A Trip to Langdu Village

Julia Zhu
Langdu, Yunnan – 1 August 2016

As one of the interns for CERS 2016 summer education program, I was lucky enough to take a trip to Langdu Village, the place where the famous yak cheese is made. Working together with CERS, Meixiang Cheese Factory successfully combined traditional yak milk with western cheese making techniques to create unique yak cheese products. Its special taste and unique background has brought attention from all over the world, as well as gained a Gold Medal in a cheese competition in France last year. My intention was to learn more about the cheese-making process as well as the story behind it.

Langdu Village sits in a remote valley surrounded by mountains, and our bus had to climb over three mountain ranges to get there. The road was in bad condition and the weather was harsh, but none of the passengers seemed to mind. After 6 hours we finally arrived at the CERS project site, which is called Meixiang Cheese Factory. The name Meixiang means both beautiful and fragrant, as well standing for America and Shangri-la in Chinese. Meixiang Cheese Factory is run by a big family. While some of the family members produce cheese, others help with the marketing, each having their own job.

Entering the main yard of the cheese factory, I saw many animals, including pigs, chicken and cows, all raised locally. The main building here is the dining hall, also known as the common room, but a sign on the top says “Meixiang Cheese Restaurant”. Inside in the middle of the room is a fireplace that is typical for every Tibetan household. This building is where passengers stop and get food, and the family that runs this factory also spends most of their time here, gathering around the fireplace doing their own things. A river runs behind the dinning hall, and above the river a bridge leads to a cabin with a sign “Tibetan Bar” on the opposite side. This Tibetan bar is open to the public, but the family also uses it to entertain themselves sometimes. Here one could sing Karaoke, play Majiang or dance traditional Tibetan dance.

Next morning, I went collecting yak milk from the farmers in the mountains with two family members from the cheese factory. Since yaks live high up in the mountains during the summer to escape from the heat, we had to park the car half way up the hill and hike up by foot. I watched “Big-beard Uncle”, the manager of the cheese factory, tying two empty stainless containers on horseback so that later the horse could carry the milk back. The sunlight was strong, the trail was narrow and the mountain was steep, I was not able to continue for even twenty minutes. I stayed by the car instead of climbing all the way up with them, since it required too much physical strength of me, especially at such high altitude. About an hour later, they came back with two big containers full of
milk, just collected by the farmers and still warm from the yaks. Both of the staff from the cheese factory were sweating and exhausted, and I was really impressed by how tough Tibetan people can be.

We brought the yak milk back to the cheese factory and started to make cheese after lunch. Meixiang Cheese Factory makes two kinds of yak cheese: one called “Gongmu”, a kind of aged, salty cheese, and another called “Yage”, which is relatively mild and fresh. “Yage” was what we were making this day. For preparation, master cheese maker Liu needed to clean and sterilize all the necessary utensils first. The next step was heating the milk. Master Liu used a technique called water bath heating, which involves placing the pot of milk into a sink filled with warm water to heat the milk. Being accurate about temperature is important to cheese quality, so Liu used a thermometer to monitor temperature of the milk. When the milk temperature reached around 80 Celsius, Master Liu added rennet into the milk to form thick curds. Then the curds were cut with a wire whisk to expel the whey.

Usually when making moist cheese such as Brie, large curds are preferred to preserve some water; whereas dry cheese like Parmesan requires smaller curds to let the water out. After the curds had been cut, master Liu put them back and cooked them again along with the whey, while stirring the curds with a ladle. Curds then needed to be drained and pressed. Master Liu put the curds into a colander, which sat above a bucket that was used to catch the whey. Then he used his hands to rub those curds into even smaller pieces, while adding some salt into the mix at the same time. It is said that the salt also helps the whey to drain off. The final step is molding and pressing. The cheese maker first lined the mold with cheesecloth, and then filled the mold with curds using a ladle. The curds filled the mold all the way to the top but later it would be consolidated into half of the size. The finished molds were placed underneath pressers to further drain away the water.

The yak cheese took us the whole afternoon to finish, which was about six hours from lunch to dinner. It required a great amount of patience as well as care. The next morning, I saw the six pieces of yak cheese that we made and they were all ready to serve. The cheese factory workers pack them firmly and then bring them to the city on the same bumpy bus that we took to get here.

It is amazing to see how, in such a remote area in China, a family is able to turn the precious local resource into a product that is enjoyed overseas by customers from different countries, and even won an international award in France. Behind the yak cheese is a typical Tibetan family’s hard work and their optimistic attitude toward life, both of which are reflections of their culture as well as their religion and history.