

“Cultural China” and the Specter of Revolution

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Abstract

This article examines the 2012 television documentary *A Bite of China* that not only became an instant hit domestically but also gained an international audience, which made it inside mainland Chinese academia an oft-cited success example of China's global media expansion effort. Analysis reveals the extent to which the show obscures or even erases some most essential elements that make up the People's Republic of China, especially in the mapping up of the country that excludes those provinces the most closely related to the revolutionary era leading up to the establishment of the PRC. Instead, the documentary offers a “cultural China” in which the non-PRC parts of “Greater China” take precedence. The show reflects the ideology of modernization in the neoliberal vein that propelled the very enterprise of Reform and Opening-up whose premise was the negation of radical communist and socialist revolution, which culminated in the second half of the Hu Jintao administration. The past of revolution dies hard, however, and resurfaces in the show in a discreet way, presaging its comeback in a near future.

Keywords: Cultural China, food, history, ideology, revolution.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2012, a television documentary, *A Bite of China* (*shejian shangde zhonguo*), meaning literally “China on the tip of the tongue”, took China by storm. First aired on three channels of China Central Television (CCTV), the country's biggest public television station, in May 2012, the show was then put on the station's website for free downloading and viewing, as well as on numerous internet venues accessible from mobile outlets, which maximized its audience reach.

Apparently the seven-episode program is a food documentary that covers most parts of China to showcase local cuisine specialties. The focus on gastronomy inscribes the show in a cultural approach. The display of inherited artisanal food processing methods seemed to have therapeutic effects, alleviating popular anxiety over food hygiene and safety, as well as responding to a middle-class taste for “quality life”. Its success, however, is not to be explained by the Chinese people's world-famous love for food alone. The syntax of the Chinese language with the epithet “on the tip of the tongue” in front of the central noun “China” makes the title, and by extension the show, a definition of China, revealing the ambition of going beyond appeal

to the viewers' palates. Effectively, in internet discussions, on web forums and personal blogs among both the mainland and overseas Chinese communities, people claim how the show “makes one's tears and saliva run at the same time”, arousing “national pride” and “patriotic sentiments”. It is no exaggeration to say that the show played a role of rallying cry to give the Hu Jintao administration a boost at its up-coming closure [1].

Such a media tour de force was not produced by the “state propaganda apparatus”, as some would conclude too quickly. In matter of fact, since the policy of separation of production and broadcasting of television programs went into effect in 2003, cultural production in general and media production in particular have become basically autonomous, market-driven activities in China. At the same time, of course it is undeniable that political, economic and cultural elites converged to promote an ideological hegemony that both shaped and catered to the hearts and minds of the masses. In this sense, *A Bite of China* (abbreviated as *Bite* for the rest of the article) deserves to be taken seriously for its ideological function: brainchild and fruit of labor of a middle-aged team of producers, photographers and editors, the show gained the endorsement of the state, and was highly appraised by

the Chinese academia as a successful representation of China's "soft power". We should therefore examine what kind of "China" the show offers, in order to understand the way in which the Chinese elite under the Hu Jintao administration conceived for a domestically and globally "sellable" China.

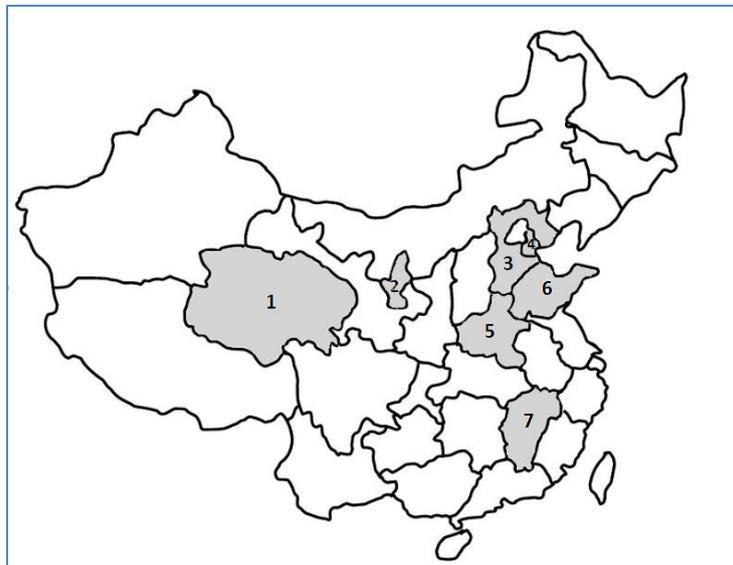
Anyone conscious about China's status at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century — rapidly becoming the world's second largest economy and first industrial power — would not miss the strange feeling of ahistoricity in *Bite*'s portrayal of an idyllic, folkloric and innocuous China. On the surface it could be explained as a tentative to counter the noises of a "China threat" with the image of a non-aggressive, life-loving and self-absorbed culture. But deep down it betrays the elite's unconscious, which longed for an "essential Chineseness" that is perennial and cyclical, always able to survive devastations and catastrophes through history. This article's reading of *Bite* reveals that in the eyes of the cultural elite who masterminded the show, the unfortunate vicissitudes are none other than the revolutionary turmoil which gave birth to the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the ensuing socialist enterprise. *Bite* constructs a "China" with the PRC hollowed out through a mapping up of the country that excludes those provinces the most closely related to the revolutionary era. The "Cultural China" the show constructs gives primary attention to Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, that is, those places that form the so called "Greater China" alongside the PRC. At the show's presumed climax, however, in the mouth of a Beijing inhabitant, a

Cultural Revolution era folk art song laudatory about Chairman Mao and the Chinese revolution escaped the creators' notice to make its way into the show. Such an incident not only deconstructs, so to speak, the show's previous efforts but more importantly manifests the contemporary Chinese population's attitude vis-à-vis the revolutionary past that is far more complex than the elite's wishful thinking would have it. The article draws the conclusion that there is popular basis for drastic changes in ideology with the power transition to the next administration.

Farewell to Revolution

To the extent that *Bite* has the ambition to cover as much as possible the diverse aspects of food in China, and does manage to cover most of the country's vast geographic territory and multi-ethnic population, what is not included in the final version of the show should get our attention. In other words, the problem of selectivity begs for interpretation, because we have every reason to believe that it is not left to chance.

Each time a place appears in the show, the voice-over gives information of the location in a clear way, making data collection rather easy. Among a totality of 34 provincial-level administrative units of China [2], 7 have no places as field work destination in the show, numbered and marked in light shadow in Map 1: 5 provinces — Hebei (3), Henan (5), Jiangxi (7), Qinghai (1) and Shandong (6); one autonomous region, Ningxia (2), and one direct-controlled municipality, Tianjin (4). Their absence calls for explanation.



Map 1

Ningxia's small size may be advanced as a reason. Also, the province's majority population, the Hui, a Muslim people, is amply treated in other episodes of the show. As for Qinghai province, sparsely populated and adjacent to Xizang (Tibet) to form the *qingzang gaoyuan* (Tibet Plateau), in the eyes of the

show's creators it could be too similar to the former to be treated separately.

To find rationales for the other absentees is harder task. It is certainly not lack of culinary specialties that would have disqualified them in a TV

show on food: Shandong is home to the Lu cuisine, one of the eight major cuisines of the nation, whereas Tianjin boasts of the internationally reputed snack *jianbing guozi*, deep-fried dough sticks rolled in a thin pancake, for instance. To visualize these places on a map makes it all the more striking when one realizes that, in fact, the entire Henan province and parts of Hebei and Shandong form the region habitually referred to as the “central area” (*zhongyuan*), that is, the very core of China (*zhongguo*). In the South, Jiangxi’s blatant absence seems perplexing too. What is going on, then? Do they have something in common that could have singled them out? The answer is yes. These locations played key roles at crucial historical moments along the revolutionary process under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) up to the establishment of the PRC.

It was in Nanchang, capital city of Jiangxi, that the CPC led an uprising to fire “the very first gunshot against the Kuomintang (KMT) reactionaries” in August 1927. In the province’s Jinggang Mountains, Mao Zedong and his comrades created the first base of peasant armed forces, whose military practice from October 1927 to February 1930 inspired the uniquely Chinese theory of “using the rural areas to encircle the cities”. The heartland area spreading over provinces Hebei, Henan and Shandong, collectively abbreviated as *jiluyu*, was the theater of CPC-led Anti-Japanese efforts (*kangri genjudi*) from 1938 to 1945 in World War II. Tianjin reminds the Pingjin campaign, which took place from November 1948 to January 1949, one of the “three great campaigns” (*sanda zhanyi*) of the Chinese civil war, wherein the victories of the CPC-led People’s Liberation Army (PLA) guaranteed the definitive overthrow of the KMT regime and the birth of the PRC.

A logical conclusion comes out of this observation: the “cultural China” that *Bite* conceives is by definition a China purged of some most protruding elements of the communist revolution. Such an attitude is very much in line with the image that the elite of the reform China strives to invent for the country. While their elders, ardent adepts of the ideology of modernization [3], started Reform and Opening-up at the end of the 1970s when socialism had gone awry worldwide while capitalism taking a neoliberal turn, the show’s creators, Chen Xiaoping (1965-) and others, belong to the generation born in the second half of the 1960s who grew up in the 1980s when the Chinese intelligentsia’s mindset was quite in sync with the Cold War anticommunist Zeitgeist. If the political elite and the knowledge elite, both exasperated by the PRC’s “backwardness” compared to the Western world’s “advance”, shared the spirit so adequately captured in the title of a volume accounting for the revisionist, anticlimactic commemoration of the bicentennial of the French Revolution — “Farewell, Revolution” [4], the former initiated reform on negation of radical mass

movements such as the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) now looked upon with a mixture of repentance, disgust, and shame, whereas the latter rejected revolution tout court, equaling the nation’s communist, and by extension, socialist past, to “premodern” peasant revolt cycle that led to dynasty change, that is, nothing but a prolongation of China’s multi-millenary “feudal” era. With hindsight one realizes that the PRC effectively occupied a vanguard position in the final stage of the Cold War: spearheaded by the 1986 student protest, a complex, broad-spectrum social movement broke out in 1989 which, at its most radicalized moment, attempted to challenge the CPC’s status of reigning party, whose legitimacy was born out of revolution, and the movement’s denouement, the June Fourth incident, took place *before* the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

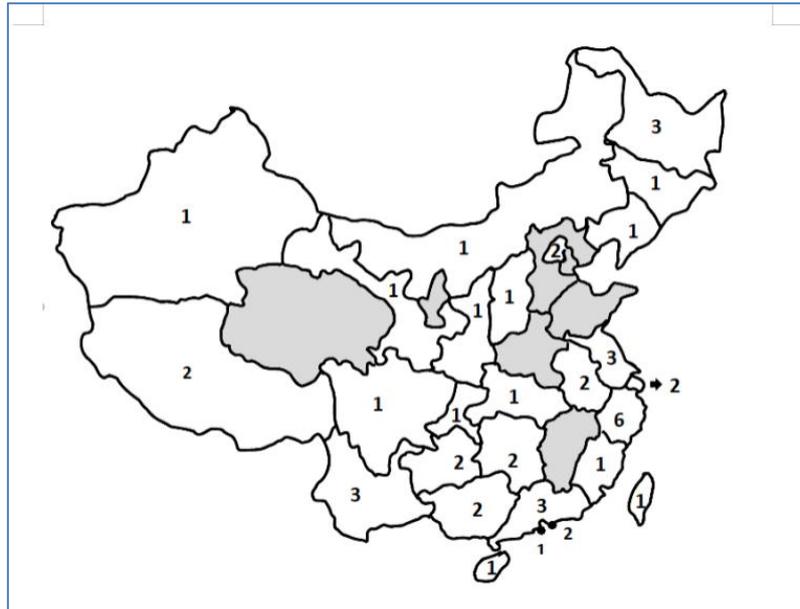
Having weathered major domestic and international crises, the PRC, “victorious loser” of the Cold War embarked on a new phase of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” which prioritized economic development while being lax on the ideological front, given that the nation was by no means equipped to resist the jingoism of the “end of history”. Quite the contrary was true. There was a consensus among a considerable part of the elites that the communist revolution was an aberration, a mistake of history, that China would have been much better off if it had not gone through the revolutionary process. The Jiang Zemin and the Hu Jintao administrations witnessed the ascendancy of neoliberalism until it reigned supreme among the majority of the political, knowledge and cultural elites [5]. With access to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, the PRC finally “joined the world’s mainstream”, benefiting from an upward curve of neoliberal globalization. Time was not propitious for the Chinese elites to modify their “unsophisticated vision of history”. There came, then, an utmost irony: the more prosperous China became, the more the elites got entrenched in their conviction that the country had gone through a huge wasteful detour, the more contemptuous their attitude towards the PRC. In the second half of the Hu-Wen era, more and more individuals of Chen Xiaoping’s generation, who made their first appearance in history as student leaders and participants of the 1989 event, came to key positions in all four domains composing the elite group — government, media, industry and academia (*guan, mei, chan, xue*) [6]. It therefore should not surprise that their aversion for revolution would manifest itself in *Bite*, as we will see further.

“Cultural China”

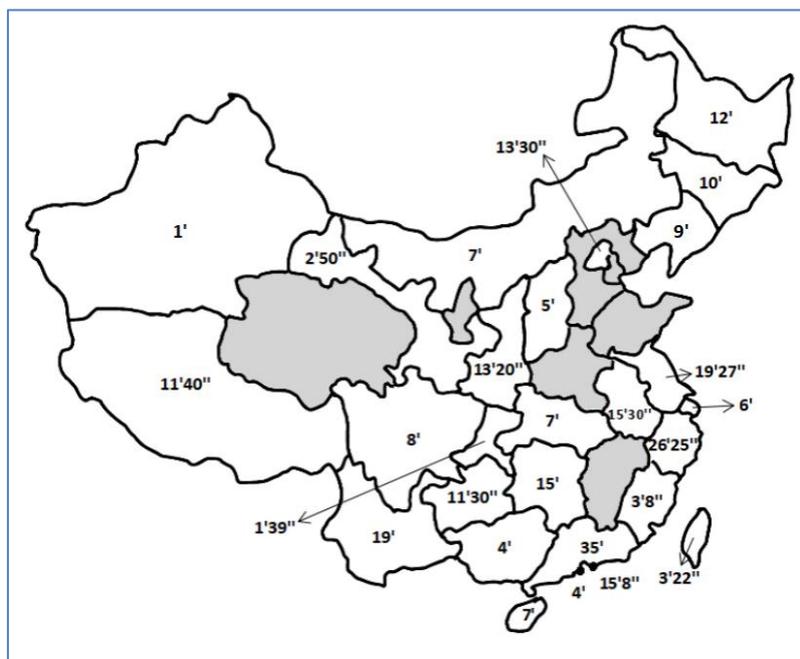
Produced by a self-appointed world elite looking condescendingly from their complacent vantage point, the show *Bite* performs a turning away from North-centered socialist China. Now we need to examine what it offers as worthy of a “cultural China” it

sets out to define. Map 2 registers the number of episodes in which each administrative unit features. Map 3 records the footage time amount each unit totals in all seven episodes. In terms of episode featuring, Zhejiang leads with 6 out of 7 episodes, while Guangdong comes up in the first place for footage time with 35 minutes in total. Again, the preeminence of these two provinces finds explanation when one turns to the domain of ideology, as both carry symbolic meanings in the show's effort to devalue the PRC. Home base of highly ranked KMT officials including Chiang Kai-Shik, the province of Zhejiang evocates

KMT, the CPC's archenemy, diametric "Other", who fled to the island of Taiwan after being defeated in the civil war. In the eyes of mainland Chinese elite, Taiwan ended up the winner of the competition across the Strait between socialism and capitalism, its trajectory of economic takeoff followed by political democratization was on "the right side of History" and showed the way to go for the PRC. As for the province of Guangdong, the place where experiments on reform and opening-up started off, it has already proceeded in the right direction, leading the race toward prosperity with the nation's highest GDP growth rate.



Map 2



Map 3

But of course, the towering figure, the most representative image of what the “real China” would have become had it not opted for communist revolution, is this special enclave, Hong Kong. Featuring in 2 episodes, it gets 15 minutes of total coverage time, surpassing most provinces in the show. This treatment, disproportional to its geographical scale and population size, reflects Hong Kong’s special status in the hearts and minds of the PRC mainlanders, elites and masses alike. Ceded to the United Kingdom in 1842 after the first Opium War, Hong Kong parted way with the rest of China, therefore perfectly missed the hundred-year experience on the mainland that led to the PRC’s birth. Ever since the latter started the Reform and Opening-up, Hong Kong served as a model to emulate: a “modern” society par excellence, “the freest economy” in the world, one of the most prestigious metropolises on earth. With admiration, pride and envy the mainlanders looked at Hong Kong, which represented for them the zenith of what an ethnic Chinese people could achieve in terms of Western modernization. On December 19, 1994, a huge digital countdown clock was installed in Tiananmen Square to display the passing of 79,879,701 seconds towards the PRC’s recovering of sovereignty over Hong Kong that was to begin on July 1, 1997. Such a gesture subjected “Beijing time” to “Hong Kong time”, aligning the PRC’s political heartbeat to that of Hong Kong handover, and marked the PRC’s transition to a neoliberal state [7].

Similar to the case of Hong Kong but to a lesser degree, special attention is bestowed on Macao and Taiwan, the other two “long-lost children” that either has already returned or is expected to return “back into the mother country’s embrace” in the mainland rhetoric. Together they constitute the non-PRC part of the so-called “Greater China”, that the mainlanders, especially the PRC intellectuals, are so unilaterally enamored of. Why does *Bite* think these places are representative of a “cultural China”? The answer still resides in the ideological field. For the mainland elites including *Bite*’s makers, one can only find an impoverished version of “Chinese culture” in the PRC today, where true “Chineseness” was damaged beyond repair because of the communist and socialist revolution. On the other hand, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan had the good fortune to have stayed away from revolutionary turbulence; therefore they preserved the essence of the “Chinese culture”, while at the same time getting “modernized” in the Western, that is, “universal” way. So much so that in *Bite*’s conception of a “cultural China”, Hong Kong qualifies, Macao qualifies, Taiwan qualifies; next to them the PRC pales as a less real, less true, less authentic China, waiting to be retransformed by the non-PRC components of “Greater China”.

The devaluation of the PRC does not stop here in the show, but goes further to favor the Chinese

diaspora over the indigenous. Among all the characters that feature in *Bite* there seems to exist a hierarchy in which the inhabitants on the mainland occupy the lower rungs. Episode after episode the viewer encounters peasants, city dwellers, migrant workers, little merchants, whose food-relative activities are mundane, down-to-earth. They pick, plant, cook to survive, to make a living. By contrast, every time the calling of “chef” appears, it befalls someone that is not a normal mainland. Episode 5 features an “internationally renowned chef of Chinese cuisine” (*zhongcan guoji mingchu*), who comes back on visit to his hometown Yangzhou in Jiangsu Province, after 25 years spent in Japan. We see him deploying his skills as expert consultant for the local cuisine museum. In the same episode another “former famous chef”, a Chinese-Singaporean, now runs a workshop of creative cuisine, through which he “gets fully involved in high-end restaurant projects all over the world, thanks to his international background and rich experience”. In Episode 6 a “superior-grade chef” (*teji chushi*) of Sichuan cuisine has recently moved back to China after more than a decade of living in the United States. In *Bite*, prestige goes resolutely to returnees, overseas Chinese, ethnic Chinese foreign nationals. The show tells us that it is these virtuosos, at work in sleek, snow-white chef attire, who will nurture the Chinese cuisine with their know-how, elevate it to art status, bring it into the realm of design as well as infuse it with creativity, all that which the “earthy” PRC and its indigenous population are incapable of achieving.

Now it is clear that the role *Bite* assigns to mainland China is that of a Third World country, as the show’s appreciation and pursuit of gourmet food reflects an anthropological, postindustrial understanding of “culture” typical of Western liberals, with whom *Bite*’s creators identify. If we believe the team members’ own words, that they sought ideas of locations to explore Chinese food in issues of *National Geography* [8], then it should come as no surprise that the show espousing a “world mainstream” middle-class oriented value system brings two elements to the foreground, multiculturalism and environmentalism. Predilection for the first transpires in the extensive attention *Bite* gives to ethnic minorities. The show’s very first episode opens with an 8 minute-long story of a Zang (Tibetan) mother and her daughter collecting matsutake in Shangri-La county forest. The part on Inner Mongolia is centered on a herdsman and his nomad family. The making of kimchee, a Korean minority specialty, constitutes the longest footage on Helongjiang province. The Hui (Muslim) noodle, lamian, and the Uygur bread, naan, are also mentioned. The provinces of Yunnan and Guizhou, both populated by many minorities, also receive much attention, with 19 minutes and 11.5 minutes of total coverage, respectively. Domestic as well as overseas Chinese viewers who take national unity for granted are ready to let their patriotic sentiments be aroused by what they

perceive to be the show's portrayal of a multiethnic nation. For those of an international audience already hostile to the CPC, however, it might just reinforce prejudices about heterogeneity of the Chinese population and the "artificial unity" that the Chinese government "imposes" on the nation. In other words, even if one finds palatable the show's display of multicultural curiosities, that does not necessarily lead to friendly feelings toward the PRC. *Bite*'s emphasis on "diversity" clearly caters to a globalized middle-class taste, but as a result it casts a self-exoticizing gaze upon the country.

The show's search for "pure" and "natural" food made the good old way, free of artificial flavors and preservatives, also reveals the extent to which its creators embrace concerns of Western liberals obsessed with pollution, environmental decay, and species extinction and so on in the postindustrial world. Just as it soothes their anxiety to see in the developing world produce and practices that remain "pristine", *Bite* delights in showing hand-picked wild mushrooms, sun-dried sea salt, artisanal secrets passed from father to son or mother to daughter. Such value orientation mutates easily into a sentimentalism through which a privileged group projects its longing for a lost Eden onto a local people in supposedly "natural state" regardless of the latter's historical specificities. Time and again viewers get the impression that *Bite* offers a Chinese gastronomy "world heritage list" to be salvaged. In fact, the show features far less below middle-age people than otherwise, with many characters in their 70s and 80s or even beyond, emanating a strong sense of imminent loss. For instance, episode 1 lets us see old fishermen at work mounted on stilts in a coastal village in Guangxi, and tells us that these are "the last four individuals" who still know the skill. Such "swan song" style of presentation gives the show a mourning tone, and celebration of Chinese food is turned into an elegy. Mainland China in *Bite* is this folklore treasure house full of wonders, some of them fast-disappearing, not unlike those that "open-minded" travelers may encounter in their next trip to the Third World.

In sum, in *Bite*'s conception of the "cultural China", the non-PRC components of "Greater China" take precedence over the PRC which is reduced to a collection of organic, pluralist and preindustrial relics. Such an approach possesses undeniable appeal to environment-conscious, self-congratulatory liberal strata of society, both domestic and foreign, whose ego the show pampers in offering them opportunities to chew on their sense of moral superiority. But the story *Bite* tells is also a biased story. Expectations put on it to assume a communicational function promoting China's "positive image" and "soft power" become naïve when one takes into consideration its creators' ideological stand. *Bite* is willing to grant the PRC only those qualities worthy of an anthropological museum. The prism is so distorting that the picture projected is at odd

with the thriving, upbeat mainland China at the end of the first decade of the new century. Fettered by ideological limitations *Bite* quite misses the very nature of the PRC, that is, a country fundamentally transformed by communist and socialist revolution which accomplished tremendous achievements in all fields including food and alimentation. As a matter of fact, the cultural elite's understanding of the revolutionary legacy as all-out negative is not that of everyone in the PRC, and even inside the show it is not possible to mute all other interpretations, which could surge when least expected. That is to be discussed in the next section.

The Revolution Bites Back

When it comes to approaching the Chinese culture, food is indeed an appropriate subject, as it had always been a primary preoccupation for a populous ancient civilization. The Chinese history was so traversed by famines that the memory of hunger is deeply carved into the national psyche. The old saying that "food is the first necessity of the people" (*min yishi weitian*) went back thousands of years, while the problem of feeding the entire population was solved only after the establishment of the PRC. The average life expectancy in China jumped from 40.8 years in 1950 to 74.92 years in 2010 [9], thanks to a steady process of industrialization: it is common sense that in modern agriculture, mechanization and automation are indispensable to increase productivity, and only industrially manufactured food can meet mass supply needs. If in mainland China one billion people no longer worry about having enough to eat, one must recognize the country's success in turning from an agrarian to an industrial power. Here comes a mission impossible for those behind *Bite*. With minds formatted by Cold War thinking, the cultural elite are unwilling to associate the PRC with notions such as "progress", "modernity", etc. Already, the adoption of a "cultural" approach enables the show to take distance from mass-produced industrial food. Its refusal to give credit to the government and its political leadership, the CPC, is so deliberate that a viewer with no preliminary knowledge of the PRC would not have any idea about what kind of a country it is in social and political aspects, for instance, by watching the show alone.

It can be observed everywhere in the world that certain voice in the media is able to submerge all others when relayed by a great number of outlets, and loudly. As argued before, *Bite*'s creators, born in the 1960s, started to accede to dominant positions in media and communication during the Hu-Wen era, therefore had enormous leverage to propagate their point of view. But we would make a big mistake if we think that the cultural elite's opinion is that of everyone living in the PRC. The mainland Chinese society in 2012 was much more complex, its population too stratified to hold any sort of *pensée unique* despite the existence of a hegemony that muffled dissidences. Especially, with

regard to the PRC's revolutionary legacy, generational and personal experience and knowledge varied significantly, so much so that even in a show like *Bite* the specter of past revolutions can return and take viewers off guard.

That moment comes near the end of the last episode. The show zooms back to Beijing, the capital city, to wrap up. Here is Zhang Guichun, an "indigenous" (*tusheng tuzhang de*) Beijinger, who realizes his dream of having a vegetable garden of his own on the roof of his apartment building situated in an alley (*hutong*). The show presents Zhang's endeavor as both a personal desire to eat fresh and healthy and eco-conscious therefore positive for the city. At the end of the sequence, to celebrate the coming of autumn season, Zhang and his neighbors make dumplings with melons harvested from his garden. During the mini banquet, a happy Zhang Guichun sings for the audience surrounding him, who smiles, nods and claps hands to the rhythm. On the show we hear the beginning of the singing: "The hot sun's just come out of the mountains, morning clouds are spreading half of the sky, here come two people on the road, an old man and a youngster." The song Zhang Guichun sings is actually titled "Sending daughter off to college" (*song nüer shangdaxue*), a piece of Beijing East Bass Drum (*jingdong dagu*), a local art form of singing and speaking accompanied by a drum and string instruments. The song, created by artist Dong Xiangkun (1927-2013) in the 1970s toward the end of the Cultural Revolution, was a hugely popular piece at the time nationwide. It narrates a peasant father who sees his daughter to go to college on recommendation by their commune members. On the road, the father recalls his sufferings before the Liberation and his years helping PLA soldiers fight enemies, and then celebrates Chairman Mao's great leadership in freeing China from imperialism, foreign invasion, and civil war. After that he goes on to praise the accomplishments the Chinese people achieved since the establishment of the new China. At the end, the daughter takes up the shoulder stick, symbol of suffering, struggle and accomplishment that the father hands her over, and vows to continue the revolution and construction.

That this song comes to Zhang Guichun's mind at a moment of relaxation and enjoyment brings the specter of the socialist China and everything associated with it back into the show. It allows seeing the existence of people who probably hold different opinions concerning the country's past from those of the show's creators. Born in 1956 [10], Zhang Guichun belongs to the generation that grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, became active participants of the Cultural Revolution, during which many were sent to the countryside. They welcomed the Reform era like the rest of the entire nation. Then in the 1990s, China went into a phase of neoliberal economic overhaul, in the name of "efficiency" and "joining track with

international practice", the government downsized or closed state-owned enterprises (SOEs) nationwide, laying off tens of millions of employees, among whom Zhang Guichun's cohort, already middle-aged, was the majority. They lived much of the Hu-Wen era in distress, many of them became members of the so-called "weak strata" (*ruoshi qunti*) in a society where disparity in wealth went increasing. For many of this group, purgatory lasted until they reached retirement age to qualify for social security coverage. Real victims of neoliberal brutality, many of Zhang Guichun's generation understandably have their own opinions about values touted by the elites. If Zhang and his same-aged neighbors get enjoyment from this song — Zhang's ease before the camera suggests not an impromptu performance but quite some regular practice — it is because the revolutionary verve and radical egalitarianism the song incorporates give them emotional and spiritual comfort, not just nostalgia for one's bygone youth.

Most interestingly, "Sending daughter off to college" is a product of the Cultural Revolution. Towards the end of the first decade of the new century, the approaching of the thirtieth anniversary of the Reform in 2008 and the sixtieth anniversary of the PRC in 2009 gave occasion for domestic evaluations of China's trajectory. The PRC's history was cut into two halves roughly, the pre-reform "first thirty years" (1949-1978) and the "second thirty years" (1978-2008) of reform. An absolute stigma was cast on the first, while the second was judged less severely as remedying for previous communist and socialist aberrations. Inside the first thirty years, the Cultural Revolution, called "Ten years of turmoil", was Evil reincarnate, the most horrible, the worst nightmare the country had ever lived, whose total negation and disavowal constituted the premise of the reform, so goes the hegemonic discourse. Thus we have seen *Bite* painstakingly avoid all traces that could make one think of the revolutionary past. Then suddenly here comes a highly stylized song from that taboo epoch celebrating peasant and proletarian revolution, class struggle and Chairman Mao all at once, pulverizing the show's agenda so to speak.

One may wonder why the producers kept this odd piece of footage in the show. The answer may not be much of a mystery. It could be a lapse on their part, simply because they were too young to identify what they heard. Born in the 1960s and 1970s, *Bite*'s creators condemn the revolutionary past without empirical experience, that is to say, their attitude is the result of ideological indoctrination. Because of their truncated knowledge of history, they could not recognize an item from that past displayed right under their nose. They are themselves defeated by history. *Bite* marks the apogee of demonization of the PRC's revolutionary heritage but also a turning point, and the idea of revolution was to enter by the front door in the years to come.

CONCLUSION

With hindsight *Bite* symptomizes the ideological sclerosis of the PRC cultural elite in media and communication, which was so deeply entrenched in the “end of history” faith of capitalism’s victory over socialism, that its mind seemed closed to the outer world. In 2008, that is four years before the show came out, a financial tsunami started from the Wall Street had swept the globe, whose disastrous consequences called into question the previous thirty years of commitment to neoliberalism, and even put forward the need to rethink capitalism. In the meantime the PRC had become a formidable industrial power: in 2010, China’s manufacturing industry surpassed that of the USA to become number one in the world [11], and in 2014, China would surpass the USA to become the world’s largest economy in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP) according to certain estimations [12]. *Bite* remained pathologically out of keep with these trends.

The show’s positive appraisal of “Greater China” and the hope it puts therein proved to be poignantly naïve as well. Starting from year 2013, social unrest in Hong Kong and Taiwan broke out, and laid bare the true nature of these places: pawns of the Western camp in the Cold War who had always dutifully fulfilled their geopolitical role of bridgeheads on the anticommunist front. The crude hostility or hatred pure and simple, that both the elites and the masses of these places showed towards the PRC, are all but logical results of decades of anti-PRC propaganda, and of the de-sinicization process that had intensified since the end of the Cold War. Subsequent development continued to deteriorate, reducing increasingly the prospect of a peaceful reunification with the mainland.

However, with a twist, the show contains its own subversion. The appearance of Zhang Guichun and his singing that escaped the revolution-allergic editors’ self-censorship, gave a glimpse into the popular basis for critique of neoliberalism and positive evaluation of the revolutionary past. Therefore the end of the show foreshadowed an ideological shift from the top political core headed by Hu Jintao’s successor, Xi Jinping [13]. Three years Zhang Guichun’s elder, Xi represents a new generation of political leaders, whose life experience, intellectual baggage, and world vision made it possible for them to steer a leftward move of the state apparatus, in response to changed world situation as well as popular calls inside the country. The tone was set as early as January 2013. Talking about the two-part division that had become a habitual way of looking at the PRC’s past, Xi Jinping declared that “the historical period before reform and opening-up cannot be negated by the historical period after reform and opening-up, nor can the historical period after reform and opening-up be negated by the historical period before reform and opening-up” [14]. To one of Hu Jintao’s theoretical legacies, the “three confidences” in the socialism with

Chinese characteristics — in its path, in its theory, and in its system [15] — Xi Jinping added a “fourth confidence”, that of culture, in July 2016, on the occasion of the 95th anniversary of the CPC [16]. In light of this addition, *Bite* clearly offers a construct of “cultural China” with no confidence in the culture of the PRC. History has not ended, but continues its march. Whether for the cause of “great revival of the Chinese nation”, or the grand initiative of building “a community of shared future for mankind”, revolutionary legacy is something that the PRC still needs to tackle with.

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2. The 34 provincial-level administrative units are: 23 provinces, 5 autonomous regions Xinjiang, Xizang, Ningxia, Guangxi, Inner Mongolia; 4 direct-controlled municipalities Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing; and 2 special administrative regions (SAR) Hong Kong and Macau.
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13. Xi Jinping became Secretary General of the Communist Party of China in November 2012 at the 18th CPC National Congress, and was elected President of the People's Republic of China in March 2013 by the National People's Congress.
14. Xi Jinping's speech delivered at the opening of study seminar to implement the spirit of the 18th Party Congress, attended by new members and new alternate members of the Central Committee of the CPC on January 5, 2013.
15. Hu Jintao's report to the 18th CPC National Congress, November 2012.
16. Xi Jinping's speech delivered at the rally celebrating the 95th anniversary of the CPC on July 1, 2016.