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The Moral Registers of Banqueting in Contemporary China

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Abstract

Chinese feasting encompasses everything from life-cycle celebrations to the indulgences of corrupt officials. Although woven into the commodity economy, banqueting also creates and solidifies social relationships, providing a space where different moral economies converge. This article explores the moral economies that intersect in Chinese banqueting as well as the differing moral registers people use to understand it. Proper form in banqueting is essential to being a cultured person and all banqueting gathers meaning through analogy to the commensal sharing at the heart of the family and ritual economy. Lavish official banqueting may be condemned in popular and state discourse as corrupt; yet officials may claim banqueting is necessary work that creates social connections which help their localities. Banquet inflation among ordinary people is also subject to contradictory moral evaluations. While the recent crackdown on official corruption stigmatises banquet indulgence, it may reinforce ordinary people's desire to utilise banquets as one of their only tools to influence those with relatively more power.

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Introduction

Commensality, or eating together, is unique to humans and common to all human societies and cultures. Yet it is also subject to cultural structuring. As Douglas Mary

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(1975: 249) pointed out, eating together can reflect hierarchy or equality, and it can act as a form of inclusion or exclusion. In China, the sharing of food accompanies all key social relationships, from familial, to lineage- and village-based, to work relationships. It is integral to daily social life, life-cycle and calendrical rituals, as well as to business, work, and political settings.

The most elaborate form of commensality is banqueting, which is ubiquitous in contemporary China and also part of a long historical tradition. This article attempts to understand banqueting in China as a set of practices in which different moral economies intersect. It also interrogates the varied and often contradictory moral discourses that frame banqueting. Following E.P. Thompson (1971) and the editors of this volume, we define moral economy as pertaining to any situation where the exchange, production, and/or distribution of goods or services is at least partially embedded in "social norms and obligations" (see Introduction to this volume).

However, in the contemporary Chinese case, the social norms and obligations that motivate exchange may not merely be customary or age-old. Thompson coined the term "moral economy" to apply to norms and obligations that predated the market. Yet in China today, the social norms and obligations that shape exchanges may spring from customary social relations and concepts or from new social arrangements, many of which were unleashed after the Chinese economy de-collectivised and opened up to the global market economy itself. China therefore illustrates a case where many different moral economies coexist and interact with one another. Moral economies in China can include sharing, reciprocal gift giving, tribute taking from officials or other superiors, as well as lingering elements of the state socialist economy. Furthermore, moral evaluations of these different kinds of exchange may vary, depending on particular social roles and contexts (Yan, 1996; Yang, 1994). The same exchange may be defined as part of a necessary moral obligation, as a morally neutral social duty, or as corrupt and wrong, depending on a person's particular social vantage point.

There is probably no activity in contemporary China more susceptible to an entire range of moral appraisals than the ubiquitous practice of banqueting. As a practice, feasting in contemporary China encompasses everything from life-cycle celebrations to the indulgences of corrupt officials. Although densely woven into the commodity economy, banqueting is an exchange that ultimately centres around and is shaped by social relationships, providing a site where many different moral economies converge.

Below, we explore both the variety of moral economies that intersect in the practice of Chinese banqueting as well as the diversity of moral registers that people use to understand it. To provide context, we begin with a brief look at banqueting in the historical past.

Banqueting and the Reproduction of Social Orders

Historical Antecedents

Banqueting is as old as Chinese civilisation itself. Historians document rituals of feasting as far back as the Shang and Zhou dynasties (eighteenth century B.C. to 221 B.

C.) as feasting played an important role in statecraft (Chang, 1977a). During the Song dynasty (960–1279 A.D.), the orchestration of imperial feasts reflected "gradations of power" including matching the number of courses and dishes, as well as levels of wine, to the placement of officials in the court hierarchy and/or their proximity to the emperor (Freeman, 1977: 166). During the Ming dynasty (1368–1649 A.D.), imperial court banquets were controlled by regulations geared to the occasion (Höllman, 2014: 128–129); midday banquets were for formal occasions while night-time banqueting was more informal and less ritualised (Moats, 1977: 220).

Throughout much of the imperial era, as might be expected, banqueting was mainly an activity for elites and was one way they distinguished themselves (Höllman, 2014: 73). Imperial banqueting displayed court power while also reasserting power differentials within the court. However, banquets during the imperial era sometimes functioned as displays of largesse to the general public. During the Tang dynasty (618–907 A.D.), the sovereign called and paid for public feasts and drinking times to celebrate such things as military victory or the birth of a son to the emperor (Schafer, 1977: 135).

Officials in imperial times sometimes regarded banqueting as an onerous duty. For instance, Ming officials complained about having to attend so many banquets, but they feared giving offence by declining (Moats, 1977: 247). As we shall see below, a similar complaint about the burden of banqueting now surfaces in contemporary China among economic and political elites, and sometimes even among ordinary people.

While most of what we know about banqueting in imperial times focuses on court feasts, banqueting for the urban middle classes began as early as the Song period with the rise of public restaurants (Höllman, 2014: 134–136). Of course, commercialised urban banqueting did not mean that ritual and social rules no longer applied, or that banqueting as an economic activity was not thoroughly embedded in social relations and obligations. For instance, during the Republican era, banquets were graded by the cost (Chang, 1977b: 16–17) and much thought went into making sure the banquet matched the

> importance of the guests being entertained. Too high for the occasion or for the status of the party, and it is branded a vulgar overkill engaged in only by the uncultured new rich; too low, you become a tightwad and get contemptuously laughed at. (Chang, 1977b: 17)

How does the aforementioned relate to feasting and banqueting among non-elites? Eugene Anderson and Marja Anderson (1977) remind us that the culture of food in China has always been effected by "status emulation." While the common people could not possibly replicate the diets of royalty or even of the wealthy, "people tried to emulate the Imperial court, or whatever local representative of the Imperial government was available" (Anderson and Anderson, 1977: 374).

Of course, poverty greatly curtailed the ability of ordinary people, especially peasants, to hold banquets of any type. Meat was a rarity in peasant diets throughout the imperial, Republican, and collective eras (Buck, 1937: 17, 11; Smil, 2005: 77, 82), and feasting, if undertaken at all, was restricted to a few important calendrical celebrations such as the Lunar New Year (Oxfeld, 2017: 10, 177). As living standards have risen throughout contemporary China, however, the importance, size, and frequency of banqueting among all classes have intensified.

Wedding banquets are one good example. In my own fieldwork, in rural Meixian, a Hakka county in Guangdong Province, older villagers remembered that wedding banquets were once limited to a small rural elite. Many ordinary families adopted a future daughter-in-law as an infant (童养媳, *tongyang xi*) and she would be married to her "brother" without any ceremony or banquet when she came of age (Oxfeld, 2017: 107). This can be contrasted to the contemporary situation in which the number of guests and the quality and quantity of dishes served at wedding banquets continue to increase each year (an issue we explore further below).

Banqueting as Etiquette and Ritual, Being a Cultured Person

If common people in the historical past could not emulate the extravagance of the meals and banquet rituals of the elites, this did not mean that they did not try to parallel elites in the importance they placed on etiquette and form. This aspect of banqueting – its imbrication with ritual and etiquette – remains an important element of banqueting in China today. We thus begin our examination of banqueting in present-day China by examining it as a set of practices shaped by ideas of propriety, etiquette, and appropriate ritual.

In Moonshadow Pond, the pseudonymous name of the village in Meixian where I have long conducted fieldwork, villagers distinguish banquets and ordinary meals by referring to ordinary meals as "eating rice" (食饭, *shifan*) and to banquets as "eating spirits" or "eating wine" (食酒, *shijiu*) (Oxfeld, 2017: 16). While ordinary meals are framed as a combination of rice and trimmings, the banquet is characterised as a combination of these trimmings or dishes with wine or liquor. This distinction between characterising an ordinary meal as a combination of a grain staple (which may not be rice in northern China) and trimmings and characterising a banquet as a combination of trimmings and liquor is widespread throughout China.

However, a banquet is more than a large meal with liquor and various dishes that is distinguished from an ordinary meal that is comprised of a staple grain and trimmings. A banquet is a rite framed by notions of how to behave and what you owe to others. For instance, describing his fieldwork in rural Hubei in central China, Hans Steinmüller (2013: 26) says, "I spent much more time in meetings and banquets where people exchange words and treats, and get to know each other. I had underestimated the importance of such personal contact, and in particular of eating together." Steinmüller (2013: 131) goes on to explain that a certain kind of etiquette and sense of morality is required when going to a banquet:

> 'To go and eat wine' implies that one would go to the celebration, give a money-gift, and participate in a lavish meal. The money-gift is called '*renqing*' (人情) locally, which means both the human feeling that the present is supposed to express, and the present itself.

As Steinmüller (2013: 131) reminds us, these form of etiquette connect to *li* (礼), a word which is usually translated as ritual, ceremony, etiquette, and/or gift, but which is also very much part of a "moral discourse." This moral discourse connects to ideas of reciprocity (Oxfeld, 2017: 107; Steinmüller, 2013: 132). In my own fieldwork, villagers often quoted the proverb "courtesy demands reciprocity" (礼尚往来, *li shang wang lai*) when they spoke about banqueting.

Putting on a banquet in rural China has typically involved mutual help from other villagers (Oxfeld, 2017: 67; Steinmüller, 2013: 139). Although banqueting has started to move to hotels, restaurants, and other venues where labour is commodified and mutual help is less critical, many rural banquets are still based on the mutual assistance model. For instance, in a recent ethnography, Mobo Gao (2018) reports on a banquet that his brother's family hosted when their son passed his university entrance exam. There were almost 200 guests at the banquet and 22 different courses. Gao (2018: 198) reports that the preparatory work for this banquet was accomplished by dividing up the work of cooking among over twenty villagers. Payment for this help may include cash, boxes of biscuits, cigarettes, and/or the obligation to remember to reciprocate (Oxfeld, 2017: 67). As stated earlier, guests who are invited to a banquet must also appropriately situate themselves by giving the appropriate cash or material gift.

Steinmüller (2013: 142) describes etiquette at a village banquet as "centring" and compares it to imperial rituals where an important aim was "a proper social expression" that reproduced the "hierarchical spatial and moral order." Thus, just as the highest-ranking officials in an imperial banquet sat nearer to the emperor, so too, Steinmüller (2013: 144) observed that at village banquets during his fieldwork, the guests of higher rank would sit "next to the ancestral shrine." As Roel Sterckx (2005: 3) observes about contemporary banqueting in China, "A meticulously stage-managed Chinese banquet today still echoes some of the precepts and rules of etiquette set out in ritual codes traceable to early imperial China."

As such, the knowledge of how to comport oneself in a rural banquet is no less critical than knowing how to behave in an imperial feast. And many of the rules of the table applicable to banquets carry over even into ordinary meals, especially those that emphasise deference (Cooper, 1986: 181). As Eugene Cooper (1986: 181) states,

> especially on formal occasions, one does not serve oneself without first offering to others, at least those seated immediately to either side […]. The overriding rule of Chinese table customs is deference. Defer to others in everything […] This means don't eat only from those dishes you like.

Importantly, one should not even begin to eat until first urged on by the host. Not to do so would be a severe breach of etiquette. Recollecting his early days of fieldwork in Hong Kong as a graduate student, James Watson (2004: 107) observes, "learning the etiquette of eating and dining […] the finer details of where and when to sit, whom to serve, and – most importantly – how not to embarrass my hosts" was tantamount to learning how to become a "civilized human being."

Banqueting as Solidarity

As indicated above, banqueting can reinforce hierarchies of status, social position, and power. Banqueting can also reinforce economic class distinctions and has been associated in contemporary China with corruption (discussed later in this article). Yet banqueting works in other settings not so much as a marker of class or status, or as an index of profligacy and corruption, but as a form of social solidarity among equals.

Ethnographers document several forms of traditional feasting that emphasise commonality, sharing, and equality. A feasting practice that I observed during my fieldwork was the practice of eating from one big pot (吃大锅饭, *chi da guo fan*). Eating from one big pot occurs when a large group shares food in an informal situation. For instance, during my fieldwork in 2007, I journeyed with the local Council of Elders (老人会, *laorenhui*) from our village to a different village. The purpose of our trip was to make offerings at the grave and memorial hall for a distant ancestor of our village founder. Our bus trip to the memorial hall took a few hours and there were about eighty of us, so it was a long day necessitating a midday meal. When we arrived at our destination, several of the women prepared a huge pot of rice; they then added fried pork, mushrooms, dried squid, and scallions to the pot, and mixed these ingredients with the rice to flavour it. They also made a simple soup of pork bones and preserved vegetables and we all dined on this after the completion of the morning rituals (Oxfeld, 2017: 164). Watson (1987) has described a somewhat similar egalitarian banqueting ritual in rural Hong Kong that involves feasting from a common pot.

Such meals emphasise the equality of all participants. In that sense, they are unlike many life-cycle banquets, such as wedding banquets, in which issues of status play a large role, and in which there are inflationary pressures to invite more and more guests, or to serve more or better food. Rather, such gatherings are closer to what David Graeber (2001: 225) calls the “timeless commitment” of “open-ended communistic reciprocity.” There is essentially no “host” in such gatherings as the participants organise and then share the meal for themselves.

Rotating feasts, which may be somewhat more elaborate than those which emphasise a common pot, are still an occasion for fairly egalitarian rounds of reciprocity. “Killing the year’s pig” is an annual reciprocal feast described by Ann Veeck et al. (2017) in rural Jilin Province. Although living standards are higher in rural China than in the past, Veeck et al. (2017: 64) point out that food still consumes one-third of rural disposable income, and feasts such as the pig feast are still a relief from the monotony of the daily rural diet. In this case, families each raise one or two pigs and then invite their extended families and neighbours to share in a pig feast before the Spring Festival. The feasts rotate among neighbours and are therefore an opportunity for reciprocal exchange.

As one farmer told Veeck et al. (2017: 64), “You kill your pig today; they kill theirs tomorrow.” And, as another farmer stated, “Everybody I invite is somebody who has helped me and people I have relationships with” (Veeck et al., 2017: 64). These pig feasts resemble those observed by Emily Martin (2015: 50) during her fieldwork in Taiwan in the 1960s, although the Taiwanese feasts also had a communal religious component; pigs were decorated, offered to the gods, and then consumed in feasts that included kin and friends of the hosts.

Another occasion for rotating feasts that I observed during my own fieldwork in rural Meixian was a round of feasting called *zuofu* (作福) which essentially refers to celebrating good fortune. This round of feasting occurs anytime during the first two weeks of the eighth lunar month. Each village in the township chooses a different date for the celebration and this enables people to alternate in their roles of hosts and guests. The guest list may include friends, affines, or matrilateral relatives.

On feasting occasions, linguistic protocols also help relax the distinction between guest and host, although it is never truly lost. Strangers become familiar through commensality and the language of kinship often accompanies such meals (Stafford, 2000a: 103). It is common to urge guests not to be shy and to make themselves at home (跟自己家一样, *gen ziji jia yiyang*). Frequently, the host/guest relation is also downplayed through ritualised modesty. While the feast may contain innumerable dishes, the hosts will insist that "we have no dishes to serve you" (没有菜, *meiyou cai*) (Oxfeld, 2017: 165).

Reunion is an important element of feasts that emphasise solidarity. The Lunar New Year, of course, is the most prominent time of reunion feasting in contemporary China, as over 200 million migrant workers in the country's urban centres journey back to their rural homes to reunite with family. The reunions take place in a series of meals that not only include the reunion meal on New Year's Eve, but subsequent meals over the course of a two-week holiday season. These include special days set aside for meals with married daughters when they return with their families to their natal homes. In the Chinese context, reunion and commensality are inseparable, or as Charles Stafford (2000a: 99) has aptly put it, in China, "commensality *is* reunion." Writing about students returning home to their villages from school or work in urban areas, James Johnston (2013: 54) states, "When asked what made New Year so enjoyable, the students stressed the unity of the family, symbolized by their descriptions of the whole family sitting around the table eating on New Year's Eve."

Indeed, in many ways the Lunar New Year in contemporary rural China can be described as a series of commensal events in which expanding circles of fellow villagers, both urban migrants and those who remain in the village throughout the year, are reunited through commensality. During the Lunar New Year in Moonshadow Pond (observed in February 2019), I participated not only in the traditional reunion meals of the patrilineal family (团圆饭, *tuanyuan fan*) and the subsequent reunion meals marking the return of married daughters (回娘家, *hui niangjia*), but many other forms of commensal occasions meant to reaffirm solidarity and connection. For instance, lineage and lineage branches schedule collective worship at their remote ancestors' graves, and these are followed by banquets. Young people, especially former classmates returning from urban work or study, are also reunited through barbeques and hotpots at homes or in restaurants or picnic areas. Each of these commensal occasions serve to reinscribe a shared village identity on increasingly deterritorialised villagers.

Solidarity in Chinese banqueting is also abetted by drinking. Liquor is an important ingredient in promoting solidarity among the feasters. As noted earlier, liquor is one of the elements that differentiates a banquet from an ordinary meal, and drinking at a banquet has a specified form. Usually the host of the banquet begins by toasting an honoured guest or guests. Later, the banquet goers can toast each other, even to the point of inebriation. It should be noted that this intense drinking and toasting is primarily a male behaviour (Mason, 2013: 118). As Adam Chau (2006: 152) notes, drinking at banquets is "the most important medium of intensified social interactions between men." This toasting is also seen as a way to soften relationships, break down barriers, and build emotional connections among the banquet goers (Kipnis, 1997: 53–54; Oxfeld, 2017: 174).

Women do not necessarily refrain from drinking liquor altogether, but usually opt for non-alcoholic beverages such as soda, which can also be used for toasting. In rural areas, especially, women are not expected to drink alcohol and they do not risk social disapproval if they fail to match fellow banquet goers with drinks and toasts of liquor. However, while intense drinking and toasting is not a necessity of female sociality at banquets, its occurrence is also not sanctioned. Creating feelings of solidarity through drinking may indeed be more important than any inhibitions against drinking based on gender roles.

I noted a number of occasions in my 2019 visit in which women banquet goers drank and toasted heavily. On one especially interesting occasion, my host family's daughter and son-in-law, who ran two small but successful retail stores in the county capital, invited their staff for a hotpot dinner. The three staff members, all women, were joined at the table by their two bosses and other family members, and they toasted and drank exuberantly and with much laughter and talking throughout the meal. In this particular case, drinking together also served to downplay the hierarchy between boss and employee while affirming solidarity and connection.

Of course, if banqueting reaffirms solidarity, then it also means that the reverse situation – refusal to dine together – can signify a breach in social harmony (Strauch, 1985). As Judith Strauch (1985: 1) points out, publicly eating together can be a way of showing friendship and solidarity in the Chinese context, and in the opposing situation, "rejection of amiable relations may be symbolically stated through pointed refusal to share in commensality." Of course, eating together is one of the most fundamental symbols of Chinese family harmony, and family division in the Chinese context, such as the division of a joint family into several conjugal units, was typically indicated by the end of meal sharing and the establishment of separate stoves. However, the issue of ruptures in social relationships beyond the family, as symbolised by refusal to eat together in public settings, is in need of much greater exploration.

Banqueting Economies and Discourses

Guanxi

Banqueting as a form of ritual, etiquette, social obligation or social solidarity has positive moral connotations in the Chinese context. But as a complex social activity, banqueting also has many other moral connotations. Thus, it would be impossible to discuss banqueting in China without connecting it to the omnipresent practice of creating *guanxi* (关系) or practical social connections.

As Mayfair Yang (1994) points out in her exploration of the art of *guanxi* in China, *guanxi* practices can be embedded in discourses of *renqing* (human feeling and relations), but they are also connected to utilitarian aims. *Guanxi* can be viewed as antisocial (Yang, 1994: 51), not upright, a way of using people, and a way of distorting *renqing* for selfish goals, and this certainly applies to some banqueting practices. When Yang wrote her book on *guanxi* over two decades ago, she was already able to point to the large number of banquets that were undertaken as part of "official business, surreptitiously paid for with public funds" (Yang, 1994: 139), thus linking *guanxi* banqueting to public corruption.

In his foundational text on gift giving, sociologist Marcel Mauss (1967) described it as a practice in which a higher status giver creates debt on the part of the receiver. But banqueting in China does not always conform to this formula. As Charlotte Bruckermann and Stephan Feuchtwang (2016: 130) point out, in China the gift may flow upwards, confirming or enhancing the status of the receiver. Yang provides a typical example of this with regard to *guanxi* banqueting. Higher officials may conduct investigations of lower-level units and are then often "treated to lavish banquets by units eager to please them so that they will write good reports" (Yang, 1994: 139). Writing several decades later, Gao (2018: 88) describes a similar phenomenon when he discusses the way a villager was able to circumvent birth planning limits by inviting village committee officials to banquets.

However, banqueting for the purposes of relationship building among officials and businesspeople in China does not always confirm to this formula of higher status receiver and lower status banquet giver. For instance, John Osburg (2013) has explored the social interactions among elite businessmen and officials in contemporary China. While banquets

> still provide the basic template for etiquette in elite entertaining […] the goal of a successful banquet […] is precisely to do away with protocol, to end the evening bonded as friends (朋友, *pengyou*) or even fictive kinship brothers (*xiongdi*) through shared experience of pleasure. (Osburg, 2013: 56)

Banqueting for purposeful relationship building is subject to contradictory moral judgements. On the one hand, lavish banqueting habits at public expense are often pointed to by ordinary people as an index of public corruption. In my own fieldwork in rural Meixian, I often heard villagers decry the expensive and exotic dishes that officials ate at banquets, from rare wild game to costly medicinal soups (Oxfeld, 2017: 145). Villagers used the verb "to eat" to speak both symbolically and literally about officials wasting public funds. And banquet indulgence has also been officially recognised as a public corruption problem. A recent article in the English-language version of the *China Daily*, for instance, reported on and decried the fact that one-third of China's consumer spending on eating out was for official banquets (Cui, 2009).

For many officials, however, banqueting cannot be so easily dismissed as a form of mere corruption. As Osburg found in his fieldwork, officials point out that they need to strive to help their localities. And, in order to do this, and to fulfil their official duties, these officials argue that they must make connections – connections which can best be cemented by wining and dining people in a process designed to break down social barriers. Drinking and eating together create shared emotions (感情, *ganqing*) (Osburg, 2013: 63), and in that sense banqueting can be viewed not as corruption or even consumption, but as a form of "production" (Osburg, 2013: 57). It is the productive work that officials claim they must undertake in order to fully serve the people.

Indeed, officials and businesspeople sometimes frame their constant banqueting not as indulgence or immorality, but as a boring necessity of work. Osburg calls this "banquet saturation" stating that entrepreneurs "complained to me that they lack any 'true' leisure time because the majority of their evenings are spent hosting and attending banquets, activities that are necessary to their 'business success'" (Osburg, 2013: 39). Ironically, their complaints about being forced to banquet as a mere duty echo the earlier complaints of Ming dynasty officials discussed above.

While villagers in my fieldsite condemned the practice of indulgent official banqueting, they also could not abstain themselves from utilising banquets to create connections and seek advantages. Villagers, for instance, might invite an official to a banquet in hopes this would help procure a favour, such as assistance for a child on the job market (Oxfeld, 2017: 146).

What is at play here is that people may use different moral registers in referring to practices such as banqueting. Steinmüller (2010: 547) conceptualises this as simultaneously holding two contrasting frameworks – a "vernacular" and "traditionalist" framework versus a "modern" or "official" one. And, as he points out, "both ordinary people and government officials use elements of vernacular and state discourses […]" (Steinmüller, 2010: 434). Regarding an elaborate funeral held by an official, for instance, some of his informants spoke admiringly of its "pomp" and display of filiality while others criticised its corruption (Steinmüller, 2010: 545).

Ironically, the most recent crackdown on corruption by state authorities has reinforced the need that many non-elite people feel for banqueting as one form of influencing and securing favours from elites. Osburg notes that over time there has been an increase in "predatory corruption" which involves the demands of the elite for ever more extravagant favours such as elaborate banquets (Osburg, 2018: S152). On the other hand, as the ranks of the elite start to harden and their privileges are passed down intergenerationally, many no longer even need to resort to entertainment as a form of cultivating connections. They are born into the elite and literally inherit their influential contacts (Osburg, 2018: S157). This new social configuration, combined with an official crackdown on corruption which even includes a policy on official meals ("four dishes and a soup"), has recently led to a decline in the number of restaurants that focus on entertaining members of business and state elites (Osburg, 2018: S157).

A contradictory state of affairs for both elites and non-elites results from these developments. As Osburg points out, even as "corruption" remains an articulated concern on the part of the state, and there is a focus on a crackdown, the very teams that go to investigate local corruption are often the recipients of elaborate hospitality, including banquets (Osburg, 2018: S151). Thus, nuanced knowledge of contradictory rules and knowing when to follow each is essential for both state actors and ordinary people. Steinmüller (2010: 547) refers to this state of affairs by the term "communities of complicity."

Class Distinction

The perception of banqueting as a morally questionable activity, its association with wastefulness and/or corruption, has thus long coexisted with the idea of banqueting as a form of social solidarity and bonding. This discourse connecting banqueting to waste, corruption, and class privilege is not new to the reform era.

Writing about the early Communist movement in China in the 1920s, Chang (1977b) points out that even before the Communists took state power in 1949, they associated banqueting with indulgence. The Communist-led Peasant Association in Hunan, for instance, detailed the following rules,

> Sumptuous feasts are generally forbidden. In Shao-shan, Hsiang-t'an county, it has been decided that guests are to be served with only three kinds of animal food, namely, chicken, fish and pork. It is also forbidden to serve bamboo shoots, kelp and lentil noodles. In Hengshan county it has been resolved that eight dishes and no more may be served at a banquet. Only five dishes are allowed in the East Three District in Li-ling county, and only meat and three vegetable dishes in the North Second District, while in the West Third District, New Year feasts are forbidden entirely. (Chang, 1977b: 15)

The fact that Communist authorities felt the need to regulate banqueting in rural Hunan suggests that it was certainly not completely absent from peasant life, even if reserved for only a few special occasions. As we will see below, the emergence of banqueting as a much more ubiquitous activity among all classes in contemporary China, and as an activity that causes ordinary people to expend large sums of money, has not gone without comment by present-day authorities, even while both business and state elites partake heavily in the practice.

In this sense, the relationship between giver and receiver in Chinese banqueting is susceptible to many differing shapes. While the "lower status" giver who would like to get something from a person of higher status, as discussed above, is one potential form of banqueting, the fact is that banquets involve differing configurations of power between hosts and guests. Certainly, the act of hosting a banquet in itself provides the host with a chance to enhance his or her status and prestige (面子, *mianzi*) simply by the act of inviting guests and feeding them.

Steinmüller (2013: 163) notes that banqueting in contemporary China has expanded not only because traditional banquet occasions, such as weddings, are marked by more guests and a greater variety and number of dishes, but because the number of potential occasions for banqueting has itself increased. This expansion of opportunities for banqueting caused many of Steinmüller's informants to point to a dilemma similar to that faced by Osburg's elite informants; the need to maintain relationships forces people to attend many banquets throughout the year, and they must eventually reciprocate, even if it means inventing an occasion to host a banquet of their own (Steinmüller, 2013: 163). Steinmüller (2013: 163) gives the example of a man who threw a banquet when his mother turned sixty. In my own fieldwork, I found that birthday parties for elderly parents were, in fact, an established custom. However, this usually did not begin until a parent was at least seventy-one years old and then continued every ten years.

These informants called this phenomenon "wines for nothing" (无事酒, *wu shi jiu*) (Steinmüller, 2013: 163), a trend that has also led to media condemnation. Steinmüller (2013: 164) quotes from a local newspaper that critiques the "vicious circle" of endless banqueting as a trend that "does not suit the development and progress of society, and the development of a socialist new countryside."

But, ending cycles of expensive banqueting is easier said than done. It is precisely the potential of banqueting to cement relations and enhance status that makes it so attractive, even if it involves raising and even borrowing large sums of money. As Yang (1994: 137) pointed out, banquets "bring much social prestige to the host, even if they must go into debt for years to afford them." The ritualised etiquette of banqueting, of course, supports the class and status considerations discussed above. Hosts need to make sure that their guests are continually plied with food and drink during the course of a banquet; at the same time, as mentioned earlier, hosts engage in ritualised modesty, decrying the lack of variety and amounts of food (Oxfeld, 2017: 165–166; Yang, 1994: 138).

Money and Banqueting

Such social pressures are revealed in the increasing commodification of banqueting and the inflationary pressures on the expense and size of banquets. The size of banquets in China is usually measured by the number of tables of guests (each table usually has eight or ten guests). My Moonshadow Pond informants remembered small banquets of two or three tables during the 1960s and 1970s (the collective era, but after the famine of the Great Leap Forward). By the mid-1990s, when I first conducted fieldwork in Moonshadow Pond, banquets had expanded; at that point a "small" banquet consisted of about seventeen tables while a larger banquet was one with over forty tables (Oxfeld, 2017: 108). Still, in the 1990s, wedding banquets were held in the middle of the day, usually at the groom's home. By the 2000s, however, wealthier families had opted to hold night-time banquets, not at home in the village, but at fancy hotels in the county capital (Oxfeld, 2017: 109). Sometimes both daytime and night-time banquets are held. As villagers recounted to me, the pressure to attain *mianzi*, or "face," activates the expanding size and expense of wedding banquets as well as the choice of more prestigious banquet locations beyond the village itself. Gao (2018: 204) reports on a similar trend in his ethnography of *Gao Village*, with banquets based on the labour of mutual help from villagers still common, but some banquets now being held at hotels in the town nearby.

The inflation in banquet costs, especially in conjunction with weddings and other important life-cycle rituals, is noted by Stafford. One of his informants in rural North China asserted that the cost of a wedding banquet might be impossible for an ordinary rural family to repay, but that they still spend the money so that their celebration will "look good for the guests" (Stafford, 2000b: 45). Stafford (2000b: 40) points out that the family of a groom may spend between two and ten years of income for a wedding. Villagers told Stafford that such expenditures were necessary not only due to status considerations but also in order for a groom to attract a bride.

The fact that organising banquets and attending them are enmeshed in the moral economy of mutual obligations also helps create inflationary pressures on costs. As discussed above, Steinmüller referenced the phenomenon of "banquets for nothing" in which people feel compelled to host banquets to repay previous obligations.

Interestingly, Gao (2018: 197) reports a contrasting motivation for throwing a banquet – not to repay a previous obligation but to recoup money spent on attending previous events Either way, it is clear that one banquet event generates additional ones in a cycle of payments and repayments, and all of this means increasing sums of money spent on banquets.

Similar pressures are experienced by guests, who may unenthusiastically attend banquets in a cycle of debt and reciprocity. Stafford (2000b) utilised the story of a "Mr. Zhang" who sharply criticised excessive expenditures on wedding banquets, but who nonetheless felt obliged to attend the very banquets he criticised, especially if the host had previously done him even a small favour. As Stafford (2000b: 46) explains, "'attending ceremonials' (观礼 *guanli*) is important because it is part of *laiwang*, literally 'come and go'." This "cycle of *laiwang* (来往) is built up through small actions and interactions, and it often similarly involves commensality, transfers of money, and the sharing of responsibilities" (Stafford, 2000b: 47).

Banquets, whether produced by the labour of friends and neighbours or by commodified labour, are therefore deeply implicated in moral economies of social relationships, moral obligations, and status creation. These pressures ultimately add to inflationary monetary pressures as well. As such, banqueting sits at the centre of the vortex in which these varied imperatives come together.

Contradictory Moral Discourses

The fact that banqueting lies at the heart of diverse motives and meaning systems helps explain the cacophony of discourses that surround it. As in the case of "Mr. Zhang" in Stafford's example, a single voice can both critique and support aspects of the ubiquitous practice of holding banquets.

On the critical side, as discussed earlier, we have seen moral critiques of banqueting voiced by ordinary people as well as in the local press (in Steinmüller's account) and even in no less an official mouthpiece to the world at large as the English-language version of the *China Daily*. This critical eye is applied to both the practice of excessive banqueting on the part of the populace at large as well as officials and other elites. In such accounts, banqueting by state functionaries is subject to the most reproach, framed as a corrupt waste of public resources that could be used for economic or social uplift.

At the same time, we have also seen that officials themselves continue to partake in and condone the practice of extensive banqueting, justifying it as a necessity if they want to make the connections they need to capably serve the people in their localities. Similarly, ordinary people like "Mr. Zhang" condemn pervasive banqueting while being unable to dislodge themselves from continued participation.

As such, in looking at discourses surrounding banqueting, it is not so much an issue of who is speaking, but of the moral discourses employed in a particular instance. If speaking of reciprocity and/or moral obligation (as "Mr. Zhang" did when he attended the banquet he had formerly criticised), then one set of moral standards will be employed. On the other hand, if the framework relates to issues of corruption, waste, and the privileges of the powerful, then a moral critique of the same practices emerges.

That banqueting in contemporary China is a domain that is permeated by moral evaluations, even if contradictory or ambivalent ones, is indisputable. Julia Cassaniti and Jacob Hickman (2014: 256) argue that the domains of experience that are heavily moralised vary cross-culturally and that some domains are more "morally saturated" than others. And, as many contemporary studies of morality observe, very few moral systems can be reduced to a mere summary of normative rules (Mattingly and Throop, 2018). Rather it is more common for people to be caught between a variety of moral frameworks – trying to figure out how to evaluate and decide for themselves what is right or wrong.

The problem of having to choose among several possible moral frameworks is especially acute in societies, like contemporary China, which are undergoing rapid social transformations. Jarrett Zigon (2008: 8) frames the situation of being torn between a variety of moral frameworks as "moral breakdown." With respect to China, some have argued that there is no longer a dominant moral paradigm, thus creating a moral crisis (Kleinman, 2011: 10). But, in fact, such a situation may also be utilised productively, as actors choose and combine frameworks that are most applicable to or useful in a given situation (see Oxfeld, 2010).

For instance, writing about contemporary China, David Palmer (2019: 128) discusses the coexistence of three moral codes: yellow, blue, and red. The yellow code is characterised by traditional moralities of filiality and reciprocity. The red code draws from the revolutionary Maoist era (Palmer, 2019: 129) and the blue code derives from the West, but has changed over time in China. It is based on notions of rationality, equality, and democratic ideals (Palmer, 2019: 120). As Palmer points out, individuals, social movements, and/or the state may draw selectively from aspects of some or all of these codes, depending on the circumstance. In my previous work on moral discourse in rural China, I have also written about the variety of moral frameworks individuals may utilise.

As such, individuals in contemporary China pull from the variety of moral frameworks available to them in evaluating their own and others' actions (Oxfeld, 2010). While both Maoist discourses and more contemporary state and citizen discourses may frame some banqueting practices as corrupt and wasteful, these same practices can also be justified as a necessary way to make important social connections and to strengthen relationships, all of which are necessary to act in productive and positive ways in the world.

Banqueting as a Total Social Phenomenon

Just as Mauss (1967: 1) famously called gift giving a "total social phenomena", so too, banqueting in contemporary China is implicated in so many aspects of social life that it is challenging to disentangle the many sources of its motivation. In that sense, of course, it is a perfect example of an activity embedded in moral economies, an economic activity that is also thoroughly interwoven into social relationships and cultural meaning systems. However, as this essay hopefully makes clear, disentangling the "morality" of banqueting is not easy. One person's indulgence is another's relief from monotony, one person's corruption is another person's duty, and so on. As discussed above, a single person may criticise banqueting in one instance while upholding its social or even moral necessity in another.

Furthermore, even as banqueting is understood as part of a gift giving economy and hence a moral economy, this fact itself hardly disentangles its meanings. Graeber (2014: 67) points out that what we call the "gift" partakes of many different "moral logics." He presents three distinct logics that can generate gift giving: communal sharing, reciprocal exchange, or hierarchical relations (Graeber, 2014: 65). Graeber's tripartite distinction works well for our analysis of banqueting as moral economy in China. This article has described banqueting in all these forms. Banqueting as a form of communal sharing is certainly exemplified in the "one big pot" meals, while much banqueting in village life is more properly understood as part of the ebb and flow of reciprocal obligations, even as these continuous obligations can sometimes lead to "wines for nothing" and banquet inflation. Hierarchical relations are also woven into many instances of banqueting. In the case of hierarchy and banqueting, we see both tributary relations, in which feasts are offered to superiors in hopes of gaining protection or favours from them (food flows upwards), or banqueting as part of an attempt to gain or reassert status (food flows downwards).

Whatever the particular moral logic underlying a single instance of banqueting, there is no doubting its power to reinscribe, deepen, or even transform the relationship of its participants through commensal sharing of food. In his analysis of sociality in China, Chau (2006: 153) examines the highly prized quality of "social heat." Social heat pertains to social events that are categorised as "red and fiery" (红火, *honghuo*) or "hot and noisy" (热闹, *renao*) (Chau, 2006: 148–150). As Chau puts it, "the more people the more *honghuo*. Embedded in this belief is a premium put on the warmth or heat generated from human sociality and a fear of, or distaste for, social isolation, which is associated with loneliness and coldness" (Chau, 2006: 153). Such social heat is contrasted with the drudgery and boredom of everyday life (Chau, 2006: 155). Banquets, quite understandably, are key social events that produce social heat.

Chau (2006: 157) argues that in the Chinese context, "event production" is as important in itself as any goal which the event is intended to produce. Being together in an event which produces social heat is an end in itself. But in regard to banqueting, it is precisely because the sharing of food is so powerful and capable of creating shared states of feeling that it can also create both the "moral" and "immoral" effects discussed above – whether the goal is diffuse feelings of solidarity with family, friends, and village or the more specific goals of getting help from an official.

Discussing the issue of corruption in China, Stafford makes a general point that is also applicable to a specific understanding of the moral registers of feasting and banqueting. What Stafford (2006) calls the Chinese "ritual economy" has its basis in the "cycle of *yang*," the obligation to care for and feed children, who will then take care of their parents as they age (Stafford, 2000a). Stafford (2006: 47) suggests that this "moral logic of parent-child reciprocity – found in the cycle of *yang* – is at the core of the Chinese ritual economy; […] it is a model from which all other types of reciprocity flow." And, it is supplemented by the cycle of *laiwang* referred to previously – "the movement back and forth of people who have a non-kin relationship of mutual assistance and (usually) friendship" (Stafford, 2000a: 105).

Many non-kin relationships of reciprocity in China therefore gather meaning through analogies to kin relationships. As such, sharing meals or commensality beyond the family is nonetheless informed by the meanings associated with sharing food at the heart of family reciprocity in the cycle of *yang* (Stafford, 2006: 49). As mentioned above, one of the most common expressions that a host employs in making guests feel comfortable is to urge them to feel as relaxed and uninhibited as if they were at their own house. Commensality in this context is a way to "make strangers familiar" (Stafford, 2006: 50). As such, Stafford (2006: 51) suggests that in China, "morally questionable economic practices are not entirely disconnected from the morally elevated sphere of kinship, and from the operation of the Chinese ritual economy." Another way of viewing this is that the communal sharing at the heart of Chinese families defined by commensality colours the meanings of other forms of banqueting – such as those related to seeking favours or influencing superiors. Indeed, as pointed out above, one of the functions of banqueting is to induce feelings of kinship in the recipients of the feast.

Banqueting can thus combine morally dubious aims with the force of commensality, an activity at the heart of the most moral of kinship and family relationships. Depending on what is at stake for someone in a particular instance, she may characterise a particular occasion of banqueting as a customary celebration, a necessary obligation, or an important and strategic intervention for gaining official favour. Alternatively, that same speaker may judge a similar occasion as corrupt, as we saw in several examples cited above. Even the audience or setting in which the judgement is made may influence the register a person uses to characterise the event.

Particular occasions for feasting may be prompted by purely economic motives, such as securing a contract or enticing investment in one's district. Or, factors of "face" and status may come into play. Yet commensality, so central to practices of reciprocity and concepts of morality grounded in kinship relations, may also turn these occasions into a morally layered terrain.

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