

# Contextualized Language Practices as Sites for Learning: Mealtime Talk in Short-Term Chinese Homestays

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When, in homestays abroad, mealtime is understood as key to the maintenance and development of family identity and involves routine gathering for nourishment and convivial talk, students attribute much of their language learning to these events. In this project, we adopt a microgenetic approach to the study of mealtime discourse as a learning opportunity for three American high school students of varying proficiency in Chinese and their Chinese hosts. Specifically, analysis of contextualized language practices at mealtime reveals the qualities of these interactions for learning Chinese and American culinary practices, related language, and associated ideologies. Our findings suggest that even short-term homestays can be particularly rich environments for language learning as hosts and students explore divergent views on the aesthetic, moral, and health-related dimensions of eating.

## INTRODUCTION

Family mealtimes involve eating and drinking, but also social, linguistic, cognitive, and moral dimensions (Ochs and Taylor 1992). While goals and practices associated with dining may vary across communities and individual homes, in many societies the dinner hour serves to nurture not only the body but also shared understandings. At dinner, family members display and develop relationships, thus carrying out the very activity that defines what it means to be a family. Through 'repeated rites of passage to adult discourse' (Blum-Kulka 1994: 45) beginning in infancy, and in parallel with language development, children are socialized into their communities' taste-related practices. Together with appreciation for certain foods versus others, they develop moral stances related to food and culture-specific understandings of the role of food in daily life (DuFon 2006).

This article explores the occasions for learning afforded by mealtime conversation in short-term Chinese homestays for American students and host families. We first review literature on mealtime talk and socialization in both L1 and L2 contexts, then briefly consider the complexities involved in learning Chinese foodways. Next, we discuss Vygotskian sociocultural theory as the

framework for the project. We then examine family dinnertime interactions involving three American learners, of varying language proficiency, and their hosts. A salient theme throughout these interactions was food and taste. In learning to talk about food, students were oriented to Chinese culinary practices and invited to explore local perspectives on aesthetic, health-related, and moral dimensions of eating. Mealtime talk also presented learning opportunities to host family members, especially during discussions of their folk beliefs about American food.

## RESEARCH ON MEALTIME SOCIALIZATION

For language learners abroad, particularly in short-term programs, the home-stay is a key site for engagement in encounters with expert or native speakers (e.g., Pellegrino-Aveni 2005; Kinginger 2008). In a recent mixed-method study of 70 sojourners in France, Diao *et al.* (2011) found that students spent more time interacting with their host families than with any other local group, with the dinner table as the primary site for this interaction. Interviews involving students from the short-term Chinese program in question here revealed that participants attribute much of their learning, including language development and intercultural awareness, to mealtime interactions with their hosts (Tan and Kinginger 2013).

Due to its pedagogical significance in everyday life, mealtime discourse has attracted considerable attention in language socialization research (e.g. Ochs 2002; Duff 2012). Through ‘repeated rites of passage to adult discourse’ (Blum-Kulka 1994: 45) during family dinnertime interactions, children learning their first language(s) develop the ability to express identity in culturally appropriate ways. For Ochs and Taylor (1992), dinners are ‘opportunity spaces’ (p. 31) for the socialization of cognition. The talk they observed during middle class family dinners in southern California involved complex, collaborative problem-solving narration, including challenge, defense, and revision of moral stances. Indeed, family members sustain their very familiarity through problem-solving talk on a backdrop of shared knowledge.

Dinnertime talk is also crucial for the socialization of taste. In introducing the first study involving direct observation of these practices, Ochs *et al.* (1996: 8) pointed out that: ‘What one eats, how one eats, when and with whom are guided by understandings of one’s identity within society’. The authors drew on Bourdieu’s (1984) definition of taste as ‘the most indelible mark of infant learning . . .’ because of its ‘archetypal relation to the archetypal cultural good’ (1984: 79). Social class distinctions are manifested through two organizing principles, the *taste of necessity* and the *taste of luxury/freedom*. The former is associated with poverty or deprivation, and includes a utilitarian approach to food along with a preference for plentiful, unpretentious, nourishing fare. The latter is afforded to those who possess the necessary capital to set aside the constraints of necessity in favor of choice and concern for refinement and aesthetics, with regard to food and its effect on the body.

Ochs *et al.* (1996) observed dinner table socialization of taste in 20 middle-class families with young children in the Los Angeles area, Rome, and Naples. Four themes emerged: food as nutrition and material good (aligning with the taste of necessity); and food as reward and pleasure (aligning with the taste of freedom/luxury). Californian families focused on food as nutrition, material good, and reward in interactions that frequently devolved into conflict as parents enjoined children to eat vegetables for their nutritional value and children attempted to negotiate a reward (for ingesting the main course) in the form of dessert. In Italian families, priority was assigned to food as pleasure, children were encouraged to express individual preferences, and the preparation, provenance, and quality of foods were discussed in strongly positive, affect-laden terms, for example, *Ah: il pomodoro*. 'Ah: the appealing, nice tomato' (1996: 28).

Whereas the family dinner table is a site for enacting familiarity against a backdrop of intimacy, in the case of homestays, particularly within short-term sojourns, participants are not necessarily familiar with one another. Thus, host families and student guests tend to dwell either on establishing relationships, on the instrumental business of learning to eat, on current events in the here and now (Diao *et al.* 2011), or on differences in the practices of their respective cultures.

Iino (2006) examined norms of interaction in Japanese homestay settings. After an initial period of role confusion, the families adopted norms on a continuum from the 'cultural dependency' to 'two-way enrichment'. In the 'cultural dependency' model, student guests were interpreted as fundamentally incompetent and in need of massive assistance to navigate daily life in Japan. Some students resented this interpretation, referring to themselves as their homestay family's 'pet'. In the 'two-way enrichment' approach, parents viewed the homestay as educationally beneficial for themselves and their own children; in this case, interactions involved exchange of perspectives and information.

Cook (2006) scrutinized the collaborative telling of folk beliefs, including stereotypes about cultural differences, in dinnertime conversations between Japanese host families and student guests. The Japanese host families' beliefs were related to *nihonjinron*, an ideology framing Japanese culture and foodways as uniquely exceptional, therefore inaccessible to foreigners. A frequently occurring topic was food and eating habits, for example, the beliefs that Americans cannot live without beef, and that foreigners cannot abide fermented soybeans (*natto*). Many of these assertions went uncontested. Yet student guests challenged them in 40.4% of cases, typically, out of concern for politeness, by providing counter-examples. Cook (2008) also found that the Japanese dinner table is a productive context for the socialization of speech style. Specifically, student guests were socialized through implicit modeling and explicit instruction to shift from plain to honorific styles in ways appropriate for in-group talk.

DuFon's (2006) investigation of taste socialization involved student sojourners in Indonesia and their host families. Four major themes characterized the topical orientation of talk: (i) orientation to the food, (ii) food as pleasure, (iii) food as social/ethnic identity marker, and (iv) food as gifts. To orient guests, hosts labeled dishes and their ingredients, described their preparation, and offered instruction regarding proper eating. They also educated students about food-related pleasure, including the unique flavors of particular foods. In other interactions, students were familiarized with the role of food as a marker of ethnic and regional identity, thereby learning about cultural diversity within Indonesia. Lesser themes included: (v) food as a material good, with emphasis on its monetary value, and (vi) the relationship of food to health. For DuFon the dinner table 'offers many opportunities for learning through the use of language about a cultures' values, beliefs, attitudes and view of food, and for learning to use the language in certain ways in order to talk about food' (117–118).

Few generalizations about the foodways of a country as diverse in landscape and culture as China would survive scrutiny. The challenges confronting novices in learning to eat and to talk about food in China are myriad. We argue, nonetheless, that students learning Chinese culinary practices may encounter a complex version of Bourdieu's basic taste categories (necessity versus luxury). Anderson's (1988) broad historical account suggests that *taste of necessity* helps to understand China's millennial practices of sustainable agriculture, and survives today in at least three additional ways: (i) avoiding waste in everyday meals; (ii) moral injunctions against 'picky eating' and display of food preferences; and (iii) Chinese traditional medicine, with its insistence on achieving bodily equilibrium through the proper selection of 'hot', 'cold', or 'warm' foods.

Concerning the *taste of luxury*, Anderson argues that throughout Chinese history, food, and table manners have played a significant role as a means of communication marking social status, ritual, and many special occasions celebrated with elaborate banquets. Furthermore, during special meals, conspicuous enjoyment of food has traditionally and exceptionally been framed as a virtue.

In the Judeo-Christian West, a distant and omnipotent God condemned gluttons or lusty eaters to eternal damnation. The Chinese otherworld, by contrast, was an extension of this one: populated by gods, ghosts, and ancestors expecting to be served only the best (through sacrificial smoke). Therefore, 'from earliest times, religion served as a powerful reinforcement to gourmetship' (Anderson 1988: 200). The puritanism of invading ideologies such as Buddhism or Communism, according to Anderson, put down wide but shallow roots: 'Chinese gourmetship was not developed through the mere absence of moral opposition; it was actually morally sanctioned' (200–201).

Students in homestay settings may thus be exposed to complex interplays of food-related values. If and when students are positioned as temporary family

members engaged in everyday eating, they may encounter norms linked to *taste of necessity*, norms less relevant in meals involving guests. On occasions marked as special, however, students may witness emphasis on the quantity, diversity, and delicacy of foods on offer, or even situations where food waste, for example, ordering more food than necessary, is a sign of social status and secures face (Chen 1990). The experiential evidence they gather depends upon the nature of the events in which they participate and upon the extent to which they are construed as guests versus temporary family members.

In learning to talk about food, students of Mandarin are confronted simultaneously with a complex system of naming and categorization. Learning to name even the most basic, everyday foods can pose problems, as evidenced in McDonald's (2011) auto-ethnographic writing, documenting the struggles of an advanced speaker of Mandarin to name plain, uncooked rice. At the same time, symbolic, poetic, or metaphorical food names contribute to an aesthetic in which pleasure and good fortune are related (e.g. 四喜丸子 [Four happiness meat balls] for four pork meat balls in brown sauce, or 阳春面 [Sunny spring-time noodle] for plain boiled noodles with soup).

## THE CURRENT PROJECT

In this article, we explore the experiences of three pseudonymous American high school students, 'Sam', 'Larry', and 'Henry' and their Chinese host families during a short-term homestay program in Beijing. We examine the themes present in interactional and interview data as well as how folk beliefs about food and eating were articulated and negotiated. We also document precisely how participation in homestay family mealtime conversations supports situated learning of language and culture for all participants.

### Theoretical framework

In this study we take up an approach to the study of contextualized language practices as sites for learning inspired by Vygotskian sociocultural theory. This approach combines several key insights on the nature of mind and its development with close examination of particular interactions illustrating the key themes discussed by the participants (van Compernelle forthcoming). Three concepts from sociocultural theory (Lantolf and Thorne 2006) are particularly relevant here. A fundamental notion is that human action, including thinking and speaking, is mediated by cultural-psychological tools (Kozulin 1998), especially semiotic tools such as language. While built on a biological substrate, the higher mental functions are cultural and historical in origin; the psychological and the social exist in dialectical unity.

Second is the theory's conceptualization of learning as a process of internalization. Through engagement with other human beings and with cultural artifacts, learners gradually develop internalized repertoires for thinking and speaking that are provided by the historically evolved sociocultural

environments they frequent (Tomasello 1999). Communicative interaction is both the source and the result of internalization, which means that language learning cannot be conceptualized as a process separate from language use (van Compernelle forthcoming). Moreover, according to Lantolf (2012), ‘the theory argues that development does not depend solely on internal mechanisms but on the *quality* and quantity of social interaction that is attuned to the learner’s potential ability’ (italics added). Thus, whereas much of the research examining language learning in study abroad focuses in various ways on the quantity of input students receive, here we examine the qualities of interactions in which students and hosts are engaged. This focus includes the linguistic, pragmalinguistic, culinary, conceptual, and ideological mediational means involved. It also includes the extent to which interactions appear to be attuned to potential ability of participants in the role of ‘learner’, that is, the extent to which participants attempt to construct Zones of Proximal Development, famously defined as ‘the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky 1978: 86).

Third is Vygotsky’s (1978) *genetic* method based on his understanding of development as a dynamic, historical process. Drawing inspiration from Engels’ *The Dialectics of Nature* (1883), Vygotsky contrasted naturalistic and dialectic approaches to understanding human history. The naturalistic approach views humans and their development as determined by nature, whereas the dialectic approach suggests that humans also influence nature, creating new natural conditions for their existence. A novel analytic method would be required to pursue the dialectic approach, one in which human behavior is traced to its historical sources and not only to its biological sources. The genetic approach thus calls for observation of developmental processes, rather than measurement of products or outcomes, at four interrelated levels: *phylogenesis* (the development of the species), *sociocultural history* (change in human cultures over time), *ontogenesis* (life history of individuals), and *microgenesis* (history of particular psychological functions over short periods of time). Particularly relevant for our study is the microgenetic study of interactive settings and affordances where researchers may trace the history of particular functions unfolding ‘right before one’s eyes’ (Vygotsky 1978: 61). According to Wertsch (1985: 55) one might think of microgenetic analysis as ‘a very short-term longitudinal study’, in this case of our participants’ ability to talk and think about Chinese and American food.

## Setting

Sam, Larry, and Henry were among eleven 2011–2012 research study participants enrolled in the Landon-in-China four-week language immersion summer program for students entering Grades 9–12. Participants were placed individually with Chinese host families for two weeks in Beijing

followed by two in Chengdu. The program functioned *in loco parentis* for its teenaged students, and attempted to match the ages, interests, and hobbies of participants with those of host siblings. The families generally included a Host Mother (HM), Host Father (HF), and one Host Sibling (HB or HS). Sam participated only in a three-week internship option in Beijing, where his stay overlapped with the other students' stays. Larry participated in the full program. Henry, who had completed the entire program the previous year (2010), in 2011 stayed only for the Beijing portion of the trip.

A typical weekday for immersion participants (Larry and Henry) involved morning language class (8:30–12:30), followed by afternoon culture classes or sightseeing excursions—in the company of host siblings, when possible. For Sam, weekdays in the internship program were spent at work with his HF, helping with translation tasks and organizing small conversational English classes for employees. The dinner hour was the most important time of day for all of the families. The dinner table was the locus of our participants' most intensive contact and convivial discussion with their hosts.

## Data

Data for this study include field notes from observation performed by the program director (Dali Tan), transcriptions of semi-structured interviews at program's end with participants and host family members, and interactions audio-recorded by the student participants at least twice per week in any setting considered beneficial for language learning, most often, the dinner table. The study was approved by the institutional review board of the first author's university, with informed consent from all participants. Table 1 displays information about the year of data collection, the estimated proficiency of each student, and amount of interactional data collected.

## Focal student participants

The focal participants for this study were selected via criterion sampling (Duff 2008) for their language proficiency. Sam and Larry were the most proficient students in the cohort. Henry was selected because his case provided contrast with the others while representing students of intermediate proficiency.

During the summer of 2012, Sam was a rising senior in high school, 17 years of age. His parents had emigrated from Ethiopia as teenagers, raising their children to be bilingual in Amharic and English. Sam had studied Chinese for 11 years, beginning with a math, science, and social studies Chinese immersion program in elementary school. He had taken an Advanced Placement course as a high school junior and had spent the summer of 2009 enrolled in a Chinese immersion summer camp program in the USA.

Larry is a White Canadian citizen whose parents had immigrated to the USA during his early childhood. Like Sam, he entered the program as a 17-year-old rising senior, having studied Chinese since Kindergarten in the same

*Table 1: Student participants and interactional data*

Participant	Estimated proficiency	Year	Number of sequential recorded interactions	Total time
Sam	Advanced	2012	9	262 minutes
Larry	Advanced	2012	6	150 minutes
Henry	Intermediate Low	2011	8	365 minutes

immersion program. Larry was so intent upon speaking as much Chinese as possible during the program that, as reported in a post-program interview, his HS eventually ‘gave up on speaking English’ with him.

Henry is a White American citizen who, at age 18, was also a rising senior and was participating in the program for the second consecutive summer, having studied Chinese since the 6th grade. Henry was characterized by his teachers as a talented language learner. All three of the participants are of relatively privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, with parents who enjoy significant professional or business-related success.

## Host families

Two host families living in Beijing were involved in the data collection for this article. One of these families hosted Henry in 2011 and Sam in 2012, the other hosted Larry in 2012. The host parents enjoy relatively privileged socioeconomic status and are employed in managerial or professional roles. [Table 2](#) displays information about the host parents’ educational background, employment, self-assessed proficiency in English, and travel experience.

## Analysis

The initial aim of the project was to understand the specific communicative practices that students reference in describing their Chinese homestays as rich environments for language and culture learning ([Tan and Kinginger 2013](#)). While interacting with their hosts, the students were invited to share host families’ food-related values, to articulate their own, and to participate in challenging and negotiating the well-foundedness of these views.

In this article, we address the following research questions:

- (1) What linguistic, pragmalinguistic, culinary, conceptual, or ideological mediational means were made accessible to Sam, Larry, and Henry and their hosts as participants in dinnertime talk?
- (2) To what extent were the interactions attuned to the potential abilities of all participants in learning how to eat and talk at table in China, and in learning about the norms and values associated with food in China and in the USA?



Table 2: *Host families*

Host parent	Education and location	Employment	Self-assessed English proficiency	Travel experience
Henry and Sam's HF	Three-year degree in Library Science, Beijing	Manager of a translation team	Can communicate	Singapore (sightseeing)
Henry and Sam's HM	B.A. in English, Wuhan	Researcher	Advanced	USA (2-week professional assignment); Korea, Singapore, Taiwan (sightseeing)
Larry's HF	M.A. in Economics, Beijing	Researcher	Basic proficiency, poor speaking ability	Canada, Japan (business)
Larry's HM	B.A. in Medicine, Shanghai	Doctor	Basic proficiency, poor speaking ability	None

To determine how much talk was devoted to food-related topics, and which subthemes were most frequently visited, we first carried out a quantitative analysis. We counted the number of spoken turns in each interaction (defined as speaker change, regardless of turn length). We then divided the data into topical episodes. Next, we isolated food or taste-related episodes and coded them by topical category, based in part upon the themes identified in previous research (see the [online Appendix](#) for an elaboration of the coding categories). Finally, we calculated the number of turns and episodes devoted to each subtheme.

In our second phase of analysis we scrutinized the qualities of particular interactional sequences for evidence of the extent to which they exposed students and hosts to novel semiotic mediational means, including linguistic and pragmalinguistic features of Mandarin as well as tastes, concepts, and ideological interpretations. We also examined the extent to which participants attempted to attune their interaction to the learning potential of their conversational partners (i.e. to construct Zones of Proximal Development).

## RESULTS

'The first requirement for learning to eat well is to talk about it'. So states the celebrated writer Lin Yutang (2005: 12) in an essay *On Diet*, commenting on the Chinese propensity to discuss culinary matters. The interactions recorded for this study involved multiple topics: movies, weightlifting, the Chinese and American educational systems, business, the environment, local sights, and US politics. However, food was a conspicuous and frequently visited topic.

Table 3 presents our findings on the prevalence of food-related talk in general and on the particular themes that tended to draw the participants' attention.

Table 3 demonstrates that food-related topics arose frequently in these interactions, accounting for 29 per cent of all turns. Major themes were orientation to Chinese and American food (137 episodes), food as pleasure (76 episodes), and offering food (65 episodes, mostly from Henry's interactions). Throughout their stay, the students were explicitly oriented to the Chinese dishes served at home or in restaurants. They also discussed the pleasure (or absence of pleasure) to be taken in food. In 21 episodes, the relationship between food and health was the primary topic. Infrequently discussed were food as material good, with nine episodes (although this topic was raised by Sam's HF in an interview) and food as a marker of diverse regional identity (14 episodes).

### Orientation to food

Early in his stay, Sam's HM oriented her guest to particular dishes by labeling the food and naming ingredients. In Extract 1 from the first recorded

Table 3: Quantitative data

Participant	Sam		Larry		Henry		Total		Total
	Episodes	Turns	Episodes	Turns	Episodes	Turns	Episodes	Turns	
Code									
1. Orientation to food	17	269	29	298	91	923	137		1,490
2. Pleasure	17	344	24	194	35	308	76		846
3. Identity	1	25	6	84	7	74	14		183
4. Material good	2	71	1	7	6	52	9		130
5. Health	6	115	7	55	8	48	21		218
6. Offering food	7	42	9	92	49	345	65		479
7. Other	10	106	3	94	18	202	31		402
Total taste-related	60	972	79	824	214	1,952	353		3,748
Total turns		3,892		2,728		6,219			12,839
Percentage		0.250		0.302		0.319			0.292

interaction, the family has been served congee (rice porridge) with mung beans. HM first ensured that Sam knew the name of the dish, then shortly afterward labeled two key ingredients.

### Excerpt 1 (Interaction 1)<sup>1</sup>

1. **HM:** *Sam zhīdào zhèige jiào shénme me*  
*Sam* (do you) know what this is called?
2. **S:** *nǐ chī de nèige wǎn límian de*  
what you're eating in the bowl
3. **HM:** *bù bù zhīdào*  
(I) don don't know
4. **S:** *zhèige shì*  
this is  
*zhè jiào xīfàn*  
this is called congee
5. **HM:** *xīfàn*  
congee
6. **HM:** *xīfàn*  
congee  
((13 turns omitted))
6. **HM:** *Sam what do you call*  
*this*

7.           **S:**           *unh bean*  
                                  *uh s I donno what [that is]*
8.           **HM:**           *[bean] bean*  
                                  *uh bean maybe is*  
                                  *a little bigger than this*
9.           **S:**           *mhm*
10.          **HM:**           *than this bean*
11.          **S:**           *uhn*  
                                  **wǒ bù zhīdào**  
                                  I don't know
12.          **HM:**           *Chinese*  
                                  *in Chinese is*  
                                  **lǚdòu**  
                                  mung beans
13.          **S:**           **lǚdòu**  
                                  mung beans
14.          **HM:**           *yeah so*  
                                  **xīfàn**  
                                  congee  
                                  **zhèige lǚmiàn jiùshi**  
                                  to be precise, it contains  
                                  *rice and*
15.          **HF:**           **lǚdòu**  
                                  mung beans
16.          **HM:**           **lǚdòu**  
                                  mung beans
17.          **S:**           *mhm*
18.          **HM:**           **dàmǐ hé lǚdòu**  
                                  rice and mung beans
19.          **S:**           **dàmǐ hé lǚdòu**  
                                  rice and mung beans
20.          **HM:**           *yeah*

In Excerpt 1, HM took on an explicitly pedagogical role to instruct Sam on the naming of congee (*xīfàn*) and mung beans (*lǚdòu*). Before the 'instruction' took place, both parties needed to agree upon their focus. In directing Sam's attention to the foods (one close to him and another close to HM), HM drew upon space deixis in the form of a question (Turn 1), underscoring the immediate location of the food for HM with the proximal *zhèige* ('this'), and to Sam with the distal *nèige* ('that'). Subsequent to Sam's confession of not

knowing the name, the proximal *zhèi* ('this') (Turn 3) was used in referencing, introducing, and highlighting the food (Huang 2013), which then became topically salient. Having determined in Turn 1 that she was working in Sam's Zone of Proximal Development, in three separate cycles, separated by an interval in which HM inquired about a word in English, HM as 'teacher' introduced a lexical item, had Sam repeat it, and confirmed that his repetition was correct, either through further repetition of her own (Turns 5 and 18) or with an explicit evaluation (Turns 14 and 20). Repetition has been granted significant pedagogical value for Chinese children since ancient times under the Confucian tradition of learning (e.g. Dahlin and Watkins 2000). It was also a common practice for the three focal participants to repeat when a new lexical item or language chunk was introduced, with or without host family's elicitation, which resembled language classroom routines.

To recall, Henry arrived in Beijing with Chinese proficiency estimated at Intermediate Low. Henry's host family also oriented their guest to food; however, this process was relatively laborious, particularly when attempting to elucidate complex cultural and historical concepts. When dining out with HM and HB, for example, the party became involved in a lengthy (71 turns) conversation intended to acquaint Henry with the quality of dishes named *zhuàngyuán* ('number one scholar'), in this case a roast duck. Here, the first 15 turns (omitted due to limited space) were devoted to clarifying which of the dishes on the table were in question at which point HM asked directly and in English whether or not Henry knew the term *zhuàngyuán*. When he replied in Chinese that he did not, HM debated with herself as to whether or not she should try to explain it in Chinese, then launched the following explanation.

### Excerpt 2 (interaction 3)

1.     **HM:**     **zhuàngyuán**  
                   number one scholar  
                   **yí ge rén**  
                   a person  
                   **gǔshíhòu yí ge rén**  
                   (in) ancient time a person  
                   **kǎoshì**  
                   (who) took an exam  
                   **dé dìyī**  
                   scored the highest
2.     **H:**         **mhm**  
                   [XX got the] first yeah

3.     **HM:**     [yǒu ma]  
                   right?  
                   *yeah?*  
                   *he he's the first in the test*
4.     **H:**        *uhuh*
5.     **HM:**     *so*  
                   *he's*  
                   **zhuàngyuán**  
                   number one scholar
6.     **H:**        **zhuàngyuán**  
                   number one scholar
7.     **HM:**     **zhuàngyuán means the person**  
                   number one scholar *means the person*  
                   *who*  
                   *gets the number one*
8.     **H:**        *highest grade ok*
9.     **HM:**     *in the test*  
                   *so*  
                   *have*  
                   **càimíng dōu jiào zhuàngyuán shénme shénme**  
                   all the dishes are called number one scholar something  
                   **[zhuàngyuán]**  
                   number one scholar
10.    **H:**        [*oh so it's*] *like*  
                   *it's like the best*  
                   *food*
11.    **HM:**     *yeah*
12.    **H:**        *oh got it*

This interaction, while also involving the naming of food, differs from Excerpt 1 in two crucial ways: the lower proficiency of the student guest and the far greater complexity of the culinary term. Rather than merely labeling an ingredient, the term *zhuàngyuán* references the ancient tradition of Imperial examinations granting access to the Chinese civil service, and survives today to denote high professional achievement. HM was thus faced with the task of deriving a simplified, pedagogically appropriate strategy for introducing a novel cultural concept to Henry. HM first explained the origin of the concept *zhuàngyuán* (Turns 1, 5, 7) while Henry repeated the term (Turn 6) and confirmed his comprehension by revoicing in English (Turns 2, 8), also a type of repetition (Moore 2012). HM and Henry then collaboratively established the meaning of the term in Turns 9–11. HM associated the

term with the naming of dishes, and Henry demonstrated his understanding of the link between the traditional name and the quality of the food in English.

Most episodes in the data on naming dishes resemble Excerpt 1, and thus do not involve cultural concepts of such complexity. Nevertheless, the use of space deixis to coordinate attention, interrogatives to explore students' Zone of Proximal Development, and repetition or evaluation to guide the students are all commonplace in our data that concern orientation to food.

For students of more advanced proficiency such as Larry and Sam, host families were able to provide orientation to foods not immediately present, including discussions of American culinary traditions. Later in the same interaction referenced above (#1), Sam's hosts requested that Sam orient them to American pasta dishes. HM mentioned that she had considered buying pasta at the supermarket and asking Sam to cook it. However, the vast array of different shapes and sauces on display had confounded her, so she preferred to discuss the idea with Sam before making an investment. After Sam objected, stating that his cooking skills were not adequate to the task, HF expressed a 'folk belief' about American pasta cookery, namely, that there is little effort involved, since the only work involved is opening a jar of ready-made sauce (Excerpt 3).

### Excerpt 3 (Interaction 1)

- |    |            |   |
|----|------------|---|
| 1. | <b>HF:</b> | <p><b>[bú shì]</b><br/>no<br/><b>kàn nǐmen zuòfàn</b><br/>looking at (the way) you guys cook<br/><b>bú shì tài jiǎndān le me</b><br/>isn't it too simple?<br/><b>nèige jiàng</b><br/>the sauce<br/><b>jiùshì yī píngr</b><br/>only one bottle</p> |
| 2. | <b>S:</b>  | <p><b>nǐ kěyǐ zuò</b><br/>you can make<br/><b>nǐ zìjǐ de jiàng</b><br/>your own sauce<br/><b>nǐ bú</b><br/>you don't</p>  |
| 3. | <b>HF:</b> | <p><b>ào ào</b><br/>oh oh</p>   |
| 4. | <b>S:</b>  | <p><b>yíding yào [mǎi]</b><br/>have to buy</p>  |

5.       **HF:**       **[mǎi] mǎi tā de jiàng a**  
buy buy its sauce
6.       **S:**         **duì**  
right
7.       **HF:**       **jiù xiàng wǒmen de zhájiàng**  
it is exactly like our fried bean sauce
8.       **HM:**       **nèige jiàng**  
the sauce  
**nèige yìdàlimiàn nèige jiàng**  
the pasta the sauce  
**hái néng zìjǐ zuò yā**  
(you) can even make your own?
9.       **S:**         *mhm*  
*uhuh?*
10.      **HM:**       **nà shì yòng shénme cáiliào a**  
then what ingredients (do you) use?
11.      **S:**         *um*
12.      **HM:**       **xīhóngshì**  
tomato
13.      **S:**         *unh xīhóngshì*  
*unh tomato*  
**shì bu shì tomato**  
is (that) *tomato*?
14.      **HM:**       **èn**  
*mhm*
15.      **S:**         **yòng**  
use  
*uhn*  
**wǒ bú tài qīngchu zěnmē zěnmē zuò**  
I don't really know how to how to make (it)
16.      **HM:**       **nǐ nè [lǐmian hái yǒu shénme]**  
what else is inside?
17.      **HF:**       **[jiùshi yǒu shénme lǐtou yǒu] shénme**  
that is to say what's inside what's inside
18.      **HM:**       **lǐmian hái yǒu shénme**  
what else is inside?
19.      **HF:**       **yǒu ròu ba**  
there's meat right?
20.      **S:**         **yǒu kěnéng rúguǒ like**  
yes, maybe, if, *like*



- |     |            |                              |                          |
|-----|------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
|     |            | <b>yǒu yīxiē</b>             | there are some           |
|     |            | <b>rúguǒ nǐ yào fàng ròu</b> | if you want to add meat  |
|     |            | <b>nǐ kěyǐ fàng ròu</b>      | you can add meat         |
| 21. | <b>HF:</b> | <b>òu [òu òu]</b>            | oh oh oh                 |
| 22. | <b>HM:</b> | <b>[èn]</b>                  | mhm                      |
| 23. | <b>S:</b>  | <b>[yǒu] yīxiē yǒu ròu</b>   | there are some with meat |

This interaction closely resembles the challenges to folk beliefs documented in Japanese homestays by Cook (2006). In Turn 1, HF expressed his condemnation of Western food in general, using a negatively framed question as a way of making an assertion and eliciting confirmation, rather than seeking information. Sam immediately contested his HF's overgeneralization about lack of effort involved in American cookery with the information that pasta sauce can be made from scratch (Turns 2, 4), although he did not quite know how (Turn 15). In Turn 7, HF drew a parallel to Chinese fried bean sauce, which can also be purchased ready-made or created at home from raw materials. In Turn 8, HM recast Sam's statement as a question, then in Turn 10 requested more specific information about the ingredients of pasta sauce. HM and HF proposed candidate ingredients in Turns 12 ('tomato') and 19 ('meat'). In response to HF's inquiry, Sam noted that depending on individual preference people sometimes add meat. Here, his use of a hypothetical conditional ('if you want to add meat, you can add meat') created an imaginary mental state, and involved his hosts in this state through the second person pronoun ('you') as the agent of the construction. The conditional clause and the agentive pronoun echoed his earlier argument that 'you can make your own sauce', which contrasted with HF's overgeneralization. Although Sam was not able to discuss in details the preparation of this stereotypical American dish, this interaction prompted HF to articulate an assumption and to consider it from a different perspective.<sup>2</sup>

### Food as (dis)pleasure

The theme of food as pleasure also runs throughout the data for this study. HMs frequently checked with their guests to verify that they were enjoying their food, most often eliciting compliments. Subthemes involving the pleasure

of eating are (i) negotiation around unfamiliar dishes, and (ii) concern that students explore the variety of foods on offer locally.

While eating out at a restaurant with HM and HB, Henry was offered mung bean soup, a cold summer dessert. Despite HM's insistence, he balked at the notion of eating it (Excerpt 4).

#### Excerpt 4 (Interaction 3)

1.	<b>HM:</b>	<b>cháng yīdiǎn</b> try a little bit
2.	<b>H:</b>	<b>hei [ouh]</b>
3.	<b>HM:</b>	<b>[cháng yī]</b> try a <i>try try [try] try a little</i>
4.	<b>H:</b>	<b>[uh]</b> <i>uh=hm= er I don't [know]</i>
5.	<b>HM:</b>	<b>[it's]</b> <i>it's very goo=d</i>
6.	<b>H:</b>	<i>I don't know= it it just looks weird</i>
7.	<b>HM:</b>	<b>[(LAUGHTER)]</b>
8.	<b>H:</b>	<b>[hěn hěn] qīguài</b> very very weird

HM urged Henry to taste the soup with a directive in Turn 1. When not receiving an immediate positive response (Turn 2), she repeated her directive and code switched to English in the middle (Turn 3). The use of directives is typical in parent-child interactions across cultures (Goodwin and Cekaite 2013) and is considered highly valuable for socializing children in Chinese culture (He 2000). However, despite HM's several attempts to lure Henry into tasting the soup, Henry continued to resist. Their contrastive dispositions were shown in their linguistic choices and voice qualities. In Turn 5, HM strengthened her encouragement by emphasizing the 'good' taste of the food with an elongation and an intensifier, 'very'. In Turns (4, 6, and 8) Henry declined HM's offer through his use of elongated pause fillers ('uh=hm='), a revulsion sound ('er I don't know'), intensifying adverbs ('very'), and a disapproving judgment qīguài ('strange'). As the interaction continued (not shown in the excerpt) HM oriented Henry to the dish, explaining its composition and cool temperature, and pressing him to try it. When Henry attempted to deflect HM's urging by stating that he disliked cold foods, HM countered by stating that he did like ice cream. The argument continued to the point at

which Henry directly stated that he did not like mung bean soup (even though he had never tasted it).

HM's insistence may be understood with reference to the taste of necessity in everyday eating, especially the avoidance of waste and of 'picky' eating and the role of food in preserving health. The disclosure of personal food preference is, of course, a source of inconvenience for hosts. More importantly, however, according to Cooper (1986) and Hsu and Hsu (1997), everyday eating in China has traditionally involved avoiding waste and socializing children to display good manners by eating every grain of rice in their bowls. This example also illustrates HM's views on the importance of a seasonally wholesome diet; during hot and humid Beijing summers, the cool nature of mung bean soup is believed to relieve thirst and restore the harmony of bodily elements, thus helping to avoid illness.

At home, Sam was oriented to a wide range of Chinese dishes, but HM was also eager for her guest's culinary education to continue outside the home. Most of the talk in interaction 7 is devoted to HM's reaction to Sam's report of eating too many steamed stuffed buns at the company canteen. HM devoted considerable effort to listing and explaining the foods available (e.g. fried dough, pancake, and noodles). In Excerpt 5, near the end of the conversation, HM summarized the gist of her message.

#### Excerpt 5 (Interaction 7)

1.    **S:**            **jīntiān zǎoshàng chī le bāozi**  
                      (I) ate stuffed steamed buns this morning  
                      **yě wǔf yě**  
                      also lunch also  
                      **wǔfàn chī le bāozi**  
                      (I) ate stuffed steamed buns during lunch
2.    **HM:**           **á**  
                      really?
3.    **S:**            **chī jīntiān [chī hěnduō bāozi]**  
                      eat (I) ate a lot of stuffed steamed buns today
4.    **HM:**           **[(LAUGHTER) ]**  
                      **(LAUGHTER)**  
                      **míngtiān zǎoshàng búyào chī bāozi le**  
                      don't eat any stuffed steamed buns tomorrow morning
5.    **S:**            <@ **hǎo** @>  
                      okay
6.    **HM:**           **tā nà zǎocān yǒu hěnduō zhǒnglèi**  
                      there are many kinds of breakfast there  
                      **nǐ yào bǎ měi yì zhǒng dōu shì-**  
                      you have to tr- every kind

- |    |            |                           |                                  |
|----|------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|
|    |            | <b>dōu cháng yi cháng</b> | taste a little bit of every kind |
| 7. | <b>S:</b>  | <b>hǎo</b>                | okay                             |
| 8. | <b>HM:</b> | <b>dōu shì yi shì</b>     | try a little bit of every kind   |
| 9. | <b>S:</b>  | <b>xíng</b>               | okay                             |

Here, Sam confessed that he had chosen the same dish for breakfast and for lunch, eliciting HM's expression of astonishment (Turn 2) and laughter (Turn 4). HM then explicitly directed Sam to avoid that dish on the following day (Turn 4), and encouraged Sam to try a variety of foods at the company canteen (Turn 6). Note that a set of morpho-syntactic features maximized the intensity of HM's utterances. First, both HM's turns entailed a directive to impose her will on Sam: 'don't eat any stuffed steamed buns tomorrow morning' (Turn 4) and 'you have to tr- every kind' (Turn 6). In addition, the modal auxiliary verb of *yào* ('should') was employed to propose appropriate actions, namely avoiding buns and tasting diverse foods. Particularly salient is the second utterance of Turn 6 where a modal *yào* ('should'), a *bǎ* construction, and two universal quantifiers *měi yi* ('every') and *dōu* ('all') conjoined in one utterance, creating the highest intensification possible in Chinese (Jing-Schmidt 2005). At the end of Turns 6 and in Turn 8, HM repaired the verb *shì-* ('tr-') by reduplicating verbs, as in *cháng yi cháng* ('taste a little bit') and *shì yi shì* ('try a little bit'). Such verb reduplication is the linguistic representation of the delimitative aspect in Chinese. While mitigating the illocutionary force of HM's imposition, the delimitative aspect, with the recycled universal quantifier *dōu* ('all'), specified how to conduct the proposed action: try/taste all a little bit. Therefore, the emphasis on diversity of foods is morpho-syntactically encoded in HM's utterances. According to Liu (2011), Chinese culinary aesthetics involve efforts to achieve harmony (*hé*) and a healthful diet through the skillful mixing and presentation of a variety of foods, emphasizing seasonally appropriate (and therefore changeable) balance between 'hot' and 'cold' foods: HM's concern about the inappropriate monotony of Sam's diet may relate both to the taste of necessity and to the taste of luxury, to concern for both health and enjoyment.

### Food and health

A less frequent, but still salient primary theme within particular episodes is the relationship between food and health. This relationship, and particularly the belief that food and medicine share the same roots, is a significant theme in scholarly inquiry on Chinese cuisine (Liu 2011). Larry's host families in Beijing and Chengdu discussed explicitly the relationship between food and health.

His hosts repeated invoked their preference for steamed or boiled dishes and the dangers of eating too much fried food. His hosts in Beijing praised the specific preventative virtues of certain foods, such as asparagus, as illustrated in Excerpt 6.

### Excerpt 6 (Interaction 1)

- |    |            |  |
|----|------------|--|
| 1. | <b>L:</b>  | <b>zài měiguó wǒmen chángcháng</b><br>in America we often<br><b>wǒ [jiārén chángcháng] chī</b><br>my family often eats (this)  |
| 2. | <b>HS:</b> | <b>[oh yeah]</b>   |
| 3. | <b>HM:</b> | <b>zhèige wǒmen jiào lúsǔn</b><br>we call this asparagus   |
| 4. | <b>L:</b>  | <b>lúsǔn</b><br>asparagus  |
| 5. | <b>HM:</b> | <b>ài</b><br>exactly<br><b>zhèige shì yīzhǒng hǎoxiàng</b><br>this is a kind of (thing), (it) seems like<br><b>yìsi néng fáng áizhèng de shíwù</b><br>(it is) a food that can prevent cancer<br><b>dàjiā dōu hěn xǐhuān chī</b><br>everybody likes to eat (it) very much |
| 6. | <b>HS:</b> | <b>you know áizhèng</b><br><i>you know cancer</i><br><b>cancer</b>   |
| 7. | <b>L:</b>  | <b>ò duì [duì duì]</b><br>oh right right right   |
| 8. | <b>HM:</b> | <b>[néng] yùfáng yùfáng áizhèng de</b><br>(a food) that can prevent prevent cancer   |

Larry nominated the topic in Turn 1 by mentioning that his family in the USA enjoys eating asparagus. HM then instructed Larry on the Chinese word for the vegetable (Turn 3), which Larry then repeated (Turn 4). In HM's next turn (5) she associated the food with her belief on its health benefit, which is to prevent cancer. HS intervened in English (Turn 6) to insure that Larry had grasped the gist of the message.

### Food as material good

The topic of food as a material good arose infrequently in the data from mealtime interactions. However, this theme was a likely source of covert misunderstanding between students and hosts in the program. The theme was salient in our

interview with Henry and Sam's HF, who was shocked to observe both students leaving food in their bowls at the conclusion of meals, picking and choosing what to eat and what to leave behind in particular dishes, and occasionally serving themselves more than they could eat.

Ochs *et al.* (1996) suggest that American children are routinely enjoined to clean their plates. As revealed in an interview with Larry, the intent of most American students may not in fact have been to show disrespect by wasting food. Rather, according to Larry, American students lacking the ability to refuse food adopted a conscious strategy of leaving food on their plates in the hope of 'politely' indicating that they were no longer hungry, thereby forestalling unwanted helpings. It is unclear whether or not Sam and Henry were adhering to a politeness system in which it is in fact appropriate to leave food behind, or were simply inattentive to this aspect of dining.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Above, we have examined mealtime as a site for learning in Chinese home-stays involving one student of modest proficiency and two students of more advanced speaking ability. Significant portions of the talk were devoted to matters of food and taste as students received instruction on their hosts' interpretation of food-related luxury and necessity. Our student participants were oriented to particular foods and ingredients, and instructed in local values related to the aesthetics of taste as well as the relationship between food and health. In orienting episodes, host parents explicitly assisted the students' performance in learning to name foods and ingredients, addressing a key challenge for learners of Mandarin. Here, the microgenesis of the students' ability to participate in conversation about food and taste is in clear evidence. Elsewhere, we found that host families provided safe contexts for advanced speakers to develop conversational ability by nominating and developing controversial topics (Cook 2006).

Host families were also exposed to novel perspectives on American food ways; when they articulated stereotypical views on the lack of attention given to culinary matters in the USA, or on the unhealthy nature of hamburgers, Sam, an advanced speaker, attempted to contest and challenge these views (Cook 2006). In other words, against a background of nascent familiarity, dinners became 'opportunity spaces' (Ochs and Taylor 1992) to challenge, defend, and potentially revise everyday folk knowledge: homestays presented opportunities for learning on the part of all concerned.

In the interview data, host families praised students' conviviality and assiduousness, and students praised hosts for their warm welcome. However, these data also revealed serious misunderstandings about the value of food and the importance of avoiding wastefulness. For these participants, much further study and immersion experience would be required to grasp the complexity and inherent contradictions involving luxury and necessity in

Chinese foodways. Short-term homestays abroad offer students access to novel semiotic meditational means, including linguistic, conceptual and ideological psychological tools (Kozulin 1998). However, there are limits to the familiarity that can be developed in a period of only weeks: many essential lessons go unlearned, presumably not only by our participants but also by the majority of American students who now go abroad on short-term programs only.

This study has clear limitations: due to space constraints, many interesting data episodes are omitted. In choosing to minimize our intrusion or disruption of routine family practices we also chose to record only sound: we cannot analyze gestural and other physical modes of communication and context.

The primary limitation of this project, however, is that it portrays the experiences of only three individuals, and thereby compromises trustworthiness and generalizability. We do not know precisely how representative Sam, Larry, and Henry's experiences are, in comparison to the experiences of other students in China with different sociocultural language learning histories and living with families adopting different approaches to the homestay.

However, that is also its principal strength: as Van Lier (2005) argued in defense of qualitative research, 'particularization' may be just as important as generalizability. By 'particularization' Van Lier meant that insights from individual cases 'can inform, be adapted to, and provide comparative information to a wide variety of other cases, so long as one is careful to take contextual differences into account' (2005: 198). Where qualitative research provides apparently contradictory findings about similar issues, it can stimulate the development of new avenues for research.

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## SUPPLEMENTARY DATA

[Supplementary material](#) is available at *Applied Linguistics* online.

*Conflict of interest statement.* None declared.

## APPENDIX A

The following conventions are adopted in transcribing the interactional data. For detailed descriptions of the features, please refer to Du Bois *et al.* (1993).

-	Truncated word
:	Speaker identity/turn start
?	Appeal
()	Vocal noises
(H)	Inhalation
<@ @>	Laugh quality
(( ))	Researcher's comment

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## NOTES

- 1 Conversational data were transcribed verbatim, including nonstandard, erroneous, or incomplete spelling of pinyin or tones, according to an adapted version of the Du Bois *et al.* (1993) discourse transcription system (Appendix A). Micro-features, including terminal pitch contours and accent, were not transcribed. To increase readability, some features (such as special voice quality, pauses, overlapping) are removed from the transcripts, except when relevant features to analysis. Each utterance is first presented in Romanization spelling of Chinese (Pinyin), then word by word glossaries, and finally free translation. For a more precise transcription, including word-by-word and grammatical glosses, please consult the [online Appendices](#) to this article.
- 2 For an additional example, please see the [online Appendices](#) to this article.

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