


2011

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Chen, Yong, "Obama Should Buy Hu a Burger" (2011). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 873.
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Obama Should Buy Hu a Burger

January 20, 2011 in [Uncategorized](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [Permalink](#)
By Yong Chen

Many people in both the U.S. and China were happy to hear that the Obamas were hosting a state dinner last night to welcome the visiting Chinese President, Mr. Hu Jintao. Finally, President Hu got the dinner that George W. Bush declined to offer him (substituting a less formal lunch instead); the last time a Chinese visitor was treated to a state dinner was 13 years ago. People see the Obama gesture, quite correctly, as a sign of respect and recognition of the importance of Sino-American relations. But the menu, which included meat, potatoes, apple pie, and ice cream, does not sound too exciting to me. A quintessentially American meal is perhaps more appropriate than a Chinese feast with dishes like shark's fin and bird's nest, and Hu's chefs certainly know better than the White House chefs about how to prepare that kind of food. Besides, some Americans would find such fare distasteful, not only politically but also gastronomically—after all, these were the kind of foodstuffs that 19th-century Anglo-Americans strongly disliked and mocked the Chinese for eating. For others, such a Chinese feast would have too much a flavor of Orientalism. But the all-American menu was still less than ideal. Despite the saying “as American as apple pie,” even most Americans do not eat apple pie more than a couple of times a year. And meat and potatoes are not just that special any more. The large-scale consumption of meat used to be something distinctive about America—the young and fast-expanding nation's abundance in meat, especially beef, attracted millions of immigrants and visitors to the New World—but those days have passed. Meanwhile, while the potato, a New World native, was once new to China, it is now a staple food there. And both meat and potatoes are readily found in American-style restaurants, which are doing very well in China these days.

But perhaps even less ideal than the uninspired menu was the setting. To truly demonstrate the strengthening U.S.-China ties of which both leaders speak, maybe Obama should have taken President Hu to a hamburger joint, such as Ray's Hell Burger in Arlington County. It's not far from the White House, and Obama has been there as recently as June 24, 2010—he went with the Russian President, Mr. Medvedev. On that occasion, Obama picked Ray's to “bond” with the Russian leader, showing the personal and close relationship that can often be found between the U.S. and European countries. In comparison, the formality of a state dinner, however desirable for those who want to see the two countries improve their ties, emphasizes the cultural distance that still lies between the U.S. and China.

It is, of course, too late to change things now. But there is still time in the future. I hope to see, in the not-so-distant future, the day when Chinese and American national leaders choose to go to an American fast food place in D.C. or a Chinese breakfast place in Beijing for *doujiang* and *youtiao*—soy milk and a deep-fried twisted dough stick that the Chinese have had to begin the day for a long time. And if they really want apple pie, there's always McDonald's—in either country.

Yong Chen is Associate Professor of History and Asian American Studies at UC Irvine. He is author of [Chinese San Francisco 1850-1943: A Transpacific Community](#) (Stanford University Press, 2000).