

Argumentative Essay

VY100 Section 2

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Of Potato Chips and Food Globalization

Potato chips are ubiquitous. These deep fried, crunchy and greasy slices, sealed in a bag or cylinder, are shelved in convenience stores of virtually every city. Despite bearing a reputation for being nutritionless, their value for research exceeds what one might expect from a cheap snack. Potato chips are a highly globalized processed food, thanks to international food corporations expanding their market. Yet on the other hand they are also localized, partly due to efforts by local branches of said corporations to cater to local demand, resulting in diverse flavors from market to market. In this paper I will use potato chips as a primary example to show that the popularity a flavor of processed food receives in a region depends on its culinary practices and the history of the food.

A particularly interesting phenomenon is that many regions feature their own set of unique flavors that are hardly found anywhere else. One example is the duo Cucumber and Salt & Vinegar, respectively found in the Sinosphere and the Anglosphere, or, for the sake of simplicity, China and Britain. Cucumber flavored potato chips are not widely known or sold in Britain; salt & vinegar flavored potato chips are just the opposite, and the minority of Chinese eaters who do enjoy them, to this day, have to purchase them abroad or from specialized stores. Product reviews on *Amazon* and *Taobao* show that, of the two, each flavor available to one region receives generally negative feedback in the other.

This observation shows that flavors are region-dependent. For a food manufacturer seeking the overseas market, simply copying all flavors of a processed food from its birthplace to another region would fail, especially if the two have little cultural overlap. There can be such unagreeable flavors that,

no matter how heavily marketed, will not be appreciated overnight. It may take years, or even generations, for the latter region's population to accept it. On the contrary, a brand new, never-before-imagined flavor could be invented there and turn out successful. What is it that determines the popularity of a flavor in a region, then? Evidently, taste is not the only reason, because there is no standard for it. This prompts us to search for social factors that consumers take into consideration when judging a flavor.

Flavor preferences of processed food are closely connected to culinary practices, in other words, how people cook. Ostensibly this may sound bizarre, since processed food is commonly believed to be an escape from the kitchen, and a consumer of processed food does not necessarily know how to cook. However, since food undergoes domestication to align better with local culture (Pilcher 33), I will show via analysis that culinary practices affect the cultural perception of a certain ingredient, and thus of a flavor. The analysis focuses on four perspectives: familiarity, social status, variety, and combination.

Familiarity is the most obvious of all. If a flavor is advertised to be made of an ingredient native to a region, it will face fewer hurdles on its way to popularity. China is the world's biggest producer as well as consumer of cucumber, which means people are more familiar with this plant. Likewise, flavors involving cheese or onion are more popular in Western countries, and seaweed flavored chips originated in Japan. Substantial consumption is beneficial but optional, as Rath pointed out that a food can act as an agent of national identity whether it is a main staple or not (82). This could explain the rise of salted egg yolk, hot pot and red braised pork belly flavors in the Sinosphere — none of the three are staples, yet all are without a doubt representative of Chinese cuisine.

Social status is the hierarchy that a culture assigns to an ingredient. To paraphrase Warde, a prestigious taste situates a person in a higher social class, and vice versa (308). In the scope of highly commodified processed food, it is approximately proportional to its price or scarcity. Rationally, it makes more sense for a consumer to opt for an ingredient higher in status, given the fact that potato

chips of common flavors cost roughly the same. Salt and vinegar as fundamental kitchen seasonings are both low in cost, and unlike fresh produce they are usually bought in bulk once every few months. Though poured into a large number of Chinese dishes, they are rarely considered vital. Except for a handful of special recipes, few would lay as much scrutiny on them as on the vegetables and meat. A flavor simply named “salt & vinegar”, as a consequence, is evaluated by Chinese consumers with a pinch of salt, and fall onto the unfavorable side of the spectrum for this reason.

Another culinary practice consumers take into account is variety, that is, the gamut of flavors that an ingredient is expected to be presented in. The wider it is, the fewer expectations will be set when one is sampling a new kind of food consisting of the ingredient, and the fewer judgments will be made should it deviate from anticipation. The so-called cucumber flavoring in potato chips contains, as the ingredient list on the package clarifies, white sugar, salt, MSG, and a mixture of cucumber, cilantro, onion, vinegar, and soy sauce, giving the chips a slightly mint-like relish which is a major drawback according to those who abhor the flavor, most of whom living in a Western country. Throughout history Chinese people have incorporated cucumber into countless dishes, simple or fancy, cold or hot, insipid or savory, traditional or modern. This means the Chinese are more likely to accept the diversity of its taste, and thus more inclined to try cucumber flavored potato chips when given the opportunity. In Britain however, cucumber, unless pickled, is more often considered a flavorless fruit found in salads with little potential other than being eaten raw, and those who encounter the rebellious, mint-like version of cucumber flavor are caught off guard. As a result this culinary underdevelopment and underappreciation contributes to the fact that very few kinds of processed food in Britain are available in cucumber flavor.

Last but not least, it is combination that amplifies judgment. In every cuisine there are unwritten rules which decree that certain ingredients may or may not coexist. Defying the rules is dangerous, as a wrong combination can form an unwelcome flavor that local people have never adapted to, and will not

accept anytime soon. Salt and vinegar is one of such combinations; they rarely pair up on a Chinese recipe. Although some dishes do require the presence of both, additional seasoning is usually added. What people expect to accompany vinegar is usually not salt, but sugar, as evidenced by the classic Chinese dish *tangcu paigu* (pork ribs in sugar and vinegar), most of whose salty taste comes from the brewed soy sauce (*shengchou*). The combination of salt and vinegar without a third companion would therefore disappoint Chinese eaters with blandness, in other words, the lack of “richness” most Chinese dishes strive to accumulate.

Each of the four reasons listed above is capable of explaining certain phenomena pertaining to potato chips. But if we were to inspect one phenomenon specifically, some reasons would fail. For instance, our first reason, namely familiarity, does not play a dominant role in affecting the popularity of salt & vinegar flavor in China. Otherwise, the flavor would be extremely widespread in China due to their abundance in a Chinese kitchen and appearance in thousands of recipes. Therefore, their failure to gain market share in China suggests there must be something inherently unpleasant to the Chinese palate about this flavor, which is why we resort to the theory of combination.

What is manifest here is that when a region makes its first encounter with an exotic flavor, culinary practices are the jury that examine whether or not the flavor belongs to local culture. Now the subsequent question is, if it does, for how long will it persist? The answer is surprisingly tautological in a way: The longer it has been, the longer it will be. To explain this we look at the history of the processed food, which matters because the assessment of a taste is formed upon historical ethnographies (Shapin 177). We can compare flavors of processed food to residents of a housing estate: Young dwellers come and go, but elder inhabitants rarely leave. In the same vein, the “elder” flavors assert their dominance in a market by being the first ones available, hence carrying historical or, sometimes, nostalgic value. The original-flavor potato chips from Lay’s Stax series are marketed as *zhongyu yuanwei* (loyal to the original) in the Chinese Mainland market. The fact that loyalty to a

flavor can be established implies its long history, which contributes to its unperishing popularity.

Cucumber flavored potato chips are documented to have been sold in China since 2004, which is 17 years prior to the time of writing, a considerable timespan in the history of China's all-round modernization. It should come with no surprise that contemporary Chinese consumers by and large take it for granted that cucumber flavor is a legitimate and acceptable option for potato chips, and it is no longer possible to discontinue it without a backlash from enthusiasts. Though it is reasonable and often proper to attribute momentary blossom to a fad, few can dispute the competence of a flavor that has endured for decades.

As to why a region has its own set of preferences, and there is no such flavor as a global favorite, we resort to the regionality of history. The countries involved in food globalization can be classified as "inventors" and "importers", two terms I have contrived. The inventors define *what* the food is, while the importers have a chance to add their touch to *how* the food will taste like by rejecting some original flavors and creating new ones. In an inventor country, the very first "classic" flavors tend to prevail. Potato chips were invented in Britain in the 19th century; seasoning on potato chips emerged in the 1950's in the same country (Joe "Spud" Murphy n.p.) Among the first few flavors that potato chips were produced in, there was salt & vinegar, which has remained popular in Britain ever since. They achieve as much popularity as longevity, eventually becoming an essential, unseverable part of the food itself.

An importer country however, having missed the infancy of the processed food, does not necessarily respect its history whence it came. Instead, it keeps its own history relative to its time of arrival; it may also reject flavors that defy culinary practices it has passed on as a form of cultural heritage and demand a local variant to its own need (Pilcher 33). Venerable flavors in an inventor country thus lose their natural advantage once imported, and relatively recent flavors developed in the importer country find them less challenging to contend with and eventually overtake. To some extent,

domestic flavors compensate for the exotic ones that failed the race, and the result is a distinct set of naturalized flavors that adhere to local culinary practices, formed gradually over the course of a shifting equilibrium.

One could argue culture and history are not as important as they used to be in affecting the popularity of a flavor in an importer country. This is true, since the advent of big data and high internet coverage have made consumer preferences on social media over the past month crystal clear to merchants, whose only duty is to produce the trending flavors as quickly as possible (Cavish n.p.) What was once an inconceivable feat is now the norm. Being novelty-driven and built upon consumers' curiosity, these extraordinarily creative flavors tend to be short-lived and reach out to an audience consisting of barely anyone else than urban young consumers. Hardly any of these flavors can achieve long-term survival in such a saturated market. The short attention span of modern consumers and social media is to blame, but the ultimate reason lies within the flavors themselves. They have never been domesticated, that is, adapted to the local palate, and given such a short lifespan, it is most likely the case that they will never be, before they are flushed away from the market. My best attempt at a metaphor here is a zoo: Visitors may admire the wild, "novel" animals on display, but few will keep one as a pet. In the long run, only flavors that truly respect local culture will receive the visa for a permanent stay, and then establish loyalty. Therefore, even in contemporary times, novelty and viral marketing cannot override culinary practices and history.

Junk food as potato chips are, they are an epitome of how a processed food is globalized and, as I have analyzed in this paper, how its flavors are assessed by consumers inside and outside of its birthplace. The reasons listed are not exhaustive, nor can I claim my theories to be comprehensive. I have certainly overlooked many intrinsic complexities of food globalization, and due to my limited knowledge and a Chinese background with chiefly Euro-American influence, my arguments may be

overturned once a third culture is taken into account. Nevertheless, I hope this paper serves as food for thought for whoever wishes to investigate this subject in greater detail.

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