

China's 'King' eater has more to stomach

January 24 2014, by Tom Hancock

After swallowing two dozen bowls of noodles, the surprisingly lean man described as China's "Big Stomach King" had barely broken sweat and announced his hunger for more.

"I can continue," said Pan Yizhong, fragments of noodle visible at the edge of his mouth, as challengers at an eating competition fell away one by one in the face of his relentless appetite.

"Come on, Big Stomach King!" the audience shouted at the event, held in a kung fu school, while its straggle-bearded headmaster looked on.

Once he passed the 25th bowl, there were no more opponents and the cheers fell away into awed silence.

"The Big Stomach King is our hero," said Lu Nan, one of Pan's defeated competitors. "He has magic powers."

Pan, 45, is the most celebrated exponent of the art of competitive eating in China—although he says his gut-busting quest has cost him his marriage.

He has previously dispatched 147 dumplings in a single sitting and once polished off 40 bowls of noodles in 15 minutes, but some view him with revulsion in a country just beginning to grapple with widespread obesity.

Just a decade before Pan's birth, as many as 45 million people died in the famine resulting from Mao Zedong's disastrous Great Leap Forward, and

he recalls eating leftovers discarded by his schoolteachers as a child.

"I grew up in the time of the planned economy, when good food and meat was only available on special occasions," he said.

Now he competes in a country where 30 percent of the adult population is overweight and nearly 13 percent considered obese, according to state-run media.

"Completely disgusting," one online commentator wrote under an article about a recent contest.

Pan realised that he had an eating talent when he took on a female Japanese eater in 2006. Even though he lost, he consumed a mountain of noodles, followed by 36 sticky rice cakes.

"That was the moment I realised I could eat three kilograms of noodles," he said matter-of-factly.

"Since then my ability has increased significantly, because I purposefully eat at self-service buffets."

A former meat factory worker but now unemployed, he keeps in shape by swimming in a river near his home.

"For us big stomach kings, you have to use up a lot of calories, or you'll get fat," he said.

Before competitions he does not eat for 24 hours, "so my stomach is empty, and I feel hungry".

Faintly visible food oil stains

China has a long history of big eaters, with accounts of an 18th century minister eating 36 bowls of rice in a contest with an army general, while records say a legal official, Xu Ganxue, ate 50 bread buns and 100 eggs in one sitting a century earlier.

But the US and Japan are the reigning centres for the practice, with the former hosting dozens of events every year where competitors known as "gurgitators" gulp down enormous amounts of hot-dogs, burgers, pies and pancakes.

The activity has given rise to its own lexicon—stuffing food in one's mouth ahead of swallowing is known as "chipmunking", and "reversals" are displays of vomiting, which generally entail disqualification.

Doctors warn that it could be dangerous, with a 2007 paper in the *American Journal of Roentgenology* saying that competitors expand their stomachs over time and run the risk of turning the organ into an "enormous sac incapable of shrinking to its original size".

Pan believes he is no match for top competitors such as Joey Chestnut—an American who recently ate 69 hot dog buns in 10 minutes—as there are few regular contests in China.

US competitions can feature prize funds worth thousands of dollars, but Pan is paid small amounts by local restaurants hoping to drum up trade.

"I don't make much money," he laments.

At the kung fu school in Liuyang, in central China's Hunan province, he ate just under 40 bowls of noodles, short of his record, but topped them off by swallowing a plate of live, squirming, worms.

Wearing a bandana reading "Big Stomach King" and a cycling jacket

with faintly visible food oil stains, he grimaced as the invertebrates writhed between his teeth.

"I have to clean my own clothes, and I'm not good at it," he said. "I live alone because it's hard to find a partner when you have this profession."

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