

Reasons Why Vegetarianism is Niche in China

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Abstract

It is well-established that vegetarianism is widely spread in many western countries, nonetheless, it is still niche in China. This study investigates the vegetarianism in China compared with which in some western countries and its future development. This paper first explores the types of vegetarian food, its history, trends and reasons why people choose vegetarian food, as well as the positive effects of vegetarian food, by the literature review. Then a 12-question questionnaire to 219 participants is distributed, and 26.03% of them are non-vegetarians, 60.27% are vegetarians.

The results show that the majority of people have a positive attitude towards vegetarianism and over half of them think that vegetarian restaurants and products are the most effective way to spread vegetarianism. And most non-vegetarians think they do not know much about vegetarianism and have no channels to understand it, indicating that in China, the channels of vegetarianism are not yet mature and vegetarianism is not widely spread. This

paper concludes that the vegetarian culture in China is not very well-developed compared to the vegetarian culture in the West, mainly because the West has a long vegetarian culture, their classification of vegetarian food is clear from the language, and many Western governments are actively taking the lead in the promotion of vegetarianism.

Keywords

Vegetarian; Lifestyle; China; Comparison study; Survey

Introduction

Nowadays vegetarianism has been gaining increasing attention, and more people are choosing to be a vegetarian. The reasons for being a vegetarian can be broken down into individual choice, religious factors, and environmental considerations. It has become a new lifestyle for a group of people. It is believed that the concepts and understanding of vegetarianism are very different between Asian countries and Western countries.

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Vegetarians can be roughly divided into 6 types: vegan, pescatarian, flexitarian, Lacto-ovo-vegetarians, Lacto-vegetarians, and Ovo-vegetarians, among vegan is the strictest one. The earliest recorded history of vegetarianism dates back to the sixth century BC, and it was promoted for religious reasons. People usually choose a vegetarian diet for health and personal well-being, environment, and ethics. In recent years, many spiritual seekers have also turned to vegetarianism. And it is very optimistic that the development of vegetarianism is gradually expanding at a rapid speed around the world.

Plant-based living conception and the development of vegetarianism can bring protection to the ecosystem as people start to practice during daily life. Afterward the motif of this paper can evoke strong responsibility in people's minds of safeguarding the Earth by exposing the natural disasters facing the world, as well as providing reasonable solutions---being vegetarian and the benefits this can bring.

As a vegan for over ten years, I found ignorance of the development of vegetarianism in China. Different from China, vegetarianism in western countries is becoming more and more popular, especially among young people. I was wondering why this situation happened, therefore, I choose to study this topic. My goal is to help spread vegetarianism in China and make more people aware of the benefits of eating vegetarian.

This study examines the differences in vegetarian culture caused by different social cultures. This paper tends to investigate the reasons for the niche of vegetarianism in China and explore the future trends of vegetarianism in China by collecting opinions from different people.

This study uses the methods of literature review and questionnaire survey to study this topic. The literature review is first used to find information about vegetarianism including history, definition, different types, its cultural development, and previous research about the motivation for choosing this lifestyle. Afterwards, differences between Chinese vegetarianism and Western vegetarianism and their cultural and historical reasons are found through literature reading.

Moreover, I use an online questionnaire to study the extent of understanding and development of attitudes towards vegetarianism in China. And better understand the reasons why modern people become vegetarians. The questionnaire consists of 12 questions about the participants' background, the relationship between vegetarian religious beliefs, their views on vegetarianism, and their future perspectives. It is designed to be completed in 2-3 minutes. All my questionnaire is put on the Chinese social media platform --WeChat.

Through literature review, vegetarianism has a long history and culture connotation, but the development of vegetarianism in China is far less than that in many Western countries. The reasons for this have to do with both history and culture as well as state behavior. Next, I will discuss the findings of the literature to answer two main questions: (1) Why is vegetarianism niche in China? (2) What are the future trends of vegetarianism in China?

Literature Review

Vegetarian means a person does not eat meat (including fowl) and seafood, or products containing these foods and excludes eggs and Dairy as well (Vegetarians and vegans don't eat products or by-products of slaughter. They don't eat any foods which have been made using processing aids from slaughter.)(Madry, 2012).

As we know, the concept of vegetarianism is becoming more widespread in China. However, its development in China is still behind that in Western countries. Therefore, I will review the literature on types of vegetarianism (definition), and reasons for being vegetarian like health, religion, personal well-being, environment, spirituality, and ethics.

The Basic Conception of Vegetarianism

Vegetarian is a popular individual diet or lifestyle. According to an online cyclopaedial 'Merriam-webster' (Elsevier, 2020), a vegetarian can be defined as a person who does not eat meat: someone whose diet consists wholly of vegetables, fruits, grains, nuts, and sometimes eggs or dairy products. Vegetarians can be classified in different ways. Furthermore, it is a concept with a quite long history of around 200 years.

Types of Vegetarian

Vegetarians include many different types: vegan, pescatarian, flexitarian, Lacto-ovo-vegetarians, Lacto-vegetarians, and Ovo-vegetarians (Kahleova et, 2017). Lacto-ovo-vegetarians, the most common type of vegetarianism, means a diet that does not include meat, poultry, or seafood. However, Lacto-ovo-vegetarians ("Quillbot", 2022) could eat dairy products and eggs. Its variations include Lacto-vegetarians and Ovo-vegetarians. Ovo-vegetarians and Lacto-vegetarians are based on Lacto-ovo-vegetarians with no eggs and no dairy, respectively. Pescatarian means a person who does not eat meat or poultry, nonetheless eating fish. Moreover, they may also eat eggs or dairy if they want. Flexitarians are people who eat vegetarianism in stages. They eat meat and fish occasionally. Vegan is the strictest type of vegetarian diet. They do not eat any animal products, including eggs, dairy, seafood, etc. Vegetarian, as what has discussed below, indicates the diet of Lacto-ovo-vegetarians.

History of Vegetarianism

With regard to the development of vegetarianism, it is important to look at it in the broader context of human history, which is a narrow perspective if it is limited to the 6,000 years of recorded human civilization.

There is a report (Huang, 1996) suggesting that the human ancestors were vegetarians, because the structure of the human body is not suitable for meat. Anatomical analysis of the human intestine has shown that it should consume vegetables and is not suitable for eating meat. Carnivores, have a short small intestine, a straight because meat fiber is less concentrated protein, not necessary to absorb slowly. Instead, the human intestinal structure is suitable for digesting plants with more dietary fiber because of their length, and meat that stays in the intestine for too long will produce toxins and increase the burden on the liver. At the stage of primitive society, human ancestors had not yet learned to use metal tools, and could not hunt animals on a large scale, so in the process of development, human beings were directly in the forest to pick the fruits of plants, including fruits and nuts. Moreover, most of our closest relatives like ape-like creatures are vegetarians.

From its inception, religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism have promoted a vegetarian lifestyle, which would be the earliest vegetarian philosophy. Documented vegetarian nutrition was started by the followers of the Orphic myth, around the 6th century BC. The Greek philosopher Pythagoras is considered the father of ethical vegetarianism, as his lifestyle was followed by many important figures and influenced vegetarianism until the 19th century (Claus, 2014). The first Vegetarian Society was founded in England in 1847; the International Vegetarian Union (IVU) was founded in 1908, as a consequence of the growth in vegetarian global movements, beyond the Vegetarian

Federal Union (1889) ¹. The IVU is a non-profit organization that accepts any non-profit organization whose primary purpose is to promote vegetarianism and the whose authorized director is a vegetarian, and purpose to promote vegetarianism worldwide². The IVU has contributed greatly to the development of a global vegetarian diet to date. In recent years, as vegetarianism has become more widely appreciated, the International Vegetarian Society (IVS) has begun to appear as a non-governmental organization in several international forums. At the 35th International Vegetarian Congress, 300 delegates from the organization had unanimously appealed to the upcoming World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg for effective measures to be taken globally to reduce the consumption of meat to reduce the negative impact of industrial farming and meat products on the environment and human health.

Development Trends

Over the past few years, with the economic development and the improvement of living standards, there are more and more vegetarians in China. As mentioned in the vegetarian segment of the second season of "China on the Tongue", the vegetarian population in China has exceeded 50 million (2014), and more and more people believe that vegetarianism is good for the body and mind.

On February 27, 2018, it was also mentioned in the Global Times that in Shanghai, vegetarian restaurants soared from 49 in 2012 to more than hundred in 2017. And according to incomplete statistics, the number of vegetarian restaurants in mainland China 2006, there were only about 200 restaurants in 2006, but in 2018, the number has exceeded 4,000, an increase of about 20 times in 12 years. And they are

concentrated in economically developed areas (Qi, 2021).

Data from Sinoforeign Dialogue.com showed that pork sales fell from 42.49 million tons in 2014 to 40.85 million tons in 2016. And many influential Chinese entertainment stars such as Andy Lau, Jet Li, Vicky Zhao, and Jacky Cheung have joined the ranks of vegetarianism.

These indicate that the vegetarian population is on an upward trend in China. Vegan food is growing rapidly not only in China but also worldwide. According to statistics, the global distribution of vegan foods has more than doubled between 2014-2019, growing 175% from July 2013 to June 2018. According to a study conducted by market analysis firm Nielsen for the Plant Based Foods Association, sales of plant-based foods in the U.S. rose 8.1% in 2017 (Vegetarian Information . CCTV: Why is 2019 the year of vegetarianism).

There is a city in the Netherlands called Amsterdam, where its government aims to achieve a balance of 50% animal and 50% plant-based proteins in the national diet by 2025, and to increase the plant-based diet to 60% by 2040, gradually reducing the citizens' intake of animal proteins. In 2020, the City of Amsterdam announces the availability of vegetarian meals at all government meetings (Zhan, 2021).

According to "Data from the Articulated Curriculum and Teaching Area 2017: the Swedish Youth Barometer", about 30% of Swedish youth are eating more plant-based foods. Nearly 1/3 of young people in Sweden are going vegan for the environment. Society attributes the increase in the vegan population to young people's desire to use it to alleviate environmental problems.

Motivation of Being a Vegetarian

Mostly, the reasons of choosing vegan can be divided into three (Belén Derqui, 2020) : health and personal well-being, environment, and ethics (animal welfare). Da Costa Birchal et al. (2018) further explores several motivations for becoming a vegetarian: functional - being healthy, physical and mental well-being; social - perception that being a vegetarian is something positive; emotional - more peaceful feeling, a clean conscience; conditional - ease of access and variety of vegetarian food and monetary values. Moreover, Beardsworth and Keil (1992) pointed out another reason---spirituality, one's most innermost beliefs, thoughts, and feelings.

In Western countries, vegan seems to be the pursuit of most young people, and about 4% of the child selected were already vegan or vegetarian because of environmental protection issues.³ A report from IPCC has pointed that the livestock sector contributes about 14.5% of the greenhouse gases released, which is serious problem that closely connected with our living environment. In this case, plant-based living style may reduce greenhouse emissions.

However, in China, most of the vegetarian are religious believers and Minorities which may cause that people have a subconscious bias against vegetarian. A group of Chinese scholars (Liu et., 2021) conducted an interview survey of 23 vegetarians in China, 56% of whom were non-religious, 35% were Buddhist and 9% were Christian. Nonetheless, due to the the small number of samples, this data is not very convincing, as far as possible for reference.

Vegetarian Effects

The greatest scientist of the 20th century Albert Einstein said, "Nothing will benefit human health and increase chances for survival of life on Earth as much as the evolution to a

vegetarian diet." Vegetarian diet is a great presence which could bring benefits to all beings, from individual, to environment and the society.

Influence Towards Individual

Different people have different motivations for being vegetarian, and the personal effects they gain can be divided into two kinds, physical and spiritual.

Firstly, going on a vegetarian diet can reduce the risk of many diseases such as lowering cholesterol and reducing the risk of diabetes⁴. High levels of LDL cholesterol will cause arteries to narrow or even clog, slowing the flow of blood and affecting the heart and brain in particular. Since the cholesterol won't appear in veggies, instead, it only comes from some dairy and animal products, an article about cholesterol from Harvard Health Publishing has mentioned that "The most effective diet to lower total and LDL cholesterol is a vegetarian diet." A vegetarian diet means eating more natural foods and reducing the consumption of a lot of artificial sugars, which can reduce the risk of diabetes.

Moreover, many people can gain a sense of psychological fulfillment and solace through a vegetarian diet. For environmentalists and animal advocates, going vegetarian gives them moral comfort and a sense of accomplishment (Liu et., 2021). For some religious believers, vegetarianism is their spiritual belief. For example, in Buddhism, they advocate the concept of "not killing", "not bearing bad results, first planting good causes", "abstaining from killing and releasing", etc (Zhou, 1999). They believe in the reincarnation of karma. Therefore, being a vegetarian will make them feel more relaxing and free inside.

Environmental: Carbon Emission

The environmental damage caused by animal agriculture is enormous. Deforestation, and the associated burning of brush, produces huge amounts of carbon dioxide just to build pastures. One cow emits 200 liters of methane in one day, and the world's 1.3 billion cows emit a total of 94.9 trillion liters of methane per year, accounting for 20% of total methane emissions, while livestock manure emits another 33 trillion liters of methane. The heavy use of fertilizers to grow food and feed for livestock and the burning of carbon, oil and gas emit 45% of the world's nitrogen oxides (Ni, 2014). Of all the greenhouse gases, this is the one that has the greatest impact. Becoming a vegetarian can significantly reduce global carbon emissions and thus mitigate the global greenhouse gas problem.

Difference Between Western Country and China

According to one report (The New Vegan Era 2015): The percentage of vegan in the US is 9%, in the UK 7%, and in China is about 4-5%. What's more, the 16–24 year-old age group is leading the trend, for example: 7% vegan consumers in this age group in Spain (compared to 0,1% nationwide) or 12% in France (Statista).

After the vegetarian tradition of Buddhism was established in China during the Han Dynasty, Buddhists became vegetarian for the sake of their religious beliefs. The Western religion of Christianity also advocates vegetarianism (Wang, Yan, 2020). The earliest vegetarian cultures in the East and West started for similar reasons. However, with the development of modern times, the West has become more and more concerned about environmental protection, and people have become more accepting and even widely spread vegetarian food. Many countries and even governments are beginning to take the lead in promoting veganism, for

example, all hospitals in New York City in the United States will offer plant-based meals to patients by default, the vegetarian village in Amrim, Israel, and the new plan by the Amsterdam City Council in the Netherlands to encourage citizens to choose a plant-based diet.

In terms of language, English has many different names for different kinds of vegetarian food, so the basic concept of vegetarianism is very clear, such as 'Vegan' means no animal products, and 'fish vegetarian' means no meat other than fish. But in China, no matter what kind of vegetarian food, there is a very common word to summarize "vegetarian". The concept of vegetarianism is not clear to everyone. So the spread of vegetarianism is more widespread and more developed in the West than in China.

Design

For the questionnaire, the author mainly investigated the reasons for being vegetarian and their attitudes towards vegetarian; for non-vegetarians, the author focused on their perceptions of vegetarianism; and all participants' attitudes and suggestions for the future development of vegetarianism.

The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions involving the aspects in participants' background, vegetarian or non-vegetarian, relationship between religious beliefs and vegetarianism, views on vegetarianism, future perspectives, and was expected to be completed in 2-3 minutes.

In order to get specific data, the author investigate the participants' background including their locations, gender, occupation and age. From the literature review, it is clearly that the reasons of being vegetarian are various, and in China, religion believers are a main part of vegetarian. As a result, for vegetarians, the author designed some questions to survey their

motivations of being vegetarian. And if they are a religion believer, the author will ask their specific religion of faith. For those vegetarians out of religion belief, the author will also study the reasons why they are vegetarian. For non-vegetarian, which is most people in China, the author focus on their attitudes towards. So the author designed the questions to investigate the non-vegetarian in the participants' reasons for not choosing a vegetarian lifestyle, and their perceptions of vegetarianism. For all participants, the author aims to get their views on the future trend of vegetarian in China.

Some children who are influenced by their parents to be vegetarian at a very young age are not necessarily vegetarian by choice. That's why we need to expand the scope of the survey and systematically understand each person's view on vegetarianism by means of a questionnaire. The questionnaire can be found in the Appendix.

Process

The author planned to conduct my questionnaire survey on the WeChat moment for one week (2022.9.19-2022.9.26), to make sure that the coverage of participants is large enough. As the spread speed through the friend circle is really fast and the feedback has stopped after 9. 23, the author decided to collect the answers during 2022.9.19-2022.9.23.

Participants

The total number of participants in this experimental survey is 219, with 27.85% men and 72.25% women. Among them, 26.03% were non-vegetarians, 60.27% were vegetarians (including pescatarians, lacto-ovo-vegetarians, and vegans), 10.96% were non-vegetarians but had tried vegetarianism, and 2.74% were others (See Figure 1).

The participants are Chinese aged between 18-60, there are 34 people below 18 years old

and 3 people above 60 years old. This age group is a relatively young in society and are the major users of popular social media on the Internet, who are more likely to reflect the attitude among current young people and future trends of vegetarianism in China. The participants are throughout the whole of China. They are meanly from big cities in China like Beijing, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Wuahan, and some others cities. the author reaches those participants through WeChat Moment.

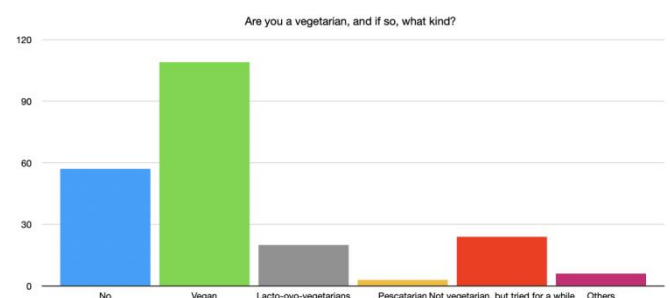


Figure 1. The participant proportion of the different diet

For those vegetarian participants (including the three types of vegetarians, non-vegetarians but had tried vegetarianism, and others), 41.67 % were there for environmental protection and animal conservation, 25 % were there to stay in shape and 9.9% were because of religious belief (See Figure 2).

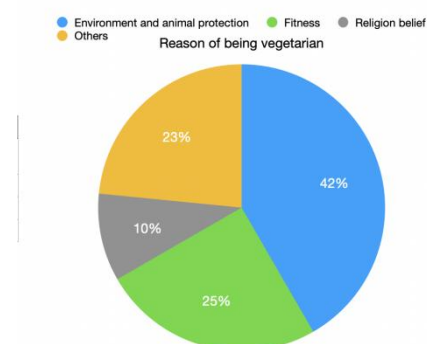


Figure 2. The participant proportion of different reasons of being vegetarian

Among all participants, those who were

vegetarian because of their religion were almost exclusively Buddhists, accounting for 63.16%, while the rest were others (See Figure 3).

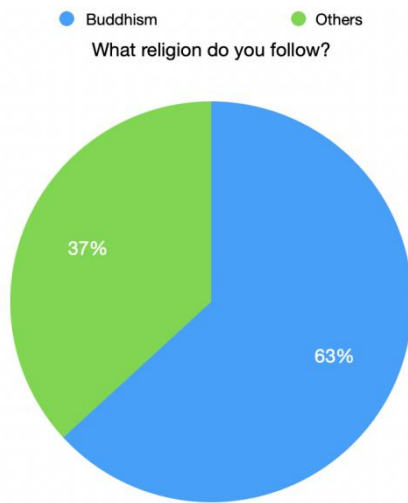


Figure 3 The participant proportion of different religion

Attitudes

Even though there were a lot of non-vegetarians, there were still about 80.37% of participants support the act of going vegetarian. 10.96% of participants thought this behavior is unrelated to them, having unconcerned attitudes. 5.94% of participants do not support vegetarianism. And 6% of participants have their idea, including thinking it's up to people's preference, showing neither support nor objectives, and some thinking the combination of meat and vegetable is more reasonable, e.g. (See table 1).

Table 1. The participant proportion of different attitudes and other opinions

Do you think you support or approve of the act of vegetarianism?		
Option	Subtotal	Proportion
Do not support	13	5.94%
Support	176	80.37%
I don't care, it doesn't matter to me	24	10.96%
I have other ideas	6	2.74%

Table 2. Illustration of Table 1

Others		
No.	Submission time	Answer text
14	Sep 19 23:35	Personal preference View Answer Sheet
16	Sep 19 23:37	Very neutral. There are definitely benefits to a vegetarian diet, but that doesn't mean not eating meat View Answer Sheet
89	Sep 20 08:24	Personal behavior, not for or against View Answer Sheet
102	Sep 20 08:37	Personally, I think it's more reasonable to mix meat and vegetables.
211	Sep 21 19:48	Personally, I think vegetarian food is more delicious, but meat is acceptable, so I think it is a matter of personal choice. View Answer Sheet
212	Sep 21 19:55	The decision is based on personal needs and circumstances, provided that there is no impact on physical and mental health.

Those 13 participants who do not support vegetarianism have two main reasons, one was that they thought vegetarianism was unhealthy and would lead to malnutrition (92.31% of those chose it), and the other was that they thought humans were at the top of the food chain and it was only right to eat other creatures (7.69% of those chose it) (see table 3).

Table 3. The participant proportion of different comments for not supporting vegetarian

What are your reasons for not supporting it?

Option	Subtotal	Proportion
Unhealthy, malnourished	12	92.31%
Humans are at the top of the food chain	1	7.69%
Others	0	0%

In addition to attitudes toward vegetarianism, I also surveyed participants about the reasons why non-vegetarians (57 in total) do not go vegetarian. The results showed that 36% were because they found meat delicious and it was hard to give up eating it, 35% were worried that it would make them malnourished and thus threaten their health, and 8.77% felt they had no opportunity to learn about vegetarianism. The remaining 13% chose others for the following reasons: they think vegetarianism is very constraining; they think it is inconvenient to eat vegetarianism outside; vegetarianism is good

but they need to overdo it slowly, etc (See table 4).

Table 4. The participant proportion of different reasons for not choosing to be a vegetarian

What is your reason for not choosing to be a vegetarian?

Option	Subtotal	Proportion
Meat is so delicious, who can tolerate it	21	36.84%
Poor nutrition	20	35.09%
No opportunity to learn about vegetarian food	5	8.77%
Others	11	19.3%

Table 5. Illustration of Table 4

No. Time of submission of answer	Submission time	Answer text
13	2022/9/19 23:35:25	Don't think there is any merit in eating vegetarian
14	2022/9/19 23:35:37	Have meat and eat meat, have porridge and drink porridge
16	2022/9/19 23:37:16	Multi-aspect supplementation
22	2022/9/19 23:55:51	think nutrition is unbalanced and there is no reason to stick to vegetarianism
89	2022/9/20 8:24:04	It is bound
105	2022/9/20 8:40:02	There is no right or wrong to eat vegetarian or non-vegetarian
118	2022/9/20 8:56:43	Vegetarian food is good, usually go specifically for vegetarian food, to slowly transition
121	2022/9/20 9:00:18	unbalanced nutrition
211	2022/9/21 19:48:53	Will eat all vegetarian when eating by myself, but will eat meat when unavoidable with family or canteen, takeaway, etc.
219	2022/9/23 23:54:54	The economy doesn't allow it.

Among all participants, 62.1% thought that vegan products (vegan restaurants, vegan snacks, etc.) would help promote the spread of vegetarianism in the future. 47.95% thought that the TV media approach would be more effective in promoting the spread of vegetarianism. 36.99% of participants thought that publicity by vegetarian celebrities could be more effective. 25.57% thought that newspapers would be more effective in promoting the spread of vegetarianism. The remaining 17.53% were other (some thought that vegetarianism did not need to be spread and was a spontaneous move by individuals; some thought that weight loss advertising might be more appealing; some thought it was all quite effective) (See Figure 4)

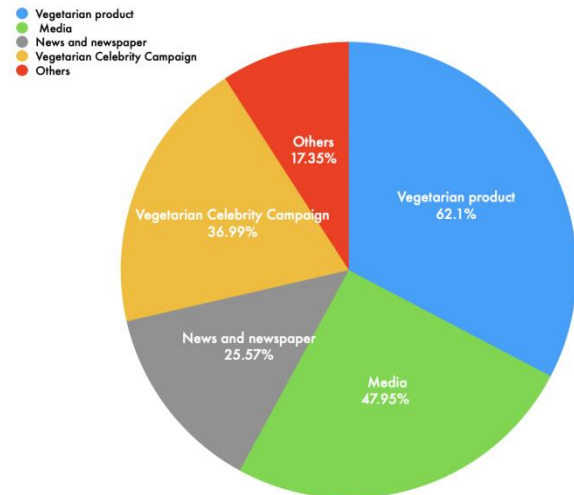


Figure 4. The participant proportion of different opinions for which way is proper to spread vegetarian

Discussion and Conclusion

The study uses literature review to search the background information about vegetarian conception, history, motivation and effect and a survey to examine the knowledge and perceptions of some Chinese people about vegetarianism.

The total sample size is 219 in the questionnaire survey. In this section, I list the important information and results which support my study using the data I collected from the questionnaire.

Data analysis shows that most people, whether vegetarian or non-vegetarian, maintain a supportive attitude towards vegetarian food. Most of the vegetarians are environmentalists and animal protectors, which shows that the western concept of environmental protection has influenced many people to become vegetarians, and most of the non-vegetarians are concerned about their own malnutrition.

The survey shows that most of the non-vegetarians do not know much about vegetarianism and had few channels to understand it. This means that vegetarian food

in China has not well developed and vegetarian food has not been systematically promoted in China.

The non-vegetarian participants also believe that vegetarianism can be malnutrition, that vegetarian food is not good tasted, and other issues. It shows that the main reason why vegetarian diets are niche in China is because there is a lack of understanding and a lot of misconceptions about vegetarian diets. Many world-class athletes in this world who have chosen vegetarian diets, such as world surfing champion Tia Blanco and record-holding ultra-marathoner Scott Jurek, all gain high levels of success in sports, which proves that vegetarian diets are not malnutrition. With the rise of meat-like soy protein in recent years, the variety and taste of vegetarian diets are gradually improving.

Most of the participants believe that vegetarian food can be effectively spread through vegetarian products, vegetarian restaurants, etc., indicating that physical experience and understanding is more effective in increasing people's understanding of vegetarian.

In my view, we can spread vegetarianism in China through vegetarian restaurants and vegetarian products. This could help well develop this new kind of lifestyle in China and affect more people to go on vegetarian, which is meaningful for protecting the planet. According to the current trend, I believe vegetarian will flourish in China in the future.

Conflict of Interests: the author has claimed that no conflict of interests exists.

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