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Yang Sheng, Care and Changing Family Relations in China: *about a 'Left Behind' Mother's Diet*

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Abstract

Drawing upon my mother's *yang sheng* (life nurturing) practices through food consumption as an autoethnographic 'vignette', the paper seeks to tease out different layers of socio-cultural meanings, underpinning a left behind ageing mother's changing diet. It brings to light the underlying gendered embodiment of food practices articulated through changing family relations (i.e. left behind mother - absent son). This is of particular salience within the context in which issues of ageing and care for older family members have become a major public concern in contemporary China. The paper highlights the relational accounts of food practices as care, imbued with shifting personal relations within the family, which are intertwined with social and historical transformations. In particular, it develops some critical insights on food practices that are beyond an individual's reflection on self-responsibility for health. Thus, it illustrates how intergenerational family care and love are facilitated through the negotiation with everyday materiality and its practices in China.

Keywords: *yang sheng*, *shen ti*, care, food, mother-son, family, China

Introduction

The last few years have witnessed a growing concern about a rising ageing population in China. Official statistics show that the population of 60 plus was over 202 million at the end of 2013, accounting for 15% of the total population (China Daily, 2014), while the population of those over 60 is expected to exceed 300 million by 2025. Of importance, the one child policy, which was introduced in 1979, is resulting in a pressing concern regarding the welfare and care of an ageing population. In particular, caring for older members of the family has become an emerging issue at both national and individual levels. Recent feminist studies (see Jackson and Liu, 2017; Liu, 2017) on the gender dimension of care for older family members, acknowledge both the changes and continuities of women's roles as caregivers for older family members in China. Meanwhile, studies on men and filial responsibilities (see Lin, 2014; Chen and Mac an Ghaill, 2015) also address the impact of rapid socio-cultural changes on ordinary men's personal lives, highlighting the unease and challenge in men's experiences of being a son and their active negotiation of fulfilling their gendered filial responsibilities, such as taking care of their older parents, including providing financial and emotional support to them.

As a transnational migrant who has an academic career overseas for more than a decade, I have started to think about my position as a son and the issue of caring for my parents as they have entered the so-called 'older' age in a Chinese context. As the only son, the filial responsibility has become increasingly intense. Rather than being present for my parents in order to fulfil a son's role as a caregiver in traditional Chinese values (see Chen and Silverstein, 2000), I have been facing the challenge of

being an absent 'filial' son and negotiating my own practices to fulfil the expectations. For example, I always try to do my best in my career to make them proud, as a way of demonstrating my filial piety (see Lin, 2014). I understand that my experience is not in isolation, as it is shared by thousands of both internal and transnational Chinese migrant sons and daughters as a result of globalization and rapid social changes (see Lin, 2014; Liu, 2017).

Modern communication technologies (see Wilding, 2006) have enabled me to enact my practices as a son through regular communication with my family on 'WeChat'. My mother and I often talk about food – sharing pictures and information of what we cook, what we eat, as well as what we should eat or should not eat from the 'health tips' that people share online. This is an example of the increasing popularity of the *yang sheng* phenomenon (Farquhar and Zhang, 2012; Sun and Lei, 2016) in China. The notion of *yang sheng*, translated as life nurturance or health cultivation, is an ancient concept originating from 'the Taoist physical exercises that were supposed to make the body immortal' (Brownell, 1995:17). The realm of *yang sheng* includes mundane activities such as physical exercise, diet monitoring and other forms of leisure activities. Sun and Lei's (2016) study on the emergence of infomercial radio and lifestyle television acknowledges that the withdrawal of public funding in health care is resulting in individuals taking more responsibilities for their own health. The re-emergence of *yang sheng* and the increasing number of self care/health related information shared on the media demonstrate individuals' rising concerns about their own health in light of the neoliberalization of the health sector and the economy.

In this paper, I use a single autoethnographic case study to develop a critical discussion of a *yang sheng* practice in relation to a changing diet. In particular, I maintain the importance of food, as a form of everyday material of care (see Bues *et al.*, 2018; Meah and Jackson, 2017), in teasing out different layers of meanings underpinning an individual's changing everyday practices and family relations. Through my autoethnographic reflection on my mother's changing eating practices, I highlight the simultaneity of care for the self and care for others. In so doing, I hope to capture, in nuanced ways, the still under theorised aspects of contextual, relational, personal and reflexive understandings of food practices, as a part of wider intergenerational family practices, in this case, between an adult migrant son and an ageing left-behind mother.

Food Practices as Care: A Relational Approach

Early feminist studies on food, family and care (see Counihan and Kaplan, 1998; Devault, 1991) emphasised the role of women in facilitating care within family practices through food, thus contributing to women's oppression in patriarchal societies. More recent feminist studies in relation to food and women's subjectivities (see Cairns and Johnstone, 2015; Lewis, 2016) have critically engaged with the earlier notion of gender division of domestic labour of care in food practices, highlighting women's agency in making sensible choice of food consumption in relation to their own bodies as neoliberal self-cared subjects, who look after their own health, as well as realizing their self identities, such as responsible mothers. The above feminist perspectives in relation to food, care and family relations have also provided

important theoretical insights in highlighting an increasing necessity of engaging with wider debates on everyday material cultures, including food, as 'materialities of care' (Buse *et al.,* 2018), in order to make sense of the complexity of mundane practices within the family. For example, Meah and Jackson's (2017) recent study maintains that foods, especially regarding convenience foods, can be seen as everyday materials to negotiate people's expression and practices of care among family members.

Morgan's (1996; 2011) theorization of family practices emphasises a sense of the everyday, maintaining that family members and relationships are fostered and defined through meaningful enactments in mundane practices, such as parenting and care, through which mother-daughter/son and father-daughter/son are able to be negotiated through 'loving, caring and sharing' aspects in intimate relations (Jamieson, 1998:8). According to Morgan (2011), those taken for granted mundane activities, such as everyday food consumption, are central in making sense of the meanings of 'family'. In light of increased diversity and fluidity of family lives, Morgan (1996; 2011) maintains that individuals are active in negotiating family relationships, through everyday interactions and the notion of *doing*, thus negotiating their gender roles, such as being a mother. These mundane activities are also shaped by changing family relations and life circumstances in the life course, such as retirement, grown up children leaving home, the birth of a grandchild, and so on (also see Chambers *at al*., 2009). While Morgan (1996; 2011) acknowledges the possibility of individual creativities in negotiating practices of family lives and relationships, he also highlights the interplay of individual agency with local cultural values and material contexts through which individual experiences and family practices are made legitimate and meaningful.

Arber *et al.*'s (2003) study on changing roles and family relations deploys a life course approach to explore diverse experiences in later life (also see Twigg, 2013), interplaying with different forms of inequalities, such as gender, class and ethnicity. Other life circumstances, such as marital status, and situations in relation to changing roles in a personal life trajectory can also be seen as important catalysts in examining the meanings of ageing, such as with and without children and grandchildren. More specifically, in relation to food and later life, Davidson *et al.*'s (2009) study on gender and food in later life argues for the importance of the social aspect of food and its role in negotiating and (re) producing gender identities (also see Fischler, 1988). They highlight the relationships of food practices and social relations in which food practices are used to perform and realize different roles and identities due to changing circumstances in later life. The above feminist perspectives on ageing provide informative and productive frameworks through which the meanings of food consumption are produced and contextualized in everyday life practices. More importantly, they enable us to engage critically with changing family relationships, wider material conditions and social divisions throughout older people's life courses. Jackson (2009) maintains that the relationship between families and food is 'socially significant, personally engaging, emotionally charged and politically contested' (Jackson, 2009: 2). Thus, a relational approach to the study will be of significance conceptually in unveiling more nuanced socio-cultural meanings.

As I addressed earlier, the issue of caring for older parents is traditionally a family obligation in China, ranging from looking after older parents for their physical and financial wellness, to fulfilling emotional support, such as bringing pride to the

family. Earlier studies on caring for older parents highlight emerging concerns about filial piety, which is seen as a core value in maintaining the continuity of intergenerational support to older people by their adult children (see Zhan and Montgomery, 2003). For example, Cheung and Kwan's (2009) study notes that a higher level of modernization might potentially lead to a negative effect on the continuation of filial piety, such as the potential discontinuity of providing financial support to parents. However, what remains under-researched is a more nuanced understanding of the impact of social changes, as a result of economic development and modernization, on diverse intergenerational responses to the issue of care for older parents as a family obligation. Gans and Silverstein (2006) acknowledge that situational factors in relation to personal life circumstances are central in understanding the changing practices of care for older family members and filial norms (also see Silverstein *et al*., 2006). Liu's (2017) recent study further highlights how local socio-economic circumstances and gender norms reshape married women's complex intimate relations with their natal families in rural China, as well as intergenerational obligations with their older parents.

Liu's (2017) theorization of intergenerational intimacy is in line with Silverstein and Bengston's (1997) conceptualization of intergenerational solidarity, which provides an important analytical lens to make sense of intergenerational interactions in which the practices of caring for older parents in modern families are negotiated through dimensions of emotional connection as well as a sense of obligation in intergenerational family relations. Chen and Silverstein (2000) further illustrate the above notion of intergenerational solidarity, acknowledging the benefit of older parents' instrumental support to their adult children and the positive psychological

impact on the older parents' morale. In light of the above studies, I aim to highlight such intergenerational bonding through the lens of everyday life eating practices, with reference to specific contextual life circumstances between an adult migrant son and an ageing left-behind mother.

Methodological Reflection: An autoethnographic vignette

Personal feelings, beliefs and experiences are reflexive resources for researchers to interpret meanings of social life (see Berger, 2015). Being an ethnographer and a migrant son, I am in a position that has enabled me to make links between my academic knowledge and my intimate experience and bonding with my parents. Within this particular position, I am able to understand how my personal life and relations are (re)shaped by everyday practices and interaction with members of my family. Such an autoethnographic approach appears productive for me to make sense of the complex interpersonal relations and different layers of socio-cultural meanings underpinning our everyday practices that help construct our identities and interpersonal relations within the family. Ettorre (2017:4) acknowledges that, 'doing autoethnography, we give way to an intimate, intermediate space, which includes ambiguity, uncertainty and equivocality.' I particularly appreciate Ettorre's (2017) endorsement of autoethnography as a feminist methodological approach, in which the story in an autoethnography is shared by the teller and the people in the story. The story is 'a living, embodied crossroads of words, flesh, emotions, interpretations and humanity' (Ettorre, 2017:6). Such an approach has enabled me to reflect on my own biography in light of the intergenerational relations between my mother and myself in

developing reflexive interpretations and new insights into my mother's choice of food, situated within a globally inflected socio-cultural context.

I selected a single episode of an everyday conversation with my mother about her choice of food[1], as an autoethnographic 'vignette' (see Humphreys, 2005:842). It has become an intimate moment for me to capture personal, contextual and relational meanings, derived from my position as an adult migrant son. It has also enabled me to maintain a culturally reflexive analysis within a particular moment of the life course that was shared between my mother and myself. Thus, the relationship of a left-behind mother and a migrant son was constituted through active reflection on the meaningful conversation in the 'vignette'. In turn, I was able to make sense of myself and of my mother (Ellis *et al*., 2011).

Equally of significance, Ellis (2007) emphasises the notion of 'relational ethics' in autoethnography with intimate others, such as family members, alongside the more established procedural and situational ethics (see Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). As she maintains, 'relational ethics requires researchers to act from our hearts and minds, to acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and initiate and maintain conversations' (Ellis, 2007:4). She also highlights the importance of acknowledging 'the reality and practice of changing relationships with our research participants over time' (ibid.). This resonates with my own experience of talking to my mother about the everyday food consumption, in relation to our changing life circumstances. It is underlined by an ethical consideration based on reflexivity (see Ellis *et al*., 2011; Humphreys, 2005), thus approaching the story with care and respect. For example, I understand that my mother is getting older and my responsibility of looking after her

as a son in traditional Chinese culture in which 'filial piety' (see Lin, 2014; Zhang *et al*., 2014) is a key concept in adult children and parent relations. However, being a left-behind parent, my mother's increasing concerns about her health and her changing diet illustrates the mutually constituted mother-son relationship and the Chinese family ethics, that 'the mother undoubtedly occupies a central position in her son's interest, for he responds naturally to his mother's love and shows her respect' (Chao, 2011: 54). Knowing the changing circumstances and being reflexive about the relational gender roles and responsibilities in a Chinese context have allowed me to respond with respect to my mother's choice of food. Such a relational 'mother and son' bonding has enabled me to tease out multiple meanings of her choice of food within particular 'historical, cultural, and biographical conditions' (Denzin, 2014: 124). Thus, the identities of being/becoming an ageing mother and an adult migrant son are mutually constituted in this process of reflection.

In the following sections, I will start with the 'vignette' about my mother's changing diet and develop a critical analysis of the issue of eating for *Yang Sheng,* as a practice of care for the self, grounded in a shifting social historical context. I will then move on to develop a further critical interpretation of my mother's changing diet as a form of care for others, in relation to me as her migrant son.

Eating for *Yang Sheng*: the manifestation of a reflexive ageing *shen ti*

Since her retirement as a college administrator at the age 55, my mother has been active in seeking healthy ways of living. At the age of 60, my mum told me one day

that she had been following a diet as she just started to eat smaller portions of simple bland food. I asked her why she ate so little, as she just had some soybean soup and a small bowl of brown rice for her dinner. The choice of simple rustic food reminded me of what they used to tell me about what they ate in their childhood during the period of the Great Famine (1958-61) (see Zhou, 2013). At that time, the nation was suffering from a food shortage. This was in contrast to what happened during the time when I was growing up in China during the 1980s and 1990s. Despite working professionally before her retirement, I remember that my mum used to prepare a table of dishes for every meal with a combination of fish, meat and vegetables, in order to maintain good nutrition in my diet, thus enabling me to grow up healthily. Her simple light dinner was also unusual to me given that my hometown is a place that is famous for its local cuisine and street food, for which I constantly crave as a migrant. My mother rationalized her choice of diet as follows:

> *'Chinese medicine says people at my age shall eat more soybeans as it contains estrogen… It is not because I don't want to eat those (local street food). I am getting old… I eat less as it is good for the shen ti (身体 meaning: body and health)… (so that) me and your father can live longer together. You also won't have much burden to look after us when we are getting older if our shen ti are good…'*

While she is still the caregiver in the family in terms of cooking for herself and my father, my mother's rationale regarding her eating practices illustrates the importance of food in making sense of herself, as she becomes older. This includes taking more estrogen-rich food that is supposed to be good for women in older age.

Located within a broader literature on gender and food, regarding women's roles as caretakers in preparing and distributing food for other family members and children (Counihan and Kaplan, 1998; Knight *et al.,* 2014), I was intrigued by my mother's intention of making rational choices of food for her health. Meanwhile, her narrative also includes her active negotiation of making choices in line with her changing role as an ageing partner and a 'left-behind' mother of a migrant son.

Parsons' (2015:1) study suggests that 'everyday foodways enable individuals to present themselves as responsible neo-liberal citizens, so that eating healthily for example demonstrates an engagement with public and medical discourses that positions the self as responsible for her or his own health and well-being (responsible individualism).' My mother's changing diet that seems to correspond with Parsons' explanation, such as having soybean soup and reducing the amount of food she consumed, can be understood through the re-emergence of the pervasive discourse of *yang sheng* (养生 life nurturance or health cultivation) in China (see Farquhar and Zhang, 2012). Meanwhile, it is important to note that one of the key elements within the discourse of *yang sheng* is to maintain a sound *shen ti* (身体, body or health in Chinese), so as to avoid diseases and to enable longevity. There are two aspects in relation to the meaning of *shen ti.* One is the physical body (*ti*) and the other is the inner state and wellbeing of the body (*health*). Brownell (1995) provides insight regarding the differentiation of *shen* and *ti*, highlighting that 'there are at least three different root words for "body" in Chinese: *shen,* animate body; *ti,* inanimate body; and *shi,* dead body or corpse' (1995: 15-16). She maintains that the word *shen* implies the notion of 'person', 'self', 'lifetime' and it also 'implies a lived body, a life history' (1995:16). The connotation of life in the Chinese body (*shen ti*) is in line with the

notion of *yang sheng*, as practices of nurturing life and realizing the embodied existence of the body. Zhang's definition of *shen ti* also maintains its emotional dimension, as she states, '*shen ti* is both physical and extraphysical, capable of feeling, perceiving, creating, and resonating or embodying changes and transformation in the social world as well as in the natural world' (Zhang, 2007:6). Thus, the Chinese notion of *shen ti* resonates with Bourdieu's (1977) conceptualisation of habitus, which is perceived as reflexive, subjected to experiences, but is also constrained by material conditions, regularities and belongings.

Food provides material resources to maintain and realize the body. In parallel with Chinese medical discourse, food consumption is central in *yang sheng* discourse. There is a long history in China of using food to prevent and to treat illness and to regulate the body. The philosophy of *yin* (阴 feminine) and *yang* (阳 masculine) in particular has helped to define the nature of food (Flaws *et al*. 2002:70), with the cause of illness seen as a result of the imbalance between *yin* and *yang*. Historically food was emphasized with reference to its biological function as an earlier development goal of post-Mao modernization, aiming to resolve the problem of adequate daily necessity as a result of natural disasters and an oversized population. During my childhood, my mother used to tell me how they treasured a thinly cut piece of meat in their diet at the time of a food shortage when they were growing up in the 1960s. Lu's (2006) study on material culture and daily life in recent Chinese history emphasises that food and diet reflect the changes of economic and environmental conditions, particularly during the shift from Mao to the post-Mao period. For example, Lu (2006: 32) notes that 'beans and bean products served as an important

source of protein' among ordinary Chinese peasants at a time of food shortage after the famine between 1958-1961.

More recently, Farquhar and Zhang (2012:16) acknowledge that there is a growing popularity for *zi wo bao jian* (自我保健 self-health/self-care) activities in the media under the heading of *yang sheng*. This is accompanied by the increasing publicly shared information of *yang sheng* strategies that are widely spread through different forms of media platforms and forums (see Sun, 2016). There seems to be a shift from an early notion of eating for the purpose of *wen bao*[2] (温饱 enough to eat and wear), as a result of the famine, food shortage and an over-populated nation, to a more recent popularization of eating for *yang sheng*, aiming to make possible the manifestation of a generational based ageing *shen ti* for people, such as my mother. As a generation that has lived through major historical and social events in contemporary China, such as the Great Chinese Famine (1958-61), the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), the economic reform of China (since 1978) and the enforcement and the reform of the one child policy (1978 and 2015), my mother's changing relationship with food also signifies socio-historical transformations, moving from a period when there was limited choice of food and the struggle of obtaining sufficient food, thus the purpose of eating was limited to daily necessity, to a period when the ancient discourse of *yang sheng* has re-emerged as a popular cultural form, reflecting the ideology of individual self-responsibility in relation to health, particularly for senior citizens (Sun and Lei, 2016). Research on food, such as Devine's (2005:121), elaborates a life course perspective for understanding food choices. She maintains that the appropriation of deploying a life course perspective

will enable us to understand changes of food choices in line with changing social and historical contexts.

Recently, we have also witnessed the changing practices of food consumption since economic modernization in the 1970s, such as changing taste of food (Veeck and Burns, 2005) and food consumption away from home (Ma *et al*., 2006). These empirical studies have also highlighted the emergence of an urban middle class and their changing life styles in relation to food practices. Such everyday life food practices are examples of the aesthetic shift in people's mundane experiences in post-Mao urban China (see Farquhar, 2002). More recently, media coverage has highlighted the emergence of organic markets in urban China. It is reported that 'organic food and imported products have risen in popularity and are considered a safer option than the traditional "wet" markets where fresh vegetables, meat and fish are sold. In cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, the number of specialist and boutique food shops selling organic food is growing, especially among the Chinese middle class and expatriate community who have disposable income and are willing to pay a premium for good-quality, safe food'[3]. This has become a pervasive phenomenon in the context of rapid economic development and the increase in the middle-class population (Rocca, 2017).

Similar studies on food and social changes (see Yan, 2012; Zhang *et al*., 2012) acknowledge the impact of fast food and food security on obesity and fatness. Other studies, such as Lora-Wainwright's ethnographic research in rural China highlights regional and class differences in addition to a generational attitude towards the *shen ti* and food that 'experience of famine and food shortage have fostered a perception of

the ability to eat and one's "fatness" as parameters for health among most villagers, except the youngest' (2009:119). It is an interesting phenomenon, as people in the city tend to believe eating less as a healthier option of diet nowadays, as reflected in my mother's choice in keeping with good health. This is in line with Counihan's (1998) argument regarding how culture and material structure, such as class, serve to make sense of the abilities of men's and women's production, distribution and consumption of food. My mother's change of diet also reflected a wider transformation in society, as a result of rapid economic growth in urban China.

Thus, the *yang sheng* phenomenon and the maintenance of the *shen ti* cannot be fully explained as a strategy of successful or active ageing. It also signifies the social historical shift of China's economic development and modernization. The Chinese body – *shen ti*, as illustrated in my mother's accounts of something that needs to be managed, thus resonates with Bourdieu's notion of habitus as a 'socially informed body' that internalizes and embodies history (Bourdieu, 1977:124). It is such a link to a historically embedded personal life course that has made possible a local interpretation of an ageing *shen ti* and older people's *yang sheng* practices through food. It is equally of importance to acknowledge that my mother's rationale for dieting as a *yang sheng* practice signals embodied gender meanings, that is now explored further.

Food as Material of Care: Beyond the individualization of eating for health

My mother's changing diet, through the emerging popularity of the *yang sheng* discourse, enables her to realise the meanings of her *shen ti* (身体 body and health), which are manifested through her food consumption (Caplan, 1997), in response to the anxiety of bodily and health decline and in making sense of 'ageing', in light of changing family relations in a Chinese context. Central to her account is a desire to maintain good health when she is getting older. One way of interpreting her simple and rustic diet is the practice of *jie kou* (戒口 food abstinence) as a *yang sheng* strategy. Thus, *yang sheng* in relation to a particular way of food consumption is seemly 'purely instrumental', as Farquhar and Zhang (2005:307) initially label older people's *yang sheng* practices in Beijing. Being my mother's only son as well as a migrant, I was pleased to see my mother's active pursuing of a good quality of life, making a sensible choice of diet. Although her choice could be understood as a practice that resonates with the notion of a responsible self, that is, that she has become a neoliberal subject of self-care, as health is the priory of her choice of food (see Cairns and Johnston, 2015), I also recognize the intergenerational bonding between me and her through her food practices, as her migrant son.

Her changing diet demonstrates her concern for her own health as a 'left behind' mother, in relation to me as an adult migrant son, as she mentioned that 'you also won't have much burden to look after us when we are getting older if our *shen ti* are good'. Her accounts are of cultural significance in linking life circumstances and the gendered embodiment of food consumption. More specifically, my mother's rationale for changing her diet is primarily driven by her intention to maintain good health, which can be interpreted as self-regulation in relation to food consumption. Such a relational notion associated with bodily health is particularly important in

understanding an individual's account of an embodied act of eating and food consumption in China. It implies a moral responsibility, in particular, within such an intergenerational context, such as a mother-son relationship. This could be a reflexive decision made during a difficult period of time in her life, as my late grandmother was suffering from dementia and my mother and my aunts were looking after her. In other words, her choice of food can also be interpreted as an act of gender-based embodiment (Lupton, 1996) of food consumption, through which the meanings of being an ageing left-behind mother are unfolded and made possible for further investigation. For me, changing diet is central in her construction of a self-responsible caring parent, who cares for her own health so as to be a caring mother. Such a gendered embodiment is at odds with the individualization of eating for good health that the paper may seem to have emphasized so far.

Individuals' personal relationships within society need to be considered in individual food practices, in order to produce a nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural meanings of bodily balance and harmony that I discussed earlier. My mother's changing diet highlights the deeper culturally informed gender meanings of food practices, expressed between a left behind ageing mother and a migrant son. Her justification regarding maintaining a healthy body in order to lower the risk of putting a burden on me illustrates what ageing means to her personally as a mother and how she adjusts her diet to negotiate her ageing identity. Such familial gender practices (Morgan, 2011) have become meaningful in making sense of how caring for family members are negotiated and maintained through adapting a healthy diet. One of the key areas within the study of food is its social role in contextualizing changing family relations. Studies in the field of sociology of everyday life and food have illustrated

the significance of food practices and their strong connection with family relationships and practices, and vice versa.

Knight *et al.*'s study (2014) highlights the central theme of temporality. The study suggests that changing food consumption in different stages of the life course. Their argument is important in reflecting on how changing life circumstances and material conditions affect an individual's choice of food. The life course perspective in relation to food consumption also resonates with Valentine's (1999) argument regarding the role of food and eating in the construction of the self, that 'identities, throughout the life course, are produced, articulated and contested through food consumption and the spatial dynamics of cooking and eating.' (1999: 491). Such a life course perspective in relation to food practices implies their value in the articulation of our self-identity as an individual becomes older. The temporality of food practices in light of changing personal relations in the family may also enable us to understand ageing as a reflexive process of negotiation.

In China, changing intergenerational relationships within the family can be seen as an important factor in understanding the dynamics of familial practices as an individual becomes older in the family. Thus, re-engaging with the shifting gender roles in people's accounts will enable us to locate an understanding of older adults' realization of their identities in line with personal social relations within the family and society. A Chinese saying of 'a daughter-in-law has finally become a mother-in-law' (媳妇熬成婆) illustrates women's changing family roles as they age and accompanying changing power positions within the family (Shi, 2011). This can be illustrated in the shifting roles from taking *care of*, to being *cared for*. However, my

mother's changing diet illustrates an active response to her changing life circumstance in light of my absence. Her changing diet could be understood as her continuous empowered practice as a caregiver. While she still cooked additional non-vegetarian dishes for my father, the use of 'us' in her account implies her intension of changing my father's eating practices as well. Meanwhile, my reflection of my own gender responsibility as a son has enabled me to make sense of her changing eating practices and maintained intergenerational intimacy with her. I do not suggest a simplistic notion of role-related narratives of food practices. Rather, I emphasize the emotional attachment between being a mother and a son, which help us to understand the meanings of food practices. More specifically, with regard to family relations, the practices associated with food can be seen as an important site to illustrate how other gender relations in the family might be transformed or reproduced in an implicit way through everyday practices.

Thus, further investigation as a result of on-going shifting gender relations within familial food practices in light of rapid social transformations, such as migration and diverse living arrangements, need to be carried out. For example, the absence of children when they have grown up and moved away from home might have an impact on the dinner table. Located specifically in China, the 'one-child' policy, economic development and the rapid internal mobility of jobs and migration have a profound impact on family structure and relationships. Such socioeconomic factors are integral in exploring the complexity of food practices, as people experience different life circumstances.

In relation to the interdependency between parents and children, individual family members' practices of food consumption have become important resources to contribute to a meaningful theoretical discussion on the discourse of the responsible self, modernity and tradition in an East Asian context (Lin, 2014; Chen and Mac an Ghaill, 2015), from which an older generation's accounts are missing from the field of inquiry. Within a cultural context in which there is a moral expectation of taking care of older family members, changing food practices might initiate potential changing gender expectations and responsibilities that are institutionalized by cultural traditions and by the law. Such negotiation of everyday eating practices illustrates the intergenerational solidarity and moral connection between adult children and their ageing parents.

Intergenerational relationships are subject to change under various living conditions, such as migration. Guo *et al.*'s study (2015) illustrates that the changing family for Chinese immigrants in Los Angles has enabled changing parent-child relationships in later life. The situation of caring for older parents has become more dynamic, depending on the needs of parents and the social-economic resources of the adult child (see Zhang *et al*., 2014). It is within the family that the practices of care are under negotiation, with reference to the nature of the intergenerational relationship within the family (Jamieson, 1998; Liu, 2017). Hence, taking care of their own health and body through food consumption can also be seen as a form of 'moral support' to their children. While the moral tradition of looking after older family members, such as being a filial son to ageing parents, also continues to be important for the relationship between children and their parents, the latter's perspectives and practices in intergenerational relations are often overlooked within the discourse of elder care.

Therefore, there is room to develop a theoretical intervention on intergenerational relations and support as a form of reflexivity regarding care taking through which the emotions (Holmes, 2010) in relation to familial practices could be made meaningful. Such an approach provides an alternative interpretation of how neoliberalism is internalized through the local and across different generations through practices on food. As explored above what older people eat and choose to eat might not simply be a health issue, but also a social and cultural act to become a supporting independent parent to help their children to realize their filial responsibility, alongside other support such as child care and housework responsibility (see Guo *et al*., 2015).

Discussion and Conclusion

When my mother explained her changing eating practices, I did not immediately respond to what she said. Rather, we continued our everyday conversation about food as I mentioned earlier. However, this autoethnographic reflection has enabled me to realise my mother's diet as a signifying practice, highlighting the multiple resources underpinning the rationale for her diet in light of her changing life circumstances as a left-behind parent, while I am an absent migrant son. Located within a global inflected social, historical and cultural context, the narratives in relation to food by older people may be seen as meaningful activities to articulate reflexive subjectivities and active ageing agency. I also highlight the possibilities of engaging older people's narratives of food and food practices as a way to revise or redefine dominant meanings of food and food practices as a form of care within a neoliberal discourse. China's economic development and changing material conditions have enabled us to

understand the impact of the emerging popular discourse of *yang sheng* in relation to food and eating in Chinese people's everyday food consumption. Equally of importance, through the lens of food as material of care in family practices (Morgan, 1996; 2011), I was able to bring to light a different layer of cultural meanings of food practices as care through a mutually constituted intergenerational account. I hope this will make a contribution to a broader theoretical discussion addressing the issue of the responsible self and governance, in light of changing personal relations within a broader socio-cultural context, such as changing family relations at different life stages.

Writing from within a western location carries a danger of re-inscribing a commonsense view that the narrative on choice is evidence of East Asian societies simply reproducing western models of globalization and late modernity politics, or simply producing a dichotomized account of east-west difference. While I address the socio-cultural specificity of the role of food and associated food practices as forms of care, I also highlight how globalization and changing material conditions continue to (re)shape our understanding and meanings of everyday life. More specifically, the study of food and changing life course potentially offers new insights into the transformation of food consumption and family relations in modern China, how and why they change, and what can we know about these stories at present which may offer a broader discussion about care and materiality through a cross-cultural discussion in the future. Returning to my conversation with my mother's own choice of food, the rationale of being a considerate loving wife, caring mother and a self-governing individual has been demonstrated by her self-actualization through her changing diet. I do not attempt to argue for my mother's food practices as a general

socio-cultural practice in China. Rather, I hope to explore the possibility of more empirical studies and reflections on changing family relations and mundane practices, such as those in relation to food, in making sense of other family relations, such as 'husband-wife' and 'father-son' that I would like to further explore elsewhere to provide more dynamic accounts of the changing self, family relations and society.

While acknowledging 'sensible consumption' of food for the purpose of *yang sheng* could result in a better health condition, as illustrated above, having a healthy body is not just an act of self-realization, it is also a relational act of being a responsible and loving parent that has enabled us to unravel mundane negotiations and new insights within the context of changing families, such as migration and ageing in this case. If we see food practices as acts that contextualize social relationships within the family, the narratives in relation to strategies of food consumption in relation to themselves and to their family members could also be seen as a critical lens to understand neoliberalism (Guthman and DuPuis, 2006) from a local Chinese perspective, situating within the context of rapid socio-cultural transformations.

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Notes

[1] I have informed my mother about the purpose of my study on this topic and obtained consent from her about being a participant of this autoethnographic study.

[2] To solve the problem of shortages of food and clothing (jiejue wenbao wenti) was the first step of the modernization stages set up at the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1987. See http://english.cpc.people.com.cn/206972/206981/8188377.html (accessed 14-04-17)

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