

CHINA

THE LITTLE EMPEROR'S BURGER

Though many Chinese know that American fast food is unhealthy and leads to weight gain, the growing trendiness of Western fast food among young people in China has contributed to its increased consumption. American franchises in China such as KFC have been thriving. In the U.S., the chain amassed 4,618 locations in 61 years. In China, however, KFC boasted the establishment of 4,260 locations in just 26 years.¹²⁷ China now consumes overall twice as much meat as the U.S.: at least a whopping 71 million tons per year.¹²⁸ Yum! Brands (the parent company of KFC, Taco Bell, and Pizza Hut) foresees significant growth in China, after spinning off Yum China from the main Yum! Brands in 2016. Yum China more than doubled its outlets in China between 2008 and 2016, from 3,000 to more than 7,000.¹²⁹

Meanwhile, McDonald's has been expanding in China at the rate of 10 new restaurants per week.¹³⁰ These alarming figures reveal how much American fast-food culture has already permeated China. American fast-food chains serve consumers Western-style food products: high in saturated fat, simple carbohydrates, and sugar, with a lot of processing and little nutritional density. In contrast, a traditional rural Chinese diet features plant-based protein, low cholesterol, plus some dietary fat.

With the burgers and fries come a host of public health consequences. A 2012 study published in the journal *Circulation* found that Chinese men and women who consume Western fast food more than twice a week were at higher risk for diabetes and cardiovascular disease.¹³¹ According to Dr. Tsung Cheng at the U.S.'s George Washington University Medical Center, "fast food and physical inactivity" are the two most important factors

fueling childhood obesity in China. China's youth are particularly at risk for developing chronic disease. Like the U.S., China has seen an increase in weight gain and related chronic health conditions among children and young people.¹³²

A 2012 study in *Obesity Reviews Journal* compared the risk of chronic disease in China to other countries, including the U.S. The researchers found that approximately 12 percent of Chinese children and adolescents aged seven to eighteen were overweight, and about 1.7

million children under eighteen suffered from diabetes.¹³³ In 2016, the *European Journal of Preventative Cardiology* published a study that showed rural Chinese children (boys especially) suffered higher rates of obesity than children in urbanized areas.¹³⁴ Additionally, the rate of diabetes among Chinese adolescents aged twelve to eighteen was about four times that of American teenagers.



A McDonald's in Beijing, China

Of course, fast-food consumption is only one piece of a larger puzzle. Obesity is a result of both biological and environmental factors, including one's access to and knowledge about healthy food and one's family and community traditions around food. What drives someone to eat fast food is complex. It is possible that in China this drive may have been amplified by the one-child policy, which, from 1979 through 2015, required most families, with a few exceptions, to have no more than one child. Single children are called *xiao huangdi*, which means "little emperors."¹³⁵

This glorified status within the family structure is often said to create an environment where adults dote upon the child, feeding them whatever foods they desire. Wikipedia even has a page devoted to "Little Emperor

Syndrome.” Essentially, the single child receives an excessive amount of attention, which often leads to eating a lot of fast food. Whether the high rates of diabetes and childhood obesity in China can be blamed on fast food, “Little Emperor Syndrome,” or both (as well as other factors), these issues demand serious public health attention. The Chinese government should carefully regulate fast-food marketing to children and teens, as well as encourage fitness programming in schools.

The EatSmart@School Campaign, a program run by the Chinese Department of Health, assists primary schools that want to create a more sustainable, healthy food environment. This campaign helps schools establish “healthy eating policies,” in order to increase awareness, and provides online resources including recipes and printable nutrition education materials for teachers and parents. It is also possible now that China has ended the one-child policy, that the phenomenon of “little emperors” will lessen in years to come.

In 2016, the Chinese government issued new dietary guidelines that encourage reduced consumption of meat, with a suggested maximum of 200 grams (7 ounces) of meat, poultry, fish and dairy per day.¹³⁶ That is about half of current per capita consumption levels. The

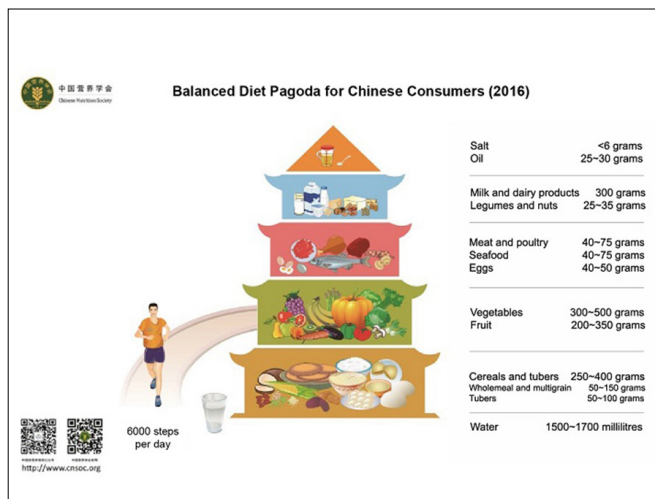
effects of these new guidelines remain to be seen, i.e., how they “translate onto the plate” for China’s 1.4 billion people, as Lucy Luo of JUCCCE, a Shanghai-based NGO, writes.¹³⁷

Although these types of campaigns and national dietary guidelines are beneficial and necessary, attitudinal shifts also need to occur in order to effect lasting change in consumption habits. Though it will certainly prove a complex task, the global image of American fast

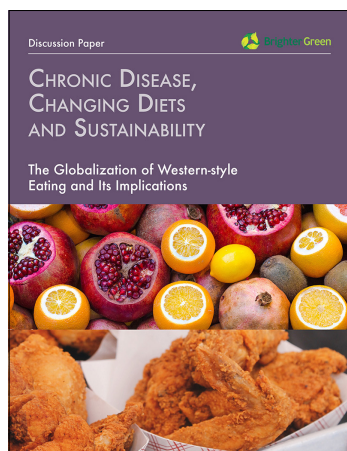
food as a trendy, modern signifier of wealth needs to change. In fact, it needs to be reversed completely so that countries like China do not fall victim to the same chronic diseases that are so common in the U.S.

Although no country has yet attempted to transform the image of American fast food, perhaps China can take on the challenge. As a nation moving rapidly through an economic and

nutrition transition, Chinese policymakers recognize the links between health and changing diets; perhaps they will also reconsider and work to reshape the idealized image of American fast food. Interestingly, consumption of Western fast food decreased 16 percent in China between 2012 and 2015.¹³⁸ Hopefully, this statistic is an indicator of China moving toward more healthful eating habits. ♦



Diet “pagoda” produced by the Chinese Nutrition Society



This is an excerpt from a Brighter Green discussion paper, which can be cited as: Bankman, Judy. “Chronic Disease, Changing Diets and Sustainability: The Globalization of Western-style Eating and Its Implications.” Brighter Green, 2017.

The full paper can be accessed at http://brightergreen.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/brighter_green_public_health_paper.pdf.