

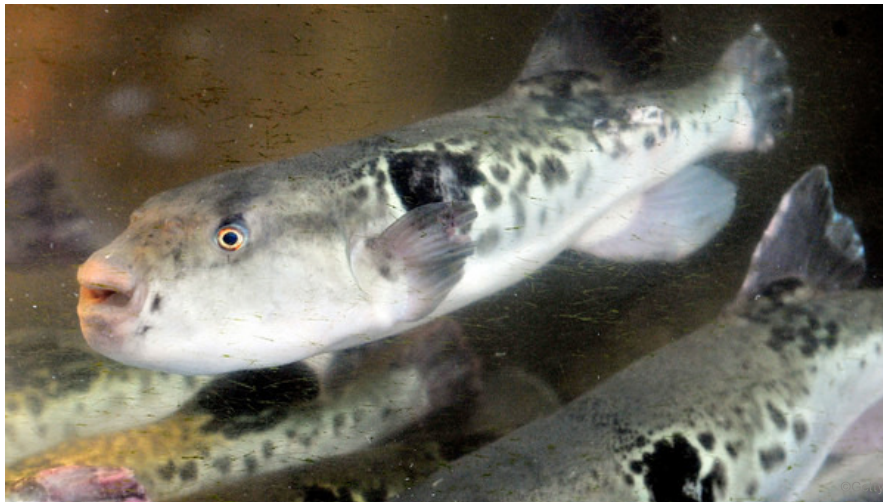
NOTEBOOK

April 30, 2013 6:19 pm

Puffer-fish protests and Xi's China dream

By Patti Waldmeir in Shanghai

Until the link between corruption and development can be severed, no official can savour his swordfish



Something about the tale just did not add up: several hundred people turn up to protest because officials of a provincial city in China are eating swordfish, puffer fish and other forms of lethal seafood at the taxpayer's expense?

Sure, there's an austerity drive on in China: these days, bloated bureaucrats are not meant to be eating, drinking or being merry at public expense. But ordinary Chinese have been watching their unelected representatives gorge themselves on their tax renminbi for decades. Surely it takes more than another government anti-corruption campaign to rouse them to revolution?

Granted, there is no shortage of public anger in China at governmental graft, greed and gluttony. That, presumably, is why almost half a million people watched the video of the puffer fish protest online – complete with lingering shots of the masticated detritus of the meal and moving footage of Zhang Aihua, the government host, apparently kneeling on the table to beg forgiveness. No one can quite agree on exactly what he said then, or even whether he was really kneeling. He may have said something like: "I am your son, your grandson, I know I am wrong," or maybe it was more like: "All of you are my parents who pay me." And maybe he just lost his footing: some onlookers say he was pleading with people to leave the prefabricated building where the banquet was held, for fear it would collapse – not asking forgiveness for the size of his publicly funded gut. But whatever he said, it was too little too late: with an alacrity not normally associated with local governments in China, he was removed from office pronto.

So it's not hard to understand why social network-savvy Chinese would fire up their iPhones to watch Mr Zhang humiliate himself. But what were hundreds of people doing at the government offices watching him eat in the first place – rather than being at home on the couch watching Qing dynasty soap operas or reality television shows like they normally would be?

And that is where the story gets more interesting – not to mention more worrying for China's leaders. As it turns out, the reason so many people were hanging around the offices of the state-owned Taizhou Binjiang industrial park, in the eastern city of Taizhou, was because they had a bone to pick with Mr Zhang quite apart from the aforementioned fish bones.

Local newspapers report (and calls to local residents confirm) that the banquet protest was almost accidental: the protesters went to the park offices to complain about a land dispute. The local government is forcibly expropriating their land, in the name of economic development – and there's nothing new about that in China. They say they are not being paid enough money to move out of houses threatened by proximity to a new petrochemical plant. So the puffer fish protest was really part environmental and part plain old Nimby dispute. And those are a lot harder to handle than official eating disorders.

As you read this, residents of the Shanghai suburb of Songjiang – appropriately, the same suburb that has recently had more than 10,000 dead pigs floating in its water supply – are trying to find a way to resist the construction of an electric car battery plant on their doorstep. (It is the same suburb whose river recently turned white because of illegal dumping by a local Apple supplier.)

But it remains to be seen whether a protest against the battery plant planned for the May Day holiday will go ahead: security police have been making uninvited visits to both the Songjiang and Taizhou protesters. The government knows that if President Xi Jinping is to deliver the “China dream” of greater affluence for ordinary citizens, he needs petrochemical plants and probably electric car battery factories to do it. And there is no shortage of government officials willing to take a bribe to make sure those plants get built in their backyards, whatever the environmental consequences.

So that may be the real message of the Taizhou dinner revolt: you can put government officials on a diet of Yangzhou fried rice and water for a while, and you can even banish Rolexes from their wrists and Porsches from their parking lots. But until the link between corruption and development can be severed, no government official can safely savour his swordfish. The growth of the middle class in China means the rise of the Nimbies – and Mr Zhang may not be the last one who ends up kowtowing for his life to them.

patti.waldmeir@ft.com

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NOTEBOOK

September 3, 2013 4:27 pm

The mooncake is eclipsed by the age of austerity

By Patti Waldmeir in Shanghai

The bland pastry favoured by bureaucrats and crony capitalists is no longer being blinged up, writes Patti Waldmeir

Whose head will be the next to roll in Beijing's anti-corruption campaign? Sinologists all over the world are reading the teacup dregs on that one right now, but I prefer to read the price tags on mooncakes at the local supermarket. And I can report that the new age of austerity has led to a fairly steep devaluation of the renmin-mooncake.

Mooncakes are the fruitcake of the Orient: more of a gesture than a pastry. The luxury variety – popular for gifting by bureaucrats, mandarins and crony capitalists – come in gift boxes that are worth several times the value of the concoction of suet and duck egg yolk inside. Recent years have seen a veritable arms race in mooncake packaging, with millions of renminbi wasted each year on cakes that no one ever gets around to eating (though the secondary market in mooncake regifting is quite active). But now outré is out and austerity is all. The days of the jewel-encrusted mooncake may be numbered.

The official People's Daily reported on the front page of its Monday edition that the mooncake market had returned to its senses this year, the result of a government ban on using public funds to buy the traditional pastries which mark the celebration of the lunar "mid-autumn festival" later this month. "Unhealthy trends" – such as using government money to buy jewels to decorate the mooncake, presumably – have been stamped out, like Bo Xilai's political career.

The People's Daily celebrates the fact that most gift sets in the grocery store these days cost less than Rmb200 (\$33) – and unlike last year, it is hard to find any priced more than Rmb1,000. And it seems mooncakes stuffed with shark fin – a symbol of excess if ever there was one – have disappeared from markets in one southern city, according to Guangdong's Foshan Daily.

It is not just government officials who are shy about splashing out on the mooncake de luxe this year: one Chinese newspaper last week quoted a purveyor of five-star pastries in Shanghai saying that pharmaceutical companies had slashed their mooncake budget this year too. Call it the GSK effect; GlaxoSmithKline is facing corruption investigations for allegedly wooing doctors with free, or even fake, conferences in China. The pharma industry can hardly risk a fake mooncake scandal on top of that.

And even mooncake coupon touts are complaining. Mooncake gift coupons are normally purchased by companies to give to their staff, or as the favourite currency of graft for officials at holiday time. But this year the bottom seems to have fallen out of the scalping market too, with touts reporting that the coupon supply has dried up.

It is not, it seems, just a matter of mooncakes: prices of crabs, another traditional holiday delicacy, are being heavily discounted, in part (merchants surmise) because of the austerity campaign. Shops along Hong Kong's malodorous if atmospheric "dried seafood street" say the campaign has depressed sales of traditional banquet foods such as dried abalone, shark fin and bird's nest. Sales of high-end liquors used to grease the wheels of graft have also been hit hard; Maotai, the favourite firewater of Chinese officials, reported this week that revenue growth had fallen to the lowest rate since 2003 – when sales were hit by the Sars epidemic.

Moon festival television galas – the kind of larger-than-life entertainment that gives China's modern culture its unique over-the-top flavour – have been cancelled by many provincial stations and even CCTV, the national broadcaster, says it is counting on donations (from, among other things, overseas Chinese) to stage the show. Next year's Chinese New Year gala – the high point of the TV-viewing year for many Chinese families – promises to be a rather frugal affair.

In fact, China risks turning into a pale imitation of its former self, if abstemiousness sets in for good. Government buildings, which can always be counted on to take architectural excess to new levels, are being reined in. Government employees are being told to stay in budget hotels and take public transport when they travel. One local government has even ordered officials to carpool in its cars when they travel outside their county.

Will all this add up to a China where thrift is the new graft? It is far too soon to read that into the tea leaves yet. But mooncake prices do not lie: the graft industry is suffering. Just watch out for a lot of old mooncake regifting next year. Fruitcake, anyone?

patti.waldmeir@ft.com

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NOTEBOOK

November 12, 2013 6:41 pm

Think 'The Sound of Music', with yaks

By Patti Waldmeir in Shanghai

The very least you might expect in western China is a measure of privacy, writes Patti Waldmeir



"I've got some banking to do, would you mind waiting here for me?" asked the deferential young security policeman assigned to follow me everywhere on my recent holiday in western China.

It seemed only fair: he had waited for me while I did my own banking earlier in the day, and had even offered advice on what traditional Chinese medicine could combat my altitude sickness in his native Xiahe, a mountain town that is also home to the Labrang monastery, one of the most important centres of Tibetan Buddhism outside Tibet. He seemed a nice young chap and he was only doing his job: making sure that I didn't accidentally interview anyone Tibetan while on my holiday.

Since I don't speak Tibetan, and most Tibetans I met apparently spoke neither Mandarin nor English, the chance of any meaningful communication taking place between us seemed slim – even on topics such as whether the hotel had hot water (it did not) and what time was the next bus out of there. Luckily for me, my policeman friend was there to help me buy a bus ticket; I knew his bosses would want to know where I was headed next anyway, and figured it would be easier for us all if he actually saw my bus ticket. That way he could be sure to have another helpful policeman meet me when in the next town: no wasting time waiting for my tail to arrive.

In fact, my holiday had nothing to do with the topic that got me my own personal security detail – Tibetans. I wasn't even in Tibet. I was in western China's Gansu province, where I had gone to live for a few days with nomad yak herders. It never occurred to me to worry about their ethnicity.

I was more focused on the fact that, living with them, I would be sleeping on the ground in a yak-hair tent, collecting yak dung at dawn for fuel. I spent a while figuring out how many pairs of long johns to pack and whether I might be allergic to the tent. I indulged unnecessary concerns about: a) spending three days on horseback getting there, b) sleeping at 4,000 metres without getting altitude sickness and c) charging my iPhone without a plug. Interviewing Tibetans who only speak Tibetan was never on my radar.

In fairness to my security detail, I chose a poor moment for this little jaunt – a fortnight before the leadership meeting of the Chinese Communist party, traditionally a time when security folks throughout China are at their jumpiest.



Fortunately, my personal policemen drew the line at forming a posse on horseback. They gallantly helped me – a white-haired lady old enough to be their grandmother – carry my luggage. They dispensed thoughtful advice on the need to dress warmly when sleeping in a tent in winter. And they politely wondered why on earth I wanted to do it in the first place. But when it came to putting foot to stirrup, I was on my own. Sleeping with yaks is apparently not on the list of things prohibited for foreign journalists living in China. Who knew?

So I set off on an unshod horse with a temperament to match the inhospitable weather. After many frigid hours in the saddle I ended up in the lap of Tibetan luxury: a tent heated by yak-dung stove, a kettle on the hob and a bowl of fragrant yak-milk yoghurt to greet me.

In a country of 1.4bn people, we'd ridden an entire day and seen only one other human – for miles in any direction nothing but high pastureland and snow-capped peaks. *The Sound of Music*, with yaks.

My Tibetan hosts and I had no common language, so no risk of any accidental interviewing there. There was no time anyway: the lady of the house rose at dawn to scoop up the poop deposited the night before by her 50-strong herd, and spread it out to dry for use as fuel. I traipsed around behind her, feebly struggling to carry one heavy yak pat while she carried a basketful, and failing to milk even one yak while she filled a bucket with yak nectar.

And when I wasn't following her, a yak or a child was following me – especially when I left the tent to avail myself of the miles and miles of uninterrupted grassland that serve as the local loo. One particular old yak dogged my every step when I left the tent for call-of-nature purposes, as did the family's toddler: neither responded to imprecations in English, Chinese, or sign language to desist. Yaks, kids, policemen, all this togetherness gets a bit much after a while. What a relief to be back in Shanghai, where Big Brother may still be

watching, but at least he lets me visit the bank, bus station and loo without an escort.

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NOTEBOOK

November 26, 2013 4:48 pm

After the Plenum, sell pianos and dairy

By Patti Waldmeir in Shanghai

The easing of the one-child policy has put the pocketbook in focus, writes Patti Waldmeir

China relaxed its so-called one-child policy this month, and everything from online opinion polls to piano stocks jumped for joy. The theory seemed to be that the only thing keeping Chinese couples from breeding more piano players was Communist party policy.

Of course, even in planned economies things are rarely so simple – especially when sex, money and tiger mums are involved. The policy change will allow couples to bear a second child if one of them is an only child; previously they both had to be singletons. It's probably safe to assume that many of the babies born as a result will learn to play the piano. What's riskier is assuming that there will be a baby boom in the first place.

Symbolically, emotionally and possibly politically, the policy change is a big deal. For most people most of the time, the party stays out of their private lives – except when it comes to procreation. The further Nanny steps away from the nursery, the more popular she will be.

But don't go long on piano stocks just yet: nearly two-thirds of the population is already allowed to have two or more children under the exception-riddled one-child policy; the official news agency Xinhua says only 37.5 per cent of the populace came under the one-child shackle, even before the recent change.

So the party was previously already allowing plenty of people to breed doubles. But many declined, because procreation – in China as elsewhere – is often determined less by policy than by the pocketbook.

Online opinion polls published since the change have routinely shown that 50, 60 or even 70 per cent of respondents say they want to have two children. In one such poll, 90 per cent of respondents over the age of 46 said they wanted two. This either means it's time to go long on fertility clinic stocks – or that people are more willing to have a second child online than in reality.

In Shanghai, more than 80 per cent of the child-bearing population was already allowed to have a second child under the old policy, says demographer He Yafu. But the city's birth rate is under one – which means many couples are unwilling to have any kids at all, let alone a pair.

But it seems other cities share Shanghai's unwillingness – or inability – to deliver a second child. Beijing family planning commission figures for 2010 show that 93 per cent of total births in that year were first children and, as of the latest census, the birth rate in Beijing was about the same as in Shanghai.

Demographer He points out that China is not the only country where people deliver fewer babies than they say they will – sometimes infertility means they cannot. Japan's "fertility intention" is 2.0, he says, but actual fertility is only 1.3.

Of course, some couples in China do want two or more children – and over the years, plenty have managed to have them, whatever the rule book said. Again, it's often a pocketbook issue: in some areas, fines for excess births are up to three times' annual income – but in others, child number two costs less than an iPhone.

Zhang Yimou, China's most famous film-maker, has seven of them (kids, not iPhones), and could owe as much as Rmb160m in fines. But population planners in charge of enforcing the fine said last week that they couldn't find him to extract it. Big Brother must have been off work that day. Or maybe he was too busy forcing poor mothers to abort their late-term foetuses, as still happens to some not married to famous filmmakers.

But whether the change portends a giant leap for reproductive freedom, or just a small step towards boosting a critically low urban birth rate, almost everyone is delighted – including grandparents happy to get another crack at reviving bloodlines that will otherwise die out. About half of those who voted for a second child in the Shanghai Daily poll did so for dynastic reasons, or so that the second child could help look after them in their dotage.

Once they do the maths, though, many couples think otherwise: some urban families spend up to half their monthly income importing safe formula for their newborn. Buying a flat in a serviced retirement home would surely be cheaper than raising a child from infancy,



26/2/2014

After the Plenum, sell pianos and dairy- FT.com

complete with keyboards. So short pianos and dairy, go long on elderly care. China is likely to have a grandparent boom long before it has a baby bulge.

patti.waldmeir@ft.com

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NOTEBOOK

December 10, 2013 3:31 pm

Breathe in that dirty doublethink

By Patti Waldmeir in Shanghai

Shanghai's solution to the 'airpocalypse': 'adjust' the pollution standard, says Patti Waldmeir



Clogged: a rush-hour traffic jam on a Shanghai highway

Last year, Shanghai's favourite winter sport was checking the air pollution readings in Beijing and gloating over how high they were. That's not so much fun this year. In the past week Shanghai has wracked up its worst pollution since records began, with the concentration of deadly PM_{2.5} fine particles topping 600 micrograms per cubic metre on Friday afternoon, at a time when Beijing's level was half that. (The World Health Organisation's safe level is 25 µg/m₃ as a daily mean.)

The Shanghai government has the perfect solution to the current "airpocalypse": it "adjusted" the city's pollution standard so that it would trigger fewer hazard warnings. What a relief, it was so annoying constantly being warned about the deadly assault on my lungs. Now my lungs are on their own – what they don't know, won't hurt them.

Then some Communist party media outlets helpfully pointed out that smog is actually good for me. In an online commentary titled "Five unexpected gains the haze has brought", state media said air pollution made people funnier, more knowledgeable and more "united". "People all over the country have found sadly that we are equal in front of smog . . . no one is better than anyone else," it said. Then Global Times opined that smog is actually part of China's air defence strategy, protecting us from enemy bombs. It's enough to make a girl feel lucky she doesn't live in, say, New Zealand.

It is easy to dismiss this kind of doublethink as some Communist thing, but it is not just the party engaging in it – everyone is doing it. Ask the ladies who gather at 7.15pm daily, on Golden City Avenue near the junction of Ruby Road and Silver Pearl Street, to engage in China's most popular senior sport, public line dancing. (Think "Gangnam Style", without the giddy up.)

They are the elderly vanguard of an exercise wave that has swept middle-class China in the past few years, as everything from jogging to gym memberships has shot up in line with rising bank balances. Visit any public square in the city – from postage stamp gardens outside low-rise housing projects, to massive plazas outside oversized shopping centres – and you will find old ladies dancing.

There is just one problem with this otherwise laudable attack of health consciousness: it couldn't have come at a worse time. Outdoor exercise is all well and good, but it is found to be most beneficial when taking in gulps of air is not quite so painful.

And that is where the doublethink comes in. On December 1, on a bright and mild Sunday morning, Shanghai held its annual marathon. Some 35,000 people turned out for it, three times as many as a decade ago. Few seemed to care that pollution on that day was so bad that, later in the day, when the grannies prepared for their evening boogie, the Shanghai government told them they had better stay on the couch.

Sun Rongwei, 25, ran that marathon and he justifies it this way. "Health is not the main reason I choose to run, I do it to relieve the pressure of work and life," he says, adding: "I do it for the psychological high." He does not know anyone who considered pulling out of the marathon for fear of a smog overdose. "Running marathons teaches you how to be persistent, not how to give up!" he says.

The elderly ladies on Golden City Avenue are, not surprisingly, more cautious than Mr Sun about pollution, but they indulge in their own doublethink. Pulling out her iPhone to display the China air pollution application – an essential accoutrement of any mainland smartphone owner – the head granny points to the PM_{2.5} reading: on December 4 at 8pm it was 136 µg/m₃. "We don't dance if it's over 140," she says – but then admits sheepishly the group had previously set the cut off at 110 µg/m₃, then 120 µg/m₃, then 130 µg/m₃ . . . and now 140 µg/m₃, well over five times the WHO standard.

By Friday, when Shanghai's air quality was declared officially off the charts or "beyond index", Mr Sun had stopped jogging and the old ladies had stopped dancing. Everyone was talking smog.

So for now, Shanghai's couch cowboys are back in the corral. But who knows for how long? I used to stay away from the gym whenever the air quality index hit 100 µg/m₃, then 200 µg/m₃, then last week I found myself thinking anything under 400 µg/m₃ was, well, about as good as a visit to the oxygen bar.

26/2/2014

Breathe in that dirty doublethink - FT.com

Ask me next week: maybe by then I'll have doublethought myself into deleting the pollution app from my phone altogether.

patti.waldmeir@ft.com

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