ANOTHER FAST FOOD NATION?

As Chinese farmers convert to cash crops, their kids are developing an appetite for candy

Story and photos by Bobbi Barbarich

I'm staring at a demolished disco ball on the edge of a narrow road. I'm wondering how it got here. But my quiet contemplation of this incongruous sight is shattered as an enormous truck roars past, honking its thunderous horn and trailing a plume of black smoke. I hold my breath and close my eyes, as I always do when sidestepping these massive hauling machines, as if their pollution dissipates immediately. I've gotten used to shoulder-high tires passing inches away from me as I walk along the road. There are no sidewalks here.

The disco ball is lying atop a heap of trash and the road is built up above the ground. Four feet down, canals flow into rice paddies and broad bean fields. The water in these canals is slimy and green. Red plastic bags, food containers, single army-green shoes and dead pigs are strewn with disregard into the canals. Farmers burn their garbage on the side of the road, leaving a putrid stench and thick acrid smoke. There's no garbage service outside town, and relatively few people live in town. Most live in tiny villages near their tiny plots of land. China's population is 1.3 billion, with 900 million villagers.

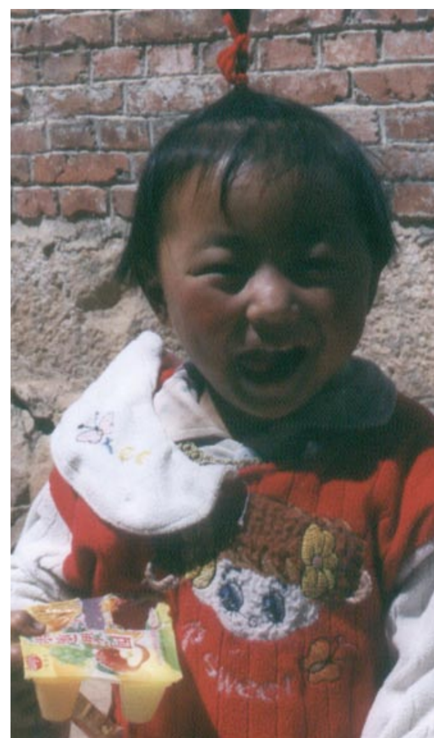
When new, the disco ball's tiny mirrored pieces were carefully glued in perfect rows. Now they're scattered over several metres. The glass has been crushed by an unceasing stream of feet, bicycle tires, horse hooves, motorized rickshaws, tractors and tour buses. Coal dust stings the eyes of passersby. Women riding bicycles carry children in baskets on their backs. Buses are filled beyond capacity as drivers try to make an extra buck.

The innards of the disco ball are styrofoam. This glittering dream catcher, which once sprinkled tiny starbursts around a dance club, is filled with a non-biodegradable, banal substance—a fitting metaphor for the materialistic aspects of western culture infiltrating China. Copying the popular western phenomenon of "creating stars," China now has its own version of *American Idol*, complete with a guaranteed record deal and pictures on the covers of the hottest magazines. As globalization and industrialization tighten their grip, cars are replacing bicycles, and junk food is replacing healthy meals. Even in remote regions, skinny children are routinely eating more candy than vegetables and meat.

For my master's thesis, I am studying the nutritional health of preschool children in southwestern China's Yunnan province, located between the plateaus of Tibet and the jungles of Vietnam. Yunnan is the country's most ethnically diverse province, with 25 different ethnic minorities giving it a vibrant array of traditions, dialects and diets.

Yunnan is also one of China's poorest provinces. The World Health Organization says children in Yunnan are among the country's most malnourished. "Stunting" occurs when children consistently do not eat enough to fuel vertical growth. In 2000, 26.1 per cent of Chinese kids were stunted; in 1998, roughly 50 per cent of children in Yunnan were short for their age. The average per capita income in Yunnan was 5,178 yuan in 2002, just under $1,000 Canadian. To combat this poverty, the province has recently initiated several expansive projects to improve hospitals, roads and farming practices. Four years ago, many subsistence farmers in northern Yunnan's Heqing county began converting their land to mulberry orchards and harvesting the cocoons woven by the silk worms living in the trees. It's not a lucrative crop, but farmers who traditionally grew rice and beans are now selling silk for cash.

My project was designed to ascertain whether this transition to a more export-oriented economy has affected the health▸



Barbarich at a restaurant in Heqing.

The disco ball ... a fitting metaphor for the materialistic aspects of western culture infiltrating China.

of preschool children. Before going to Yunnan for two months in March 2004, I planned to compare a traditional, non-mulberry village with a village where agricultural changes have been underway since 2000. I expected to work with children, in both villages, who needed help. But what you expect in China is rarely what you get.

HEQING COUNTY IS LOCATED BETWEEN Dali and Lijiang, two of Yunnan's major cultural centres and popular destinations for both Chinese travellers and a growing number of international tourists. The average annual income in Heqing is 1,300 yuan, which is approximately $220 Canadian and about four times lower than the provincial average.

The disparity between incomes *within* Heqing is also extremely high. People living in fertile valley communities—where they grow rice, broad beans and canola—earn between 1,000 and 30,000 yuan a year. But two-thirds of Heqing's land is mountainous, and almost half of its population lives above 2,700 metres in extremely remote villages. Mountain villagers earn much less than valley people, which explains the low county average. Arable land is scarce in the mountains: cornfields the size of tabletops are squeezed between rocks pushed out of the ground by earthquakes. Mountain farmers have difficulty getting to markets to sell or buy the little that has grown. Low water levels and marginal soil quality further hinder the quantity and quality of their limited food supplies. Most of Heqing's malnourished children live in these mountain villages, which is where I planned to do my research—until county health officials informed me otherwise.

On my first morning in Heqing, I was told I would be studying adjacent villages which, although difficult to get to by Canadian standards, can actually be reached by road. Located in a relatively affluent valley, Ruyi and Shuanlong also have water reservoirs, primitive hospitals and stores that sell popsicles and pepperoni sticks. Their rice paddies are adequately irrigated and every family has bicycles to ride to the market. It's a challenging though livable rural life, but it doesn't reflect how most of Heqing's 260,000 citizens live and eat.

A mud-bogged road lined with eucalyptus trees leads to Ruyi and Shuanlong, which are five kilometres apart. Driving the 15 kilometres to the villages from the capital of Heqing takes nearly an hour, although it feels longer if you're in an ambulance full of chain-smoking men.

China is not known for its bureaucratic efficiency, nor for its trust of foreigners. This makes research, particularly in remote areas, time-consuming and delicate. I knew this when I left Alberta, but I wasn't prepared for what lay ahead. Rural officials tend to be suspicious of foreign interest and worry about scrutiny from provincial officials, especially if children in poor health could make their policies look questionable. The most frustrating part of my project, however, involved communication discrepancies. Before leaving for China, I clearly and repeatedly told Heqing county health officials that I needed a translator, trained health care workers and permission to take tissue samples. "It will be a success," they promised after each request.

I met my translator the day I arrived in Heqing and did not see him again until the day I left. "What a pity," he said, over and over, politely informing me in broken English that he was too busy to stick around and help me. He did hesitantly offer to answer phone calls if I had to clarify simple problems, but he simply would not be available when I was talking to villagers and officials. Liu Si was one of the only people in the county who spoke English. I was stranded with my Mandarin dictionary and a pleading smile.

Thankfully, I also had a handbook detailing exactly how my study should proceed. I'd had it translated into Mandarin before leaving Canada; that foresight was my saving grace. County health officials hired eight interviewers and recruited 200 preschool children. Every morning, an official would pick me up at my hotel and drive me to both villages, where the interviewers were waiting. Interviewers asked the children's mothers questions about income, occupation and diet. Without a translator, I could only observe. I spent many hours sitting in the courtyards of the health centres in Ruyi and Shuanlong, trying to ignore the faint smell of human waste drifting in from the nearby pit toilets.

After all 200 questionnaires were completed, it was time for me to take tissue samples and measure the height and weight of the kids. We did Shuanlong first: 100 children were waiting in the courtyard for the *weiguoren* (foreign person) to arrive. My white face was the first

any of them had ever seen. The children screeched, cried and whimpered as they were measured, but the sight of me—at 5'7", bigger than the biggest man there—stopped most protests. A shopping bag full of fruit candy made me seem more human (and gave me a small following wherever I went in the village). Yet I quickly realized that my candies were more expectation than treat. While waiting to be measured, many of the kids snacked on ice cream, candies and high-fat packaged meat like North American pepperoni sticks. The questionnaires confirmed that many children here eat a lot of this junk food—sometimes triple, by weight, the amount of vegetables or meat they eat in a day.

In both villages, mothers appeared genuinely pleased to participate in a project that could help their kids. They let me take tissue samples from the mouths of their children and draw blood from their fingers. I recorded intimate aspects of their lives. It was an attempt to improve their children's health the way we do things in the West—a big selling point. But once the data were collected, officials became nervous and took the questionnaires from me. On the day I was leaving Heqing for Kunming, Beijing and eventually Edmonton, four officials told me that I would not be allowed to take the tissue samples or the questionnaires back to Canada. I began pleading and frowning, then gave them the silent treatment—universal signs of irritation. They didn't bend on the tissue samples, but the official who escorted me to the airport carried the questionnaires under his arm and handed them to me with a quick nod as I passed through the security gate.

AS I WAS WALKING DOWN THE STREET IN Heqing town one afternoon, a white guy rode past me on a Chinese bike. We were both shocked. He said "Hi." In English. A doctor from Germany, he had lived in China for four years. From him I received precious insight into the secretive nature of the Heqing health bureau. Even though he was nearly fluent in Mandarin and was teaching surgery to local doctors, he still wasn't allowed into some hospital wings and certain villages. "They don't want you to go there," he said. The mulberry project, he explained, brought copious amounts of money and national recognition to the county. Local officials want higher officials to see that the project is working well. Foreign reports of malnourished children would undermine their progress.

I went to China expecting to find children who could benefit from nutritional education and improved diets. Instead I was taken to affluent villages where children are relatively healthy. Most eat balanced meals, but as their parents earn more cash they're starting to prefer sweets and fatty meats. My impression about the type of education they need has changed entirely: people in Heqing county already know *how* to prepare healthy meals; they need to know *why* to avoid the type of food that's become all too common in the west.

As countries develop stronger relationships with international markets, more and more parents leave home to work. As incomes rise, animal-based foods with more fat infiltrate meals. Wholesome and balanced meals like rice and beans with vegetables are being replaced by fast food with few nutrients. Pizza Hut, KFC and McDonald's—part of the engine driving our frantically globalizing world—are located on almost every block in Beijing. According to a national nutrition survey, the number of obese children in China is estimated to be growing by up to 8 per cent per year.

I'm afraid it won't be long until researchers discover that childhood obesity has become a bigger problem around the world than malnutrition, skipping over the healthy ground between extremes altogether. North America's obesity epidemic should serve as a warning for Chinese counties like Heqing: their economies are changing rapidly, and so are their diets. Children in Heqing are learning to eat ice cream and drink cola. We know how to help them, but it's difficult to do research in rural China, and we can't even help ourselves. They may meet us in the lineup at the burger joint.

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Health care worker outside the health care compound in the village of Ruyi.