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Social eating as a favor exchange facilitator: New survey evidence from China

Yanjie Bian and Lingfeng He

Social eating – or eating a meal with significant others – is universally important for social networking in society. This article reviews a research program on social eating as a network builder and resource mobilizer for favor exchanges, and presents new survey evidence on patterns of participation in social eating and favor exchanges in China today.¹

Social eating as a network research program

Social eating has long been an issue in scholarly research. Centuries ago, the French philosopher Montaigne argued that eating was a fundamental source of human sociability because good company generated pleasure that was much more important to human beings as social animals than the consumption of food itself (see review by Fischler 2011). This wisdom was esteemed by some of the founding fathers of sociology in their discussions of the social significance of the common meal, or collective gatherings of individuals to eat, emphasizing its cultural meanings and religious functions (Durkheim 1912), as well as its implications for maintaining group cohesion through sociable conversations at the common meal (Simmel 1997 [1910]).

Contemporary sociologists have expanded Simmel's analysis in important ways. Bossard (1943), for example, considered family meals as an agent of chil-

dren's socialization and the intergenerational transmission of family culture. While time spent on family meals has decreased since the 1970s, time spent on meals away from home has increased proportionally in both Western (Warde et al. 2007) and Eastern (Kim 2020) societies. Studies have shown that eating out with neighbors, coworkers, and other friends functions to maintain group norms (Young 1971), strengthen social bonds (Giacoman 2016), increase life satisfaction (Dunbar 2017; Kim 2020), and reduce social isolation, especially for the elderly (Boyer, Orpin, and King 2016). Even fast-food places such as McDonald's restaurants have become a social, not merely a commercial space in which rituals are celebrated, status is recognized, and connections are expanded (Watson 1997).

Recent research has focused on a broad range of relational functions of social eating. In the United Kingdom, Dunbar (2017) reports that those who eat socially more often tend to have higher levels of generalized trust, greater social engagement, and larger social networks. The underlying logic is that social eating functions relationally because it *is* social. For Botswana Bushmen, with their "primitive" lifestyles, evening conversations around the campfire are predominantly social, for they share stories of relatives, neighbors, and exchange partners "with gestures, imitation, sound effects, or bursts of song that brought the characters right to the hearth and into the hearts of listeners" (Wiessner 2014, p. 14030). In advanced modern societies, relational functions are maintained to a considerable extent through social drinking, as the social consumption of alcohol creates opportunities for conversations, laughter, singing, and dancing that reinforce social bonds (Dunbar et al. 2017). These researchers have demonstrated that, compared with non-drinkers, social drinkers have more friends on whom they can depend for emotional and other support.

Independent of the above-reviewed Western research tradition, the first author of this article began to study social eating in China within the framework of a network research program implemented through a series of household surveys from the late 1990s onward (Bian 2019, 54–61). A measurement device called a "social eating network" emerged from this program (Bian 2001), which measures the frequency, structure, and friendship generation of social eating occasions attended by survey respondents. It has proved to be analytically useful in research on China (Li 2009; Zou, Ao, and Li 2012; Li and Li 2016) and East Asia (Bian and Guo 2015). The device has also been included in the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP, see Sapin, Joye, and Wolf 2020). Built into this research program are two theoretical themes, treating social

eating as (i) a network builder and (ii) a resource mobilizer for favor exchanges.

As regards the first theme, social eating is a common practice for building personal networks in China. A daily calendar study (Bian 2001) shows that in a typical week, an average Chinese urbanite has 21 percent of their lunches and dinners with friends and non-family others. These are “social banquets” that, unlike in the West, are frequently paid for by the “host,” the party that initiates the event and wants to show their hospitality to the invited parties. Only on less than a fifth of the relevant occasions is the cost of social eating shared by all parties involved. To most Chinese people, social eating is meant to provide a relaxed environment for personal conversations (75 percent), to maintain social relations (70 percent), and to meet new friends (88 percent). These patterns are widely observed within and between social classes, however measured. During social eating, gossip, secrets, and rumors are discussed and frequently concern the “dark side” of politics and politicians, thus lowering the levels of political and institutional trust for frequent social eating participants (Chen and Bian 2015).

The fact that the cost of social eating is frequently covered by only one party implies the second theme: Social eating is a resource mobilizer for favor exchanges. According to the daily calendar study (Bian 2001), more than a quarter of social eating events are purposely initiated to “talk about business” and nine out of ten such meals are paid for by the initiators/host. In these situations, hosts tend to be well-connected with high incomes, guests of honor may include Communist Party members who hold important positions, while other attendees may have diverse connections and serve as liaisons between hosts and guests. The 2012 Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) shows that frequent social eating participants include entrepreneurs, managers, professionals, and office staffers, while social eating contexts tend to be hierarchical in the sense that seating and conversations are consciously arranged to recognize participants’ status and power (Bian 2019, 60). These features differentiate China’s social eating from “the common meal” or “communal feasts” as observed in the West, which are casual, relaxed, and social, involving friends and acquaintances of equal status (Boyer et al. 2016; Giacomani 2016; Dunbar 2017). In sharp contrast, China’s social eating occasions seem to be culturally quite different; many of them are deliberately set up to facilitate favor exchanges, a case scenario to which we now turn our attention.

Social eating as a favor exchange facilitator

To provide a frame of reference, we begin with an overview of social eating participation around the world. The 2017 ISSP module on “Social Resources and Social Capital” includes the following question: “How often do you go out to eat or drink with three or more friends or acquaintances who are not family members?” Eight response categories are provided: (1) daily, (2) several times a week, (3) once a week, (4) two to three times a month, (5) once a month, (6) several times a year, (7) less often, and (8) never. Space limitations do not permit a full presentation of the results, but two findings are summarized here. First,

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there is a great deal of interpersonal variation in social eating participation in each member society of the ISSP, and China is no exception. Second, inter-society variation is huge, ranging from an average of 13.1 days of social eating and drinking a year (Sweden) to 78.3 days (Slovenia), with China (30.2) being placed right in the middle, along with Chinese Taiwan (30.2), the Philippines (32.1), and Thailand (28.1). Further data analysis will focus on China, using 2017 CGSS, the survey source of the Chinese data in the ISSP data archive (see Bian and Li 2012 for CGSS design and data quality).

Figure 1 displays four distributions concerning features of social eating in China. Panel A confirms that social eating participation is a common practice in China (80.8 percent of 3,092 total respondents), with 19.2 percent nonparticipants on a yearly basis. China’s rate of nonparticipation is close to that of Croatia (20.3 percent), Israel (18.5 percent), and Chinese Taiwan (18.2 percent). Confined to participants (N=2,498), Panel B indicates that social eating is functional more for relational maintenance (for meeting new friends “never,” at 11.2 percent, or “rarely,” at 47.2 percent) than for friendship expansion (meeting new friends “sometimes,” at 30.9 percent or “often,” at 10.7

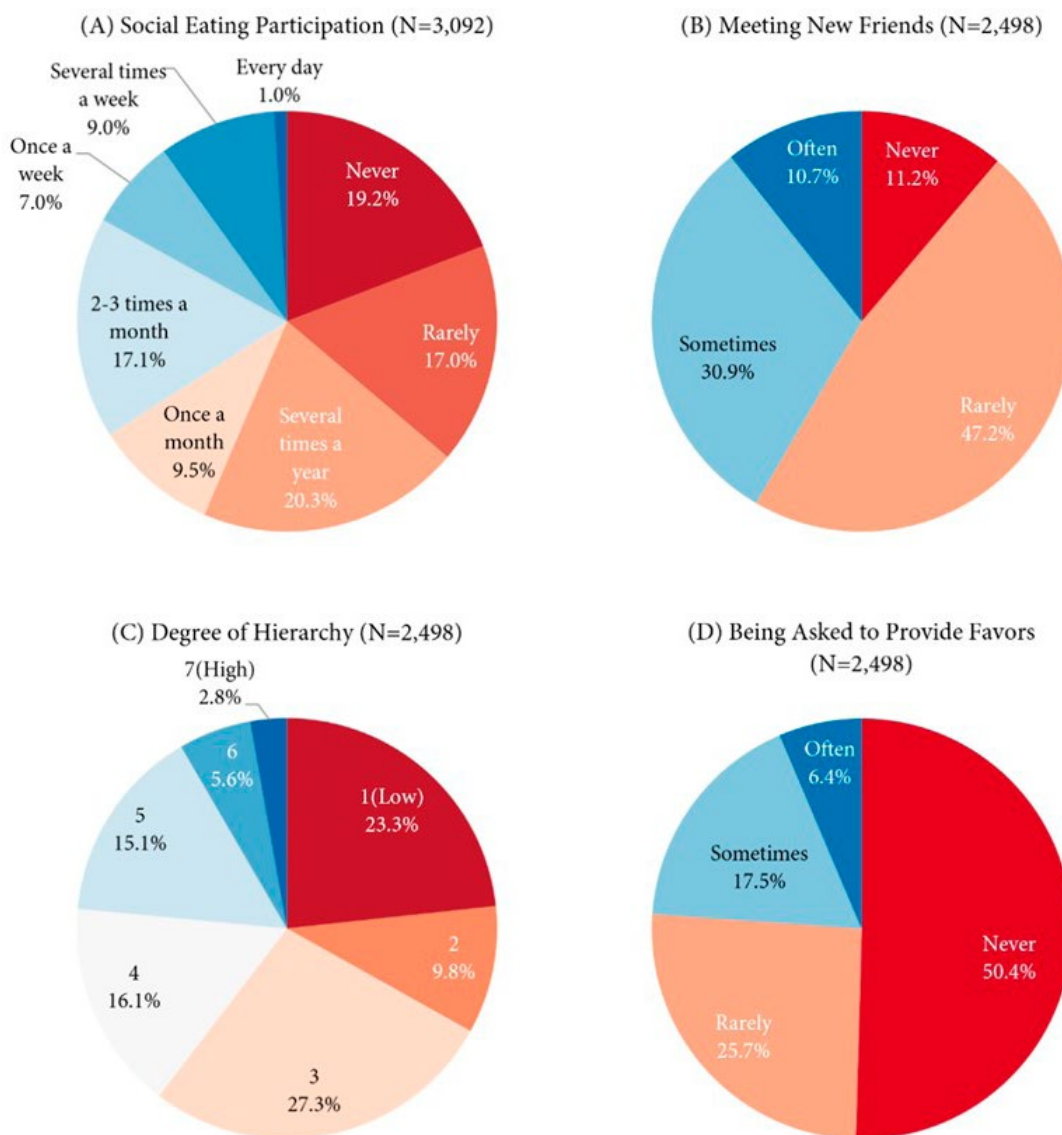


Figure 1. Social eating distributions (CGSS 2017)

percent). Panel C shows that social eating contexts vary in hierarchical characterization, from a one-degree context (23.3 percent) in which social eating is equal-status oriented, to a seven-degree context (2.8 percent) in which seating and conversations are deliberately arranged to recognize participants' identity (host, guest, attendee), status (age, seniority, honor), and power (office rank, political influence). The great majority of social eating contexts (73.9 percent) range from two degrees to six degrees of hierarchical characterization. In sum, China's social eating contexts are more or less hierarchically oriented.

Panel D represents our central interest. This is concerns the frequency with which respondents are asked to provide favors to someone known to them. China is widely known as a society centered on the notion of *guanxi*, or personalized social relations to facilitate favor exchanges (Bian 1997, 2019). While fa-

vor exchanges are a fundamental way through which individuals tried to survive and gain advantages in pre-revolution era (Fei 1992 [1947]), under Mao's redistributive socialism (Yang 1994; Yan 1996), and in the post-Mao transformation towards a market-non-market hybrid system (Chan 2009; Bian 2018), only those with access to positional power, scarce resources, and/or strategic network positions have the potential to provide favors to others connected to them directly or indirectly. This implies that, while nearly all Chinese people must seek favors from *guanxi* contacts at least once in their lifetime (Bian 2019, chapter 2), not everyone is asked to provide favors to others, and only a small minority of elites are repeatedly involved in the game of favors. Panel D provides evidence in support of this hypothesis. As shown, half of the CGSS respondents are "never" asked by anyone to provide favors (50.5 percent). Among the other

Table 1. OLS and Logistic Regressions on Favors Sought After (CGSS 2017, N=2,498)

Predictor Variables	OLS Model 1	OLS Model 2	Logistic Model 3	Logistic Model 4	Odds Ratio Model 4
Social eating variables					
Participation		0.001*		0.413*	1.511*
Friendship expansion		0.060*		0.662***	1.938***
Hierarchical context		0.080***		0.359**	1.431**
Demographic variables					
Age	-0.001	0.001	-0.002	0.003	1.003
Gender (male=1)	0.020	-0.009	-0.017	-0.059	0.943
Marital status (married=1)	-0.006	0.001	-0.054	-0.052	0.949
Hukou (urban=1)	-0.066	-0.072	-0.230	-0.238	0.788
Work sector (state=1)	0.090	0.074	0.156	0.144	1.155
Socioeconomic variables					
Education	0.021***	0.020**	0.064***	0.059***	1.061***
Party membership	0.150**	0.129*	0.397**	0.380**	1.463**
Income (log)	0.016**	0.015**	0.040*	0.035*	1.036*
Executive (unskilled=0)	0.507***	0.449***	1.036***	0.960***	2.612***
Manager (unskilled=0)	0.386***	0.374***	0.907***	0.874***	2.397***
Skilled (unskilled=0)	0.216***	0.219***	0.672***	0.697***	2.008***
Constant	1.331***	0.848***	-2.510***	-3.643***	0.026***
R square or Pseudo R square	0.074	0.101	0.061	0.074	0.074

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Note: In Models 3 to 5, the following variables are converted into dichotomies: Favors sought after 0=never or rarely and 1=otherwise; Participation 0=never or rarely and 1=otherwise; Friendship expansion 0=never and 1=otherwise; Hierarchical context 0=low (1,2,3,4) and 1=high (5,6,7).

half, people are asked to provide favors either “rarely” (25.7 percent), “sometimes” (17.5 percent), or “often” (6.4 percent).

Given this large variation in sought-after favors, our remaining question is twofold. First, who is likely to be asked to provide favors? Is this someone with money, status, or power? Second, does social eating participation increase one’s probability of being asked to provide favors? If so, in what ways? Table 1 provides us with answers to these questions.

Model 1 measures “favors sought after” as a continuous variable (coded 1–4), a proxy of varying intensities of favor exchange from low to high. Two sets of clear-cut results are generated. First, favor exchanges occur equally across demographic groupings (age, gender, marital status) and institutional boundaries (rural vs. urban *hukou*, private vs. public work sector). Second, propensities to provide favors are unequally distributed around socioeconomic variables and are significantly increased by one’s education, Communist party membership, income, and class power. Thus, status, money, and power are the operating mechanisms whereby favor exchanges are facilitated in China today.

Model 2 shows that social eating increases one’s propensity to be asked to provide favors. Specifically, the higher one’s participation in social eating, the greater the likelihood that one will be asked to provide favors; the more opportunities to meet new friends from social eating, the greater the likelihood that one

will be asked to provide favors; and the higher the hierarchical degree of social eating contexts, the greater likelihood that one will be asked to provide favors.

Measuring “favors sought after” as a continuous variable is not free of flaws. The variable is a 4-point scale, far less qualified than a true continuous variable would be. The “never” category, moreover, contains a simple majority, at 50.5 percent of cases. Finally, the “rarely” category (25.7 percent) is close to nonexistence among ordinary Chinese people. Therefore, we reconstruct this variable as a dichotomy, with respondents being “sometimes” or “often” asked to provide favors, coded 1 for frequent participation (23.9 percent) and otherwise coded 0 for infrequent participation (76.1 percent). This dichotomy very well matches our elite–nonelite image of favor exchanges: A minority of elite members are highly likely to provide favors to connected others, whereas the great majority of nonelite members are unlikely to be sought after for favors by anyone. Based on this binary variable, Models 3 and 4 present logit coefficients for quantitative readers, and the last column presents odds ratios transformed from Model 4 logit coefficients to allow for easy interpretations. We interpret these odds ratios below.

Let us start with the three social eating variables (converted to dichotomies as well) one by one. First, as compared to infrequent participation in social eating, frequent participation has a 51.1 percent (odds ratio of 1.511) greater probability of being asked to provide fa-

vors. This demonstrates that social eating in China is indeed a favor exchange facilitator. Next, social eating is a stronger favor exchange facilitator when it creates opportunities for people to meet new friends; the odds ratio of 1.938 indicates that the probability of being asked to provide favors is nearly doubled when social eating is a venue for friendship expansion. This implies that new friends people meet at social eating events are instrumental to facilitating favor exchanges. Finally, our third social eating variable indicates that a hierarchical context of social eating is a booster of one's probability of being asked to provide favors, in the amount of 43.1 percent.

All socioeconomic variables have survived statistical significance tests in logistic analysis. First, one year's education increases the probability of providing favors by 6.1 percent. This means that compared with a high-school graduate (12 years of schooling), a college graduate (16 years of schooling) will enjoy a 24.4 percent greater probability of being asked to provide favors. This is a large education effect. Second, as compared with non-members, being a Communist Party member increases the probability of doing favor exchanges by 46.3 percent. This is a huge political effect. Third, one unit increase in income (a log-transformed variable) generates a 3.6 percent increase in the likelihood of providing favors to others. This is a substantial economic effect. Finally, as compared with unskilled workers who have no power to control the labor of others, those who have varying degrees of control increase their probability of being asked to provide favors by 100.8 percent for skilled workers, 139.7 percent for mid-level managers, and 161.2 percent for top-ranking executives. Clearly, power is a major generator of favor exchanges.

Social eating in the context of anticorruption

Xi Jinping became China's new paramount leader at the Eighteenth CCP Congress in October 2012. Immediately thereafter, the CCP Central Committee announced "eight provisions" that marked the beginning of a nationwide anticorruption campaign. By June 2021, China had reported a total of 626,500 cases in violation of the Eight Provisions, including 392 state officials at province/ministry levels, 22,000 officials at municipality/bureau levels, and more than 170,000 county-level officials (http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2021-06/29/nw.D110000zgqnb_20210629_4-02.htm). To what extent has the anticorruption campaign affected social eating and favor exchanges in China? Figure 2 displays survey data about changing trends in social eating and favor exchanges in recent years.

Changing trends in social eating. The blue line in Figure 2 is generated from the first author's multi-year surveys of the Job Search Network project (JSNET, N=16,575) conducted in the eight largest Chinese cities (consult Bian 2022 for detailed descriptions of the JSNET project). It shows that frequent social eating participation (sometimes very often) sharply decreased from 44.4 percent in 2009 to 36.9 percent in 2014, and then further decreased to 34.3 percent in 2019 and to 31.6 percent in 2021 (but this 2 percent drop from 2019 to 2021 was likely to be caused by the Covid-19 pandemic). Each observed year has a small estimated interval at 95 percent confidence, indicating that the above-reported percentages are reflective of reality in China's largest cities. Although the data are from a limited number of such cities, they not only

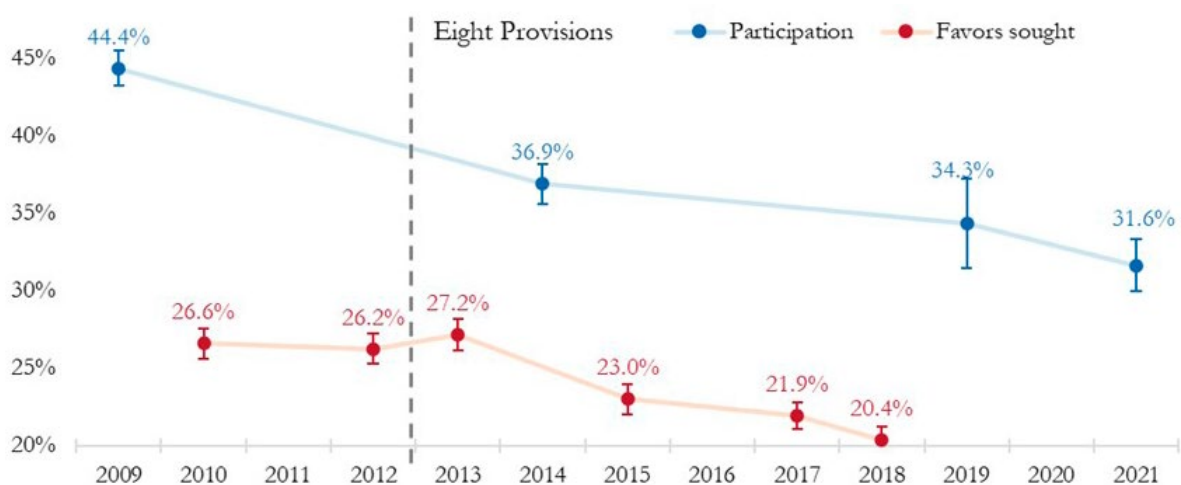


Figure 2. Percentages of frequent social eating participation and favors sought after, by year

cover a fairly large regional variation from north to south and from east to west, but also represent centrally-administered (Shanghai and Tianjin) and provincial capitals or leading cities (Changchun, Guangzhou, Jinan, Lanzhou, Ximen, and Xi'an) where the anticorruption campaign has been concentrated. Put in a national context, China's restaurants with annual revenue of over 2 million RMB (or US\$300,000) sustained an average annual growth of 20 percent from 2000 to 2012, but its growth rate sharply dropped to around 2 percent in 2013–2017 and only slowly recovered to around 10 percent in recent years (State Statistical Bureau, 2000–2022).

Changing trends in favors sought after. The red line in Figure 2 is obtained from the 2010–2018 series of CGSS datasets (N=47,779). It indicates that more than 26 percent of CGSS respondents were asked to provide favors before the anticorruption campaign, or more specifically 26.6 percent in 2010 and 26.3 percent in 2012. In 2013, just one year after the publication of the Eight Provisions, there was a 1 percent increase in favors sought after, at 27.2 percent, which can be understood as the legacy of the pre-Xi regime. Yet, the effect of the anticorruption campaign, which intensified after 2013, began to be measured from 2015 onwards, when the percentages of CGSS respondents asked to provide favors dropped to 23 percent in

2015, to 21.9 percent in 2017, and to 20.4 percent in 2018. Again, the small 95 percent confidence interval for each observed year indicates that the reported year-specific percentages are highly likely to be observed in China and that the trend displayed in Figure 2 must be taken seriously.

Limited effect of anticorruption campaigns. In both trends displayed in Figure 2, one may draw a simple conclusion about the limited effects of successive anticorruption campaigns. Many years into these campaigns we still observe a significant number of frequent social eating participants, at about one-third in 2021 (JSNET), and more than a fifth of the adult Chinese population still being frequently asked to provide favors to others in 2018 (CGSS). Of special interest here is the small margin of decline in favors sought after before and after 2013, from 26.2 percent in 2012 to 20.4 percent in 2018, or just a 5.8 percent drop during the increasingly intensified six years of continuous anticorruption campaigns, averaging about 1 percent annually. This implies the persistence of favor exchanges as a resilient cultural norm in China. Because only a minority of elites with power, status, or money are repeatedly engaged actively or reactively in favor exchanges, one wonders about what happened to these people after the start of anticorruption campaigns. Table 2 provides some answers.

Table 2. Regression Results on Three Dependent Variables

Predictor Variables	Model 5 Attitude toward <i>Guanxi</i> OLS	Model 6 Social Eating Participation Odds Ratio	Model 7 Favors Sought After Odds Ratio
Year			
2013 (2010 & 2012=0)			1.084*
2015 (2010 & 2012=0)			0.829***
2017 (2010 & 2012=0)			0.732***
2018 (2010 & 2012=0)			0.682***
2019 (2014=0)	-3.185***	0.988	
2021 (2014=0)	-3.373***	0.647***	
Attitude to <i>guanxi</i>		1.011***	
Socioeconomic variables			
Education	-0.063	1.080***	1.055***
Party membership	-3.062***	0.996	1.195***
Income (log)	1.375***	1.563***	1.032***
Executive (unskilled=0)	0.211	1.456**	3.624***
Manager (unskilled=0)	1.035	1.480***	2.962***
Skilled (unskilled=0)	-0.769*	1.024	1.671***
Demographic variables			
Age	-0.062***	0.971***	0.995***
Gender (male=1)	1.019**	1.585***	1.233***
Marital status (married=1)	-1.347***	0.720***	0.933*
Hukou (urban=1)	-2.085***	0.923	0.986
Work sector (state=1)	-2.799***	0.754***	1.439***
Constant	58.614***	0.166***	0.107***
R square or Pseudo R square	0.038	0.123	0.079
N	9,314 JSNET	9,314 JSNET	47,779 CGSS

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Note: In Models 6 and 7, the following variables are converted into dichotomies: Favors sought after 0=never or rarely and 1=otherwise; Participation 0=never or rarely and 1=otherwise.

Attitude towards guanxi. No matter whether they are actively or reactively engaged in social eating and/or favor exchanges, elites and nonelites are conscious individuals who have been cultivated in Chinese *guanxi* culture. Therefore, their attitudes toward *guanxi* as personalized relations to facilitate favor exchanges are the starting point of our analysis. Model 5 shows that people are not positive about *guanxi* if they are a CCP member, a skilled worker, an older person, married, urbanite, and working in the state sector. In contrast, one tends to accept *guanxi* as a cultural norm if one is male, younger, nonurbanite, not a CCP member, has a non-state job, and earns a higher income. Note that attitudes towards *guanxi* were significantly lower in 2019 and 2021 than in 2014. However, as indicated by a low explained variance ($R^2=0.038$, or 3.8 percent), *guanxi* normalization is widespread as positive attitudes towards *guanxi* are, by and large, randomly distributed (96.2 percent unexplained variance) across social groups and strata in the Chinese population.

Frequent participation in social eating. Model 6 presents four sets of interesting results. First, frequent participation in social eating declined from 2014 (odds ratio=1) to 2019 (0.988) and 2021 (0.647), a drop of 35.3 percent within seven years. Second, positive attitudes towards *guanxi* norms increase frequent participation in social eating. Thus, attitudes indeed matter. Third, CCP members and non-members have about the same propensity to participate in social eating (odds ratio=0.996, or not significantly different from 1.0). Recall from Model 5 that CCP members have negative attitudes toward *guanxi* favoritism, but they do not themselves deviate from non-members in social eating participation, a clear indication of an attitude–behavior gap among CCP members. Finally, one’s propensity to be a frequent social eating participant is significantly increased by one’s education (8 percent for each year of schooling), income (56.3 percent for each unit increase), and class power (45.6 percent and 48.0 percent advantages for executives and managers, respectively). Note that high income earners tend to be positive about *guanxi* norms, and they also are frequent social eating participants. This is clear evidence of attitude–behavior consistency among economic elites.

Frequent favor exchangers. Are these elites frequent favor exchangers despite the anticorruption

campaigns? Model 7 provides us with a positive answer. As shown, favors sought after have significantly decreased in quantity since 2013, by 17.1 percent (from 100 to 82.9 percent) in 2015, by 26.8 percent in 2017, and by 31.8 percent in 2018. Despite these remarkable anticorruption achievements in terms of reducing overall volumes of favor seeking, the long-standing patterns in which power, status, and money produce and reproduce favor exchanges are unchanged. Specifically, one additional year of schooling generates a 5.5 percent higher propensity to be a frequent favor exchanger, and this is further increased by CCP membership, with a 19.5 percent margin over non-members; by income, there is a 3.2 percent margin for every log-transformed income unit; by class power, such as executives (2.624 times), managers (1.962 times), and skilled workers (67.1 percent) over unskilled workers. Anticorruption reduces the quantity of favor exchanges but does not affect the underlying operating logics and mechanisms.

Conclusion

With reference to a long tradition of social eating research in Western societies, two recent Chinese surveys present a systematic set of empirical evidence on social eating as a favor exchange facilitator in China. First, social eating is a favor exchange facilitator within and between demographic groupings (age, gender, marital status), as well as institutional boundaries (residential location, economic sector). Second, those who participate in social eating more often tend to have a greater probability of being asked to provide favors to others, and such probabilities are significantly higher when social eating serves as a venue for meeting new friends; when seating and conversations are hierarchically arranged to honor participants’ identity, status, and power; and when participants have higher human, economic, and political capital. Finally, social eating and favor exchanges have been affected by Xi’s anticorruption campaigns, but their effect is rather on the surface and related to volume, not in terms of hidden patterns, underlying logics, or causal mechanisms. As always, power, status, and money not only normalize the *guanxi* culture of favoritism, but have also served as mechanisms facilitating favor exchanges before and after anticorruption campaigns.

Endnote

1 The authors thank Professor Cheri Shun-ching Chan for helpful comments on an earlier draft. This work was presented at the biweekly sociology workshop series at Xi’an Jiaotong University

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