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# Virtuous Eating: Landscaping the Ethics of Elder Care with Food

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## Abstract

The paper invigorates the discussion on ethics of care in 'care-ful geographies' by highlighting the importance of thinking with 'culture' and its moral dimensions in filtering local ethics of elder care in China. More specifically, it illuminates how care, both as ethics and virtue, was manifested by a group of Buddhist older adults' appreciation of vegetarian eating in relation to the responsibilities for their own health and accompanying moral obligations. The conceptualization of 'virtuous eating' provides a hermeneutic cultural tool to interpret the shifting identifications with vegetarian eating, articulated as *xiu lian* (修練 cultivation), *fu bao* (福報 blessing) and *ci bei* (慈悲 compassion), thus generating its analytical capacity in highlighting the reciprocity and relationality of care. The meanings associated with values and morality of vegetarian eating were enacting in forging new configurations of ethics of care within their self-therapeutic caring encounters.

## Highlights

- The paper invigorates the debates in 'care-ful' geographies by highlighting the importance of thinking with 'culture'.
- The Buddhist older adults' vegetarian eating enabled them to shape their own self-therapeutic landscapes of care.
- 'Virtuous eating' serves as a cultural toolkit to interpret the reciprocity and relationality of care.
- The paper exemplifies cultivation, blessing and compassion to mediate the reconfiguration of ethics of care in China.

## Introduction

The paper contributes to critical debates in health geography regarding the universality of ethics of care (Tronto, 2013; Mol, 2008; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) and the importance of thinking with culture and its moral dimensions. In response to the theoretical agenda of the Special Issue of Cultural Landscapes of Care (SI, 2021), I approach culture in relation to its particularity of a meaningful way of life (Williams, 2009), while also highlighting culture in relation to local values and practices as a critical toolkit of mediation (Anderson, 2020) that enables us to open up and translate meaningful encounters and reconfigurations of care. Recent years have witnessed a growing discussion on changing caring relations and responsibilities within the context of changing institutions, environments and communities (Middleton & Samanani, 2021; Milligan & Wiles, 2010; Lawson, 2007). The above literature offers a critical lens to engage with the issues of ageing health, elder care, and caregiving. They have shed light on the role of space and place for older adults' well-being (Milligan, 2009; Wiles, 2005); the embodied and emotional experiences (Anderson & Smith, 2001; Andrews, et al., 2013), and the representations of their experiences in relation to place (Hopkins & Pain, 2007). The paper develops 'virtuous eating' as a new conceptualization to reinvigorate the discussion on how local older adults navigate care through food and eating practices, as Mol, et al. (2010:13) maintain in their understanding of care as 'something to do, in practice, as care goes on'.

Through the lens of therapeutic landscape, existing studies in health geography have underscored the role of religious beliefs/practices and the spiritual dimension of place in cultivating individuals' emotional and mental health, as well as quality of life in general (see Bigante, 2015; Agyekum & Newbold, 2016). This paper presents a study of a group of Buddhist older adults living in a coastal city in Guangdong, China and their appreciation of vegetarian eating. The conceptualization of 'virtuous eating' has enabled me to better translate their articulation of *chi ping an* (吃平安) that highlights the simultaneity of moral and ethical dimensions underpinning the practices of 'doing' care (Lynch et al., 2021) in a neoliberal landscape. In turn, this has enabled me to engage critically with the tensions in relation to care for and care about, as well as responsibility and obligation. *Chi ping an* can be translated as eating for health and safety. The notion of *ping an* (平安) connotates meanings regarding normality, wellness and safety. It contains the moral sentiments and expectations for individuals and their

loved ones, which often appear in people's prayers and wishes when they seek blessings from the Buddha, the local gods and their ancestors.

The accounts exemplified three meaningful layers of virtuous eating, including *xiu lian* (修練 cultivation), *fu bao* (福報 blessing) and *ci bei* (慈悲 compassion and mercy) to mediate the ethics of care as both responsibility and obligations. 'Virtuous eating' provides a culturally sensitive analytical tool to explain how reciprocity and relationality were enabled in the older adults' therapeutic encounters with vegetarian eating.

**Ageing, Culture and Changing Landscapes of Elder Care**

The paper deploys a broad definition of care as a 'provision of practical or emotional support' (Milligan & Wiles, 2010: 373), a 'way of life' that is embedded in everyday encounters (Lawson, 2007), taking place within ordinary spaces (Power and Hall, 2018). Debates around attentiveness to elder care and responsibilities of care have mainly focused on inquiries on who cares and how good care can be enabled in everyday settings, as well as how care is constrained (Milligan 2009). Both conceptualizations of 'landscapes of care' (Milligan & Wiles, 2010) and 'therapeutic landscapes' (Kearns & Milligan, 2020; Gesler, 1992) build on the notion of the deinstitutionalization of care and highlight the importance of material, social and symbolic factors in forging relational health care and healing processes. Ingold (1993) understands 'landscape' as a sense of feeling in relation to belonging where embodied practices are enabled to take place. Studies on care ethics in a western context tend to focus on the tension between 'care for' and 'care about' regarding the activities of specific caring practices and the feeling of emotional connection, such as compassion and affection (Bowlby et al. 2010). Milligan and Wiles (2010) maintain the need of thinking about 'care for' and 'care about' beyond the spatial understanding of proximity and distance. Feminist geographers highlight their vision with reference to the ethics of care regarding the morality of attentiveness, responsibility and compassion (Lawson, 2007; Massey, 2004; Tronto, 1994), which needs be understood not as 'a contract but a condition; even a pre-condition' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012:198). Hence, the ethics of care needs to be approached as a cultural condition that enable us to reflect on how relationality is lived out, so that good care takes place beyond the ethical code of practices and orders. Culture is also served as a critical domain of understanding meanings as negotiable (Jackson, 1989), and as an 'assembled' articulation of value, condition and a way of being

(Anderson, 2020) for filtering its moral dimension as obligation. Thus, this paper builds on the above critical engagement in relation to the deinstitutionalization of care by exemplifying how culture equips us with analytical tools to develop new insights for understanding the changing landscapes of elder care in China and the meanings of care as lived out in older adults' mundane practices in relation to food and eating.

The ontological understanding of care in China is comprehended both as ethics and as virtue, alongside the tension between responsibility and obligation. There is a saying regarding the ideal state for an older adult and the ethics of elder care, that is *lao you suo yi* (老有所依), meaning that the elderly should have someone to depend on. The word *yi* means *yi kao* (依靠 depend), *yi lai* (依賴 rely on), or *yi fu* (依附 attached to). It is governed by the ethics of mutuality and reciprocity in relation to familial caring relations within one's life course. It also implies the obligation of dependency and the proximity of care in terms of physical and emotional distance between the elderly and the carers, who are expected to be the son and his family. This expectation of elder care is also related to the ethical order of filial piety (Liu 2016; Lin, 2014), which requires adult children to provide physical care in terms of distance, such as co-residence; materiality of care including food and financial provision, as well as emotionality of care regarding support for their psychological wellbeing (Chou, 2011; Zhan, 2004). Filial piety is of equal importance a virtue, in line with *zun lao ai you* (尊老愛幼 respecting the elderly and loving the young) as a moral condition for developing mutual caring relations and practices. If we understand care as ethics regarding codes of practices and orders of relations, then care as virtue would provide a lens to recognise both the moral obligation and emotional connection that govern the negotiation of new orders and the completion of good care. Pang-White (2011) illustrates the resonance of love and care in Confucian philosophy with ethics and virtue through the concept of *ren* (仁), highlighting 'the relational context of *ren* as a virtue that can only be cultivated in the dyadic relation of the one-caring and the cared-for in its development and completion' (Pang-White, 2011:378).

Within the context of a changing ageing society in China, Qi's (2021a) study sheds light on the importance of thinking with culture to unsettle the ethical order of elder care. Through the conceptualization of a *ziran* (自然 natural) approach in making sense of the ageing population in China, Qi argues that the older population 'seeks accommodation with the process of ageing rather than attempts to control them' (2021a:1). Qi (2021a) maintains that the provision of care

and traditional caring responsibility to ageing parents are shifting in light of the constraints and uncertainties of material circumstances, including the sons and their partners' constraints of their time due to employment and other responsibilities in their own household. Thus, older adults tend to look after themselves without putting pressure on their 'assigned' carers and to become older 'naturally' through taking responsibility of their own health. This is illustrated in Lin's (2020) study on the changing eating behaviour of a 'left-behind' mother of a migrant son. It illustrates how food reconfigures intergenerational familial care and love that matter to the traditional filial responsibility and order of elder care. This provides a critical cultural lens in making sense of the possibilities and strategies of negotiating new orders of caring responsibilities in a neoliberal landscape, within which the cultural ideology and expectations in relation to elder care are under negotiation, resulting in new norms and practices. For example, Zhong and Li's (2017) study acknowledges how families in urban China renegotiate intergenerational relations to maintain elder care and emotional support in response to changing social and economic conditions. Their study suggests that older parents' active involvement in providing strategic financial support to their children in terms of housing, in return for potential future security and emotional togetherness, 'resembles traditional filial responsibilities but without stressing obedience' (2017:168).

Fox and Smith (2011:403) argue that the discourses of individual responsibility of healthy eating 'need to be contextualised in the cultures and environments in which they are received'. In China, of equal importance is the proliferation of *yang sheng* (養生 nurturing life) as lived out in different forms of self-care practices, ranging from bodily exercises to diet monitoring with an aim of maintaining good health (Farquhar, 2002; Sun, 2015). Farquhar and Zhang (2005) maintain that *yang sheng* practice creates a space that enables the state to collaborate with the public that might appear to be exercising personal effectiveness in self-governing their own bodies. They argue that *yang sheng* practice mobilises power and 'exerts control over life from within, practicing the civilized arts that give form to life' (2005:323). This is of particular salience within a neoliberal context, where the privatization of health care and the uncertainty of changing life circumstances are resulting in individuals' internalization of taking responsibility for their own health and wellbeing, accompanying an emergence of therapeutic landscapes for health (Wang, et al., 2018). This paper highlights how 'virtuous eating' served as a critical cultural lens to make sense of the changing neoliberal landscape of elder care.

## Method and Analysis

*Research site*

The paper derives from an on-going study on the role of food in older adults' everyday day lives since 2018. The data were collected from a field trip during the Spring of 2018. Institutional ethical approval was obtained prior to the fieldtrip in China. The participants in this paper were selected from the fieldwork carried out at a Buddhist hall in a residential area in a coastal city in Guangdong, China. The Buddhist hall in this study is typical of the urban residential areas. They tend to be smaller compared to regular Buddhist temples, which are usually outside the city. Thus, worshipers go there due to its convenience, rather than traveling miles to a temple. The Buddhist hall, or as locals call it *fo tang* (佛堂) is situated on the 1st floor of a residential apartment block. The Buddhist hall was especially busy on the 1st and the 15th of the lunar calendar months. People at the Buddhist hall seemed to know each other, especially among the regular visitors. Some of them also acted as volunteers, helping with the day to day operations at the Buddhist hall.

*Participants*

The participants were aged between 58-71 at the time of the interviews. I was first introduced to a few regular participants by a family friend, Auntie Liu (age 59), who is also a regular worshipper at the Buddhist hall. Auntie Liu was a dedicated Buddhist in the local Buddhist community and had been a vegetarian for more than 10 years. I was talking to her about my study about food and eating in older adults' everyday lives. Auntie Liu said that she could introduce me to a group of her Buddhist friends to talk about vegetarian eating. The 14 participants selected for this paper came from similar socio-cultural backgrounds, including 4 men and 10 women; 7 of them were retired professionals, 4 were full time housewives and 3 of them were unclear regarding their professions and social status, as they had been volunteering at the Buddhist hall for a long time. Most of the participants can be categorised as local middle class residents, as evidenced in their accounts during the interviews in relation to the backgrounds of their families and areas of residency. Thus, it is with this in mind that the analysis of the data might offer specific analysis of a particular cohort of the older population. It also offers a critical lens to understand the changing landscape of elder care in China in relation to diverse geographic locations and social-economic positions. Although I am based in an

overseas institution, I am reflexive about my position as someone who shares local cultural traditions and language with the participants. I particularly understand the importance of maintaining the issue of cultural relevance in data collection, in order to produce responsible knowledge about the local. Thus, the interviews were carried out in the local dialect and were translated into English. I referred to them as 'auntie' and 'uncle' as a way of showing my respect to someone senior, rather than as an indicator of a family member. I was inclined to keep the colloquial expression with extended explanation as there was no direct translation, or the translation was not be able to capture the exact meanings of what they tried to express within its particular context.

*Analysis*

During the fieldwork, a number of 'aunties' were a little embarrassed about what they said. They tended to self-deprecate during or after the interviews that their narratives might appear *fu qian* (膚淺 shallow) and didn't know if they were useful. In fact, their so-called 'shallow' accounts became of critical significance for me to make sense of how care was articulated culturally at a local level. The study is informed by a 'visceral' turn in human geography (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2010; Hayes-Conroy, 2017), in making sense of their 'ordinary' ways of life. The understanding of 'visceral' is understood as 'that relating to, and emerging from, bodily, emotional and affective interactions with the material and discursive environment' (Sexton et al. 2017:200). Hayes-Conroy (2017:52) acknowledges the capacity of a visceral approach in developing the interconnections of 'mind/body, discourse/feeling, immaterial/material, social/biological, self/environment.' It is a bodily reaction that is associated with 'elemental emotions, natural instincts, and non-intellectual bodily judgments' (Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy, 2010, p. 1273). For the analysis, I paid particular attention to the older adults' description and reaction in relation to feeling, emotion, taste and flavour of food and eating and how these helped shape the participants' self-therapeutic landscapes of care.

## Findings

I was expecting that all the participants I talked to were vegetarians. However, I found that most of them just were following semi-vegetarian diets (9 out of 14), while practicing Buddhism. I will elaborate how the notion of *Chi Ping An* (吃平安) or 'virtuous eating' as an emplaced

cultural lens enabled me to bring to light meanings of care and ethics as articulated in their accounts of *xiu lian* (修練 cultivation), *fu bao* (福報 blessing), and *ci bei* (慈悲 compassion), which were 'filtered' through their appreciation of vegetarian eating, thus, enabling them to negotiate their self-therapeutic landscapes of care, for themselves and for others.

**Vegetarian Eating as *Xiu Lian* (修練 cultivation)**

Most of the participants understood vegetarian eating as an embodied practice for bodily health. Equally of importance, they understand vegetarian eating and the related lifestyle of eating lightly and simply as a form of spiritual practice of cultivation as they called it *xiu lian* (修練 cultivation and transmutation). Many of the participants highlighted the notion of simple eating as a pathway of being or becoming a vegetarian. Uncle Wang (age 63, semi-vegetarian) was talking about his controlled eating practices since a regular health check that he had a higher level of blood sugar and on the edge of diabetes that worried him and his family. Since then, he has been following his wife practicing vegetarian eating and Buddhism and changing his lifestyle.

> Uncle Wang: I used to eat everything, especially when you were out socialising, eating and drinking were not monitored…It is interesting about being human, once you start to eat less and less meat for a while, especially you eat more vegetables, both *jing sheng* (精神 the spirit) and the stomach are feeling better.

Uncle Wang's account was shared by other older adults I met regarding their adaptation of vegetarian eating. Auntie Liang (age 61, vegetarian) was a retired high school teacher. She was living in a nearby affluent gated residential garden. She explained to me her views about vegetarian eating and worshipping the Buddha at the Buddhist hall.

> Auntie Liang: Our living standard is improved. (But) the society is quite *fu zao* (浮躁 impulsive) and people compare (things) with each other. Buddhism has taught us to *xiu sheng yang xing* (修身養性 cultivating one's body and soul). At our age, we don't have much material desire. Vegetarian eating is to keep the inner organs clean, so as to have a peaceful mind.

Uncle Wang's story of vegetarian eating enabled me to think about the relationship between faith, health and life course. For example, the cultivation of 'spirit' in his account was in line with what Farquhar & Zhang (2005: 312) claim in their study about their participants' *Yang Sheng* (nurturing life) practices in Beijing that 'to have spirit, to be spirited, is to be more than just alive'. For older men, such as Uncle Wang, professional work or business activities might have an impact on their bodily health as they became older. Thus, his account of feeling better in relation to the 'spirit' was emanated by food and eating practices in light of the concerns for his health and the enlightenment of practicing Buddhism. To be able to have the spirit or feel good spirit was an unmeasurable 'indicator' of good health and a positive outlook on life. His account regarding his visceral reaction of having good spirit in light of his changing eating habits was shared by Auntie Liang's notion of *xiu sheng yang xing* (修身養性 cultivating one's body and soul), which implied a sense of resistance to the neoliberal ideology of competitiveness in seeking better a material and successful life, as Auntie Liang coined contemporary life as *fu zao* (浮躁 impulsive) and how she tended to cope with the anxiety of wellbeing through vegetarian eating. A similar account was shared by Uncle Chen (age 65, semi vegetarian) regarding his change of *xin tai* (心態 state of mind; mindset). Uncle Chen used to run his own company. During the last few years, he has been in the process of transition to retirement and had been very careful about what he ate compared to how he used to be. He and his wife - Auntie Wu - were semi vegetarians highlighting the relationality of their vegetarian eating practices.

> Uncle Chen (age 65, semi vegetarian): You see when we were children, we were poor and had nothing to eat, we were skinny (but) our body (health) was fine…Human beings don't need to eat meat. Vegetarian eating is like a type of *xiu lian* (修練 cultivation)… My *xin tai* (心態 mindset) is changing when (I am) older. It doesn't matter how good I eat. Eating lighter and maintaining *ping an* (平安 safe and well) without illness is most important.

> Auntie Wu (age 64, semi vegetarian): I was practicing Buddhism for a long time, moving to practice 'full' vegetarian eating seemed natural. (But) my body couldn't handle it after a few days. So I returned to eat fish and eggs. Some people can get used to it, some people can't. I thought I hadn't got the *fo yuan* (佛緣 destiny with the Buddha). The *shi fu* (the master monk) said that it's just as good to be *sui yuan* (隨緣 natural, let nature take its course). The purpose of vegetarian eating in Buddhism is to cultivate a *ci bei xin* (慈悲心 a heart with

compassion)… (So) I should just take good care of my own body, that benefits myself and benefits others (利人利己).

The above accounts regarding the cultivation of *xin tai* (心態 mindset) illustrated the older adults' self-therapeutic encounter of care through appreciating vegetarian eating. The notion of *xin tai* (心態 mindset) illustrated their temporal spiritual sensibility informed by Buddhism. Their close connections with Buddhism through appreciating sensible vegetarian eating were in line with Mattioni et al.'s (2020) study on the attribute of food environment to individuals' ascribed meanings to food. The Buddhist values and beliefs surrounding the older adults' everyday lives shaped a spiritual landscape to enable them to articulate a meaningful rationale for their eating practices that focused on the purposes of life, beyond a self-care discourse. Paradoxically, while they were reflecting on the changing material circumstances in life, their cultivation of *xin tai* (心態 mindset) could also be interpreted as the result of their 'classed' sensibilities (Cairns & Johnston, 2015) in light of their improved material living circumstances, which I will discuss further in a later section.

### ***Fu Bao*** **(福報 blessing) and Familial Care**

The previous section illuminates a reading of the older adults' vegetarian eating practices as spiritual attentiveness to their own health and wellness as a way of cultivation. I would like to highlight their rationale further in association with the caring relations their familial relations in their life course and how vegetarian eating in Buddhism helps shape their understandings of ethics of care. For many participants, vegetarian eating is often linked to the Buddhist values of 'karma', which highlight the causal relations between what happened in the past and the present, and what happens at present and the future. The older adults' accounts also illustrate that vegetarian food carries symbolic meanings of care, demonstrating solidarity, responsibility and emotional togetherness. The symbolic meanings of vegetarian food serve to encapsulate their eating practices as affective ways of showing their love and care to their children, with a good will of bringing them fortune. In return, the older adults is expected to be rewarded with blessings when they are older, with good health and surrounded by their families. For example, Auntie Zhang (age 66, vegetarian) was a housewife and had been a vegetarian for more than 10 years. She was living with her husband and her mother-in-law. Her son was married living in the

same city but not together with them. She followed her mother-in-law to practice Buddhism and vegetarian eating.

> Auntie Zhang: …She (my mother-in-law) doesn't know what is good for her health. She just wants all her children to be *ping an* (平安, safe and well)… Everyone says she has *fu qi* (福氣 blessing and fortune), still in good health, almost 90 years old and *zi sun man tang* (子孫滿堂 a house full of children grandchildren). I admire her dedication…It wasn't easy (for me) at the beginning when I saw people having fish and meat. (But) I am afraid of the smell of meat now. As long as you are *cheng xin* (誠心 sincere), it is just natural (that you don't like the smell of meat).

For Auntie Zhang, becoming a vegetarian might be interpreted as a means for achieving good health and longevity. But her account regarding her mother-in-law's rationale of vegetarian eating provides a rationale that entails a moral obligation of ensuring her family is safe and well. Her admiration of her mother-in-law's *fu qi (*福氣 blessing and fortune) demonstrates how the symbolic capacity of Buddhist vegetarian practice can also be translated into a spiritual food environment, with prayers for Buddha's blessing and 'care'. For Auntie Zhang, vegetarian practice was a taste for *ping an* (平安 safe and well). Her reaction to the smell of meat carried a visceral sense of belonging to Buddhism and to becoming closer to the Buddha's blessing, and hoping her virtue of being sincere be rewarded with a similar 'blessing' as her mother-in-law, while she became older.

Auntie Hong (age 65) and Uncle Hong (age 68) were semi-vegetarians. Their two sons and their families were living away from the hometown, one in another major city in the province and one in Australia. Auntie Hong was joking that she had not reached the spiritual state or mindset as she expressed as *jing jie* (境界), where she could fully be committed to be a vegetarian as she spent some time elsewhere looking after their grandchild and she just wanted to be *sui yuan* (隨緣 a Buddhist mentality of accepting what naturally comes according to circumstances and accepting) as it is not easy to maintain vegetarian eating when she was away from home. However, she was very particular about having vegetarian breakfast when she was at home.

> Auntie Hong: We worship a Buddha (statue) at home, so I tend to consume vegetarian food at home. They said that having vegetarian food in the morning is the best for the children…

> They said it's ok to eat egg in the morning. I thought egg was not vegetarian. (So) I used to have just a bowl of rice porridge and some pickle vegetables or fermented tofu. (But) in the middle of the morning, I started to feel acid fluid from the stomach (acid reflux).
>
> Uncle Hong: She would do anything for the two (sons) …

The mixing of rice porridge with pickle vegetables or fermented tofu caused discomfort in her stomach. Her account of vegetarian eating illustrates how she made sense of her private life and spiritual space, such as having breakfast at home as a religious practice with a sense of obligation to care for her sons as a mother's 'prayer' for her sons' blessing through her 'virtuous eating'. Similar accounts were shared by other participants regarding their articulation of a familial landscape of intergenerational dependence, support and care.

> Auntie Xie (age 62, vegetarian): We worship the Buddha, we don't eat beef. (We) should *ji fu* (積福 accumulate fortune and blessing) for myself and the kids.
>
> Uncle Wang (age 64, semi vegetarian): Earning money is endless. Leave some to the young people to earn. I am old and don't ask for anything, just keeping good health is important. Do regular exercise, don't eat fatty food and look after yourself well. When you are well, the (lives of) *zi sun* (子孫 son and grandchildren, referred to as the next generations) can be relatively easy.

Family is the main source of support for older adults (Qi, 2021b; Liu; 2016). The above accounts about the connection between vegetarian eating and their families were in line with Sheng's (2021) study on older Chinese women's participation in plaza dancing as an active strategy of managing their ageing bodies and health, with an underlying obligation of delaying their impending dependence on their children. The notions of simplicity and natural were shared widely as the older adults' preference of their food. Uncle Wang and Auntie Xie expressed explicitly above about the link of between vegetarian eating practices informed by their religious beliefs and the potential meaningful outcomes in relation to the parental obligation for their children's blessing. Their accounts illustrated how their virtuous eating practices were ethically accountable and morally responsible, as they were driven by both religious beliefs for not eating meat, as well as the cultural expectation of being a good parent for accumulating good deeds for

their children. Hence, the accounts demonstrated their active re-organization of filial obligation of care and their shifting responsibility in a neoliberal landscape of elder care (Qi, 2021a).

Auntie Qiu's (age 71) appreciation of being a vegetarian furthers an understanding of reciprocity. She was the oldest participant in this study. She lived nearby and walked to the Buddhist hall most mornings, unless the weather was not good. Sometimes she stayed for lunch when there was major praying events. She lived not far from her son and daughter's families. As a dedicated Buddhist and vegetarian, her daughter-in-law bought some vegetables and tofu for her every day and she would cook her own meals.

> Auntie Qiu: …Eating *qing dan* (清淡 light and bland) is good for health, so that (I) don't have *fu dan* (負擔 burden).
>
> Interview: What kind of burden?
>
> Auntie Qiu: Body, illnesses and pain. (It is claimed that) vegetarian people do not have too much waste in the body. It is not easy to become ill. To be frank, you don't know what is safe to buy at the market. Amitabha…When I go (die), I would be at ease to go to the *ji le shi jie* (極樂世界 *Sukhavati*: the western paradise in Buddhism) with the Buddha. (So) there won't be much hardship for both my children and myself.

The notion of burden in Auntie Qiu's account initially referred to her anxiety regarding food safety and toxicity in the body as an explanation of why she chose to become a vegetarian as a self-care practice. Her account also illustrated the meanings of taking responsibility of eating as a sensible practice of taking good care of themselves while demonstrating affection and care across generations. The notion 'burden' was further developed in her account that having a healthy body will enable her to reach the ultimate reward as a Buddhist, that is to pass away without pain and illness. Nath et al (2013: 432) acknowledge that 'fundamental to the Buddhist belief system is the idea that food choices are critical in determining the character of not only one's current life, but also one's next life and the nature of one's existence across many lives.' This also has relational implications for herself as a mother and for her children. The above account illustrated an 'ethos of care' (Puig de La Bellacasa, 2017:18) with a sense of obligation, which also shared similar meanings and sentiments of Qi's discussion on a natural death expressed by her respondents as 'not to burden their adult children with "unnecessary" expenses' (2021a:7) in a

neoliberal landscape of health care, where public health services are marketized and cost of health care might not be affordable. Rather, discussion on proximity and distance in relation to care should also think about the 'social and emotional closeness and distance' (Milligan and Wiles, 2010:741). Auntie Qiu's accounts implicitly illustrated her emotional connection underpinning her rationale of vegetarian eating and her active negotiation of attentiveness to her bodies and its implications for informal interdependencies and the enactment of reciprocal care through embodied practices across the life course (McKie et al., 2002).

**Care about the Taste and a Heart of *Ci Bei* (慈悲 compassion)**

The older adults often brought fruits and vegetarian pastries to the Buddhist hall to pay tribute to the Buddha. Auntie Liu always shared her *gong ping* (貢品 tributes, offering) with her family members and friends after the Buddhist ceremonies to *chi ping an* (吃平安 eat for safe and well). She always bought the freshest fruits and vegetarian pastries to the Buddhist hall. Her idea of *chi ping an* illustrated her prayers to the Buddha with a wish for those with whom she shared the food that they would be blessed as well. In particular, Auntie Liu also saw vegetarian eating as a virtue of caring for other lives. Hence, by practicing ethical eating with a heart of compassion and mercy, such as by not buying something alive from the market for her family members, they would be blessed as well.

> Auntie Liu (age 59, vegetarian): I don't buy things that are alive. I donate money to the Buddhist hall for organizing *fang sheng* (放生 a Buddhist virtue of releasing lives to the wild, usually releasing fish to the sea or the river). Local people tend to buy something alive as they taste fresh. When I see the fish and shrimps are jumping or swimming in the market, I just walk away.

As Pang-White acknowledges, 'the feeling of empathy and commiseration resembles the emphasis of care ethics on affective feeling toward others' (Pang-White, 2011:378). Auntie Liu's account of *fang sheng* and its relation to vegetarian eating demonstrated another dimension of care as 'ethical eating' (Liu et al, 2015) for others' lives. This was shared within Auntie Wu's accounts when she was talking about *ci bei xing* (慈悲心 a heart with compassion) in the previous section about eating as a way of cultivation, where she implied that the notion of care for others and care for the self were mutually constituted.

Auntie Liu also had two friends Auntie Ma (age 61, semi vegetarian) and Auntie Zhu (age 58, semi vegetarian). They told me that they like coming to the Buddhist hall to meet for lunch. Their accounts implied how food at the Buddhist hall shape their distinctive tastes for vegetarian eating. As a tradition, they usually donate money in the donation box as a gesture of contribution to the cost of the food, or donate for the lives releasing ceremonies.

> Auntie Liu: They (people working in the Buddhist hall) prepare the food to present to the Buddha, (so) they are exquisite. They don't cook things like vegetarian chicken or vegetarian pork. Vegetarian food should be fresh and natural. I don't like processed food at vegetarian restaurants. You don't know what they add in them.

> Auntie Ma: They (the restaurant) want it cheap, their vegetables are sometimes quite *se* (澀 dry and tough). It was such a waste. (Although) it was not expensive, it doesn't respect Buddhism.

> Auntie Zhu: (Although) eating should be simple, simplicity doesn't mean rustic. We Buddhists should be particular about the food we eat, natural and hygienic. When the vegetable is fresh, it tastes sweet. And it is not going to be wasteful.

The above accounts paid specific attention to the tastes and the quality of food they consumed as an anchoring point of expressing how they cared about other lives. Hays (1994:65) maintains that 'culture is both constraining and enabling'. Their accounts illustrated their particularity of 'taste' (Ward, 1997; Bell & Valentine, 1997) and how virtuous eating is an enabling cultural practice for a certain groups of people who have the resources and sensibility to navigate care for themselves and to articulate the virtue of compassion for others, including the environment and other animals. As Auntie Shen (age 66, semi vegetarian) nicely put it regarding how the virtue of caring for other lives is a 'natural' reciprocal outcome of caring for herself.

> Auntie Shen: When we have something to eat, we need to think about those who don't and to *xi fu* (惜福 treasure blessing). We don't just pray for ourselves, we pray for *feng tiao yu shun* (風調雨順 good weather with gentle breeze and timely rain) and *guo tai min an* (國泰民安 the prosperity of the nation and the peace of the people).

Auntie Shen's accounts help develop another dimension of reciprocal landscape of care, linking care for the self with care for the others, the nature and the nation. Her accounts of compassion for others, nature and other lives illustrated Lawson's (2007:1) conceptualization of care ethics, that it enables us to move our attention 'towards the construction of new forms of relationships, institutions, and action that enhance mutuality and well-being'. And this could be made possible through our engagement with the significance of virtue that is understood as a cultural mediator of translating the ethics of care, as we have engaged with in the Special Issue.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Rather than taking culture as a reductive category of analysis in terms of geographic location, the paper engages with culture as an analytical tool of mediation in helping develop the conceptualization of 'virtuous eating', thus making sense of the older Buddhist adults' food practices as self-therapeutic caring encounters. Thus, the paper furthers the theoretical discussion on the deinstitutionalization of care in health geography. More specifically, the notion of 'virtuous eating' has enabled me to re-engage the ethics of care with culture to open up the changing landscapes of elder care in China, seeing the older adults as active subjects in navigating their self-care within a neoliberal landscape of elder care. The older adults' accounts have shed new light on how we need to approach culture as a toolkit (SI, 2021) in order to mediate and interpret their positionings in negotiating ageing and care through food and eating and how their appreciation of vegetarian eating can be better made sense of regarding the manifestation of different configurations of care for the self, for others and with others.

The paper does not intend to argue for the benefits of vegetarian eating or practicing Buddhism for older adults as a pathway for healthy ageing. Rather, the conceptualization of 'virtuous eating' is relevant to non-vegetarian eating as illustrated by the participants. Virtuous eating serves a conceptual idea that mediates how ethics of care is entwined with Buddhist values, as well as cultural expectations regarding familial relations and elder care in China. It provides a unique lens to make sense of how care is lived out in the older Buddhist adults' everyday lives, highlighting mutuality and mutability of care imbued in the cultural vectors of everyday life. Virtuous eating is simultaneously about caring for the self, for others and with others. For example, as highlighted in some of the older adults' accounts, having a healthy diet is also associated with not killing animals and not wasting food, which are deemed important

cultural values as a Buddhist, and as an important reference point of becoming a responsible citizen, who cares about the environmental implications of sustainability. For example, my analysis of *feng tiao yu shun* (風調雨順 good weather with gentle breeze and timely rain) and *guo tai min an* (國泰民安 the prosperity of the nation and the peace of the people) further reveals a distinctive cultural understanding of virtuous eating in Chinese society as care, marked by reciprocity and relationality. It is through this cultural lens that we are able to make sense of and to contextualise ethics of care in a global context. Thus, the focus on the narratives of virtuous eating helps elucidate the culturally inflected food and eating practices as a critical means to lift the discussion of cultural landscapes of care in this Special Issue. The issue of health for the Buddhist older adults are of equally a moral discourse and their practices of virtuous eating enable them to make sense of care as both an ethics and a virtue. As Milligan and Wiles (2010:740) maintain, care can be negotiated through the 'issues of responsibility, ethics and morals, and by the social, emotional, symbolic, physical and material aspects of caring'. The older adults' embodied practice of vegetarian eating is a site of negotiating the tension of care for and care about in health geography, including issues on dependency, proximity and responsibility of care.

The paper also highlights the particularity of a class culture in light of the sample of the study. Despite its limitation in not being able to generalize the eating practices and behaviours of the older population in China, it contributes to the existing literature by demonstrating the local classed sensibilities of eating related to these older Buddhist adults' social positionings and their shifting therapeutic caring encounters, thus making sense of their meanings of life in contemporary China, imbricated with neoliberal landscapes of elder care. For the Buddhist older adults, the notion of virtuous eating was informed by their moral and religious beliefs, as well as their material living conditions and social positionings. Their narratives were relational and mutually affective in articulating their own therapeutic encounters of care that mattered in landscaping the ethics of elder care. Thus, I highlight the notion of virtuous eating as a self-therapeutic caring encounter (Conradson, 2005) and argue for its analytical capacity in interpreting the relational understanding of care by thinking with culture and its potential in re-configurating the changing landscape of care within an ageing China. For the Buddhist older adults, bodily health is of equal significance as a moral discourse and their practices of vegetarian eating enable them to shape their self-therapeutic landscapes of care that were culturally accountable.

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