

With opening-up came snacks

In the 1980s, Chinese were just getting a taste for the good life, which brought new eating habits

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‘Snacks? I don’t think we had the concept in my childhood,’ recalled Gao Cuiling, reminiscing about being a girl back in the 1960s.

That may well be, but nowadays she is busy taking care of her 1-year-old granddaughter and fretting about how to prevent the baby from gobbling snacks that might taste good but are not suitable for her.

Gao’s early memories are shared by many of her generation. During the 1960s, China’s total grain output had increased, but by today’s standards it was meager. And the production record set in the 1960s was still only 210 million tons, equivalent to 280 kilograms per person for the whole year. That is enough to fill peoples’ bellies, but not enough to support any vibrant national snacks-producing industry.

The snacks made at the time were more like luxuries, too, beyond the reach of ordinary folk. Back in 1959, ABC Mickey Mouse Sweets — which later morphed to become the famous White Rabbit Creamy Candy and whose history can be traced back to Shanghai in the 1940s — represented such a high percentage of an average worker’s monthly salary during that period that they were considered extravagant treats.

Things fared a little better in the late 1970s. “During festivals we got some additional food such as sweet rice dumplings for the Lantern Festival, or rice cakes for the Dragon Boat Festival,” said Gao, who is 54.

“They’re probably the earliest snacks in my memory, if you insist on calling them that,” she added.

It was after the launch of reform and opening-up in 1978 that China’s economy really took off, which in turn caused a food boom. In the 1980s, China’s food production kept growing and finally reached 400 million tons in 1989, double the record set in the 1960s.

That also marked the start of the massive consumption of snacks in the country.

According to the theory of human needs propounded by eminent US psychologist Abraham Maslow in the 1940s — a list of ‘must haves’ depicted in a pyramid, with the most basic needs like safety at the bottom, ranging to self-actualization at the top — food is a dominant, core imperative. A look at history also shows that when a nation steps out of poverty, the first thing people do is to move their palates and stomachs onto the finer stuff.

Back in the 1980s, Chinese people, who were just getting a taste for the good life, were very creative in sniffing out the snacks they liked, which



Yuan Jinghao and Zhu Xinyu, two cousins born in 2008 and 2009, pose with their snacks. However, the daily amount of snacks they are allowed to take is limited. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

“Every snack shop near my school gave us a feeling of happiness.”

YAO WENJUN

A worker in Shenzhen, born in 1991, recalls her school days

in turn created enormous business opportunities.

ABC Mickey Mouse Sweets, which had already changed its name to White Rabbit Creamy Candy, seized the opportunity and forged its prime place in the pantheon of the national snacks industry.

Previously a luxury, it repositioned itself successfully, leaving consumers nationwide with the idea “You can now enjoy luxury, too”, winning it the warm affection with consumers it still enjoys to this day.

In the hall of fame for drinks, the most successful brand has to be Jianlibao. At the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games, China’s women volleyball team scored gold, overnight inspiring and fueling both sports mania and national pride.

Jianlibao capitalized on that, popularizing the concept of “sport drinks” with China’s consumers, with such success that at one point it had an extraordinary market share as high as 70 percent of the country’s soda drinks sector.

For some born in the 1980s, Jianlibao was pretty much the only soft

drink they would think of drinking during the summer.

There are a raft of other examples from the period. Fudges in orange, apple, pineapple and other flavors gained popularity, too, while canned fruits, mostly brewed in sweet drinkable water, became the preferred gift for those visiting patients in hospitals.

Nowadays nostalgic Chinese, whose childhood was in the 1980s, are very fond of recapturing the sweet moments of the time. Just do an online search on “snacks in the 1980s” and you get 930,000 results on search engine baidu.com. On micro blog Sina Weibo — China’s equivalent to Twitter — there is the long-standing topic #Snacks in the 1980s#, which has recorded more than 100 million hits.

Even today, people surfing e-commerce platforms can easily buy snacks with packages and flavors exactly the same as those of the 1980s. “I buy this only to wake up the taste inside my heart,” is a typical comment about one of the products.

Yet the snacks industry in this

period was not without its problems. A lack of proper laws and regulation saw a fairly high percentage of snacks produced in illegal underground workshops. Some of the backshop boys even produced pirate products carrying fake trademarks of famous brands, or registered trademarks designed to be easily confused with the leading ones.

For example, when White Rabbit Creamy Candy really took off, some businesses registered Grey Rabbit or Small White Rabbit for their rival milk candy products. White Rabbit bared its teeth in response, registering some similar trademarks first to avoid them being registered by others, among them Black Rabbit candy. That trademark has been held by White Rabbit ever since, just to head off imitators.

After a decade of development and competition, China’s snack market had two major characteristics in the 1990s: Stricter regulation and internationalization.

In 1995, the Standing Committee

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