



2024

## Nourishing Connections: Chinese Immigrant Identity in Tokyo through Commensality and Hospitality

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### Recommended Citation

Brown, Sarai (2024) "Nourishing Connections: Chinese Immigrant Identity in Tokyo through Commensality and Hospitality," *BYU Asian Studies Journal*: Vol. 9, Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/asj/vol9/iss1/3>

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### Cover Page Footnote

I thank Dr. Greg Thompson (Brigham Young University) and Dr. Jacob Hickman (Brigham Young University) for their helpful discussions and constant feedback in helping me develop this paper. As always, I am grateful to my parents, Angela and Joe Brown, for their support and shoulders when I needed a good cry. I would like to also acknowledge my appreciation of my fellow field school classmates, especially Rhiannan Boseman, Sydney Nai, Cyrus Lee, and Bridget Kawai, who accompanied me on some of my fieldwork and supported me the whole time. And last but certainly not least, special thanks to Dr. Jordan Haug for his endless encouragement and for believing in me even when I failed to believe in myself. Without him, this paper would be entirely impossible. Thanks for making Tokyo field school an experience to never forget.

## Nourishing Connections: Chinese Immigrant Identity in Tokyo through Commensality and Hospitality

Sarai Brown

### Introduction: A Loud Invitation

Trains in Tokyo are generally designated quiet spaces that offer a reprieve from the loud bustle of day-to-day life. If people choose to speak, they do so quietly with their companions, doing everything they can to avoid inconveniencing those around them. It was in such a quiet car that I met one of my close informants.



After a successful shopping spree all over Shinjuku, my friend and I were heading back to my home in Kita-ku. My friend, a Japanese speaker who was familiar with Mandarin, nudged me and quietly asked in English if the woman and her daughter sitting on my right were speaking Mandarin. Suddenly, I became hyper-aware of the two, and some quick eavesdropping confirmed they were using Mandarin. I gathered the courage to violate what I had come to understand as Japanese societal norms—to rarely speak on trains and to never bother strangers—and asked this woman in my limited Japanese if she was speaking

Chinese. She hesitantly confirmed in Japanese, brows scrunched but expression overall polite. Taking this as my go-ahead, I began speaking to her in Mandarin. Immediately, she burst into an expression of delighted surprise, smile wide and eyebrows high. Without much more input from me than a brief answer as to how I knew Mandarin, she very enthusiastically—and loudly—invited me to her home for a meal with her and her family. Having made the invitation, she then said: “Oh, right! What is your name?”

Throughout my fieldwork in Tokyo, Japan in June and July, I was interested in the transposition of cultural identity amongst Chinese immigrants, how they hold onto things from their original cultural contexts, and what things make them *feel* Chinese. What I found was that at the forefront of interactions that made someone *feel* Chinese was food-sharing, or commensality, and with it the performance of hospitality.

Commensality is generally defined within anthropology as food-sharing where parties eat and drink at the same table. Though commensality is centered around food, it can include a wide range of elements, including such as the setting of where and how people are eating, the roles of who is serving and being served, etc. (Sahlins 2011). The primary lens through which this paper will examine commensality is as "a fundamental social activity, which creates and cements relationships" (Kerner et al. 2015). As such, hospitality goes hand in hand with commensality; food has always been an integral part of hospitality (Douglas

1975) as part of its function to establish a relationship or promote an already established relationship (Selwyn 2001).

This paper ultimately aims to share that the performance of hospitality allows Chinese immigrants in Tokyo to feel more in touch with their own cultural identities due to the importance of hospitality in Chinese culture contrasted with the Chinese interpretation of its distinct absence in Japanese culture.

### **Dinner with Guo Shuai: Home is Where the Food Is**

The elements of commensality I'll be focusing on in this section will include the necessity of eating together, the food itself, and how commensality connects to the very essence of someone's being, particularly in the context of Chinese identity. Food elicits not only a feeling of home but also a feeling of self. In this way, food acts as a vehicle to reconnect the self and others to the individual's identity. This aspect of commensality is when the boundaries between people and their bodies become less explicit as they merge for the incorporation of one another (Munn 1992).

During our time in Japan, my friend Syd and I became well acquainted with two young men our age: Yuki, a native Japanese man, and Guo Shuai, his best-friend-from-high-school-turned-coworker who had immigrated from China to Japan as a teenager. One night, when we all were hanging out at the bar they

worked at, Guo Shuai mentioned that he and Yuki were going to Guo Shuai's favorite Chinese restaurant, 福清菜館 福来園 (*fúqīng càiguǎn fú lái yuán*, or Fuqing Restaurant Fu Lai Yuan), after their shift. When I jokingly asked why he wasn't inviting me and Syd, Guo Shuai raised his eyebrows, challenging whether



I actually wanted to go. He insisted that this was a very authentic restaurant and wasn't really suited for Japanese tastes, let alone an American's. Once I accepted the challenge as an invitation, Guo Shuai happily told us when and where to meet. The next day, we met Guo Shuai and Yuki at Fuqing

Restaurant. Though small, the restaurant was bigger than the majority of Japanese restaurants, furnished mostly with classic Chinese round tables meant to seat large groups, though smaller rectangular Japanese-style tables were available on the outskirts. Guo Shuai was excited for us to try the food, informing us that it specialized in dishes from his hometown, Fujian, a coastal province in Southeast China.

In China, food has a long history as a form of recognizing self-identity. Throughout many dynasties and ruling cultures of China, food has always been a main identifier of the cultural groups people belong to. Currently, the Chinese Communist Party promotes the theory of 'diversity and unity,' where China is

united as one but remains proud of the diversity in its foodways, which differentiate between diverse subcultures. “On the aspect of food and foodways, the ‘diversity and unity’ theory can be explained as the idea that the various specific elements of Chinese food and foodways can be traced back to different ethnic groups, but, seen from a holistic viewpoint, there is a general set of rules for Chinese food and foodways” that unite these cultures under the larger umbrella identity of Chinese food (Cao 2020). Sichuan is known for its spicy foods, Shanghai is known for its sweet and sour combinations, and Guangzhou is known for its rich flavors and stir-fries, while many more cuisines throughout China have distinct characteristics that point to their proud identities. Food in this way “serves both to solidify group membership and to set groups apart” (Mintz & DuBois, 2002). It is no surprise, then, that Guo Shuai was eager for us to try the food of his hometown and therefore share his identity with us.



Though we each were handed menus, Guo Shuai ordered for us in what Yuki referred to as “Chinese style,” taking charge and requesting a variety of dishes for the whole table. Most of the food was clam-based, featuring crispy

fried dumplings, noodle dishes, rice balls, and more. During our meal, Yuki said, “This food is too Chinese.” He explained that Chinese food is often very oily and heavy-feeling, in contrast to typically light Japanese food. He also mentioned how weird it is to eat all from the same place rather than ordering for ourselves. A distinguishing factor of Chinese commensality is diners eating from a communal bowl, which makes Munn’s (1992) concept of incorporation into one another a more explicit phenomenon.

Hearing this, Guo Shuai leaned over and playfully hit Yuki, chiding him in Japanese, both of them grinning all the while. Guo Shuai then turned to me and, in Chinese, told me that Yuki was just stupid and didn’t know how to *really* appreciate the food. Guo Shuai emphatically stated that Fujianese food was the most delicious food out there, pointing between me and the food with his chopsticks to indicate that I should be eating more. While I had his attention, I asked what the names of the foods were, but Guo Shuai said that he didn’t know. Incredulously, I asked how he possibly couldn’t know, since he ate there all the time. He shrugged and said in English, “They’re yummy, that’s all that matters.” His response shows that, while the food itself channels identity, it does so more through the feeling (感觉 *gǎnjué*) of being connected to each other and culture, rather than through the precise dishes being offered.



In Japanese culture, while food can exist at one level solely to sustain health, food is also described as an expression of Japanese identity. This is similar to the Chinese cultural ideal, where *being* Chinese means eating dumplings and Chinese culture *is* Chinese food (Allison 1991). On another level, food in Japanese culture is often used as a vehicle to express affection (Cwierka 2006), though this vehicle is meant to be enjoyed separately rather than together. In this way, it acts as a sort of contained affection with specific boundaries, rather than the broad affection that is present in Chinese commensality. Most famously in bento boxes, mothers or wives create boxed lunches with multiple aesthetically arranged courses for their family members to consume during designated break times at work or school. They get both pleasure and creativity from preparing the bento boxes, and feel validated by showing their family affection in that way (Allison 1991). The striking aspect of this in comparison to Chinese culture, however, is the way this food and affection is enjoyed apart from each other, a phenomenon that has been driven to further extremes in the demanding work and school cultures of modern families (Cwierka 2006).

A Japanese acquaintance of mine mentioned one evening over *okonomiyaki*, a Japanese communal food, that he usually eats by himself. The meal we were having escaped the usual bounds that daily meals were contained in. It seemed that he had made an exception to these when invited by a mutual American friend to join me and three other Americans for a meal. Of his routine,

he said, “Why would I invite someone else? I just want to eat,” and went on to explain that he generally views food as a necessity rather than a social activity. He explained that communal food as a “social activity” is usually a mandatory work culture event, which serves as more of a burden rather than something to enjoy. For the Japanese, food is not considered to be a vehicle for communal enjoyment or sociality but is a separate, private enjoyment. In contrast, I’ve been told that in Chinese culture, food is very much rooted in the social. Food *is* the activity that a group enjoys in order to convey affection—it can’t be enjoyed separately from each other.

The night before our lunch at Fuqing Restaurant, I told Guo Shuai that he didn’t actually have to invite us to the restaurant since I had sort of imposed a self-invite. He shook his head and grinned, telling me that he was looking forward to having us “try the food of [his] people, [his] home.” Guo Shuai explained to me that he frequented this restaurant because it helped him feel a connection to his home in Fujian, which he hadn’t been to in a long time. Though he left when he was young, he still considers the food to be the most memorable part of his home. Guo Shuai told me that he felt he was sharing a part of himself with another person whenever he shared Fujianese food with them because Fujian is a part of him. In his mind, food just happens to be the easiest way to let others experience his hometown. The word Guo Shuai uses to convey the feeling of his hometown is 家乡 *jiāxiāng*, which is comprised of the word for family (家 *jiā*) and the word

for native place (乡 *xiāng*). Family connection to one's hometown is an important concept in Chinese culture. When Guo Shuai tells me that food gives him the feeling of his hometown, he is describing how food gives him a sense of family, kinship, and belonging. Understanding this connection is key to understanding Guo Shuai himself. He explains that he is “a Fujian person” and this identity is integral to his being. He said that, until Yuki had experienced Fujianese food, “he didn't really understand me.”



The nice thing is, food is one of the easiest parts of culture to replicate regardless of location. Because it is easily transported, one can have a taste of home wherever they go. For Guo Shuai, home really is where the food is. It helps him feel more in touch with who he is, gives him a sense of pride for his identity, and allows him to share that identity with others.

### **Dinner with Ting Ting: Conversational Intimacy and Intensity**

Eating together becomes an even more intimate and intense affair when held

inside the home. This intimacy and intensity is found in the example of one of my closer contacts: my friend Ting Ting, whom I briefly introduced earlier as the woman I met on the train. Our relationship was formed based on our serendipitous encounter and allowed us to engage in intimate and intense conversations over dinner, which in turn strengthened our relationship. These kinds of conversations in Chinese cultural commensality allow individuals to bridge any existing gaps in knowledge or understanding of one another, serving as a way to get to know each other so deeply that any status as a stranger is replaced by status as an inducted kinship member, an aspect important to Chinese hospitality (Da Col 2019).

Ting Ting's husband, Li Chen, describes our happenstance relationship as 缘分 *yuánfèn* (luck brought us together). As I had never heard the word before, Ting Ting explained the concept for me, describing it as a type of very important relationship that "the heavens influenced to be brought into being." Li Chen says that this *yuánfèn* was why we were able to "share a meal;" he's glad that we were able to get along so well so quickly because "talking [with me] has been like talking to any other family member". My shared connection with them—being a Chinese-speaking foreigner in Japan—made way for this *yuánfèn*, which allowed us to form a clientelist relationship where Ting Ting and Li Chen served as my patrons and I as their client (Hicken 2011). Under this established relationship, I was invited into their home, where they were then able to engage further with the

clientelist relationships that are seemingly characteristic of Chinese culture. Notably, literature on clientelism is heavily directed towards the political sphere rather than the social sphere. On the occasions where it is applied to strictly a social sphere, most literature only discusses some African cultures that engage in social clientelism. As such, I am among the few to apply social clientelism in name to Chinese culture, a concept I am deriving from the available literature on African cultures. Though not yet studied, clientelism essentially describes what happens in Chinese kinship networks. By becoming a client, I become part of the kinship structure and function within that system as an extension of a person's family without actually joining that family as an adoptee.

When unfulfilled, clientelism leaves Ting Ting and Li Chen feeling unsatisfied in their lack of a successful patron-client relationship. According to both Li Chen and Ting Ting, "Chinese culture is hospitality [and] friendliness." They speak of hospitality as if it is synonymous with being Chinese. Both describe how Chinese hospitality is what they miss most from China, especially because cultural norms in Japanese society so thoroughly contrast the Chinese modes of hospitality and commensality. In their eyes, distinctly Chinese hospitality is in the home, homemade food, loud casual speech (随便说法 *suíbiàn shuōfǎ*), and comfortability with one another.

During our happenstance meeting, Ting Ting saw me as someone with whom to build a hierarchical friendship of sorts—hierarchical in the sense that I became the hosted or the client but never the host or the patron, as Ting Ting had already claimed that role by taking it upon herself to look after me through her invitation. This hierarchical relationship demands that we each pay each other reciprocal respect and honor, though it should be noted that “this reciprocity does not obscure the distinction between the roles,” a distinction that is heavily adhered to and creates a very Confucian sense of order (Pitt-Rivers 2012).

Ting Ting also gains something from our relationship because of my foreigner status. In her eyes, I was a ‘double foreigner.’ She saw a white American—clearly neither Japanese nor Chinese—who was obviously in need of a patron to induct me into a kinship network, a network that I gained access to through our shared language of Mandarin. If I were Chinese, Ting Ting would likely assume that I already had people I was connected to, especially if I didn’t go out of my way to strike up a conversation with her. As such, she may not have so readily taken me under her wing. Her readiness to induct me is because, in Chinese culture, it is very much a game of who you know. These kinship networks are referred to in Chinese as 关系 *guānxì* and are crucial to not only everyday social operations but also business encounters (Ai, 2006; Bian & Ang, 1997; Barbalet, 2014; Wong, 2007). Because of this, it is almost impossible to successfully operate in Chinese culture without an established kinship network,

where you as an individual have *guānxì* with several people. Ting Ting, understanding this, was eager to help me expand my kinship networks and therefore allow me the ability to more freely move in Chinese spheres, even with the understanding that we were in Japan, where *guānxì* would not be as helpful as it would be in China.

Ting Ting's behavior especially falls under a Chinese-coined phenomenon called 媚外 *mèiwài*, which refers to the special treatment that some Chinese give to foreigners where they fawn over and flatter them. While this concept has not been sufficiently studied academically, it has been described in popular media, which describes how associating with foreigners—particularly white foreigners—can signify prestige, legitimacy, and highly-valued international status. This is so much the case that a whole line of work has been created where the Chinese hire white foreigners—referred to as white monkeys, 白猴子 *bái hóuzi*—for their events to boost their image (Yan 2017; Toropov 2019). By inducting me into her network, Ting Ting is also able to boost her social status by becoming acquainted with a foreigner.

Before we got off the train, Ting Ting and I exchanged contact information via LINE. From there, she asked for my favorite Chinese foods and what foods I wanted to try, eager to set up a dinner with me and her family. She truly was going above and beyond to be the ultimate host, trying to accommodate my personal tastes while at the same time expand my palate. In securing a dinner

date, Ting Ting thus dismantled my previous status as ‘stranger’ because, “in Chinese hosting, there are never strangers. One always participates as a guest” who is inducted into the social order (Da Col 2019). By crafting a menu specifically for me, Ting Ting shows me a sort of respect through recognizing my preferences.

For our dinner held a week later, Ting Ting intentionally made a Sichuan (Szechuan) meal (though feast would more accurately describe it). She laid out several dishes, excited to share with me new foods in a familiar style that I had earlier said was one of my favorites.

The dinner was hosted in her family’s small living room, their daughter Mei Mei’s futon neatly folded in the corner. A flimsy fold-out table was set up, and Li Chen, worked on his laptop at it before fully engaging in what would be a raucous dinner.



Our conversation covered a lot of ground. It ranged from deep philosophical discussions on American individualism and Chinese communalism to U.S. political debates over gun control and immigration and then to popular tourist destinations in America that they hoped to one day visit. The dinner was



never in a lull of conversation; for that matter, it was a generally loud affair with boisterous laughter and enthusiastic debate. The whiplash from switching between extremely intense, controversial topics to light, relatively insignificant topics is a key characteristic in my experience of how commensality is practiced amongst the Chinese. This range of topics and intensities allows all parties to get to know each other more intimately, while the food in this instance only serves as a vehicle in which to have these loud, messy discussions. These discussions are described as 随便 *suíbiàn*, a word that roughly means ‘casual’ or ‘random’ and is often used in these hospitality contexts to refer to the general atmosphere, the way people eat, how they refer to each other, what they speak about, and more. Ting Ting and Li Chen would frequently throw the word around with me, encouraging me to 随便说 *suíbiàn shuō* (to speak unrestrained) and 随便吃 *suíbiàn chī* (to eat whatever). Anytime they noticed that I wasn’t eating, they insisted that, unless I was speaking, I needed to be eating. They would even go so far as to use their own chopsticks to place food from the communal bowl into my own dish.

Among these topics, Ting Ting and her husband shared with me their longing for the hospitality culture they left behind in China, telling me about a trip they were making next week to go back to visit because they were craving this aspect of culture that they never got in Japan. They lamented that Japanese people—in their eyes—were cold, unfriendly, and largely unwilling to talk with

others, whereas Chinese people were the exact opposite. Of course, the Japanese response would likely be to point out how loud Chinese people are, particularly in public, to the point where the Chinese are impolitely inconveniencing others. The Chinese, however, see their loudness and talkative nature as a way to make friends, because friends (as Ting Ting and Li Chen both described) make “life matter and more exciting.” Li Chen also told me that being loud makes for “an energetic atmosphere [under which] to engage in conversation and relationship building.”

Ironically, Japan is globally recognized for its cultural hospitality and mindfulness of others, an approximant description of the concept 御持成 *omotenashi*, which includes the famous 敬語 *keigo* (honorific speech). Many of these *omotenashi* performances exist in the 外 *soto*—the exterior/non-kinship zone—and specifically in the 面 *omote* zone. In this zone, “the self perceives the other as someone who... deserves respect” to the point that the goal is to maximize the other’s sense of pleasure, which is characterized by status asymmetry where the respectable other is much higher than the lowly self (Lebra 2004).

Chinese hospitality shares much of the same focus on the other and is also largely performed outside the home, though the physical stages look different. However, where Japanese hosting is always done at rectangular tables with food

is portioned out for each guest (thus serving as another reminder of the separate bound forms of affection and enjoyment in Japanese food), Chinese hospitality is mostly enjoyed around large, round tables where food for the group is placed on a turntable. While table shape and style may seem to be a small detail, this style of sitting and eating gives way to what Sahlins (2011) describes as a ‘mutuality of being,’ where participants intimately share their space and incorporate themselves with one another from the communal bowl.

However, because the Chinese mode of hospitality and commensality is not common practice in Japanese societies, hospitality for these diasporic communities is relocated to intimate performances in the home that reconstruct Chinese society’s macro-sociality on a micro-scale. Though this was on a smaller scale, by literally stuffing food into my face, Ting Ting and her family were still forming a hierarchical relationship with me of the feeder and the fed. Ting Ting felt compelled to invite me into her home because she felt like an outsider in Japan and was striving to express a deeply felt part of her identity, even if she was expressing it via a stranger. The point of Chinese hospitality that Ting Ting engaged with was to turn strangers into incorporated members in a hierarchical structure of, essentially, a mentor and a mentee. This kind of relationship is also expressed in another woman I met, described below.

## **Dinners with Chun Hua: Physical Expression in Tangible Identity**

Chinese culture tends to be very physically expressive. When talking with a Chinese individual that you are acquainted with, the Chinese individual will often be holding your bicep, patting your back, or pulling you into a strong hug. The Chinese also take pride in the physical products of their culture, particularly the fine porcelain dinnerware that has come to positively represent China internationally. Chinese culture is found in both the ease of casual physical affection amongst friends and the delicacy of beautiful porcelain. Physical affection and physical objects allow Chinese immigrants to more firmly claim their ‘Chineseness’ through tangible reminders of their cultural identity.

I was in an Ikebukuro branch of a popular Shanghainese dumpling chain (上海富春小龍管 *shànghǎi fù chūn xiǎo lóng guǎn*) struggling to order using their tablet system. Seeing me struggle, the hostess rushed over, trying to explain the menu in limited English as the only languages on the tablet were Japanese or Simplified Chinese. I asked her in Mandarin if she spoke Chinese. After a few seconds of shock, she said yes, at which I sheepishly told her that I couldn’t read some of the menu options due to my preference for Traditional Chinese over Simplified. The hostess, after establishing that I was somewhat competent with Mandarin, was extremely friendly, touching my arm and laughing freely as we

chatted. While we did so, one of the other patrons perked up and obviously eavesdropped on our conversation. The hostess picked up on it, calling out to her to remark how incredible my Chinese was. The woman agreed. When I invited her to finish her meal at my table, she immediately moved and struck up a conversation with me in English. She introduced herself as Naomi, a Chinese



woman who had moved to Japan as a teenager, married an American, lived in America for a decade or so, and just recently returned to Japan. When she discovered more about my research, she without hesitation

promised to put me in touch with an old classmate of hers whom she'd met when she first moved to Japan, a woman named Chun Hua.

After we became acquainted via LINE, Chun Hua and I always met up over dinner. Our first meeting was at a Thai restaurant in Ikebukuro Station—an area known for its Chinese presence—but every meeting after that was always hosted by Chun Hua in her home, where she mostly would provide me with homemade food.

At the beginning of our relationship, Chun Hua would often mention to me that she felt more Japanese than she did Chinese, as she'd lived in Japan since

she was twelve (she is now in her mid-30s). In an interview, Chun Hua expanded on this, saying that she considered Japan to be her real home since she didn't remember a lot about China and therefore didn't feel like she could claim China as her home. While this was her claim, however, Chun Hua also tended to tell me that she appreciated Chinese things more than Japanese things, particularly gender roles. In her view, China is more progressive in how it welcomes and expects women to work as well as their husbands. Child-rearing is left largely to the grandparents, something she mentioned she would appreciate more than the Japanese expectation that she stay home for her children. Additionally, she considers most Japanese people to be very close-minded because "they're so stuck in their traditions."

Chun Hua also said that despite marrying a Chinese man, she didn't practice Chinese culture; almost as if she had an aversion to the thought of it, so desperate was she to claim a Japanese identity and belong to the culture in which she currently lives. However, when she hosted me in her home, she was eager to make traditional authentic Chinese food and even intentionally used specialized dinnerware to serve me the herbal tea soup. Chun Hua told me that these material items were wedding gifts that she hadn't used since she and her husband were first married. It was important to her that she served me these foods in these dishes as it added to the authenticity, giving it a more "Chinese feeling." She'd never needed to use them, as the intense and demanding work culture of Japan

more or less prevented her from making intimate friends who would be appropriate to host. It seems that Chun Hua, as an overseas Chinese, reflects more



critically on her original culture because she is living outside of it. While over time—we met about once a week—Chun Hua no longer used the special dinner sets, she always provided me with some kind of homemade, Chinese-influenced food.

After our first dinner in the Thai restaurant, I asked her if I could hug her. I didn't notice at the time, but she seemed caught off guard before she agreed and hugged me. After that, Chun Hua began to be more touchy with me, both requesting and delighting in the physical affection that I've noticed is typical of Chinese culture but rather odd for Japanese culture. We hugged every visit for our goodbyes, and Chun Hua mentioned once that she wished she could do it more as she doesn't get this form of bonding anymore. In their adulthood, Japanese people don't practice skinship, the act of intimate or platonic bonding through physical, skin-to-skin contact (Lebra, 2004), a term commonly used in South Korea and Japan, though Chun Hua noted that she believes it's common



practice among young adults and children. Chun Hua and other Chinese friends of mine have also told me that Chinese culture tends to be very physically expressive. Regardless of gender or age differences, people touch you without hesitation as they speak with you, though the type of skinship may differ depending on the differences in identities and contexts. Whenever we said our goodbyes at the train station, people always glanced our way, almost certainly because of the public display of platonic affection between two adult women.

Again, because of our shared connection, I was able to provide Chun Hua with an opportunity she was previously missing to practice this aspect of friendliness and hospitality, particularly the aspect of hierarchy. Chun Hua told me that this friendship was something that she wasn't able to build often, not only because of the work culture but also because Japanese people, in her view, tend to stick to themselves. This is a part of the Japanese identity that she wishes she could change, expressing that she actually enjoys the Chinese friendliness of being willing to strike up a conversation with whoever, whenever, and wherever.

In our very last meeting, as one final act of hospitality, Chun Hua insisted that I let her know whenever I find myself next in Taiwan or China so that she can reach out to whoever she knows in the area to look after me. Because I am part of her hospitality kinship structure, others who also fall under that framework will feel that I, by extension, am under their obligations as well. Chun Hua also gifted me an apron she made using traditional Northern Chinese fabric since her



husband is from Northern China. As she gifted it to me, she shared that she was grateful to me for helping her feel more Chinese and reconnect with her culture. She expressed having unknowingly missed being able to exhibit Chinese friendliness in hosting people. In her experience, Japanese hosting isn't as 'hands-on,' since it typically exists outside the home, in a restaurant where the individual has more choice over what they consume. This performance of friendliness and hospitality was what allowed Chun Hua to reconnect to her Chinese self. In Chinese culture, hosting boosts the image of the individual or household as perceived by the self and the community. "Indeed, hosting is not only a test of 'sociality' or moral virtues such as reciprocity and altruism, but also involves the production of collective effects and the accumulation of social capital... [H]osting is one of the most critical of relatedness in Chinese society, the sphere of production of good relationships (*guanxi*) where networks of mutual assistance are forged or renewed. Relying on symbolic and material *ritual expenditure*, hosting engenders the community's excitement (*honghuo*), establishing the household's mastery and reaffirming its moral character" (Candea & Da Col 2012). This affirmation leads to a fuller understanding of the Chinese self, one that Chun Hua has felt a distinct absence of in her lack of opportunities to express it. Over the course of our interactions, as she was able to practice her role as my patron/host, her understanding of her identity changed. No matter how much of an outsider Chun Hua feels, in contrast to me, her client, she will always be more

Chinese than I am. In this way, my status as her client is able to reaffirm her Chinese identity.

## Conclusion

Many cultures hold food at the center of, or at least as a large part of, connection-building. While Chinese culture certainly focuses on food and has a large variety of cultural dishes, the food itself is not the only thing at play in building kinships. The act of hosting, of engaging in hospitality, is specifically how kinships are formed. By



inviting me into their home and consuming the same food with me, Ting Ting and Li Chen solidified our *yuánfèn* kinship. They even later insisted to let them know whenever I find myself in Taiwan or China so that their friends and family—their private kinship network—could also take care of me. Chun Hua extended the same invitation to me, wanting to make sure that I am looked after by people she knows and trusts. My contacts have come to know and trust me via commensality, though the food simply acts as a way to perform multi-level hospitality—cooking for someone else or paying for the meal, inviting them into your home or to an

impressive restaurant, providing care for another. Chinese hospitality is about incorporating someone into kinship structures and networks. In a place where Chinese cultural modes of hospitality are not held as the societal standards, these Chinese immigrants jumped at the opportunity to participate once again in a central aspect of their home cultures.

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