an instrument known to be the basis of much traditional music from the region. As the tune draws to an end, a close-up shot of two hands finishing the wrapping of a *zongzi* also comes to a close, as if signaling the fading of a traditional practice. The scene then cuts to a much more fast-paced wrapping process taking place in a factory setting, evidenced by the white uniforms worn by the workers and the rhythmic synthesizer music. As the sped-up sequence unfolds on screen, the voiceover introduces the main character, a young man from Sichuan province who now works in Jiaxing as a “*zongzi* artificer.” He wraps “3000 *zongzis* a day,” which means “seven per minute,” with each *zongzi* wrapped within “less than ten seconds.” Then the camera takes the viewer in for a closer look of the “standardized workshop” and its “36 procedures for making a *zongzi*.” The narrator informs us: “Over a million *zongzis* are produced every day; it has given this ancient staple food a different kind of modern look without foregoing its charm of manual production (which remains) wrapped inside.” As more close-up shots of the wrapping process appear, we are told that, “these young artificers are using the temperature of their hands to protect the vitality of this traditional food.” An extreme close-up then follows, showing a *zongzi* being unwrapped slowly to a synthesized tune with a more spiritual mood, before shifting the scene to a lush wheat field. “From farming civilization to industrial civilization,” the narration continues, “technological progress has set *zongzi* free from the constraints of regions and seasons. But for the Chinese, going along with nature and making the proper food with their own hands suggest a kind of continuation of a traditional way of life.”

At first glance, this *zongzi* sequence quite directly reflects the consequence of McDonaldization as Ritzer (2007, 31) has it, as a “festive food” of the past is now transformed into a factory-produced staple food to keep up with the fast-paced lifestyle of urban China. However, the orchestrated display of the workers in a Fordist factory, which may seem odd in a program with a pronounced focus on nature, also opens itself up to a diverging set of interpretations. In one regard, the narrative emphasis on efficiency, accompanied by the accelerated footage of the labor process, metonymically points to China’s ostensible “success” in modernization—primarily by providing abundant cheap (but educated and skilled) manual labor for the global commodity supply chain.<sup>4</sup> In this reading, the imagery can be easily seen as glorifying rather than denouncing the McDonaldization process that has transformed humans into machines.<sup>5</sup> In another regard, the display of workers as central figures on screen can equally be motivated by a desire to visualize “the invisible,” to unveil a commodity’s own history. This motivation is not unlike the kind shared by such North American documentaries as Jennifer Baichwal’s *Manufactured Landscapes* (2006) and David Redmon’s *Mardi Gras: Made in China* (2005), which take great pains to reveal the labor conditions that shore up the globally circulated “Made in China” label.

Certainly, the visualization of labor on the television screen does not immediately suggest a critical stance toward the exploitative relationship between capital and labor, since the representation of food producers can just as easily become a “spectacle.” The result is often the further “conversion of productive labor into free labor” (Retzinger 2010, 458)—that is, as consumers of televisual advertising and as voluntary contributors to online discussions of television programs. Much of this spectator-as-laborer logic applies in the context of postsocialist China, particularly given the immense advertising revenue that *A Bite* and its subsequently broadcast Season Two have generated for CCTV. What this reading leaves out, however, is the nationally specific experience that undoubtedly informs the show’s making. As Ren reveals, all of the series’ eight directors—none of whom paid handsomely for this successful series—are urbanites born in the 1970s who have grown up in a relatively stable social milieu and gone through state-supported “formal education” (quoted in M. Yang 2012, par. 19). This background means that Marx’s political economy, including his famed treatise of commodity fetishism, is part of their required readings in college. Unlike the 1960s generation that came before, whose suffering from natural and political disasters has “made them angry,” this “post-70s” (七零后, *qiling hou*) group has retained an emotional tie and a sense of responsibility “toward the national family” (quoted in M. Yang 2012, par. 19). Ren’s way of fulfilling this “responsibility” is to bring her urban audiences away from the “incomplete world in front of them” and into the “common villages, caves, woods, and seaside” (R. Zhang 2012). The best review of *A Bite*, to her mind, comes from a magazine editor who sees in it “a resistance or indifference to modern civilization” as well as a celebration of the “farming civilization” that created “the Chinese taste” (Li Honggu, quoted in M. Yang 2012, par. 12).

This focus is perhaps why the factory sequence is immediately followed by the un-wrapping of a sumptuous *zongzi* and aestheticized shots of ready-to-be-harvested wheat fields. The reopening of this traditional food item “goes hand in hand” with the narrative focus on the “continuation” of a “way of life” that, despite the advancements in technology, remains faithful to one’s agricultural roots. While the industrialized mode of food production is neither celebrated nor condemned outright, it is the hand-making process that is highlighted throughout. As Ren puts it, “the temperature of a human hand is the extension of a human being,” and “it is this person of nature. . . that is the main protector of the vitality of traditional food” (quoted in He 2012, par. 11). The emphasis on the “vitality of tradition” here and in the script, then, may be seen as an attempt to proffer an alternative configuration of “Chineseness.” Unlike the *National Geographic*-style portrayal of natural sceneries in the series’ opening shot, which uses the national to fix a relationship between people and geography, in the *zongzi* sequence the connections between people and places are established by “tradition”—not as objects bound to fade away at the advent of modernity but as practices that remain “vital” within the changing patterns of modern life. Emerging from this, then, is a privileged positioning of the local that contests a hegemonic conception of global modernity, one that refuses to take the latter’s teleology—and China’s developmental path within it—for granted.

This return to the local is more explicitly noted in the fifth episode (*The Secrets of the Kitchen*): “In today’s China, every city looks very much like another. Only the habit of eating and drinking can distinguish one place from another.” The nation is invoked here as a spatial backdrop of urbanization, whose production of sameness has rendered local cuisines a more distinct marker of difference than cityscapes. In other words, the local persists as a site of heterogenization even as the national is aligned with the homogenizing forces of global modernity. If the “dislocation of space from place” is a distinct feature

that marks the transition from a premodern society to a modern one (Giddens 1990, 19), this characterization is complicated in *A Bite*, wherein the immediate bonds between social life and its geographic settings are simultaneously dislodged and retained. As the factory-to-wheat-field sequence suggests, even though technological progress and standardized production have extended the spatial and temporal reach of *zongzi*, its wrapping procedure remains subject to individuated procedures, a logic that is inherently opposed to standardization and reproducibility. At work, then, is a different kind of cultural imagining than what is proffered by the rules of the global media market. This imagining does not position the national as an object for global gaze, but rather regrounds its cultural roots in the embedded practices of the (multi-)local. In this privileging of the local over and against the global, which destabilizes the ontological sanctity of both, the “national” as a category also appears less absolute than relational (Cox 1998). No longer fixed as a packaged “Chineseness” that awaits global consumption, the national now becomes a site of alternative meaning making.

One sequence in the first episode speaks to this alternative imaginary production most pointedly. Ye Maorong and Ye Shengwu are two brothers who travel with hundreds of other workers every fall to Hubei province for work, where lotus roots are used as an ingredient for a variety of delicacies. Despite the food’s popularity in many parts of the country, few if any of China’s urban consumers have ever seen the process through which a lotus root is excavated from underground (R. Zhang 2012). This “uprooting” is precisely the focus of a seven-minute-long sequence in the first episode of the entire series. Overlapping with the Ye brothers’ own accounts (about their hard work, rewards, and health problems, for example) are repeated close-up and mid-range shots of the intricate process. “It takes patience and skills to take out a whole lotus root,” the voiceover explains; not only does the worker “need to know its growing direction and length,” he also needs to “clean the mud [off] section by section,” because “broken roots don’t look good and mud could get inside,” which would reduce their market price. As many as five similar shots are shown in sequence, displaying a worker’s hands as they slowly and carefully pull a lotus root out of the mud before cleaning it up to reveal its full, undamaged body.

For Ren, the story of these two brothers is among her favorites in the entire series, despite the “muddy” challenges during the shoot.<sup>6</sup> The scene is also by far the most frequently mentioned among *A Bite*’s audiences, some of whom pronounce that they “will never waste one bit when consuming lotus roots in the future” (R. Zhang 2012). While the scene’s obvious “shock” value to the eyes of an urban consumer may be comparable to those that dramatize “man’s combat with nature” in such Discovery Channel shows as *Deadliest Catch* (2005), the manner in which this human-nature relationship is depicted in *A Bite* should not be dissociated from the motif of “tradition vs. modernity” emphasized in the series as a whole. As one example, the lotus root that is carefully removed by human hands from the muddy underground is literally detached from its natural surroundings. This “deterritorialization” of a food item from its immediate locale, featured repeatedly in extreme close-ups, is presented as a delicate process, one that cannot sustain the fracturing momentum unless meticulously handled by the workers. What is uprooted here is arguably not just a local food item but also a national self subject to the disembedding forces of global modernity. Just as in the *zongzi* sequence, the protection of tradition lies in the hands of the artificers, here again the agents who are tending to this uprooting are none other than the “laboring people” (劳动人民, *laodong renmin*), embodied by the Ye brothers. Once upheld as the “nation’s masters” (国家的主人) during the Maoist era, the workers—the majority of whom have migrated from rural areas to urban centers—have

long been deprived of their subject status through wholesale (self-)objectification as the nation-state reintegrates itself into the global economy (Pun 2003). The lotus-root sequence, by reestablishing the workers and their manual labor as essential to caring for the nation during its “dislocation,” is more than suggestive of a call for resituating the national imaginary within China’s domestic, proletarianized base, as opposed to a more globally oriented consumer constituency.

This kind of visual tactic, which mobilizes “tradition” to contest the logic of global modernity, can also be discerned in the next story featured in the same episode. The shot of the wheat field at the end of the *zongzi* sequence transitions the setting to a village near Ningbo in Zhejiang province. There, a five-year-old girl and her great-grandmother set out to hand-make rice cakes (*niangao*) for family members who have returned from the city to the countryside for the Lunar Chinese New Year. Highlighted throughout the sequence, again, is the use of mortar, pestle, and other “premodern” tools to turn rice into a variety of rice cakes. At the end of this sequence, a bus is shown to be carrying the younger generation back to the city, with “homemade rice cakes” packed in their luggage. As the bus crosses several bridges and a tunnel, the locale is shifted from Ningbo to the capital city of Beijing, where the final sequence—featuring another family’s dumpling making—is to take place. Curiously, this transition is rendered through a blurring of vision from the perspective of a passenger. The city as the destination for those passengers is thus figured as a space of uncertainty. This stylistic choice is more than noticeable in a program that routinely champions a “high-definition” aesthetic. Indeed, it is in moments like this that the visual elements appear to have broken away from the narration itself to proffer a more complex set of meanings. In some sense, this blurring of vision can be seen as operating as a visual “question mark” raised on the march toward “urbanization,” a process that has led China’s urban population to outnumber its rural one (for the first time in January 2012). In this and several other episodes of *A Bite*, subdued references are made to this ongoing movement, though the characters highlighted are often those who have chosen to stay behind or returned to their home villages. These include a clay-pot maker’s son in the fifth episode (*Secrets of the Kitchen*), a salt-mine worker in the sixth episode (*A Perfect Blend of Five Flavors*), and a taro farmer in the last episode (*Our Farm*). All of these young people are shown to be devoting themselves to “traditional” agricultural practices despite the lure of higher-paying jobs in the cities. The blurred vision after the *niangao* sequence, then, may be read as a pause for reflection on the nation’s seemingly unstoppable industrial development, whether manifesting itself as massive urbanization, large-scale ecological disruption, or the widely reported issue of “food safety.”

China’s public concern for food safety has been on the rise in recent years due to the media exposure of several high-profile “food scandals.”<sup>7</sup> Despite the complex historical reasons that gave rise to the multilayered phenomenon of “poisonous food,” today the “public fears” surrounding food often stem from “a disconnection and a sense of alienation associated with food” among many consumers who “have little knowledge about the origins, ingredients, and the actual making of the foods they eat” (Yan 2012: 713). The structural separation between consumers and producers, in other words, contributes as much to the “problems of unsafe food” as do “modern farming and food-processing technologies” (Yan 2012, 715). Under these circumstances, it is only understandable that the complete absence of “food safety” discussions in *A Bite* would irritate a significant portion of its domestic audience. Following the popular celebration of the show, the hashtag #A Bite of the Periodic Table of the Chemical Elements# (#舌尖上的元素周期表#) emerged on various microblogging sites. A parody video called “Gifts from Chemistry,”

which includes mainstream media footage of the biggest food scandals in recent years, also gained circulation on sites like Youku (the Chinese version of Youtube) and iFeng, among others.<sup>8</sup> While producer Chen denied that food safety issues had inspired the idea for *A Bite*, he did lament that “the industrialized mode of production” has resulted in the marginalization, if not “disappearance,” of “many traditional cuisines featured in the documentary” (R. Guo 2012). Although Chen personally much preferred to watch independent works that are more “realist” (纪实题材, *jishi ticaì*), he stressed that the “deadly issue for a television station” is not so much politics as “ratings,” which would be unlikely to favor those shows that are “painful” to watch. Part of his regret, then, is that “it would be difficult for later generations to learn about what happened in China between 2011 to 2015” from watching *A Bite*, since it is only “a gentle basket” into which “we place certain things that can’t be said too plainly” (Chen 2014 par. 1).

Unlike Chen, for whom food safety issues are “self-censored” for market reasons, director Ren argues that the show was never an attempt to expose “the dark side.” As a creative decision, she says that she wants to present the rural in “its most ordinary state,” the “beauty” of which she is “entitled” to convey (R. Zhang 2012). “Those who make bean curds, dig up lotus roots, or collect pine mushrooms don’t even know what a microblog is,” Ren stresses; “the real world. . . exists quietly, and you only see it when you get up-close” (M. Yang 2012). On the surface, the kind of “reality” invoked by Ren cannot be more different from the one depicted in the online parody of *A Bite*, which sets out to turn the “embellished and embroidered society” (Chen 2014) portrayed in the original on its head. But a closer examination of the parody video would reveal that the target of criticism is not so much the beautification of the countryside in *A Bite* but rather the “amoral business people (无良商家, *wuliang shangjia*)” who are “no longer satisfied with things created by nature” but instead use chemicals to artificially “enhance” their foods (Anon. 2012). The intertextual reference to *A Bite*’s imagery takes place precisely at the point when “nature” is invoked. In the end, the video questions whether “you can still drool. . . in front of the screen” when all that is left (of the Chinese taste) is the taste of chemicals. While this message certainly displays an implicit discontent with the CCTV program’s concealment of an issue more frequently reported by local media (G. Yang 2013), it does not necessarily negate the latter’s intent to trace the “reality” of urban food to rural origins and human producers. After all, “gifts from nature” are much preferred to “gifts from chemistry,” for the original and the parody alike.

Nonetheless, this dispute over “reality” that arose from the production and reception of *A Bite* also reflects the tension between homogenization and heterogenization, both at work in shaping the show’s stylistic orientation and narrative composition. This tension, between the market pressure to “beautify” China and the producers’ own desire to document “the ordinary,” ultimately results in a “Chineseness” simultaneously packaged—that is, in the global-friendly media format of nature documentary—and negotiated, which mobilizes the local as a means to contest the globally dominant, industrialized mode of (food) production. The competing objectives can be felt most keenly at the end of each episode, when all of the food producers featured therein appear smilingly on screen, one by one, with the “fruits” of their labor in hand. Accompanying this sequence, in the second episode in particular, is another “nationalizing” anchor: “This is the Chinese people. This is the tradition of the Chinese people. This is the story of staple foods, told by the Chinese people.” When a reporter told Ren that some viewers had found this display of “happy faces” to be “quite fake,” Ren responded that this was a “pictorializing method (图片化的拍法 *tupianhua de paifa*)” (quoted in R. Zhang 2012, par. 48). Her preference for the “pictorial” indeed echoes her goal to “reeducate” urbanites about the

nation's agricultural roots. The lingering faces can thus be seen to be operating as "the still," in Roland Barthes' sense of the term; "by instituting a reading that is at once instantaneous and vertical," they function, much like the "visual question mark" of the back-to-the-city scene, as an act of defiance against the self-legitimizing "logical time" that is modern "progress" (1977, 68).

Ultimately, the audience perception of this sequence as "faked happiness" also points to the difficulty faced by cultural producers such as Ren and Chen in postsocialist China. Despite their attempts to reinsert the local as a site of living and evolving practices, they cannot seem to escape the stylistic flattening that is called for in the fixation of "Chineseness" as a globally marketable commodity. But this limitation does not mean that their work should be seen merely as state-compliant propagation of cultural nationalism. Indeed, as an artifact that crosscuts the globalizing "Slow Food Movement" and China's "New Documentary Movement" at once, *A Bite* is better seen as participating in a kind of cultural struggle that seeks to generate more productive rethinking of the nation's present and future "possibilities" (Lu 2010, 48). As Tomlinson points out, the most severe consequence of "cultural imperialism," experienced by societies upon which the institutions of capitalist modernity are imposed, is "the failure of a collective will to generate shared narratives of meaning and orientation" (1991, 165). China's historical struggles "for national survival and nation-building" have long endorsed "science and technology" as the default instruments for fulfilling "the dream of modernization," thus preventing many from realizing that problems of food safety are "unintended consequences" of that very process (Yan 2012, 722). If the politics of food is more about "moral economies" than about "economics" (Leitch 2009, 61), *A Bite's* treatment of "Chinese food" can be seen as an effort to rejuvenate a long-neglected search for alternative modes of meaning making. In a national context where modernization consists of a mixture of "incomplete" industrialization (since the "premodern" persists) and the "postindustrial" (as marked by the reign of consumerism and postmodern cynicism), this cultural rethinking is perhaps more than necessary for tackling not only the problems related to food but also broader structural challenges faced by China in the 21st century.

### Conclusion

The last episode of Season One of *A Bite* highlights numerous food-production practices of a more sustainable kind, from wheat paddies that operate as ecosystems, with coinhabitants like carps and ducks, to elevated mud fields for growing taro plants that can only be cared for manually, and finally to a rooftop vegetable garden in a Beijing apartment building. Echoing the theme of "nature" in the first episode, these segments invoke the "Chinese" as a people who not only rely on their specific geographical surroundings for food but also continue to embody the role of food producers, even when their urban residence is far removed from nature itself. It is somewhat ironic that this vision—which shares some commonality with the sustainability movement that is now spreading across many developed nations—is rarely mentioned, if at all, in the public discourses generated by the show. The more celebrated effect of the program's popularity appears to be its promotion of food sales online (Bai 2012). The workings of a consumer imaginary here can hardly be disputed, which again speaks to the effects of neoliberalism as a globally hegemonic cultural regime.

In this sense, attending to the cultural contestations that often arise when considering national adoptions of global media forms is perhaps more important than ever. As a

“televisual hypertext” (Mi 2005, 327) that operates quite differently from the 19th-century print media in Benedict Anderson’s account of national construction (1991), *A Bite* enacts the simultaneously homogenizing and heterogenizing mechanisms of globalization that intercept food and media at once. To be sure, this televisual reimagination of the national community may not exactly constitute a visible site of resistance to a (state-endorsed) developmental model that conforms to, rather than challenges, the culture of global modernity, given that “television food” dominated by genres originating from Europe and America “replicates the structure of dominance that characterizes the global political economy of food” (Miller 2002, 78–79). Precisely because of this structural inequality, however, more attention must be paid to the semiotic contingencies that are afforded by the televisual medium itself, which may offer us an opportunity to attend to those struggles over meanings that cannot be completely subsumed by the market rationality of contemporary globalization. While dissecting the ideological force of globally hegemonic media forms remains an important task, critical analyses of non-Western cultural texts are perhaps just as necessary if we wish to expand, rather than foreclose, the latter’s difference-making potentiality.

### Notes

1. The entire series can be viewed at the online branch of CCTV at <<http://jishi.cntv.cn/program/sjsdztg/index.shtml>> as well as on several YouTube channels with English subtitles.
2. All translations of the script are my own, except for the titles of the episodes, which I have taken from the official CCTV English site, where a dubbed version of the program can be found: <[http://english.cntv.cn/special/a\\_bite\\_of\\_china/homepage/index.shtml](http://english.cntv.cn/special/a_bite_of_china/homepage/index.shtml)>
3. A perhaps atypical example of this is the controversial classic *River Elegy* (河殇, Heshang, 1988), which appropriated symbols such as the Great Wall and Yellow River to signify the decline of Chinese civilization (W. Sun 2007, 192) and was subsequently banned for its presumed impact on the 1989 protests in Tian’anmen Square.
4. China’s supply of labor force for contemporary globalization is a theme that returns in the seventh episode of the second Season, which features both the workers and their industrialized canteens in a Shenzhen-based factory of Foxconn, one of the largest electronics manufacturers in the world notorious for its working conditions as a supplier of Apple products.
5. This, indeed, was an interpretation voiced by a group of first-year doctoral students at my university in the United States, for whom I screened a few clips of the first episode.
6. One of the crewmembers has documented some of the production process in her blog, “Days before the Broadcast,” which features dozens of pictures taken during this time. <[http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_888cd0b50101059r.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_888cd0b50101059r.html)>
7. Of these, the one caused by the Sanlu Group’s melamine-contaminated baby formula in 2008 was perhaps the most widely reported and condemned.
8. For better viewing of the parody from outside China, see <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVer2kiPyF4>>.

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