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of the National People's Congress, the nation's top legislature, passed China's Food Hygiene Law, which clearly required law enforcers at all levels to strike down the underground illegal workshops that produced low-quality foods or foods under false brands. Until then, quite a high percentage of these kinds of foods were actually sold in school tuckshops and targeted at pupils.

These illegal products finally disappeared from the market through stricter enforcement. They might still exist here and there, far from the main urban areas, but the total amount has decreased hugely.

Global brands also jumped on the bandwagon, rushing into China. Spanish brand Cola Cao made its first appearance in 1990 and ruled the roost for quite a few years. A nutritious product made of cocoa powder, it gives out the smell of chocolate when brewed in hot milk, making it a popular drink with kids.

Yao Wenjun, born in 1991 and now working in Shenzhen in the southern Guangdong province, witnessed the changes as a girl. "During my six years at primary school, the number of foreign snacks brands near my school grew from none to three, or one every two years," she said with a smile. "Every snack shop gave us a feeling of happiness."

US food giants KFC and McDonald's were among the international brands that moved into China during the period, along with rivals such as Subway and Pizza Hut. Interestingly, the difference in the meaning of the word "lunch" for Chinese people and Westerners made their roles different in China, too. For many in the West, lunch is often a sandwich or roll, ordered to go and eaten on the run within half an hour.

In China, however, lunch is a substantial meal — no less important than breakfast or supper. As a



Zhang Junyao, a 1-year-old girl, enjoys biscuits on her baby cart. WANG JINGJING / FOR CHINA DAILY

result, the fried chicken and sandwiches sold by KFC and McDonald's were seen more as leisure snacks when they first came out in China and their best-sellers were french fries.

An inevitable result of people eating more and more french fries and other high-caloried snacks, both domestic and global brands, is obesity. According to the international Danone Institute, which specializes in nutritional research, the obesity

rate for Chinese 7-18 years old had risen eight times in 2000 compared with 1985; for the subgroup aged 17-18, the rate was up 21.5 times.

That is why, since the beginning of the new century, "control" has become a key word in the lexicon of parents, reflecting their new attitude toward snacks for their family. Some parents have cut back on their kids' weekly allowance or pocket money, while others have imposed strict discipline at home and set limits on the

amount of snacks their children can consume.

Yuan Jinghao and Zhu Xinyu, two cousins born in 2008 and 2009, have experienced both measures. Yuan is allowed to spend only 20 yuan (\$2.90) a week on snacks, while Zhu is allowed to have only one small bag of snacks each day, with a weight not exceeding 150 grams.

Back at the Gao residence, baby granddaughter Zhang Junyao might

still be wearing diapers, but she is already following rules, because of her obvious taste for snacks.

For her health, besides her meals, she is only allowed to take fruits, a small cup of yogurt, and two kinds of children's biscuits.

"It seems a natural desire for children to want snacks," Gao said.

"But the health of my granddaughter is the most important thing, and I must be strict in implementing the rules."

Contentment we cannot do without

'Bonus happiness' is what makes snacks so many people's indispensable pleasure

By PAN YIXUAN

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Refined and delicious food can bring gourmands a profound sense of joy and contentment — but for others the humble snack is a popular habit that can bring them easy and instant gratification.

"Having meals gives me life, but eating snacks brings me joy," said Xu Shuyang, a graduate student at Tianjin University, in North China.

For Xu, snacks are an irresistible pleasure. "I'm afraid of putting on weight, but I can't give them up, so I prefer snacks with lower calories and I usually increase my exercise routine after eating them," Xu added.

For some foodies, varying their

snacks with different flavors is all the rage. "It's impossible for me to give up snacks, although I know many are junk food, because they taste so good," said Zhou Jinmei, 23, a graduate from Southwest China's Sichuan province.

She said she would like to tuck into some snacks after a good meal, but sometimes skips meals when she has been filled up with snacks.

According to Zhou, meals are too formal, while the snack is a kind of instant food that she can reach out for whenever she is hungry, having as much as she likes and storing the rest.

Besides, she added, compared with the standard menus in formal restaurants and canteens, new kinds

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of attractive snacks are being produced all the time.

At the grocery store or in supermarkets — where all kinds of snacks with various flavors are displayed — Zhou enjoys multiple choices according to her mood, including the option of trying out new products.

Zhou's friend, Long Lefan, from Central China's Hunan province, added that eating snacks is a kind of "bonus happiness" that became a habit in childhood.

"We had snacks on the way home after school as a bonus, which gave me the energy to do my homework after," Long said.

For Long, snacks are a simple way to get and to give others satisfaction. She said she was once moved

by her niece who told her that she was happy for a whole day because of the ice cream Long had bought her.

Instead of eating snacks, storing snacks brings happiness to Zhao Chen, from East China's Jiangxi province.

"Buying a lot of snacks makes me happy, which gives me satisfaction in abundance," Zhao said.

"I can control myself, so that I only eat a few snacks at a time, but I can't stop buying them."

When asked why she does not stock supplies only for regular meals, she demurs.

"Snacks are my instant satisfaction. For meals, whatever I cook, I have to wait."