

The Significance of the Insignificant: Reconstructing the Daily Lives of the Common People of China

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IN TERMS OF subject matter and research focus, the trend in the field of modern Chinese history in the past three decades in the West might well be summarised by three Chinese idioms, each representing a major shift: *cong wai dao li* (from the outside to the inside), *cong da dao xiao* (from big to small), and *cong shang dao xia* (from top to bottom). Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, the field has moved significantly from the once dominating trend of research on the foreign impact, major diplomatic events, and big political episodes, to the pursuit of historical dynamics *inside* China. This shift has been analysed in Paul Cohen's 1984 monograph, *Discovering History in China*. Since then research has focused on socioeconomic issues and, more recently, cultural studies have been the most noticeable trend in the field. Today, most researchers seem to favour topics of a local nature (hence the "small") and, frequently, those at the grassroots level (hence the "bottom").

There are good reasons for the shifts. For the first shift, in a country as vast, complex, and rich in history as China, internal factors are obviously much more instrumental in shaping its modern fate than external forces. For the second shift, ever since G. William Skinner's call for regional studies, there has been little doubt that micro studies of space in China can yield a meticulously detailed picture and therefore may offer a glimpse of the nation as a whole.¹ As for the third shift, few would challenge the notion that human history is first of all a history of the multitudes and therefore the life of the ordinary people must be the base upon which is built an understanding of everything else in a given time and place.

But these shifts have developed unevenly. The shift "from the outside to the inside" is now irreversible and, given the decades of rigorous studies of local history, the shift to the "small" can also be seen as complete; historical studies of grassroots Chinese society have however barely started. Of course we now have a much better understanding of subjects such as popular movements, mass participation in big political events, local reactions to national upheaval, working class stratification, and so on than we did, say,

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two decades ago. Yet it seems to me that we need to carry the inquiry further — to look at how ordinary people lived through the extraordinary changes in China's modern history by examining the warp and weft of their quotidian lives.

This essay looks at a few seemingly trivial matters in what might be called the material lives of the people — ranging from daily necessities such as piped water and electricity to common food items such as cooking oil and bean products — to see how everyday things shaped people's political outlook and view of life. The daily lives of the common people may have had a greater impact on Chinese society and politics than we previously realised, and the study of this subject can lead to a vibrant sub-field, one which may provide scholars working in other fields with clues, if not answers, to major questions such as modernity and revolution in China.

The Sagas of Piped Water and Electricity

Can the use of the basic daily necessity, water, reflect the process of modernity and change of mentality of the people? Clean running water readily available in the family kitchen may seem to have unquestionable advantages over untreated water manually drawn by individual households from rivers and wells. Yet when piped water was first introduced to China, it encountered more suspicion than welcome. Aside from economic reasons for this reaction, that is, there were not enough funds to build waterworks and underground pipes to distribute the water to common households, there was cultural resistance to this progressive change.

Shanghai was the first city in China, significantly earlier than most other cities in the country, to provide piped water to its residents. For generations the Chinese in Shanghai drew water from the Huangpu River and its numerous branches for daily use. Community wells shared by neighbours also served as a primary source of water. There were also water coolies (*shuifu*) who carried barrels of water on shoulder poles or carts to neighbourhood stores and common households. The river water was far from healthy — it could even be fishy and smelly when the seasonal ocean tides backed up in the Huangpu River. For drinking water, alum was used to get rid of sediment, which was about the only treatment water received.²

¹ G. William Skinner, "Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China," 3 parts, *Journal of Asian Studies* 24, Nos. 1–3 (1964–5): 33–44; 195–228, 363–99; see also Skinner, "Introduction: Urban and Rural in Chinese Society," in *The Chinese City in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1977), pp. 211–49.

² Using the water for drinking required boiling. To this day, piped water in China is still not drinkable without boiling. For a description of water supply and public health in 19th-century Shanghai, see Kerrie L. MacPherson, *A Wilderness of Marshes: The Origins of Public Health in Shanghai, 1843–1893* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1987).

A British-owned water company was founded in 1880 and started to supply running water on 1 Aug. 1883. Chinese residents, however, for a while did not welcome this new service. People were suspicious of water that came from iron pipes buried underground, which seemed to suggest that it came from an unknown source and was therefore untrustworthy. Rumours were spread, such as the one which claimed that because the water pipes were close to gas pipes, gas might penetrate the water pipes and poison the water. There was also the superstition that there were two dragons fighting inside the pipes and hence it was unlucky to drink the water. The residents were in a way spontaneously boycotting piped water. The water company struggled to promote this obvious improvement in the supply of water. It gave free sample water to teahouses and the “tiger stoves” (a type of neighbourhood store providing hot water), hoping to reach the masses through these popular water suppliers.³ It also put out newspaper advertisements guaranteeing that the tap water was not poisoned. As people were still not convinced, the water company appealed to the British Consul General who in turn asked the Chinese government for help. Finally, the local *yamen* issued an official statement in *Shenbao* (Shanghai Daily) endorsing the safety of the water.⁴ Only then, about half a year after water was plumbed in, was the matter settled.

Shanghai residents should not be seen as particularly conservative for taking six months to adjust to this innovation. It took nearly half a century for cities in the rest of the country to consider piped water as a daily necessity. The Nanjing decade (1928–37) marked the beginning of a nation-wide effort to build waterworks in urban areas. In Jun. 1928, the Nationalist government issued “Running Water Regulations,” which called for local initiatives and fund raising in establishing waterworks at the city and county levels. In Apr. 1929, the government again issued a document calling for the establishment of waterworks nationwide and allowed local authorities to issue bonds for that purpose. But even then piped water remained in its infancy in China. Take Hangzhou for example. As late as 1930, this major Yangtze delta city located only 70 miles southwest of Shanghai, had no piped water at all. The city’s main water supply consisted of 4,842 wells that supplied more than half a million residents, meaning that an average of 20 households or 104 residents shared one well. Still, when the first waterworks opened in 1931, the government had to *mobilise* people to use piped water, i.e., it was mandatory for restaurants and teahouses located along the pipelines to use the piped water. The expansion of piped water in Hangzhou was slow. In 1950, two

³ See Lu Hanchao, “Away from Nanking Road: Small Stores and Neighborhood Life in Modern Shanghai,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 54, No.1 (Feb. 1995): 92–123.

⁴ *Shenbao* (Shanghai Daily), 15 Feb. 1884.

decades after the first service, only 1,500 households in the city were using piped water.⁵

The slow development of piped water service in China was first of all due to economic limitations. Insufficient funding for waterworks and primitive urban infrastructures were always the major obstacles facing a city wanting to build up a well-developed water system. From the consumers' point of view, water from rivers and wells had always been essentially free, but piped water had to be purchased. However, there was also cultural resistance to the innovation. A reaction to piped water in a residential neighbourhood in Chengdu in the 1950s echoed the Shanghai case of the 1880s, leaving us an intriguing trace of the diffusion of modernity in the daily lives of common people.

Up to the 1950s most households in Chengdu did not have running water. Instead, in an age-old service, men brought large pails of water from a nearby well and distributed the water to the neighbourhood. One such man was Ma Laoer, who provided water to a neighbourhood near downtown Chengdu. A stout fellow, Ma drew water daily from a well in Yuelai Alley next to Jinjiang Theatre and brought it in two pails on his shoulder pole, a burden well over a hundred pounds, to Huaxing Street. As he reached the street, he went door-to-door filling the water vat of each household, which was customarily placed in the kitchen next to the coal stove. After he had provided a household five full pails of water, he would pick up a coal cinder and write a five-stroke character, *zheng*, on the kitchen wall to signify the number of pails. This served as the bill by which he would collect his fees at the end of each month. Ma was pleased when electricity became available in the early 1950s and Huaxing Street was lit because his work hours were generally before dawn or in the evening, and the electric lights thus made his trips back and forth easier. Neighbours often saw Ma looking up at the streetlights with admiration and hearing him praise "the people's government" for bringing the "fire machine," as electricity was called at the time, to benefit the people.

But soon Ma faced another change that would affect his livelihood. Workers started to lay water pipes in Huaxing Street. Boys and girls in the neighbourhood stood by to watch the roadside construction and found it quite exciting to know that soon they would have clean piped water going directly into their homes, and that using it was just a matter of turning on the taps. But this was an omen to Ma. Wu Xiaofei, one of the neighbourhood boys, recalled that the next time he saw Ma, he was sitting at a street corner trying to sell his shoulder pole and two wooden pails. Sympathetic neighbours came over to comfort him, saying that piped water had chemical powder in it and they

⁵ Li Tong, "Hangzhou zilaishuichang chuangban qianhou" (The Establishment of Hangzhou Waterworks), *Hangzhou wenshi ziliao* (Cultural and Historical Materials on Hangzhou) No. 8 (1987): 112-9.

preferred sweet well water and still needed his service. Ma was touched by the good intentions and loyalty of his customers. In tears and with hands folded in front of his breast, he bowed to the crowd and promised to lower the price by half a penny per pail as a token of his appreciation.

Meanwhile rumours about piped water spread. One was that the “machine water,” as piped water was called, was actually from sewers, and thus needed chemicals to clean and bleach it to make it look clear. There were even rumours that drinking the machine water caused diarrhoea, sores, and skin ulcers. Naturally people were concerned and did not know what to believe. One old lady, Mrs. Zhang, even asked someone to write a letter on her behalf (since she was illiterate) to the government asking if the “machine water” was drinkable. She got a reply from the government office saying that piped water was “a great leap in civilisation” and a wonderful benefit that the communists had bestowed upon the people.

Ma knew he could not compete with this “great leap” and left the neighbourhood, carrying his old shoulder poles, but this time stuffed in the two pails were his clothes and bedding — his luggage. Except for a few old residents who, nostalgic for his many years of kind service, occasionally mentioned him, Ma was soon forgotten. His coal-cinder bills written on the kitchen walls were completely obliterated by lime wash, which was commonly painted on walls for hygiene purposes, and Ma was seen to retreat to an outlying area between the city proper and suburbs, where he continued his service.⁶ His “defence line” was moved farther and farther away from the city proper as water pipes were laid from the downtown core to the outskirts. But Ma, or more precisely, his calling, was to survive for another few decades. The modernisation of Chengdu, just as elsewhere in the nation as a whole in Mao’s era, was slow. Up to the late 1970s, most people in suburban Chengdu still used water from rivers, wells, and even rice paddy fields. As late as 1987, after much effort in building waterworks, only 47.7% of small towns in Chengdu municipality actually had piped water.⁷

The tale of piped water may reveal a theme bigger than the question of a daily supply of water. Shanghai and Chengdu are geographically thousands of miles away from each other and the events mentioned here were chronologically several decades apart. Nevertheless, the initial reaction to piped water in both places had much in common, revealing a widespread conservatism among the populace. On the other hand, that the suspicion about piped water repeated itself in Chengdu well over half a century

⁶ Zhang Xiande, *Chengdu: Jin wushi nian de siren jiyi* (Chengdu: Personal Reminiscences over the Past Fifty Years) (Chengdu: Sichuan wenyi, 1997), pp. 37–8.

⁷ *Chengdu nianjian 1988* (Chengdu Yearbook 1988) (Chengdu: Chengdu nianjianshe, 1988): 33; see also Chengdu chengsi kexue weiyuanhui (Chengdu Municipal Committee for Urban Science), ed., *Chengdushi yanjiu* (Research on Chengdu) (Chengdu: Sichuan Daxue, 1989), pp. 172–3.

after it first appeared in Shanghai well illustrates the disparity between the hinterlands and Shanghai in terms of the pace of modernity. Whatever the pace, modern facilities had a revolutionary effect once they became part of people's daily lives.

The introduction of modern lighting is another case in point. For centuries, the Chinese used soybean or rape oil for indoor lighting. For outdoor and big occasions such as so-called red (wedding) and white (funeral) events, candles were used. After the opening of Shanghai as a treaty port in 1843, the Europeans brought kerosene lighting to the city. A kerosene lamp was four to five times brighter than a vegetable oil lamp of the same size and not costly. By the 1870s, kerosene had replaced cooking oil to become the most common source of artificial lighting in Shanghai. Meanwhile, gas lighting, starting from 1865, soon became the main source of street lighting in the city, earning Shanghai the nickname, "the city without nights."⁸

These changes, however, were not without opposition. One main complaint about kerosene was that it was much more likely to cause fires than vegetable oil, and several fires were indeed caused by incidents related to kerosene lamps.⁹ For a time the Shanghai Daotai (county magistrate) Liu Ruifen officially banned kerosene lights, although it was not of much use, for people saw the obvious benefit of the device and would not go back to the old ways.¹⁰ The gas that lit up street lamps was known as "earth fire" (*dihuo*) because the gas pipes were laid underground. Since it was seen as a kind of "fire," many people believed that the streets where gas pipes were laid must be hot, and hence thick shoes were needed when walking in those areas. For a while, people made a detour around North Tibet Road where the gasworks was located, for it was believed that the surface of that road was hot. It was even rumoured that the heat transmitted from the ground into human feet had the cumulative effect of causing fatal heart disease and that Shanghai's barefooted coolies were particularly vulnerable.¹¹

Electric lighting was introduced to Shanghai in 1882, and by the 1890s had largely replaced gas lighting. At first the invention seemed beyond the people's imagination and electric shocks were described as being "hit by man-made thunders." For a while the popular unrest over electricity seemingly led to rioting and the Daotai delivered a note to the Shanghai Municipal Council asking that electric lighting be suspended. The Daotai also issued a poster prohibiting electric lamps in Chinese-run shops, saying that electricity would set houses afire and inflict bodily harm without

⁸ Xiong Yuezhi, ed., *Shanghai tongshi* (A History of Shanghai), vol. 5 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin, 1999), pp. 168–9.

⁹ *Songjiangfu xuzhi* (The Extended Gazetteer of Songjiang Prefecture), comp. Bo Run (Songjiang, 1884): *juan 5 fengsu* (customs).

¹⁰ *Shenbao*, 18 Mar. 1882.

¹¹ Chen Boxi, comp., *Lao Shanghai* (Old Shanghai) (Shanghai: Taidong shuju, 1919), p. 183.

any means of rescue.¹² But the definite advantage of electric lighting over gas lighting (especially after the cost of the former was greatly reduced by the invention of tungsten filament) not only made electric lighting win out, but also become a symbol of Western civilisation.

From kerosene to gas to electricity, things Western worked their way into the realm of daily life in China. Modern China saw numerous similar cases: machine-made textiles replacing handicraft fabrics, automobiles replacing wheelbarrows, matches replacing flints, cigarettes replacing pipe tobacco, the Gregorian calendar replacing the lunar almanac, photographs replacing drawings, and so on. Changes in hairstyle and attire in the 20th century were another domain where the Chinese altered their lifestyle significantly in line with their image of Westerners. As a historian pointed out, Western material presence in China “was not as intimidating as a cannon, but it was more powerful than a cannon. It did not infect people’s thinking as much as an ideology, but spread wider than ideology into everyone’s life.”¹³ The ubiquitous material culture that originated in the West affected people’s thinking and contributed to the widespread social mood in China known as “worshipping things foreign” (*chongyang*), which has intermittently but consistently, lasted for more than a century since the late 19th century. How such a general mood could coexist (and sometimes even be compatible) with the spirit of anti-imperialism as well as, occasionally, xenophobia, is a question yet to be answered. But any attempt to pursue this inquiry cannot be made without exploring the daily lives of the common people.

‘To See the Political Situation through the Bamboo Food Basket’

The extraordinary reign of turmoil and catastrophe in 20th-century China made the issue of subsistence the outstanding theme in the lives of the common people. In that sense, popular culture in China is first of all culture that reflects the ways ordinary people cope with the demands of daily life. These include how people overcome various kinds of hardship, maximise the use of available materials, deal with political pressures, seek joy in adversity, etc.

Many of the typical topics in the study of popular culture, such as dramas, movies, cartoons, newspapers, etc., may not be sufficiently closely related to the daily lives of the common people to be truly “popular.” Take an ordinary factory worker’s family in Republican Shanghai as an example: household spending on the category of “culture” was extremely limited. An average worker’s family in the late 1920s spent only 0.3%

¹² Hu Xianghan, *Shanghai xiaozhi* (Minor Records of Shanghai) (1930; reprint, Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1989), p. 18.

¹³ Chen Xulu, *Chen Xulu wenji* (Collected works of Chen Xulu), vol. 1 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin, 1997), p. 371.

of its income on entertainment, which included going to the theatre and movies.¹⁴ A 1929–30 survey of 305 worker’s families in Shanghai found that only 16 families spent any money on newspapers. Though these families occasionally purchased a newspaper, none had a regular subscription. The average total amount of “education expenses” per family per year, which included tuition, books, newspapers, and stationery, was 1.45 silver dollars, less than the cost of a month’s subscription to a newspaper at that time.¹⁵ These workers’ families were by no means on the lowest rung of the social ladder. Many lived in the city’s lower middle class neighbourhoods and may well have been average Shanghai families. Overall, the Shanghai workers had a higher standard of living than their counterparts in other Chinese cities.¹⁶ Furthermore, if we add the fact that most of China’s rural population had a still lower standard of living, we can imagine the cultural expenses of ordinary families in other parts of China.

Actually, the most important types of popular culture for the majority of the “everyday people” were not very “cultural,” for they were plainly unadorned and merely related to the daily necessities for maintaining subsistence. But they were truly “popular” and were unquestionably part — perhaps the fundamental part — of the nation’s culture. The following account aims to dissect another part of 20th-century Chinese culture by taking a close look at an even more basic realm of life — food.

Food, of course, is by far the most important necessity of daily life. The age-old Chinese saying “people see food as heaven” (*min yi shi wei tian*) reflects the vital importance of food in the formation of people’s political faith. During the Cultural Revolution years when any human desire could be labelled as bourgeois and therefore reactionary, this ancient adage was attributed to Mao to lend it legitimacy.¹⁷ Another popular saying, which is a bit vulgar in Chinese but extremely common, conveys basically the same idea: “Whoever has milk is the mother” (*younai bianshi niang*). Feeding the population has constantly been the primary task of the Chinese government, irrespective of the historical period. Likewise, from the viewpoint of the people, the first criterion for judging the performance of a regime was whether it fed hungry mouths. In much of the PRC period, despite the fanaticism and ideological zeal generated by innumerable political campaigns and overheated propaganda, conventional wisdom usually remained calm and realistic.

¹⁴ Yang Ximeng, *Shanghai gongren shenghuo chengdu de yige yanjiu* (A Study of the Standard of Living of Shanghai Labourers) (Beiping [Beijing]: Shehui diaochasuo, 1930), p. 84.

¹⁵ Bureau of Social Affairs, *Standard of Living of Shanghai Laborers*, comp. the City Government of Greater Shanghai (Shanghai: Chung Hwa, 1934), pp. 158–9.

¹⁶ Lu Hanchao, *Beyond the Neon Lights: Everyday Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 63–4, 275.

¹⁷ See Zhe Yongping, ed., *Nage niandai zhong de women* (We in That Age), vol. 1 (Huhhot: Yuanfang chubanshe, 1998), p. 344.

“To see the [political] situation through the bamboo food basket” (*cai lanzi li kan xingshi*),¹⁸ as a popular saying goes, reflects a down-to-earth sensibility and a realistic attitude toward politics behind artificially inflated political zeal.

One of the most frequently used pieces of propaganda in the PRC (especially during Mao’s time) was to tell the people that “the situation is great, and it is getting greater and greater” (*xingshi da hao, yue lai yue hao*). However, at the time when virtually all basic daily necessities were strictly rationed — many items were rationed at a level below subsistence — such propaganda about the nation’s “great situation” was no more than feeble political jargon, as one outspoken person uttered honestly: “To see whether the situation is good or not, I do not judge — as I won’t be able to judge — from anything other than the situation of my stomach. If my stomach is full, then the situation is great (*da hao*), otherwise, the situation is no good (*bu hao*).”¹⁹ In the campaign of “Giving Your Heart to the Party” (*xiang Dang jiao xin*, i.e., to tell one’s heartfelt feelings to the Party), one old teacher in Tianjin Number One High School was frank enough to say: “After Liberation, we as intellectuals are often told there has been a great improvement in our lives. However, this is not what I feel. Before the New Year, I went to a tofu store to buy the monthly tofu ration. I stayed in the line for two hours for only six cuts of tofu”²⁰

The popularity of tofu earned this food both a magnified name, China’s “national dish” (*guocai*) and a name matching its reality, China’s “flora meat” (*zhiwurou*).²¹ When such a common food — and bean products in general — became so scarce under rationing, political discontent naturally followed. In the late 1950s, a children’s folk rhyme based on a conversation between grandparents and grandchildren could often be heard in the streets of Harbin:

Grandma asks: “What are you eating?”

“Steam rice with stir-fry bean sprouts.”

Grandpa asks: “Are they delicious?”

“[Having such a meal] once in half a month, how can it not be delicious?”²²

¹⁸ See Wang Dechun, *Airen, tongzhi: dalu suci quanshi* (Lover, Comrade: Annotations on the Common Sayings in the Mainland) (Taipei: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1990), pp. 61–3.

¹⁹ *Piaozheng jiushi* (Ration Coupon Reminiscences), comp. Xue Yanwen and Wang Tongli (Tianjin: Baihua wenyi, 1999), p. 11.

²⁰ *Piaozheng jiushi*, pp. 10–1.

²¹ Pan Jiangdong, *Zhongguo canyinye zushiye yanjiu* (Research on the Origins of Chinese Cuisines) (Taipei: Yangzhi wenhua, 1999), p. 152.

²² From Liang Xiaosheng, *Liang Xiaosheng huati* (Liang Xiaosheng’s Talking Topics) (Beijing: Jiuzhou tushu chubanshe, 1998), p. 133; Tong Zongsheng and Chen Erjing, eds., *Mingren xuezhe yi muqin* (Celebrities and Scholars Recalling their Mothers) (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin chubanshe, 1991), pp. 229–34.

This ditty expressed an appreciation of food, but could also be seen as a roundabout way of describing the lack of food in the fertile Manchurian plain where Harbin is located. Steam rice was a twice-per-month delicacy, implying that the staple food the rest of the time was perhaps coarse food grains such as maize and millet or “wet food” such as gruel. Accompanying steamed rice (*fan*), Chinese daily dishes (*cai*) such as bean sprouts (mainly soybean and green bean sprouts) were as common as tomatoes or lettuces in a sandwich or hamburger in the Western food tradition. In Sichuan, for example, there were commonly two types of stir-fry bean sprouts: one, deep fried with soy source; the other, quick fried with a pinch of salt and a few drops of hot oil. Both needed little seasoning.²³ In Shanghai, bean sprouts of any kind were part of what might be called working class food. Bean and bean products were also the common daily food for peasants. The writer Han Zi recalled that in her hometown, Liyang, Jiangsu, bean curd and all kinds of bean products were the most common snacks.²⁴ If bean sprouts were seen as a special treat in Manchuria, which was China’s major bean growing area, the rest of the story tells itself.

Another folk song about food in Shanghai had a clearer political message, because it was adapted from a song for mass mobilisation during the “Resist America and Aid Korea” campaign of the early 1950s. The musical composition remained the same, but the words were changed. The original song began:

Whenever my motherland needs me,
I pick up a rifle.
And rush onto the Yalu River.
Let’s defend our country and our homeland...

In a humorous way the adapted rhyme went:

Whenever I am starving,
I pick up a pair of chopsticks
And rush into the kitchen.
Let’s see what we have today.
Oh. Again, green cabbage stir-fried with beancurd.
How can I eat rice with dishes like these?²⁵

Since this rhyme was adapted from a song of “patriotism and internationalism,” it was regarded as “reactionary” although it occasioned no serious political trouble at the time.

²³ Tang Zhenchang, *Zhongguo yinshi wenhua sanlun* (Essays on Chinese Food Culture) (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu, 1999), p. 55.

²⁴ Han Zi, “Kanxi” (Watching Theatres), *Xinhua ribao* (New China Daily), 19 Jul. 1981.

²⁵ Lu, *Beyond the Neon Lights*, p. 270.

In fact, changing the words of a revolutionary song and adapting it (that is, keeping the original music) to a popular ditty or rhyme was part of Chinese popular culture even during the radical Cultural Revolution era. Such practice reflected the wit and sense of humour of the common people, and in a way gave vent to political complaints that otherwise could not easily have found an outlet. In Wuhan, for instance, one of the most popular songs during the Cultural Revolution, “I Love the Blue Sky of My Motherland,” which originally had lyrics supposedly sung by a pilot of the People’s Liberation Army, was adapted as a sort of home-loving rhyme that expressed nostalgia about a local food: hot-dry noodle. These are the original lyrics:

I love the blue sky of my motherland:
 Brilliant sunshine and endless serene air,
 The white clouds pave a thoroughfare,
 And the east winds send me flying forward.
 The golden sun is dancing and waving to me on my side,
 Underneath my feet there is the beautiful and flourishing land.
 Ah... ah...
 Seamen love oceans, cavalymen love grasslands,
 If you ask what a pilot loves —
 I love the blue sky of my motherland!²⁶

The adapted song was full of ridicule and its focus was food:

I love Wuhan’s hot-dry noodles:
 Ten cents and two *liang* of grain coupon [for a bowl].
 The dumplings of the Four Seasons [Restaurant] are juicy and delicious,
 The bean curd of the Old Town [Restaurant] is delicious and juicy.
 The Wangs’ sesame cakes are big and round:
 One bite takes away one side.
 Ah... ah...
 The Henan people love lice, the Hunan people love hot peppers,
 If you ask what a Wuhan person loves —
 I love Wuhan’s hot-dry noodles!²⁷

What were Wuhan’s hot-dry noodles? According to an oral tradition, they were invented in the 1930s by a peddler nicknamed “Lump Li.” His given name seems to have been forgotten, and the nickname was bestowed due to a big wart on his neck.

²⁶ *Tong yi shou ge* (The Song We Shared), comp. Meng Xin and Feng Xuemin, vol. 1 (Beijing: Xiandai, 2000), pp. 154–6.

²⁷ Fang Fang, *Wuhanren* (Wuhan People) (Hangzhou: Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe, 1997), p. 42.

Lump Li lived in Hankou near the Temple of Guandi on Changdi (literally, long dyke) Street. Everyday he carried his bamboo shoulder pole and a drum-shaped rattle selling noodle soup and bean jelly. One hot and humid summer day business was slow, and by sunset Lump Li still had a bundle of fresh noodles. Worried that they would spoil overnight in such weather, he boiled them for a few minutes, quickly took them out and dried them on a kneading board, which was a common way of preserving food at the time when refrigeration was not available. As he spread the noodles on the board, he accidentally knocked a bottle of sesame oil onto the board. Frustrated and also not wanting to waste the precious sesame oil, he simply mixed the noodles with the oil and then dried them on the board overnight. The next day, instead of serving noodle soup, he put the sesame oil-soaked noodles in boiling water for a few seconds, scooped them out, added a spoonful of sesame paste, and served them with minced spices: ginger, green onions, hot peppers, and preserved vegetables.

To Lump Li's surprise, his customers were impressed by this little invention. Gobbling down bowls of the noodles at the roadside stall, they asked him the name of this new dish. Never anticipating that his accidental product would be such a hit, he quickly fabricated a name on the spot: "Well, this is called 'hot-dry noodles' (*reganmian*)."²⁸

As one can see, making hot-dry noodles needs plenty of sesame oil, which during Mao's era was a luxury. In most cities, sesame oil was rationed only for the Chinese New Year and the amount allocated was only about 0.5–1 *liang* (1 *liang* = 1.76 oz) per person or 5 *liang* per household, depending on the locality. Not actually a daily necessity, the more serious problem was the general scarcity of cooking oil nationwide. The noted writer Zhang Xianliang, who spent two decades after 1957 in a state-run farm in northwestern China, recalled his experience in a satirical tone that does not mask his sadness:

The disaster of the nation was deep and grave. Then, what were China's conscience and backbone — the intellectuals — doing? At that time, every two months the farm only allocated one *liang* (which was a sixteenth of *jin*) [1.1 oz] of cooking oil per person. Please think of this: if you were a single person, what kind of container would you use for an amount of cooking oil that is less than a mouthful of saliva? And, how could you manage to have the oil evenly used in your daily cooking for sixty days? I bet this is beyond your imagination. But I, a person with great wisdom, quickly found a solution: an eye drop bottle! This way, I could squeeze a drop of cooking oil not only everyday, but even for every meal. The invention spread quickly to the whole farm — the only pity was that no one had such concept as intellectual property at that time. Yes, this was where the Chinese intellectuals used their

²⁸ Fang, *Wuhanren*, pp. 43–5; Tang, *Zhongguo yinshi wenhua sanlun*, p. 61.

wisdom and intelligence. And, yes, this is an important reason why up to this day the overall national intelligence level of China still lags behind that of the developed nations.²⁹

An accumulation of such sentiments can be explosive when the time is ripe, and consequently they can be decisive in making history. The success of Deng Xiaoping's reforms in the 1980s was rooted in the overwhelming popular support for his renowned pragmatism. Such support was in a way an explosion of the discontent and frustration accumulated in daily life during Mao's "ration coupon age." Many factors contributed to the success or failure of the major reforms in 20th-century China. Ultimately, however, the fate of a particular reform depended on whether or not it managed to address livelihood issues.³⁰ The Communists well understood this and even Mao, who tended to emphasise the vital importance of ideology and spirit over material life, was aware of the weight of daily necessities in politics. Indeed, the Lushan Conference in 1959, which is now well known for its purge of Marshal Peng Dehuai, was at the beginning designated to correct some of the radical excesses of the Great Leap Forward. According to the senior communist leader Bo Yibo, at the meeting Mao told his colleagues: "These five words, 'clothing' (*yi*), 'food' (*shi*), 'housing' (*zhu*), 'articles for daily use' (*yong*), and 'transportation' (*xing*) are the great issues relating to the stability of 650 million people."³¹ Unexpectedly, Peng Dehuai's personal letter to Mao, which contained some negative assessments of the Great Leap Forward, enraged Mao who then transformed the meeting into a political purge. This marked a major left-turn in the policy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that eventually led to the disastrous Cultural Revolution.³²

²⁹ Zhang Xianliang, *Xiaoshuo Zhongguo ji qita* (Novelistic China and Others) (Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 1999), p. 320; *Piaozheng jishu*, p. 51. The standard *liang* equals 50 grams in China, but some hinterland regions might still use the old weight system in which one *liang* is a sixteenth of 500 grams.

³⁰ For example, the failure of the Qing reform in the early 20th century was largely due to the elite nature of the reforms and their failure to respond to ordinary people's concerns about their basic livelihood. This caused deep and widespread discontent among the masses and eventually contributed to the downfall of the Qing regime. See Joseph W. Esherick, *Reform and Revolution in China: The 1911 Revolution in Hunan and Hubei* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 117–23.

³¹ Bo Yibo, *Ruogan zhongda jueyi yu shijian de huigu* (Some Major Resolutions and Events in Retrospect), 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe, 1993), vol. 2: 848–9.

³² For an account on the Lushan Conference see Roderick MacFarquhar's *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution vol. 2* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), ch. 10.

Periodically, in more pragmatic political interludes, the authorities had tried to respond to the real concerns of the people and had launched some programmes under the broad umbrella known as “Doing A Few Real Things for the People.” One of the programmes concerning “real things” was called the “Bamboo Food Basket Project” (*cailanzi gongcheng*), which aimed to improve food supplies in the cities.³³ When Li Ruihuan was the mayor of Tianjin, he explicitly pointed out that China’s “four-modernisation” programme could be achieved only by the people’s great enthusiasm for it, and people would have such enthusiasm only when their daily lives benefited from the reforms. In particular, as he asserted in a public speech, the government should never expect to build a prosperous nation by “tightening ordinary people’s belts and squeezing their gums.”³⁴ To Li, asking the people to tolerate food shortages for a promised future is a classic example of why government policy in the PRC repeatedly failed and was potentially dangerous. This mayor (and later Vice Premier, Member of the Standing Committee of the CCP Political Bureau, and National Chair of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference), who rose from being an obscure carpenter, surely knew the lives of the ordinary people. Disconsolate tales about the “bamboo food basket” may reveal some themes not easily seen in political headlines, and accumulation of them could eventually create the forces that make headlines.

Conclusion

Studies of the lives of the common people are essential to our understanding of China and Chinese history. Such studies are, to apply a metaphor, the bricks of a building. Without them there is simply no structure at all. We need a kiln to produce better bricks for building Chinese history, and reconstructing the daily lives of the common people in China may well be the kiln.

Stories surrounding the material lives of ordinary people may also reflect popular mentality. There is an “ideology of the everyday people” that is far richer and more complicated than is usually thought. There were (and still are) many “personal voices” to be recorded and researched.³⁵ For example, how did ordinary people cope with the big ideological changes that so frequently affected their lives? What were their true thoughts about the communist revolution? What was their view of China’s position in the modern world? In an interview given immediately after the hand-over of Hong Kong, a stevedore

³³ *Shanghai chengshi shehui jingji diaocha baogaoji, 1990* (Reports on the Social and Economic Conditions of Shanghai, 1990), comp. Shanghai shi chengshi shehui jingji diaochaui (Team for Investigating Social and Economic Conditions of Shanghai) (Shanghai, restricted publication), p. 59.

³⁴ Li Ruihuan, *Chengshi jianshe suitan* (Speeches on Urban Reconstruction), 2 vols. (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1996), vol. 1: 51.

³⁵ To borrow the title of Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter’s book, *Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980s* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

told me that he thought Jiang Zemin was humbling himself by going to Hong Kong to attend the hand-over ceremony. “In my view,” the 65-year-old worker said with a sense of righteousness, “the ceremony should have been held in Beijing. Let the British come to our capital to hand back what they robbed. Or at least Nanjing, where the initial treaty was signed.”³⁶ Should we hear more of this kind of voice at the grassroots level that may form the base of, in this case, Chinese nationalism? Is this kind of national pride a continuation of the age-old “great China” mentality or just a reaction to the current trend of “worshipping things foreign”? Is this kind of resentment the expression of real and strong national identity or a self-imposed psychological link with an “imagined nation”?³⁷ Finding the answers will require us to go beyond the familiar haunts of library and archival research to field studies. Sociological surveys and interviews and anthropological on-the-spot observations and investigations are imperative for historians of recent Chinese history.³⁸

Studies of the lives of common people can also be a place where social history and cultural studies meet. Much of the discussion in this essay is clearly within the realm of social or socioeconomic history. Yet subjects such as these should also be seen as legitimate topics in the domain of cultural history, if we could but break up the general assumption that cultural history is largely about high culture and intellectual history, or is literati-oriented, as well as the familiar notion that popular culture is mainly about entertainment, popular literature, and leisure activities. The phrase “sociocultural history,” although seldom used in the English-speaking world, should be brought in to guide vigorous studies of the lives of common people, as well as to provide an appropriate way to convey the nature of this still relatively unfamiliar field.³⁹

³⁶ Interview with Chen Fude, 4 Jul. 1997, Shanghai.

³⁷ Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 7–8.

³⁸ For example, if a Hong Kong-based interview project conducted in the late 1970s could produce a detailed and insightful account of Chinese lives such as B. Michael Frolic’s *Mao’s People*, given today’s much improved research environment, one certainly could expect more from other scholars’ fieldwork.

³⁹ “Sociocultural” is not a newly-coined term. According to *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, the phrase passed into written English no later than 1928. It is noteworthy that the expression “sociocultural history” (*shehui wenhua shi*) has been commonly used in Chinese academia. For a recent discussion of the concept of “sociocultural history,” see Liu Zhiqin’s “Introduction” to a three-volume study of modern Chinese sociocultural history. For a discussion on the current trends of culture and social history in the China field, see Joseph W. Esherick, “Putting the Social (and Economic, and Political) Back into Twentieth-Century Chinese History” (paper presented at the UCLA conference “In Search for Alternative Theories and Concepts for Chinese History,” 8 May 1999); the Chinese version of the paper is published in *Zhongguo xueshu* (China Scholarship) 1, No. 1 (Jan. 2000): 201–15.