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What Cultured Meat Can Tell Us About China

A new survey on a niche product provides a window into changing attitudes, and even has implications for Chinese national security.



By [Bonnie Girard](#)

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Credit: [Depositphotos](#)

Tucked away in a corner of the complex landscape of China is a story about evolving Chinese food preferences. This straightforward story, however, involves larger themes of consequence in China today. One is the question of whether the average

Chinese citizen feels safe in giving an opinion on a simple, non-political issue. In contrast, another is the increasing open-mindedness in much of Chinese society toward trying new things. A third is the very national security of China itself as expressed by President and General Secretary of the Communist Party of China Xi Jinping.

Surprising Chinese Attitudes Toward Cultured Meat

The platform tying these core issues together is a recent research project surveying Chinese opinions on “cultured meat.” The boutique consultancy [Hub of China](#) researched the opinions of middle-class consumers, a demographic that the team had already determined was willing to at least consider trying out cultured, often called in vitro or lab-grown, meat.

That willingness may be due to not only connections with and exposure to the West, but also to a “growing awareness,” particularly among the young, of social, ethical, and environmental issues, including animal welfare.

Cultured meat, according to an [article published by the U.S. National Institutes of Health](#), is made by a process that recreates the “complex structure of livestock muscles with a few cells.” To do so, “a biopsy is taken from a live animal. This piece of muscle will be cut to liberate the stem cells, which have the ability to proliferate but can also transform themselves into different types of cells, such as muscle cells and fat cells.” Cells then begin to divide and ultimately, a form of meat, depending on one’s definition, is produced.

As dubiously appetizing as that may sound, there have been advances since the first cultured meat hamburger was produced by Professor Mark Post from Maastricht University in 2013, at a reported cost of \$300,000. Since then, the cost has come down to \$9, according to the NIH-published research report.

Back to Hub of China’s study: Researchers found that only 2.5 percent of Chinese at large have even any awareness of cultured meat. David Joseph, Hub of

China's founder, suggested that this percentage is "a lot higher" in Western countries.

The Willingness to Express, But More Cautiously

That Hub of China is able to conduct such surveys in China at all is a story in itself. In a society in which the government and the ruling China Communist Party have taken surveillance and monitoring of Chinese citizens to an obsessive level, it is a wonder that people are willing to raise their heads and answer questions about any aspect of life. As Chinese who lived through the Cultural Revolution know only too well, the answer to even something so seemingly innocuous as "Would you try this food?" could be convoluted and construed as a damning political statement.

The Diplomat asked Joseph if he runs into resistance when approaching Chinese citizens to participate in his firm's surveys.

Indeed, his answer is a reflection of the changes in tone and societal trust in China since Xi took power.

Joseph said that "In recent years we have certainly noticed it becoming more difficult to add new citizens to the database as there does seem to be a greater suspicion about giving out data (than in the past), and we get more questions about what the data will be used for... With regards to focus groups, participants also seem less keen on being filmed and wish to remain anonymous."

He added that they don't survey on "particularly sensitive issues" and that, as an established company in his field, people are fine with responding "as long as they know how the data will be used."

However, Joseph said, he thinks that "if we were just starting up it would be very difficult to gain the trust of Chinese citizens to provide us their data."

In terms of the survey results themselves, Hub of China reports that 75 percent of respondents were "willing to try" curated meat products. While only 40 percent would actually prefer the cultured meat product to its "conventional" counterpart.

Nonetheless 65 percent were willing to buy those cultured products.

Speaking to the willingness of Chinese citizens to dive into the new and the unknown, however, is another data point from the research.

Very few respondents had prior knowledge of cultured meat. “After reading descriptions of it, 90 percent of respondents indicated they were interested in learning more,” the researchers reported. So much for conservative China.

Food Security in China

Ironically, however, the subject of cultured meat may be a more sensitive subject for the Chinese government than researchers may have originally taken into account.

In both words and actions, China has been signaling that it has a food shortage problem.

[Xi has personally proclaimed](#) that the security of both seeds as well as ample food supplies is a matter of national security. Indeed, Chinese government statistics show that imports of grains, foods, and seeds shot to record levels in 2020.

Most tellingly, on July 6, Xinhua, China’s official state media outlet, [stated on its English-language site](#) that “in 2020, the COVID-19 epidemic brought great challenges to the global food market.”

The article goes on to quote Xi as saying that “the more risks and challenges we face, the more we need to stabilize agriculture and ensure the safety of grain and major non-staple foods.”

Reading between the lines of those two statements is China’s official acknowledgement that its own food security was challenged. In case that message was missed, however, Xinhua quotes Xi as saying it outright.

“The foundation of China’s food security is still unstable, and the situation is still grim,” Xinhua reports Xi as stating.

The key points of grain production “must be addressed earnestly and properly to attain breakthroughs in grain production,” Xi is quoted as saying, going on to emphasize, as he has done in the past, that curtailing food waste is “part of the effort to ensure food security.”

Public statements admitting deficiency and weakness in any facet of the CCP’s leadership of China are rare.

Xi’s comments on food waste refer to an unwelcome trend in China. During the last 25 years of an ever-increasing bounty of food, particularly in urban areas, a culture of over-ordering in restaurants and leaving a significant portion uneaten took hold in China. Many Chinese attributed this to over-compensation for earlier times of lean food supplies, and the famine years of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Others have called it an expression of newfound prosperity that allows people to show off their wealth by discarding food.

For a society often seen from the outside as closed, rigid, and impenetrable, Chinese have shown themselves to be nimble, open, and adventurous in exploring not only formerly off-limits geographical places, but also new and interesting technological spaces.

Culturally, there are few societies on Earth which enjoy a long and fulsome meal as much as the vast majority of Chinese do. Accustomed to a wide variety of tastes, textures, and types of food, the crucial component of acceptance for anything new is a guarantee that those products are safe, secure, and healthy.

Cultured meat products that have met those milestones are yet to become a mass market product offering anywhere, including China.

But when they do, the groundwork of political messaging that these products can help China to enhance its food security, and therefore its greater independence from foreign nations, will have already been laid. Policymakers may wish to take heed.

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