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Ann Veeck

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Rapidly changing food consumption patterns in China has for the last 15 years captured the attention of Western Michigan University international researcher and marketing professor Dr. Ann Veeck. In nearly annual trips to China, Veeck examines how these patterns are changing parallel to the expansion of the Chinese economy and how marketing efforts affect consumers' lives in both positive and negative ways. Her research projects have focused on issues related to quality of life, such as food safety and the effect of China’s one-child policy on family consumer decisions.

“With the unprecedented economic growth in China, more people have been lifted out of poverty
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in the last two decades in China than in any other time or place in history,” Veeck said. “I can't imagine a more exciting place to study marketing than China in recent years. Food consumption patterns have proven to provide particularly intriguing focal points from which to study the transformation of the Chinese economy, as food-related behavior is intertwined with changes in social relationships, the family, the retail, distribution, and transportation infrastructure, the political and legal environment, and many other social and economic phenomena.”

Veeck’s project foci have included adoption of new food purchase behaviors, perceptions of food safety, the purchasing influence of children, the role of family meals, and other topics related to family and food. She uses a variety of research methods for her field work in China: in-home interviews, accompanying consumers on food shopping trips, observing meal preparations, and, conducting focus groups and surveys.

On her most recent trip to China in summer 2010, Veeck was affiliated with Jinlin University and had two major research objectives: to observe the food shopping habits of local consumers and the annual pig feasts hosted by area villages that precede New Year celebrations.

“I generally ask quite a few questions in the course of the shopping trip, such as, 'why did you buy celery from that vendor instead of the vendor over there?'; 'why didn't you bargain with the tomato seller?'; and, 'why did you choose to buy pork from a supermarket instead of a morning market? ’” she said.

Following the shopper back home after the shopping trip gives Veeck the opportunity to observe how he or she stores the food that was purchased. With permission, she makes a thorough examination of the shopper's kitchen and other areas to see how and what food items are stored.

“It is interesting to observe to what extent the practice of
refrigerating food has changed since I first began conducting these observations in 1995,” Veeck said. “At that time, most urban dwellers owned refrigerators, but the consumption practice was fairly new and the refrigerators tended to be dorm-sized. Many people were reluctant to put food in the refrigerator because they believed that once fruits and vegetables were refrigerated they were no longer fresh, so refrigerators tended to contain very few items. Many urban families now own full-sized refrigerators, and when I look inside them, I often find that they are stuffed with all kinds of food.”

Compared to 1995, Veeck said food shopping behavior in China is now much more diverse to fit the more heterogeneous lifestyles of city dwellers. In 1995, shopping every day for the freshest possible food was the norm. Almost every shopper she observed at that time walked by foot to the nearest outdoor market and purchased just a few items to feed his or her family for the next 24 hours. She said today’s shoppers enjoy greatly expanded retail choices and might shop for food in a morning market (like a farmer’s market), a traditional food market, a supermarket, or a smaller convenience store. Older shoppers often still shop for food daily, but it is becoming common for many people to shop for food once or twice a week at a supermarket.

“I have often watched Chinese families prepare meals, but I don't usually stay and observe families eating meals,” she said. “While it would be interesting and useful to observe meals, it would make families very uncomfortable if I just observed their meals and didn't sit down with them and eat. If I joined them in eating their meals, it would completely change the dynamics of their family meals. As such, observing meals in person would be nearly pointless.”

Almost all of Veeck’s research has been focused in urban areas, until the summer of 2008, when she began collaborating with her husband, Dr. Gregory Veeck, a WMU professor of geography, on fieldwork in rural Jilin Province to research annual reciprocal pig feasts. “People told me it was the most important ritual of the year in the formation and maintenance of relationships,” she said. Several weeks before the New Year, many families—even the poorest families—raise one to two pigs that they butcher and cook to serve friends and family. Veeck said the pig feasts are
important to the villagers for establishing and maintaining important social and economic networks and to show gratitude to people who have helped them throughout the year.

“My research was based on interviews with farmers in four villages in Jilin Province,” she said. “The study analyzed how this ritual has served to affirm social networks and organize the collective tasks that are necessary for rural survival. While the pig feast remains an important ritual in most farm villages in Jilin Province, there is now evidence that they may disappear in their current form within a generation due to rapid economic and social changes in villages.”

Veeck said that because China is changing so quickly she discovers new findings every time she visits, even if she is pursuing the same research topics. “It's a fun challenge,” she said. “The breakneck change makes for interesting research that requires me to constantly update my findings and knowledge.”

Veeck received her Ph.D. in business administration from Louisiana State University in 1997 and a master's of marketing research from the University of Georgia in 1986. Her publications include articles in *World Development*, *Journal of Macromarketing*, *Journal of Business Research*, and other journals, as well as numerous conference proceedings.

*Story by Nate Coe*