

# The Roles of Vegan Meat in Contemporary China

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## ABSTRACT

As the population grows rapidly around the world, the demand for available food resources is increasing simultaneously. Meat has been on the diet of human for millions of years, while it is not sustainable. Ultimately, its substitute vegan meat gradually comes into people's view. In China, plant has a longer history than meat due to the ancient agricultural civilization, which allows vegan meat to compete with real meat in the market. Nevertheless, most people still cannot accept the existence of vegan meat in their diet or do not perceive the vegan meat as a food. Therefore, the article will interpret the role of the vegan meat in terms of contact zone and social trends in contemporary China and figure out its importance in people's diet.

**Keywords:** Contact zone, Symbolization, Environmental concern, sociality

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Vegan meat, also known as the plant-based meat, has prevailed around the world in nowadays. Most of the vegan meats are in the form of beef, chicken, and pork and so on. For instance, the *suji*<sup>1</sup> in China is viewed as family meal for the people who want to lose the weight. Apparently, the ingredients of the vegan meat come from soya bean and mushroom. Therefore, the vegan meat contains the flavor and texture of real meat and the nutrition of plants. In China, the vegan meat takes place mostly in the restaurant within the temple because of the religious practices of *Ahimsa*<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, why vegan meat but not just vegetable; How people transform from meatatarian to vegans; How attractive the vegan meat is for people who love meat, is it because of the flavor, or people tend to switch to a healthier diet; Are there any social trends influencing people's diet, such as concern toward the environmental crisis due to the carbon emission, or vegan meat become a new type of communicated tool between friends which resemble to tea and alcohol. Those question raises the investigation on vegan meat. Besides, many existing literatures primarily focus on the relationship between cooking and human identity [1]. However, there is less focus on the relationship between vegan culture and influencer community. Therefore, this essay intends to explore the following two aspects: 1) the role of vegan

meat in the people with lachanophobia; 2) the influence of social trend on the choice of food.

## 2. CONSUMER

As a new product appearing in the market, vegan meat is not that widespread. In China, 34.1% were not at all familiar with plant-based meat; 36.1% were moderately or slightly familiar, and 29.9% were very or extremely familiar [9]. Based on the data above, the popularity of vegan meat is not really high. While in this 66%, most consumers are meat eaters instead of vegetarians. Besides, the consuming regions and distribution of vegan meat are mainly in high developed area such as urban areas. In Tucker's study, it is estimated that men, younger people, and city-dwellers were more likely to eat cultured meat than women, the older people, and rural participants [12]. One possible reason is that cities have high population with well educational background and high incomes. The fast pace of life makes people living in the cities more receptive and willing to try new things to improve their tedious life. While in the countryside, the major food resources still come from conventional agriculture and livestock farming. Plus, the average ages of people living in the countryside is pretty old comparing to those in cities, and they are conservative in many aspects due to the lack of scientific knowledge on the vegan meat. Therefore, it is difficult for those people to change their dietary habit from eating real meat to vegan meat, because they are not familiar with the emerging

products and hard to accept it. In addition to the consumer group of vegan meat, the route of information transmission is also worth to discuss, which also contributes to the consumption of vegan meat. An unprecedented channel for information transmission has been provided by computer networks. For instance, the rising of *mukbang*<sup>3</sup> and Vlogs promotes the spread of vegan meat. Audiences can virtually experience the taste of a certain food based on the reaction of the streamer toward the food, because the streamer will try to persuade the audience how tasted the product is. Thus, people are tending to purchase the product after they being immersive.

### 3. CONTACT ZONE

The consumption of vegan meat is rising due to the open and inclusive society in China. According to the investigation on Chinese consumer groups, most of the people are not identify themselves as vegan, while the interest in vegan meat is based on culture and the increasing on health awareness [2]. For example, the fitness crowds are afraid of the intake of grease, while requiring abundant of protein. The vegan meat not only exclude the grease from meat but also contain plant-based protein, which fit the requirements of fitness crowds.

Vegan meat also plays a crucial role in helping those who did not like vegetables or have lachanophobia transit to a healthier lifestyle in a smooth way. According to scientific investigation, consuming high levels of animal protein will impair physical health in the long term, and high protein plants can justify the transition towards plant-based protein supplementations [3]. Based on the reciprocal relationship, it is important to clarify the “transition” that mentioned above. Borrowing from Clifford’s concept, the author proposes to define vegan meat as a “contact zone” between vegetables and meat. According to James Clifford, contact zone is a space of exchange, negotiation and communication [4]. Based on this interpretation, contact zone can be applied to the role of vegan meat, since they share the same characteristics of reconciliation and intermediation. Firstly, the vegan meat places in the middle stage of meat and plants, combining the taste of meat and the nutrition of plant, which is healthy due to the low salt, low sugar (meat dish contains added sugar for Chinese cuisine), and less preservatives. Regarding to the people with lachanophobia, who are afraid of the vegetables and believes that meat is tastier because of the texture and flavor, they cannot absorb sufficient nutrition from plant, which is harmful to human body. Therefore, they have alternatives such as vegan duck or vegan beef, enjoying the meat-like taste and intaking the nutrition simultaneously. Moreover, vegan meat also

brings psychological comfort in terms of illusion for eyes and tongue. People with lachanophobia do not feel like they are eating green leaf’s vegetable since the vegan meat looks and tastes like real meat. Thus, they will not have psychological resistance during the eating process. As they eat more and adapt this kind of diet, they become accustomed to the presence of vegetable consciously since they know they are actually eating vegetable in other forms, which makes them more receptive to vegetable in the future. Refer to this example, the author inferring that with the intervention of vegan meat, those people with lachanophobia indirectly transform from hostility toward vegetable to accepting the presence of vegetable. Besides, most of the vegan meat meal that offered by the restaurant is not only contain vegan meat but also accompany by the green leaf’s vegetable. For those who just do not like to eat vegetables. For people without lachanophobia but do not like to eat vegetables- green leaf’s vegetable plays a role of decoration, which makes the appearance of the dish less monotonous and abrupt, as well as establishing the integrity for the dish. The meat-like appearance of vegan meat plus the green leaf’s vegetable brings the overall feeling of comprehensiveness. People will feel like they are eating meat and vegetables at the same time even though the food is vegetable-based.

### 4. SYMBOLIZATION

Vegan meat has already become a symbol of wealth among the affluent class in China due to the consumer groups. Regarding to the price of vegan meat meal, the true value is based on the cuisine methods rather than the raw-food material itself. In China, people are focusing on the taste, pursuing the various cooking methods that implement on the raw-food materials regardless of its commercial value or rarity. For instance, there are 40 ways to manufacture a chicken, such as stir-frying, steaming, braising, and boiling. It seems that most of the cooking methods are similar to each other, while the slightly change on temperature, also known as heat control, or time will totally alter the taste of the same materials. Despite the way they cook, spice and sauce are indispensable. Back to the vegan meat with the same cooking methods as real meat, even though the price of real meat is usually higher than vegetable, the way one manufactures the vegetable into the meat-like form is time-consuming because most of the fancy restaurants tend to import the raw-food material from local farmer without processing by factory, which means that the chef needs to spend time on shaping the vegetables into the meat-like form, and preparing the suitable sauce. From an overall perspective, the expensive vegan meat meal is determined by the meticulous processes and careful production. As famous sociologist Bourdieu mentioned before, habitus is acquired as a group thought, behavior, and mode of leisure activities. The concept of habitus

connects lifestyle and class position reflected in a series of practical activities in such areas as consumption [5]. It is interpreted that consumption relates to the social status. For instance, upper class pursues the novelty and luxury to enrich their life, while middle class and lower class pursue the stability and necessity to maintain their life. Therefore, only the affluent class can afford the vegan meat in China, which reveals that vegan meat is not cheap as people thought before.

Nevertheless, the vegan meat not only symbolizes the wealth but also the social trend. Contemporarily, global warming has become a serious problem, which is caused by the increased concentrations of greenhouse gases, also known as methane, in the atmosphere, mainly from human activities such as livestock cultivation. Based on the investigation on livestock and climate change, the most important greenhouse gases from animal agriculture are Methane which is a gas with an effect on global warming 28 times higher than carbon dioxide [6]. If the emission of the methane is eliminated, apparently the global warming will slow down due to the large proportion of methane in the factors. Therefore, increasing on the demand for vegan meat can implicitly reduce the livestock cultivation. In other words, the fewer animals that grazing on the land, the less methane will be produced. Furthermore, the ending of livestock cultivation also marks the end to exploitation of animals, an end to most deforestation, a massive reduction in the use of pesticides and fertilizer, the end of trawlers and longliners [8]. It seems that the rising of vegan affects the whole industrial chain in a positive way, corresponding to the popular idea of environment-friendly. For those who care about the environmental problem, they will embrace the vegan meat as a respond to their beliefs of environmental protection.

In addition to environment, vegan meat is also a tool for sociality. In nowadays, vegan meat has already come to the attention of the larger Chinese public. People want to become more likeable in social events, and eating vegan food helps them create good impression when socializing with other people, just like the tea culture in China. The traditional view of eating meat is described as cruel and brutal, because if people want to eat meat, they need to kill the animals having consciousness, which disobey the traditional beliefs of Ahimsa<sup>2</sup>. On the contrary, eating plant and vegetable demonstrates the simplicity, calmness and benevolence, which can help people shape the personality of kind and approachable in front of others.

## 5. POTENTIAL PROBLEM

Admittedly, the vegan indirectly ensures the environmental quality and potentially improves the health. Nevertheless, the nutrition and flavor of the vegan meat still be a concern. Unlike the real meat,

vegan meat is difficult to inhibit the flavor derived from raw materials; release of flavor substances between raw materials and substrate, and the dynamic changes in flavor during meat processing [10]. Due to this result, the degree of satisfaction will decline, which will directly affect the sale volume of vegan meat and the investment on it. Besides, the vegan meat is healthy but not nutritionally adequate, because plant-based meat will inevitably lose some nutrients that exist naturally or are added as supplements during the manufacturing process [11]. Even though the lack of some certain nutrients will not harm people's health immediately, it will cause healthy problem in the long term.

## 6. FUTURE DIRECTION

As time goes by, people start realize that the current livestock cultivation is unsustainable. Therefore, future of vegan meat is optimistic because of the concern over the food security on real meat. It's estimated that the outbreak of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) crisis led to consumers increased demand for meat substitutes [7]. The crisis brings the opportunity for vegan meat to rise up in the market, presenting a huge profitable prospect. However, how to capture this opportunity is the further research that should be done in this field, because the vegan meat is not absolutely nutritionally adequate or tasted even though the imitation techniques have already matured. Therefore, how to win the broad consumer acceptance is the priority. The food anthropologists should focus on the development of vegan meat flavor, or perfect the manufacturing process without lacking any necessary ingredients. More importantly, the price of the vegan meat should lower down and become affordable, which aim to enhance the market competitiveness. In addition, the role of vegan meat can be promoted through the media reports. For instance, science and education channel can introduce the benefits of eating vegan meat. The more opportunities for vegan meat to appear on the screen, the more likely people will know its existence, which effectively spread the awareness. Therefore, its role will gradually become important.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this essay has briefly discussed the roles of vegan meat in contemporary China in terms of contact zone and symbols. The paper suggests that vegan meat plays a transitional role in people with lachanophobia and vegetarian's diet, because its appearance and flavor resemble to the real meat, providing a comfort zone for those people to supplement the necessary nutrition. Furthermore, the study indicates the symbols of vegan meat in nowadays such as social tools and trends. Even though vegan meat plays an important role in daily life and access to people's diet successfully, there is still nutrient issues on intaking the

vegan meat in the long term, and the flavor of vegan meat may be destroyed during the manufacturing process. The investigation scope of vegan meat's role is limited in urban city but not includes the countryside or undeveloped area. The limitation may cause the misinterpretation on the roles of vegan meat in detail or overgeneralization. Therefore, the further study will extend to the undeveloped areas like countryside and analyze the similarity of the role of vegan meat between urban and countryside.

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