

NEWS REVIEW

Morgan Spurlock gave us a supersized warning about junk food. Did we listen?

The film-maker, who died last week, showed that eating only McDonald's for a month took a hefty toll on more than just our waistlines, writes *Samuel Lovett*

Morgan Spurlock unwraps his Double Quarter Pounder with cheese, gives it a kiss, and proceeds to take the first bite of many as he attempts to polish off a supersized McDonald's meal. "That's a lot of food," he tells the camera from the front seat of his car, a sense of regret creeping into his voice. In time, he's contending

with the "McSweats", the "McTummy Ache", the "McGurgles" and twitching in his arm, which he blames on the 1.2 litres of Coca-Cola he's drinking.

After 22 minutes the American film-maker hangs his head out of the window in defeat and empties the contents of his stomach.

And so, in this tone, Spurlock's game-changing

2004 documentary *Super Size Me* unfolds, chronicling one man's attempt to eat nothing but McDonald's for a month.

Spurlock died on Friday, aged 53, of complications relating to cancer. His was an intriguing and controversial career in which he produced and directed nearly 100 films. But it was in the Oscar-nominated *Super Size Me* that he made his most lasting impact.

Even today, the film is just as shocking and funny as when released. It changed the way many of us think about food, highlighting just how unhealthy the junk food industry had become.

"It got people watching and talking – that was the most important thing," says Professor Marion Nestle, a nutritionist at New York University and one of the talking heads in the documentary.

It's a disturbing watch. The vomiting incident takes place on only the second day of the

challenge. Three days later a weigh-in reveals that Spurlock has put on 4.3kg. Bouts of depression, lethargy and headaches soon followed, he claimed. Towards the end of the month, Spurlock experiences heart palpitations and finds he has piled on 11kg.

One of the key conditions of this trial by Big Mac was that any time a server offered to "supersize" the meal – meaning more chips, more meat and more drink – Spurlock had to accept. He munched his way through nine of these huge portions.

There was something freakish about the whole spectacle, yet there was a point to it all. The film held a mirror up to the nation's dire relationship with fast food and showed how burgers the size of dinner plates were, and still are, sickening consumers the world over.

"My take from the film is that what happened to his body over a month happens



Spurlock put on 11kg on a diet of Big Macs and fizzy drinks

over a couple of decades from eating ultra-processed foods," says Ethan Balk, a clinical dietician at NYU Steinhardt. "He showed just how bad the combination of fat and sugar can be for us physiologically."

Of course Spurlock's documentary wasn't particularly revelatory in concluding that fast food is unhealthy. Rather, it was the exploration of the more

subtle, hidden impacts of this food that felt illuminating. The lethargy, the depression, the mood swings, the headaches, heart palpitations and the rest – the depiction of these symptoms nudged the conversation about fast food into new territory.

Spurlock's work also shone a light on the influence of America's fast food industry and the enticements it uses.

"People were offered price breaks to upgrade to bigger portions," says Nestle. "Toys were added to entice children."

Produced for just over £50,000, the documentary made more than £17 million.

Critics point out that the film was unscientific in its approach, highlighting how Spurlock failed to release a daily food log detailing his "McDiet" or that he intentionally gave up exercise during the experiment, possibly skewing his findings.

In 2017 the film-maker also admitted to alcohol abuse, which some experts believe may have exaggerated many of his symptoms.

Yet few of the naysayers had managed to get the public thinking twice about the dangers of eating a Big Mac, or bounced McDonald's into discontinuing its supersize portions, an announcement that came six weeks after the film's debut. This was a notable highpoint

of Spurlock's career, which in effect ended in 2017 after he revealed he had been accused of rape and had settled a workplace allegation of sexual harassment.

But for all the success of *Super Size Me*, it barely even dented its target. McDonald's today is bigger than ever. With nearly 42,000 restaurants, its stock price has increased nearly 1,000 per cent since the film was released, although perhaps Spurlock might have taken some satisfaction from the low-calorie wraps and salads that now populate the menu.

The wider fast-food industry that *Super Size Me* took aim at is also booming. About 84 million Americans still consume fast food every single day. For all his success in getting people thinking about fast food, Spurlock couldn't stop them eating it.

Ian Cowie, I'm lovin' my investment in McDonald's, Business & Money, page 11

Under surveillance...



under control

Last week a British man accused of spying for Hong Kong was found dead. But what are Beijing's aims in the UK? While Vladimir Putin uses his spies to cause chaos abroad, Xi Jinping's masterplan is to stop dissent spreading back to China, writes *Gordon Corera*

On Friday morning two men appeared at the Old Bailey accused of working on behalf of the Hong Kong intelligence service in Britain. Last Sunday a third man, Matthew Trickett, who had been charged in the same case, was found dead in a park in Maidenhead.

These arrests came as a surprise to Simon Cheng – not at the idea that such surveillance might be taking place but rather that something was finally being done about it. "It's unexpected to see decisive action being taken," he says.

When I first met Cheng in London a few months ago, he was visibly emotional. A bounty for information leading to his arrest had recently been issued by the authorities in the former British colony, which is increasingly under the legal and political control of Beijing. The bounty was a million Hong Kong dollars, or £100,000.

But what really upset Cheng, 33, was the fact that his parents in Hong Kong had just been taken in for questioning. "I'm still quite shocked at how far they would go, not only after me, but even my family members," he told me.

It's well known that the Chinese Communist Party's desire for control at home and keen sense of self-preservation have led it to build an extensive surveillance state within China's borders, to keep

track of possible dissenters and restrict the flow of information. But increasingly, as Cheng has found, China has been exporting that model around the world and into western countries. The full extent of that infiltration is becoming apparent.

Cheng grew up in Hong Kong and had once worked at the British consulate in the city, but he was detained by the Chinese authorities in 2019 for his involvement in the territory's pro-democracy protests. After a public campaign led to his release, he fled to the UK without telling his parents, for fear of getting them into trouble.

But any hope that coming to London meant escaping the long arm of China soon proved misplaced. "I feel not totally safe here," he told me. The bounty was one indication; another was the belief that informers were trying to get close to him. He was also worried about physical violence, even abduction.

And he believed Britain had not been doing enough, especially compared with America, to clamp down on Chinese activity. In the US, the FBI has been vocal about what it describes as "transnational repression". Last year, a New York court charged 34 officers in China's national police with remotely harassing Chinese citizens by creating an online "troll farm".

Other Chinese police operatives who were charged by US prosecutors were

working out of "overseas police stations" that China has opened in a number of countries, ostensibly to provide diplomatic services to Chinese citizens abroad, though they've been accused of using them as surveillance outposts. "I don't see any similar actions that have been done in the UK yet," Cheng said.

Western spies say China's covert activities are different from those of Russia. The latter likes to sow division and spread chaos; what China wants is control. It wants to manage what is being said about the country, to limit criticism and remove any risk of subversion where dissenting voices abroad might reach back into China or influence Chinese people living overseas. And it is becoming increasingly bold in its activities.

One dramatic case in the US features



Matthew Trickett, who had been charged with spying, was found dead in a park in Maidenhead

Yan Xiong. A student leader in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests in China, he later escaped to the US but, 30 years later, found himself the target of the Chinese state when he tried to run for Congress. A private investigator was hired to place him under surveillance, smear him and even look at staging an accident in which he would be hurt, he told me. Luckily, the FBI publicly exposed the activity.

In Britain, universities have become a focal point for Chinese activity. Around the same time that Cheng was first detained in Hong Kong, a student at Newcastle University decided she too wanted to protest about China's actions in her native Hong Kong.

What happened to her – and the fact she still does not want to be named – says much about the way in which Beijing's reach extends into campuses in the UK. She and a group of friends planned a protest in the middle of Newcastle, but she says they were met with an organised counter-demonstration of Chinese students and older people.

She quickly found her group surrounded. The atmosphere was hostile: female students were shouted at and told they were prostitutes. They were followed as they left and asked the police for help. "Our freedom of speech was even restricted here in the UK," she says.

Some of her fellow protesters had their pictures taken and uploaded to Chinese-language social media accounts with a

message saying that they needed to be identified and reported.

A similar incident took place at Southampton University last year, when a group of Chinese nationals were alleged to have attacked young protesters demonstrating for a democratic Hong Kong.

In Manchester two years ago, another violent incident took place in which a Hong Kong pro-democracy protester was dragged onto the grounds of the Chinese consulate and beaten.

China angrily dismisses claims of interference, instead accusing the UK of meddling in its internal affairs. But British officials maintain that Beijing uses a range of techniques to exercise control abroad, including the overseas police stations, often hidden behind front companies.

Last year, Britain's security minister, Tom Tugendhat, said that four of these police stations in the UK were closed by the Chinese authorities, stating that the Foreign Office deemed them "unacceptable". Tugendhat added that the mere fact of these stations' existence would have "worried and intimidated" those who had left China. China maintains that the existence of these stations is a "complete political lie".

Those China wants to pressure can also be reached by phone – without anyone needing to be in the country. One British official describes a typical conversation involving someone being called up by their own parents and told they need

to come back to China, or else they would face consequences. What are technically called "coerced repatriations" have happened on numerous occasions in the UK, officials say, although they are not aware of physical abduction of dissidents. In other cases, dissidents have been lured to countries like Thailand from where they have been taken to China.

Cyberespionage is another battleground. In March the government blamed Beijing for a hack of the Electoral Commission in which data from the electoral register was stolen. A hack on the UK's armed forces payroll was also reported to be linked to China.

Britain has begun to push back by giving the police and MI5 new powers under last year's National Security Act. This allows them to prosecute activities such as working on behalf of a foreign intelligence service. Remarkably, this was not illegal before.

The willingness to challenge China's activities is growing just as the country is becoming more assertive. The result will be more arrests, diplomatic rows and growing friction. We are only just beginning to address the difficult question of how best to deal with a burgeoning superpower seeking to extend its reach.

Gordon Corera is the BBC's security correspondent. His series – Shadow War: China and the West – is available now on BBC Sounds and other podcast platforms

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