

Life returns from spectre of epidemic

Enforced life-style changes brought about by SARS look set to linger on

As summer takes hold in Beijing and the spectre of fear and disease lift, the capital's residents are beginning to emerge from the siege of SARS. And their appreciation of life, the delights to be found in the things they had taken for granted is evident. But they have also learnt a few valuable lessons and some new ways of doing things which are likely to stay. China Daily staff YU NAN and JIN BO, together with MA GUIHUA from the China Features, have been taking a look at the latest dining habits, online purchasing and online education of a few Beijingers.

For Wang Dajun, a faculty member with the College of Life Science with Peking University, dining out at TGI Friday's restaurant on a juicy and mouthwatering steak was one of those unforgettable moments.

"It has been about a month since I went out for dinner... waiting until the number of new SARS cases continued to ebb in Beijing," he said.

Wang's latest feasts with family and friends in the eateries of Beijing have included a delicious South Korean barbecue and meaty Xinjiang dishes from Northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region.

Restaurants re-opening and crowds pouring in are the most obvious sign that life in the nation's hardest-hit city is returning to normal, he added.

Like Wang, the chance to dine out tops the list of first moves for many Beijingers' as fears concerning the risk of SARS have begun to ease of late.

Parking space outside Qiaojiangnan, a large traditionally decorated eatery famed for its Sichuan cuisine close to the northern fourth ring road, is packed all day now, said a parking attendant.

The choice of places to eat remains influenced by the shadow of SARS and Wang, like many others, said he would opt for larger and more expensive restaurants rather than smaller and cheaper ones whose hygiene standards may be inferior.

With its long history, Chinese food has long been famed for its Now, after enduring the massive impact of SARS, people have added "clean and healthy" to their list of requirements, said Bian Jiang, vice-president of the China Cuisine Association.

Healthy eating

The past six weeks have been busy and uneasy ones for the wives and husbands in charge of cooking at home.

For Liu Yanhong, 34, a high school teacher, dining out with

her husband is now one of the most enjoyable things following weeks of enforced home-cooking. "I have tried all the recipes I know and I feel that I am at my wit's end," she said.

Like thousands of others Liu's life was transformed virtually overnight. With her classes suspended from late April she had to communicate with her students by e-mail and telephone. And with her lessons not scheduled to resume normally until July that aspect of her life will remain unchanged for the time being.

"The special period has given me the chance to practice my culinary skills. My husband says they have improved a lot within a short time — one of the biggest 'achievements' in the past month," she quipped.

Liu said the recipes she has been creating each day are balanced and varied. She also browsed many websites in search of recipes recommended by experts and aimed at improving the body's immune system, one of the most effective measures to prevent SARS.

In traditional Chinese medicine, proper food is the first defence line and an important factor for good health, said Zhao Lin, a nutritionist at the Department of Nutrition with the General Hospital of the People's Liberation Army.

On Zhao's list of foods which help reduce body heat and clear the body of toxins are winter melon, gourds, mung beans, watermelons, pears, lilies and *yuxingcao* (cordate houttuynia).

It has been scientifically proven that eating fresh radishes can increase the body's resistance to viruses, while also good for preventing certain types of cancer, said Zhao.

Quanjud, the Beijing-based restaurant chain famous for its delicious Peking roast duck, has added several new dishes to meet the special demands of patrons for "healthy" food after it reopened on May 20, according to Ma Wenbin, director of its public relations department.

The soup made with pear and

ying'er (tremella), is excellent for reducing body temperature and tastes good too.

Ma said the restaurant was thrilled to see the number of patrons steadily increase in the past two weeks.

"Now, there are about 400-500 people including several foreign friends dining at our Hepingmen branch in southern Xuanwu District everyday," he added.

The restaurant quickly won the trust of patrons partly due to its strict hygiene standards and new service practices, said Ma.

To safeguard the health of staff and customers alike, a machine for testing the body temperature of all who enter has been installed at the entrance. Antiseptic wipes are handed out at the table and anti-bacterial soap has been installed in the restrooms.

Changing habits

Waiters wear surgical masks and gloves when serving food and for those customers who prefer not to share their dishes, food can be served to diners individually, a rare scene at a Chinese dinner table, but the norm in the West.

"Some traditional eating habits should undergo changes, both in people's mind and in actions," said Bian Jiang.

He also called on the catering industry to seize the opportunity to further improve its standards, particularly as the public are now much more hygiene conscious, due or, perhaps thanks to SARS.

Bian said the outbreak of SARS might persuade some people in South China's Guangdong Province to change their culinary habits.

The eating habits of the people of Guangdong have become something akin to urban myth, except there is nothing mythical about them. They have earned a reputation or notoriety for eating anything that moves, including snakes and masked palm civets, the animal said to be possibly linked to the SARS virus.

Before the outbreak of SARS,



LIJIANHUA/ChinaDaily

Bug spells good news for e-commerce trade

Fashion magazine editor Tang Xiaosong is an archetypal bookworm. Every weekend he could be found scouring the capital's

Books Mansion in Xidan and the Xinhua Book Store in Wangfujing.

But in late April, the 25-year-old's passion for books was rudely curtailed, another casualty of SARS.

In order to cut the risk of becoming infected, people choose to stay home throughout May, even during the annual Labour Day holiday. And the majority of recreational places such as cinemas and bars were temporarily closed on the orders of the government.

That was a real headache to Tang, for whom reading is more than just a pastime. As a fashion editor, he needs to keep abreast of the latest international trends.

One day while surfing the Internet by chance he clicked a pop-up advertisement which led him to dangdang.com, one of China's largest online-bookshops.

"I suddenly realized that books, which had been kept away from me by the SARS virus, are only a click away," he recalled. After two hours of perusing dangdang.com, Tang had ordered 11 books, costing nearly 300 yuan (US\$36). "I bought even more than I did at a real bookstore," Tang laughed.

It appears that the SARS epi-

demical has forced many businesses in Beijing and around the country, into a corner.

While SARS has not curbed the innately social Chinese's expression in recent weeks. It has also brought with it some unexpectedly positive results.

Among them is China's burgeoning e-commerce.

Dangdang.com, striving to become China's amazon.com, reported a 30 per cent increase in revenue in April compared with March.

It is not the only beneficiary. Since the end of April, almost all of Beijing's online bookshops reported a sharp increase in their revenues.

Joyo.com, dangdang.com's major competitor and quite similar to it in terms of website layout and market strategy, also did well from the Internet market and increased its usual takings.

In normal times joyo.com had monthly book sales of around 10 million yuan (US\$1.2 million). But in the first week of May their sales soared to 15 million yuan (US\$1.8 million), a period when fears over SARS peaked.

Jingqi.com, another leader in the field, has viewed it as an opportunity to challenge the industry pacemakers. To attract customers, it sold 1,000 types of books at 70 per cent discount.

Even the "real" bookshops which had not run their business on the Internet before have gone online in response to market needs.

In late April, Beijing Books Mansion, one of the largest book shops in Beijing and located in the bustling Xidan commercial area, updated its online-transaction platform to meet the increase in online orders. That proved a wise move. Between May 1 and 14, the store's website received 60,000 hits, an

increase of 70 per cent year-on-year.

With many schools closed, students were forced to stay at home and study by themselves. Science and language books rose significantly.

Although there are many online bookshops in China, buying books on the Internet had been the last choice for many Chinese, even in big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai.

Many online bookshops are still losing money. Even dangdang.com, which opened in late 1999 and boasts a stock of 200,000 titles and is arguably the largest Chinese online retailer, their profits were very small. Thanks to SARS, its business is experiencing a turnaround.

Thanks to SARS, its business is having a turnaround. While people chose to stay at home and avoid going out, reading became one of the limited number of ways to pass time for the majority of people. And once the reading bug has bitten, it may well become a habit post-SARS.

Insiders have pointed out that the impact of SARS on online bookstores could be far-reaching.

In the first few years of the launch of online selling, the major factors that limited the development of e-commerce were payment and distribution.

These problems have now been partly addressed and industry insiders believe that it is people's shopping habits that are set to change.

"The only obstacle to the development of China's e-commerce is that people have not formed the habit of shopping online, which is because they have little experience," said Wang Juntao, the president of e-commerce website 6688.com.



English on-line: Teachers with the Beijing Research Centre for Basic Education are available at the click of a keyboard to answer students' questions.



Maths class: Man Yipeng of the Middle School Normal University attends a "class-on-air" broadcast Television Station. The lesson is given by Li China's top mathematics teachers from the B School.



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Virtual learning — a solitary time for the class of one

No one would have expected that the days ravaged by SARS would have transformed online education among students in Beijing.

Since all primary and secondary schools in the Chinese capital were officially closed on April 24 to prevent the spread of the virus, tele-courses and on-line classes have taken the place of normal lessons.

"I've been learning through an on-line school website which offers voice resolution so I can hear the teacher giving the course," says Xiao Xiao, a 14-year-old pupil at Beijing No.5 Middle School.

She is referring to Jinghua Education. Between April 18 to June 30, Jinghua has been doing its bit to help in the SARS fight by providing all its courses free to high school students. The demand has been considerable with over 314,000 visits via its

website www.jinghua.net.

"To cope with increasing demand, we've invested an additional 277,000 yuan (US\$33,000) in more servers and expanded band width and other facilities," says Helen Yang, a public relations officer with Jinghua Education.

Jinghua is not the only education facility to offer free online courses.

The Beijing Education Commission has been collaborating with eight other major network schools to open their resources and help students compelled to study at home. Over 230 primary and high school teachers, working on a rotating basis, are available to answer students questions online.

The Middle School Affiliated to Peking University has gone a step further than the opening of its courses to local students. Through an arrangement with Gosun Communication students

were able to get connected free of charge between May 12 to 31.

"The spread of SARS has greatly affected the normal routine for teaching and learning. Online courses are the safest and most efficient way of learning at this moment of unexpected emergency and can help us reduce the impact to a minimum while we get through this difficult period," says Kang Jian, president of the school, which has injected over 2 million yuan (US\$240,000) in technical support.

"As a renowned school in Beijing, we are obliged to shoulder more social responsibility and share our quality online resources with more students through the Internet," he added.

Online courses have been well received by students, especially those who are about to enter high school or college. Many parents who had previously shunned computers at home for fear their children might get engrossed

with online material on the Web, have taken their children with them.

"Online courses are almost the same as those at school, except with my class I have a freedom of choice whatever I want to listen to, chat with, and discuss BBS. The online answer session is especially interesting, with evening his or her views on a question board," says Zhao Yu, a student from No 25 Middle School.

According to Liang Wei, director of the Beijing Research Centre for Basic Education, about 1.7 million primary and high school students have access to online courses at home.

Every day, teachers of 13 subjects answer questions on line, while education websites receive millions of hits daily. In addition, more than 1 million students in Beijing can receive tele-courses on TV or by radio, not to mention those asking for teachers' help by telephone or through voice mails.

"It is beyond anyone's expectation that online education in China has been advanced in such a manner, but at least it helps students across the country to be acquainted with it. In this sense, its significance goes far beyond maintaining students studies," says Jin Linbo, a research fellow with the Trade and Economic Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

The Beijing Education Commission has pledged that it will maintain the momentum for the new teaching mode of "classes on air" during summer and winter holidays.



Duck to go: The Quanjud Restaurant at Qianmen is offering fresh roast duck take-aways as a way of promoting sales during the SARS epidemic.