Afterword: Comparing Vegetarianisms

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Cross-cultural comparisons have been rare in the recent anthropology and sociology of meat-eating and vegetarianism. The search for general principles that hold true across time and space, which underpinned the heated debates between proponents of 'symbolic' and 'materialist' approaches to dietary prohibitions,[1] no longer whets most anthropological appetites.[2] As in the current issue, scholars have instead fleshed out the meanings of meat in a single locality or country, or carried out careful comparisons between adjacent locales or within broadly-defined cultural 'regions'. In this Afterword I first consider some of the differences in approaches to the studies of meat and meat avoidance in two such 'regions': the West; and South Asia. With the help of additional cases drawn from research on meat prohibitions in East Asia, I then go on to suggest that a comparative, cross-regional approach to meat avoidances and prohibitions is in fact increasingly important to understanding the social dimensions of vegetarianism, including at 'local' and 'regional' levels.

A number of recurring themes, ranging from articulations of meat-eating with 'masculinity', 'alcohol' and 'luxury', to the embroilment of meat—and especially beef—in national politics, can be found in accounts from both South Asia and the West (and elsewhere, such as East Asia). Nevertheless, the economic, social and cultural contexts in which prohibitions against meats, dairy products and eggs occur may appear so radically different from one another as to make such recurrences seem irrelevant to understanding avoidances in any one of these regions. Thus, social scientists studying meat

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[1] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966); and Marvin Harris, *Good to Eat: Riddles of Food and Culture* (Long Grove, Ill.: Waveland Press, rpr., 1998).
[2] Ladislav Holy, 'Introduction: Description, Generalization and Comparison: Two Paradigms', in Ladislav Holy (ed.), *Comparative Anthropology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp.1–21; and Richard G. Fox and Andre Gingrich, 'Introduction', in Andre Gingrich and Richard G. Fox (eds), *Anthropology, By Comparison* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp.1–24.

avoidances in South Asia have tended to work within a very different framework to those working in Western societies. 'Vegetarian' and 'vegetarianism', terms whose original usage can be traced to the emergence of a vegetarian movement in nineteenth-century Europe and North America,[3] are used not so much as tools for making explicit comparisons across these regions but rather as convenient shorthand for a range of beliefs and practices associated with meat rejection and operating in radically different milieux. As Staples, Caplan and Desai indicate in this issue, the scholarship on South Asian 'vegetarianism' has previously paid little attention to the possibility that the adoption of a meat-free diet might be related to a person's strongly-held convictions or aspirations for personal fulfilment and well-being. Instead, the consumption and avoidance of meat or particular meats has been viewed as largely pre-determined by ethnic and religious divisions and caste hierarchies. In this scholarly tradition, Hindu notions of pollution and the rules governing food exchange between castes and genders have been given particular weight.[4] To the extent that the exercise of 'choice' has come into it at all, the adoption of vegetarian diets has been interpreted as an attempt at status improvement, usually by an entire caste.[5]

By contrast, the question for most sociologists studying vegetarianism in Western countries has been: why is it that in societies where meat is generally not only highly valued but also increasingly abundant and affordable, certain people choose to avoid—or claim to avoid—meat, fish, eggs or dairy products? In discussing self-proclaimed vegetarians' 'choices' and 'rhetorical strategies',[6] scholars have highlighted a variety of themes, including ethical debates on the environment, food distribution and animal welfare and rights, concerns with personal health and the construction of individual identities.[7] Many of these accounts draw on cases from industrialised countries throughout Western

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[3] Alan Beardsworth and Teresa Keil, *Sociology on the Menu* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp.222–3.

[4] R.S. Khare, *The Hindu Hearth and Home* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1976); and Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1970).

[5] McKim Marriott, 'Caste Ranking and Food Transactions: A Matrix Analysis', in M. Singer and B.S. Cohn (eds), *Structure and Change in Indian Society* (Chicago: Aldine, 1968), pp.133–71.

[6] Donna Maurer, 'Meat as a Social Problem: Rhetorical Strategies in the Contemporary Vegetarian Literature', in Donna Maurer and Jeffery Sobal (eds), *Eating Agendas: Food and Nutrition as Social Problems* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995), pp.143–63.

[7] Beardsworth and Keil, *Sociology on the Menu*; Anna Willetts, '"Bacon Sandwiches Got the Better of Me": Meat-Eating and Vegetarianism in South-East London', in Pat Caplan (ed.), *Food, Health and Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp.111–30; and Deidre Wicks, 'Humans, Food, and Other Animals: The Vegetarian Option', in John Germov and Lauren Williams (eds), *A Sociology of Food and Nutrition: The Social Appetite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 2004), pp.263–87.

Europe, North America and Oceania. They do not, however, use examples from Asia, Africa or Latin America, where comparatively low levels of meat-eating are assumed to be due to either the effect of religion and 'tradition', and/or to poor access to meat (resulting from poverty or other factors).[8] The impression is created of a dichotomy between a 'voluntary' and 'modern'[9] form of vegetarianism located in the West and an 'involuntary' and 'traditional' form of vegetarianism found elsewhere.

There may be some compelling empirical reasons behind these differences of approach—including, of course, massive nutritional inequalities—although to complicate matters further, increasingly these inequalities are marked not only by a polarity between 'the North' and 'the South', but also by the fact that a growing number of countries, including India, face problems associated with both under-nutrition and over-nutrition.[10] In South Asia, to return to the core theme of this collection, the consumption and prohibition of meats is a key medium through which social divisions are communicated, enforced and, as the writers in this collection demonstrate, imagined and negotiated. The abstention from meat, and beef in particular, has enjoyed a privileged status through its association with the purity of the Brahmin *varna*. In recent decades, with the rise of Hindu nationalism, this status has been enhanced, and as Chitageri in this issue points out, in some cases violently enforced as well as resisted. Indeed, the politics of Hindu nationalism are an explicit or implicit factor in nearly all of the foregoing contributions. Even Desai, who is highly critical of the assumption that low castes and 'tribals' turn to vegetarianism out of a desire to enhance their social standing, nevertheless accepts that his 'tribal' informants themselves associated vegetarianism with Hindu nationalism and attempts at status enhancement (even though people in the village who adopted vegetarian diets may originally have done so for very different reasons).

In the West, by contrast, vegetarianism has only occasionally been associated with social elites and political power. Although advocated by a number of thinkers since antiquity, and particularly from the seventeenth century,[11] the practice did not really take off until the middle of the nineteenth century, when vegetarian societies were established in England, Germany and elsewhere.

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[8] Beardsworth and Keil, *Sociology on the Menu*, p.218.
[9] Wicks, 'Humans, Food, and Other Animals: The Vegetarian Option', pp.263–87.
[10] Gary Gardner and Brian Halweil, *Underfed and Overfed: The Global Epidemic of Malnutrition* (Washington, DC: Worldwatch Institute, 2000).
[11] Tristram Stuart, *The Bloodless Revolution: Radical Vegetarians and the Discovery of India* (London: Harper Press, 2006).

Thereafter it became increasingly widespread, and by the twentieth century it had become linked with a number of radical social movements, including socialism and feminism.[12] And since the late twentieth century various practices of meat avoidance have been on the rise, leading some writers to argue that vegetarianism has become 'mainstream' and a consumerist 'lifestyle choice'—one of many popular forms of 'ethical consumption'[13]—while others have identified in this rise signs of a shift in Western understandings of humanity's relationship to the wider environment, understandings which have previously emphasised domination over nature, including the right to kill other species for food.[14] Arguably, however, Western societies remain hegemonically carnivorous. Vegetarian practices continue to play a part in 'counter-cultural' movements and sub-cultures, and the rejection of meat within these groups is represented by actors themselves or interpreted by outside observers as an inversion of the dominant gastro-social order, in which the eating of meat—in particular of 'red' meat—continues to be associated with power, status and patriarchy.[15]

Yet despite such differences, the articles in this issue demonstrate the inadequacy of the distinction between 'voluntary' Western vegetarianism and 'rule-governed' vegetarianism in South Asia. Instead, people in South Asia as elsewhere can make situated decisions to consume or avoid certain foods—decisions often embedded in constructions of space and place, as among Caplan's and Donner's middle-class Hindu urban families where certain household members, in particular men and children, enjoy meat outside the home but observe stricter rules inside it. Such place-making dimensions of food choices include the construction of regional identities.[16] Again, decisions to eat or accept particular foods may be highly strategic. According to Michelutti, for example, North Indian Yadavs embraced vegetarianism in an attempt to forge caste unity and raise their standing within the broader caste hierarchy, but Yadav men also consume chicken, milk and whisky to cultivate and perform their 'masculine' strength and sexual prowess, and to create political alliances with other groups. Decisions to eat or reject meats are, as is clear from these

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[12] Beardsworth and Keil, *Sociology on the Menu*, pp.219–23.

[13] Willetts, '"Bacon Sandwiches Got the Better of Me"', pp.111–30; Wicks, 'Humans, Food, and Other Animals: The Vegetarian Option', pp.263–87; and Bob Ashley, Joanne Hollows, Steve Jones and Ben Taylor, *Food and Cultural Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p.191.

[14] Nick Fiddes, *Meat: A Natural Symbol* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991).

[15] Julia Twigg, 'Food for Thought: Purity and Vegetarianism', in *Religion*, Vol.9, no.1 (Spring 1979), pp.13–35; Carol Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York: Continuum, 1990); and Dylan Clark, 'The Raw and the Rotten: Punk Cuisine', in *Ethnology*, Vol.43, no.1 (Winter 2004), pp.19–31.

[16] Donner; Mookherjee; Osella and Osella; and Caplan in this issue.

examples, often highly gendered,[17] and they can in some instances be read as forms of resistance against caste oppression[18] or against domination in the household.[19]

Furthermore, while the political and cultural contexts within which such situated avoidances take place may appear so different as to make explicit comparisons between 'Indian' and 'Western' vegetarian practices superfluous, in practice however the boundaries between apparently-discrete foodways frequently become blurred through the movements of people, ideas, images, commodities and capital. As several writers in this collection demonstrate, the 'Indian' vegetarian/non-vegetarian divide is not encapsulated in a bubble. Rather, it is informed and challenged by, and sustained and reshaped through, the consumption of goods from both near and far and the interactions with, and imaginings and memories of, peoples from across ethnic divisions and national borders.[20] People in South Asia and elsewhere reflect upon their own practices as they compare and contrast them with those of others—both 'foreign' others and 'internal' ones. Indeed in everyday life such comparisons are made all the time, as people are confronted with others' habits in shared spaces, at public events and in the media. People partake of each other's foods, sometimes in carefully managed situations of commensality,[21] at other times through conspicuous or surreptitious experiments with others' cuisines in commercial eating establishments or in homes.[22]

Nevertheless these boundary-blurring encounters can include interactions with anthropologists. In this collection Staples and Mookherjee provide vivid accounts of how their own decisions to accept or reject certain foods offered to them provoked responses among their hosts—responses which raised new questions and produced new insights about the communities they were studying and the meanings of food within them.[23]

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[17] Michelutti; Caplan; and Donner in this issue.

[18] Chitageri; and Staples in this issue.

[19] Donner in this issue.

[20] Mookherjee; Osella and Osella; and Caplan in this issue.

[21] Caplan; and Michelutti in this issue. See also Maris Boyd Gillette, 'Children's Food and Islamic Dietary Restrictions in Xi'an', in Jun Jing (ed.), *Feeding China's Little Emperors: Food, Children, and Social Change* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp.71–93.

[22] Osella and Osella; Mookherjee; Donner; Staples in this issue. See also Pierre L. van den Berghe, 'Ethnic Cuisine: Culture in Nature', in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol.7, no.3 (July 1984), pp.387–97; and Melissa L. Caldwell, 'Tasting the Worlds of Yesterday and Today: Culinary Tourism and Nostalgia Foods in Post-Soviet Russia', in Richard Wilk (ed.), *Fast Food/Slow Food: The Cultural Economy of the Global Food System* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006), pp.97–112.

[23] See David Sutton, 'The Vegetarian Anthropologist', in *Anthropology Today*, Vol.13, no.1 (Feb. 1997), pp.5–8.

As anthropologists have argued, it is precisely in encounters with others that food prohibitions and other dietary rules may become solidified as markers of one's own group, but it is also through such meetings that these prohibitions and rules may be transgressed and challenged.[24] Such culinary encounters, as Mookherjee, Staples and Osella and Osella point out, do not simply challenge one's classifications intellectually. Rather, eating events, including those involving various forms of 'culinary tourism', are multi-sensory bodily experiences.[25] The consumption or even thought of certain unfamiliar or prohibited foods may provoke visceral reactions of disgust—or in some cases intense feelings of pleasure—just as familiar tastes and smells can transport one instantaneously to distant times, places and occasions.[26]

The study of such culinary encounters and exchanges might, it is hoped, include more investigations of the movement of ideas concerning meat rejection and consumption. Such investigations would consider which avoidances become accepted, by whom and under what conditions, and how the social, political and philosophical-ethical meanings of these meat avoidances become reshaped in new settings. Simoons' cultural geography of flesh avoidances in the 'Old World', in which he notes that 'food avoidances can change in a culture with the passage of time; and they can be diffused to other cultures and reinterpreted by them',[27] is one early and ambitious attempt to understand such processes. The book is an excellent reminder of just how interconnected foodways have been throughout history, although its broad comparative ambitions leave little space for ethnographic depth.

Recent historical studies may provide more useful models. Tristram Stuart explores the ways in which Indian philosophy, and in particular the doctrine of *ahimsa*, was taken up in European debates on vegetarianism between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries in a process which involved both the undeniable impact of India on Western debates, but also radical

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[24] Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*; Mary Douglas, 'Deciphering a Meal', in Clifford Geertz (ed.), *Myth, Symbol, and Culture* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1971), pp.61–81; Frederick J. Simoons, *Eat Not This Flesh: Food Avoidances in the Old World* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1961); and Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, *Rice as Self: Japanese Identities Through Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[25] Caldwell, 'Tasting the Worlds of Yesterday and Today: Culinary Tourism and Nostalgia Foods in Post-Soviet Russia', pp.97–112; and David Sutton, *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).

[26] Mookherjee in this issue; Efrat Ben-Ze'ev, 'The Politics of Taste and Smell: Palestinian Rites of Return', in Marianne Elisabeth Lien and Brigitte Nerlich (eds), *The Politics of Food* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), pp.141–60; Deborah Lupton, *Food, the Body and the Self* (London: Sage, 1996); and Paul Rozin, 'Food is Fundamental, Fun, Frightening, and Far-Reaching', in *Social Research*, Vol.66, no.1 (Spring 1999), pp.9–30.

[27] Simoons, *Eat Not This Flesh: Food Avoidances in the Old World*, p.109.

reinterpretations of Indian thought.[28] Indeed, the inspiration that vegetarian movements in the West continue to draw from India[29] makes the lack of interest in South Asian vegetarianism in sociological studies of meat avoidance in the West all the more striking. Conversely, one might also ask in what ways Western interests in Indian vegetarian philosophies may have impacted on the meanings of meat rejection in India itself. In this vein, Stuart discusses Gandhi's encounter with the Vegetarian Society during his time as a student in London at the end of the nineteenth century, and argues that English and American advocates of vegetarianism such as Henry Salt and Henry David Thoreau—themselves indebted to Indian philosophy—had a profound impact on Gandhi's own political vegetarianism.[30] Stuart writes: 'Western vegetarianism had been heavily influenced by Indian culture for more than 300 years; in Gandhi's hands it was re-exported to India as a core element in the great national freedom struggle'.[31]

Historians have also demonstrated that patterns of influence may be rather complicated, however, and that in some cases where practices seem to have spread from one place to another, the links may actually be rather weak or even non-existent. Kieschnick, for example, argues that although nowadays 'Buddhism is closely associated with vegetarianism in China . . . this link was not inevitable'.[32] Rather, he demonstrates that the more or less universal adoption of vegetarianism by the Chinese Buddhist clergy occurred many centuries after the introduction of Buddhism from India—and then only partially under the influence of Indian and Chinese Buddhist scriptures. Other important factors, Kieschnick maintains, included Chinese associations between meat-eating and luxury which predated the arrival of Buddhism. Similarly, while the widespread 'beef taboo' in late imperial China has often been assumed to be the result of Indian influence through Buddhism, Goossaert[33]—echoing aspects of Harris' famous argument concerning the 'riddle of the sacred cow' in India[34]—has recently contended that the ban on beef-eating and on the use of beef as a sacrificial meat among temple

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[28] Stuart, *The Bloodless Revolution: Radical Vegetarians and the Discovery of India*.

[29] See for example Rynn Berry, *Food for the Gods: Vegetarianism and the World's Religions* (New York: Pythagorean Publishers, 1998).

[30] Stuart, *The Bloodless Revolution: Radical Vegetarians and the Discovery of India*, pp.423–30.

[31] *Ibid.*, p.424.

[32] John Kieschnick, 'Buddhist Vegetarianism in China', in Roel Sterckx (ed.), *Of Tripod and Palate: Food, Politics, and Religion in Traditional China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p.186.

[33] Vincent Goossaert, 'The Beef Taboo and the Sacrificial Structure of Late Imperial Chinese Society', in Roel Sterckx (ed.), *Of Tripod and Palate: Food, Politics, and Religion in Traditional China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp.237–48.

[34] Harris, *Good to Eat: Riddles of Food and Culture*, pp.47–66.

communities were closely linked to the growing importance, beginning in the tenth century CE, of draught bovines in Chinese agriculture.

We might also consider how and when trans-regional and trans-national connections may be involved in the abandonment and revival of food prohibitions. In Japan, argues Cwiertka, the taboo on beef began to disappear in the 1860s as a result of the association of beef consumption with the Westerners residing in the treaty ports whose carnivorous practices were emulated by many 'progressive' Japanese.[35] Although levels of meat consumption remained low in Japan for another 100 years, the ban formally ended in 1872 with the announcement that the emperor ate both beef and mutton, a move which 'elevated [beef consumption] into the symbol of Japan's transformation into a modern nation'.[36] Goossaert suggests that the decreasing importance of the beef prohibition in early-twentieth-century China was closely related to the state's attacks on temple communities.[37] However, despite the extraordinary rise in meat-eating since the early 1980s, beef consumption remains far from universally accepted in China, and meat still carries a sense of dangerous excess.[38] Indeed, with the religious revival of the post-Mao era,[39] both beef avoidances and the adoption of vegetarian diets, particularly on certain days of the ritual calendar, may be on the rise. There are also signs of the emergence of a 'new' vegetarianism among urban intellectuals inspired by animal rights' movements and ecological activism in the West, Taiwan and Japan. Shi Youbo's *Vegetarianism* is a fascinating vegetarian manifesto for contemporary China which draws primarily on Western sources to develop an argument for vegetarianism on the grounds of environmental protection, human health and animal welfare. It also strategically draws the reader's attention to Chinese and other East Asian traditions of vegetarianism and vegetarian cuisine, and describes the recent rise of vegetarian associations on Chinese campuses. In this book, meat avoidances with very different historical, ethical and cultural underpinnings become articulated into a single 'vegetarianism'.[40]

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[35] Katarzyna J. Cwiertka, *Modern Japanese Cuisine: Food, Power and National Identity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), pp.24–34.

[36] *Ibid.*, p.33.

[37] Goossaert, 'The Beef Taboo and the Sacrificial Structure of Late Imperial Chinese Society', p.246.

[38] Judith Farquhar, *Appetites: Food and Sex in Postsocialist China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

[39] Daniel L. Overmeyer (ed.), 'Special Issue: Religion in China Today', in *The China Quarterly*, Vol.174 (June 2003).

[40] Shi Youbo, *Sushizhuyi* (*Vegetarianism*) (Beijing: Beijing Tushuguan Chubanshe, 2004).

The role of trans-national encounters and ideas in shaping local foodways draws our attention to the political-economic processes and wider discourses that create the conditions within which people and ideas travel. As Cwiertka demonstrates, for example, Japanese aspirations to resist Western imperialism and join the ranks of nation-states played a crucial role in the acceptance of beef-eating.[41] Conversely, in India, nationalist movements have enhanced the status of vegetarianism and furthered the ban on cow slaughter, as Chitageri and others have highlighted in this issue. At the same time, Staples suggests that increases in beef consumption among Christians in the area where he conducted his research can be interpreted as a form of resistance to Hindu oppression,[42] and he tells us that beef-eating was associated there with the West and with modernity, and in fact enjoyed a rather high status. Indeed, prior to becoming, in Stuart's phrase, a 'born-again vegetarian' in London, Gandhi had been briefly an advocate of meat-eating as a means of strengthening Indians in their struggle against colonial rule.[43] These Japanese and Indian articulations of beef-eating with nationhood and advancement are, of course, not wholly unrelated to nineteenth-century Orientalist writings which presented meat-eating Europeans as physically and mentally superior to the 'meat-deprived' Indians and Chinese.[44] Indeed, Stuart's discussion of Indian influence on Western vegetarianism[45] needs to be juxtaposed to these imperialist discourses, which represented India's reliance on grain and vegetables as a sign of its innate inferiority, irrationality and need for deliverance by enlightened carnivores.

Culinary encounters and exchanges are of course not new, but the scale and speed of such transactions, within and across various 'regions', have intensified in recent centuries—and perhaps especially in recent decades—as a result of increased migration and other forms of travel, new technologies in areas such as communication, food preservation and transportation, and the expansion of capitalist markets and consumerism.[46] Clearly, the rise of consumer capitalism and the increase of international trade are crucial to the understanding of

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[41] Cwiertka, *Modern Japanese Cuisine: Food, Power and National Identity*, pp.24–34.

[42] See Chitageri in this issue.

[43] Stuart, *The Bloodless Revolution: Radical Vegetarians and the Discovery of India*, pp.424–5.

[44] Warren Belasco, *Meals to Come: A History of the Future of Food* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), pp.8–14.

[45] Stuart, *The Bloodless Revolution: Radical Vegetarians and the Discovery of India*.

[46] Sidney W. Mintz, 'Afterword: Swallowing Modernity', in James L. Watson (ed.), *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp.183–200; Sidney W. Mintz, 'Food at Moderate Speeds', in Richard Wilk (ed.), *Fast Food/Slow Food: The Cultural Economy of the Global Food System* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006), pp.3–11; and Jack Goody, *Cooking, Cuisine and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp.154–74.

contemporary food exchanges.[47] Donner's argument that middle-class married women in Calcutta in the 1990s were adopting strict vegetarian diets to carve out personal spaces for themselves in the household is set against the backdrop of a city with increasing opportunities for transgressive meat-eating outside the home, and where consumption was becoming an important means of self-expression. Her comment that women referred to themselves using the English word 'vegetarian' is intriguing, suggesting both the emergence of 'the vegetarian' as a consumerist identity, and that the practice may derive some of its significance through association with the West. Caplan draws attention to how the growing popularity of eating out and home catering among middle-class Brahmins in Madras required flexible approaches to caste purity and the vegetarian/non-vegetarian divide. Indeed, the introduction of commercially-prepared and -packaged foods may not necessarily entail the attenuation of social ties, as Counihan has argued,[48] but may in fact create new possibilities for commensality across ethnic, caste or religious divides. Gillette argues that while the Islamic pork prohibition had previously made it nearly impossible for ethnic Han in Xi'an to invite Hui Muslims into their homes, canned Coca Cola and wrapped, Western-style sweets have provided new sustenance for social interactions between Hui and Han in the Chinese city.[49]

The increasingly trans-regional and trans-national food markets and the growing power of agribusiness within these are highly relevant to the study of food prohibitions, and not only in terms of the consumption of fast foods and ready-made meals. In Western contexts, the growing popularity of vegetarianism has been interpreted by some as a form of 'risk management' in a context where food economies have become less localised, and the long-term and short-term health risks associated with foods have become experienced as diffuse, untraceable and unfamiliar.[50] Either as a form of risk management or as an ethical consumerism addressing the power of the meat industry, vegetarianism can be seen as one of a number of reactions to trans-local and trans-national food economies and trade regimes, reactions which include movements toward organics, local foods, Slow Food and fair trade.[51] In China, food safety has

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[47] James L. Watson (ed.), *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

[48] Carole Counihan, 'Bread as World: Food Habits and Social Relations in Modernizing Sardinia', in Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (eds), *Food and Culture: A Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), pp.283–95.

[49] Gillette, 'Children's Food and Islamic Dietary Restrictions in Xi'an', pp.71–93.

[50] Ashley, Hollows, Jones and Taylor, *Food and Cultural Studies*, pp.187–97.

[51] Richard Wilk (ed.), *Fast Food/Slow Food: The Cultural Economy of the Global Food System* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006).

become a major concern among urban residents.[52] Shi begins his book *Vegetarianism* with the argument that the recurrence of food scares, such as the recent SARS epidemic, demonstrates the relevance of Pythagoras to contemporary China.[53]

What I am advocating here, then, is that anthropologists investigating meat avoidances incorporate explicitly comparative approaches into their research. This is comparison in search of the convergences—and also divergences— which may illuminate the specific cases at hand, not a comparative method in search of underlying principles or laws. I have in mind, on the one hand, something akin to what Fox describes as 'the study of historical transformation'.[54] Following this method, one might explore how specific vegetarianisms move through time and space, diverge and converge with one another, and take on new forms and new meanings in different contexts. On the other hand, 'vegetarianisms' with no traceable connections may also shed light on each other by virtue of operating under similar historical conditions. The two types of comparison are not really unrelated either, as a comparison of (apparently) disparate dietary practices and beliefs in contact with different spheres of a trans-national food economy, for example, could help us understand how that economy operates, what its limitations are, and how it is transformed by specific economic and cultural contexts.[55] Moreover, as we have seen, historically-distinctive practices may suddenly become articulated through social encounters or imaginings. The papers in this issue demonstrate the significance of regional, national and trans-national dimensions to the 'local' practices of vegetarianism and meat-eating they explore—be they in middle-class urban settings or 'remote', 'tribal' villages. My hunch is that with the intensification of trans-national connections, including not least a globalised food economy, a comparative perspective that addresses historical convergences and divergences will become increasingly necessary to understanding vegetarianisms and meat-eating, not just in South Asia, but also in the West, in East Asia and elsewhere.

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[52] Peter Ho and Eduard B. Vermeer, 'Food Safety Concerns and Biotechnology: Consumers' Attitudes to Genetically Modified Products in Urban China', in *AgBioForum*, Vol.7, no.4 (2004), pp.158–75.

[53] Shi Youbo, *Sushizhuyi* (*Vegetarianism*), p.2.

[54] Richard G. Fox, 'The Study of Historical Transformation in American Anthropology', in Andre Gingrich and Richard G. Fox (eds), *Anthropology, By Comparison* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp.167–84.

[55] Wilk (ed.), *Fast Food/Slow Food: The Cultural Economy of the Global Food System*. See also Fox, 'The Study of Historical Transformation in American Anthropology', pp.167–84; and Aram A. Yengoyan, 'Introduction: On the Issue of Comparison', in Aram A. Yengoyan (ed.), *Modes of Comparison: Theory and Practice* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), pp.1–27.

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