

Why I've become a vegetarian: Chinese filmmaker speaks out about environmental impact of eating meat

[Tom Levitt](#)

29.07.2014

Jian Yi, director of 'What's For Dinner?', says he was shocked into becoming a vegetarian by the environmental and animal welfare costs of meat production



Jian Yi is director of the film 'What's For Dinner?' (Image by BrighterGreenNY)

Jian Yi, director of ['What's For Dinner?'](#), a film about the meat industry, speaks to Tom Levitt about his own views on China's burgeoning livestock sector.

1. What inspired you to make this film?

Before making the film I'd only been vegetarian for a month. Mia MacDonald, founder of New York environmental organization Brighter Green got in touch via independent film distributor Karin Chien, asking if I would make a short film on the environmental impact of the meat industry. I didn't agree right away, as I'd only just become vegetarian and I didn't think I had enough understanding or experience of the issues. But Mia kept sending me their reports and when I read them carefully I was actually shocked. I'd never thought about how something as basic as what we eat could affect us so much. If we don't reconsider and make some changes, nature will sooner or later take its revenge. So I decided I would make the film, using the opportunity to explore this issue and bring it to wider attention. It's so important; I couldn't pretend it just didn't exist.

2. What did you learn or come to understand through making this film?

It turned me into a staunch vegetarian. Before it had just been a little lifestyle experiment, I wasn't sure how long I'd stick with it. After making the film, there was no going back. There's no way my conscience would let me sit down and eat the flesh of an animal and think there wasn't any harm being done. When I realised that we, human beings, have better options, how can I kill animals just

to keep myself fed? How could I not remember that our appetites result in livestock suffering? How could I pretend the environmental damage had nothing to do with me? I couldn't do that.

I thought of Kafka, who also became a vegetarian. After finishing this film I can do the same as he did, look animals in the eye and say, "Now I can look at you in peace."

3. Who in the film had the greatest impact on you?

The vegetarians we interviewed, people like Xie Zheng and Dr. Yu. Both because they were actually taking action to demonstrate better ways of living, and because with their support my wife and I were able to have a vegetarian wedding and raise a vegetarian child. When society as a whole lacks understanding of healthy and green eating habits, support from friends like that is invaluable.

4. What's the biggest challenge you confronted while making the film?

Well, the biggest challenge was that I wasn't very knowledgeable about the topic back then. In order to deliver convincing messages, the filmmaker needs to have deep knowledge about what s/he is making. Therefore, it was quite a challenge back then to finish shooting the film in less than two weeks while I had been a vegetarian for only a month.

Another challenge came from the crew. Three out of our five-person crew were not vegetarian. During the shooting and interviews, the crew saw and heard a lot of things over a short period, and it was intense to hear what the vegetarians and environmental experts had to say, so much so that on the last day, everyone felt mentally overloaded. Then during the last work dinner on a summer night, in a restaurant right next to the Pearl River, the crew exploded with powerful sentiments and arguments that had accumulated and been withheld for days. The vegetarians and non-vegetarians of the crew burst into heated debate. The vegetarians had even stronger feelings against meat consumption, while the non-vegetarian members of the crew were upset about being constantly judged on their choice of food during the shooting and interviews. So I turned the camera around and documented those drastically fiery moments.

5. How aware do you think the Chinese people are of the issues covered in the film?

The vast majority aren't aware of the effect of the meat industry on the environment. It's important information, easily found online, so why haven't they seen it? Humans can have a kind of selective blindness sometimes, not just in China but everywhere. And our social values still favour money, enjoyment, quick rewards. Civil society is weak, there's little space for public debate, and many more "obvious" environmental issues aren't being taken seriously either, nevermind the more "conveniently" ignored impact of the meat industry.

What I want to say is that even if people are aware, that doesn't mean they'll do anything. There are examples all around us. Unlike driving cars and shopping, which also affect the environment, eating is something that everyone does, that is very close to everyone's hearts; it's both a very private and very public matter. What we choose to put in our mouths is a very private thing. What I said earlier about the fight among our crew members at the end of the film production is a case in point. You can see this also in the attitude my parents have towards our raising our child as a vegetarian. They can accept our own choices for ourselves, but they're strongly against us making the same choice for our child. They think it's like we're "kidnapping" their grandson and carrying out an experiment. (What they fail to realize is, however, that they themselves have been captured by mainstream views of meat-eating and are trying to impose that on our child).

But eating is almost never only a personal matter; there's always a public aspect to it. When food is grown or raised, harvested, processed, or sold, this is a societal matter. How do these processes affect the way we relate to ourselves, to other people and to society? That's something we still need to take a closer look at.

For vegetarians that lack of understanding, even opposition, from other people and even loved ones, is not necessarily a bad thing. What's worse is a lack of concern. Opposition at least drives us to think about why and what we eat, and how we eat it; to better understand how this affects us and our world. If vegetarians can look at animals, can look at the world, with compassion – why can't we do the same for other people who haven't reached the same stage of understanding we have?

6. In China, are there a good number of people or organizations actively advocating less meat or meatless lifestyles? If there is, why are they doing it, for global environment, personal health or animal welfare?

I personally find that the number of people, organizations, and activities promoting vegetarianism in China is increasing. If someone makes a different choice than the mainstream on something as essential as “eating” despite all the inconveniences and “trouble” this choice entails on a daily basis, s/he must have a very important conviction. I have not done research on this, but in my observations, vegetarian advocates are driven by three major concerns: (1) personal health – this is most common among non-Buddhist communities; (2) no killing – this is strongest among Buddhists; (3) environmental concerns (including animal welfare) – this group is perhaps the smallest and are usually young members of our society and/or Buddhists. Of course, the above-mentioned are just our points of departure, while in reality, most vegetarian activists are concerned with a couple or all of them. We may also look at these from a different perspective – personal health concerns, refraining from killing other living things, and the environmental concerns of the world as a whole – they each are our responsibility concerned with a different aspect of life. And it all goes back to this one question – “what kind of a person do I want to be?”

At this point, I would like to stress the word “commitment”, instead of responsibility, because one can have excellent knowledge of all these responsibilities and talk big about them in class, in writing, or in front of the camera while still regarding them as something that's not relevant to his/her personal life. Very often they become “good things to know about” rather than principles we live by. For someone who willingly chooses to be vegetarian, however, this responsibility cannot be separated from commitment. Knowing this, one should not be surprised that quite often those vegetarian friends of ours tend to be more actively concerned about others, the environment, and our planet.

Actually, to this question of “what's edible”, I have something to say. Just think about this: anything that we can physically put into our mouth and be digested later on is “edible”, which includes what we normally regard as food, drugs, and poison. Whether we eat it at all, and when and how much we eat it, determines “the edible” to be food, drug, or poison (for instance, some food is poisonous to people who are allergic to it; some food or drug becomes poison when we eat too much of it or overdose). Therefore, what we end up putting into our mouth by choice really depends on what we think is important.

When we think it is important to get rid of the feeling of hunger, we will eat “food”; when we think

losing weight is important, we stop eating as much food and sometimes choose to take in drugs; when we think it is important to cure our illness, we may choose to take drugs and go on a diet; when we think meeting our desires for meat is important, we will find all kinds of reasons why animals can and should be eaten; when we think it is important to kill ourselves in order to escape from the world's sufferings, we may think "poison" is edible. For the same reasoning, increasing public support of vegetarianism is actually a reminder to humanity that when our consumed products are abundant and man has the power to destroy the planet, it is important that we be more mindful of what we eat and how we relate to "the edible". We should give more thought to this issue and make more thoughtful choices.

Well, of course, we've been talking about vegetarian eating. Vegetarianism also covers other aspects of life. A vegetarian avoids using other forms of animal products, for much the same reason s/he does not eat meat.

7. What factors do you think are increasing meat consumption in China?

I was amazed by the impact the meat industry has on the environment we live in, but what worried me more is that in China, with one fifth of the world's people, meat production is going to expand and become more intensified in line with economic growth. There's plenty of research showing that this, coupled with China's huge population, will be hugely bad news for human health, animal welfare, food security, climate change, and many other fields. And the root cause of this is the changing values of the Chinese people.

In the last thirty years China has been powered by economic growth. Reforms have remoulded Chinese society and our values. Our self-worth is now defined by our ability to consume. But the market reforms have been incomplete: we still lack the rule of law and the transparency associated with markets, leading to our current economic structure and distorted social development. Economic development can influence politics in the West too, but China's challenge is that the ruling party and the government are bound together. Government legitimacy rests almost solely on economic growth. So the government has to push GDP growth and make economic activity the dominant role in the people's lives. All social activity becomes about the economy. It's like instant noodles – all calories, no nutrition.

The sudden acquisition of wealth and disposable resources has made the Chinese people, emerging from the planned economy's low standard of living, think that the individual is now in charge of their own lives. And to an extent that's true; we have money, we can travel or even emigrate, we are able to fulfill our ownership urges, we can eat delicacies from all over the world, drive sports cars and sail yachts, fly private planes. If you've got the money, you can do what you want, and it all seems great. But all these material possibilities have been accompanied by deterioration in the environment we live in, and humanity's future is under threat. When we use the language of economics to describe the world, when we use our material possessions to understand ourselves, of course we can't hear the cries of the animals, the complaints of nature, or the sighs of future generations.

8. Were you a vegetarian before making the film?

I've been vegetarian for five years. Five years ago my wife and I saw a couple we were friends with living a life of tranquility and moderation, and that inspired us to cut out meat. That was how it started. Then I took on this film and decided to stick with it.

I mentioned earlier that I'd decided to go vegetarian before, and that lasted for a year. This was around the Chinese New Year of 2005. I was filming a rural family that was being resettled. They were very poor; they had nothing but some cast-off furniture and a hen. That hen was so precious to them it had spent its whole life tied to the leg of the kitchen table. And as they were being resettled, they decided to kill it for the New Year dinner. And the guy, with his first swing he cut the bird's throat, then on the second he cut the rope it was tied up with. And that made me think. I wasn't religious then, but the fate of that hen for some reason made me think of our own fates. Are we only set free from our own fetters when we die? That made me decide to eat vegetarian for a year. But I never thought about it further, so I didn't stick with it.

There was something else that happened in between which brought me close to vegetarianism again. In 2008 I was in New York, eating dinner with a group of international friends. A chicken dish came out and someone said it was really good. And because in English they use the same word for 'chicken' and 'chicken meat', it sounded for a moment to me like she was saying the chicken was very good for having allowed us to eat its meat. For most people, there's no difference between a chicken and its meat. For diners, a chicken's life has no value; the only value is when it's served up as meat. I was eating a lot of meat at the time, and that was a shocking thought.

That reminds me of something a vegetarian friend, Brian, told me. His four-year-old daughter is proud to be a vegetarian, as it means she doesn't love the cute animals in the cartoons one minute, then turn around and use a real animal for food the next.

9. Is the film mostly for those in cities? In rural areas meat consumption is lower, and they raise livestock to make a living. It's in the cities that the meat is actually eaten.

The film isn't for anyone in particular. But it's more likely that people in cities will see it. As for the differing levels of meat consumption between the cities and rural areas, I haven't looked into that, so I can't say for sure. But from what I've seen, more meat is being eaten in the rural areas than in the past. And that's even more the case in the cities. People have more purchasing power, salaries are higher, so in the cities people expect to eat meat. For restaurant owners, different types of meat, and in particular exotic types, sell well and allow for much more profit than vegetarian dishes. So restaurants will try to tempt and encourage people to eat more meat.

10. Do you worry about the future? Do you think mankind can find a sustainable way to live and eat?

Well, the future's possibilities are always endless. Sometimes things look pretty awful, but simply because they are so unbearably terrible, more and more people agree that things cannot go on like this and they decide to change. Environmental degradation as we see it today is largely a product of our often distorted values and world views. We process materials known as our wealth at the expense of Nature (including animals) and consume as if there were no costs to Nature and the environment. When trying to solve environmental problems, we always wish to invent new things to replace the old ones, but unfortunately the new things keep giving us new problems and make us think we need more even-newer things. We always want others to change but are unwilling to change ourselves.

Climate change is a good example of this; American politicians say, "oh, no, let's not give up too much because the voters won't re-elect us if the economy gets worse," and the Chinese are saying,

“oh, you guys have accumulated so much wealth in the last decades, why should we sacrifice our economy for the planet?” It’s like an ocean liner headed towards an iceberg and in order to save everybody’s lives, the crew must act together to change the course of the ship. Yet, the crew members who boarded the ship first say, with their wine glasses in hand, “no, there is no way I’m going to put down this wine, because my life’s always been like this,” and those who boarded the ship later argue, “you have had so much wine already, why should I sacrifice for you?” Therefore, nobody puts down their glass, and they all die with their beautiful wine in hand. This stupidity is indeed happening to humanity today.

So when we speak of environmental problems, let’s not always turn to others. We just need to ask ourselves if we want to save ourselves or not. It sounds like a cliché but really the future is in *our* hands. There is a question that concerns all of us, a question that concerns our happiness and our future but is seldom asked or discussed and that is: what is a good life? Many around us think that as long as we don’t violate the law (or don’t get caught afterwards), we can do anything we want. Well, if all of us build our future on the minimum commitment to the law, what kind of a future would that be? Where shall we place those values that make our civilization a worthy one?

Please ask yourself: if there is one thing in this world, something that as long as you do it, will make the world a little bit better, something that everyone in the world can do, regardless of race, gender, or age, as long as you wish, then would you do it or not? What I’m talking about here is consuming less or no meat. It is probably the most “democratic” way of making a difference in the world and is the basis of living a sustainable lifestyle. So, the question is directed at *you*, now will you give it a try?