

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social trust and luxury seafood banquets in contemporary Beijing

Michael Fabinyi^{a,b*} and Neng Liu^b

^a*Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies, James Cook University, Townsville 4811, QLD, Australia;* ^b*Department of Sociology, Peking University, Beijing, China*

China is marked by rising levels of consumption, but also high levels of social distrust. This paper offers an empirical study of luxury seafood consumption in banquets in Beijing as a way of understanding perceptions of and responses to a lack of trust in abstract social institutions in Chinese society. We focus on the chronic distrust Chinese people have in the food system and the economic system. Governance of the food system is marked by failures related to food safety and authenticity, while the formal institutions of the economic system are insufficient to provide security in professional contexts. Because people do not have social trust in the rationality and effectiveness of such abstract institutions, they are compelled to generate personal trust. Luxury seafood consumption in banquets is an important component of this process of generating personal trust.

Keywords: China; banquets; consumption; trust

Introduction

Consumption in China in recent years has become an increasingly common topic of academic research and popular discussion, as observers examine the scale, growth, scope and broader impacts of this phenomenon. The rapid economic growth of the past several decades has seen what has been labeled by some as a “consumer revolution” (Davis 2000), as Chinese residents engage with the market economy in dynamic ways. The growth of various forms of “luxury” consumption has formed a significant aspect of Chinese consumption, as China is now the second-largest market for luxury goods in the world (*People’s Daily Online*, May 6, 2011). In this paper, we focus on luxury seafood consumption in banquets. While luxury seafood banquets are more typically analyzed in the context of economic or environmental issues (Fabinyi 2012), we argue that they can also shed light on important social issues related to trust in contemporary China. We suggest that luxury seafood banquets provide a novel empirical example of the intensity of social distrust in China, and the strategies that actors take to address this distrust.

Social science perspectives on consumption in China have focused on a wide range of social developments that are connected to consumption (see for example Buckley 1999; Davis, 2000; Wu and Cheung 2002; Ngai 2003; Smart 2004; Goodman 2008; Hanser 2010). Given this diversity of perspectives on Chinese consumption, it is perhaps unsurprising that in a recent survey of this literature, anthropologist Kevin Latham has concluded that “Chinese consumption is not one unified set of practices, but a massively diverse array of behaviours that increasingly need to be considered in their

own right rather than subsumed under one broader general category” (Latham 2011, 413). Following this argument, this paper examines a specific form of consumption – luxury seafood consumption in banquets in Beijing – to highlight the intensity of what has been described as a “crisis of trust” in China (Sun 2003; Hanser 2010; Yan 2012), and the diversity of social practices Chinese citizens employ to cope with this crisis. Trust was not an issue that we set out to study in our research, which was initially focused on consumer attitudes toward environmental sustainability and seafood preferences in banquets. Yet the dominance of this issue in our interviews meant that trust subsequently became central to our analysis of these banquets. We analyze two key social themes that are central to consuming luxury seafood: the food system and the economic system (discussions of what we mean by these two terms are given below). These reflect respectively, the growing concerns Chinese consumers have with the safety and authenticity of their food, and the importance of managing personal relationships in professional contexts. We suggest that both of these themes highlight the lack of social trust in China more generally.

We distinguish between two forms of trust. First is what Giddens calls “social trust,” or trust in abstract systems, “in which faith is sustained in the workings of knowledge of which the lay person is largely ignorant” (Giddens 1990, 88). The food system and the economic system are two examples where social trust is invested in abstract institutions. This is in contrast to “personal trust,” which is formed through face-to-face interactions. Another description of these two forms of trust is “generalized” (trust in those different from ourselves) and particularized (in-group) trust (Rothstein and Uslaner 2005). We argue that because of the lack of trust in China’s abstract institutions, such as the food system and the economy as a whole, consumers need to generate personal trust through banqueting and other means – even though these means themselves contribute to a decline in social trust more broadly.

Many scholars of China have identified the contemporary importance of distrust. As Hanser argues, drawing on the work of Sun (2003), “The perception of dangers in the marketplace and distrust of institutions ranging from the economy to the legal system to the government itself does appear to be a generalized condition – and mindset – in contemporary Chinese society” (2010, 315–316; see also Zheng and Peng 2003). Examples of this lack of trust include the economic system, the food system, and the rule of law more broadly. Scholars have different ideas about the causes of this lack of trust in China. Fei Xiaotong’s notion of “differential mode of association” (差序格局) (1992 [1947]), for example, argued that in China social norms have traditionally been based on personalistic ties, which suggests that distrust of people outside of one’s social network has a long history. Other scholars, however, have emphasized the effects of more recent developments, such as the rapid growth in inequality (Rothstein and Uslaner 2005). For some scholars, the lack of trust relates to the intensification of risks in contemporary Chinese society and the notion of “compressed modernization” (Liu 2008; Han and Shim 2010; Yan 2012). We see China’s “crisis of trust” as a complex and multi-causal phenomenon that can be very difficult to disentangle. So instead of focusing on general causes, we focus in this paper on how people perceive social trust, and what practical strategies people use to manage this in their everyday lives.

As we outline below, the anxieties and fears expressed about the safety and authenticity of food in banquets indicate a pronounced cynicism about social trust in the food system in China. Yan similarly argues that “. . . the threat of poisonous food has incited suspicion of strangers, stirred up social resentment, caused a decline of social trust, and posed a risk of trust that China cannot afford to bear during its rush to modernity”(2012, 718–719). In banquets, consumers express distrust not only about the

safety of the food, but also about the authenticity of the food. There are strategies that consumers adopt to try and mitigate these problems (cf Veeck, Yu, and Burns 2010; Klein 2013), but overall, the dominant theme in our interviews regarding the food system in China was that of profound distrust. People do not trust in the ability of the food system to guarantee them food that is safe, that is what it is identified as being, or that comes from where traders tell them it comes from. Indeed, as the responses from restaurant operators will show, this distrust is justified.

This lack of trust in the Chinese food system is also reflected in a lack of trust in the institutions of the economic system. By this we mean that there is a lack of trust in the fair, impersonal workings of the economy itself as a system separate from the state and mediating production, labor, distribution and marketing. To use Giddens' language, people do not trust this "abstract system." Thus, as we will highlight, banquets remain a fundamentally important feature of Chinese professional life where social networking is performed and personal trust generated. Although consumers decry the weaknesses of China's food system, they are compelled to take part in personalistic banqueting in order to get ahead in life. Because people do not have social trust in the rationality and effectiveness of abstract institutions – exemplified by the chronic distrust of the food and economic systems – they are effectively forced to engage in personalistic practices themselves to generate personal trust. They do this through banqueting.

In the following sections, we provide background on the methods used in this study and an overview of luxury seafood banquets in Beijing, before moving to the more detailed results.

Methods

The data for this paper are largely based around 34 semi-structured interviews, between 50 minutes and 2 hours duration, that were conducted between April and July 2012 in Beijing. Respondents included 20 representatives of seafood restaurants (manager or chef), seven regular seafood restaurant consumers, and seven key informants in the trading sector (seafood traders and representatives of trading and restaurant associations). Long-term participant observation of luxury seafood banquets was difficult to conduct for several reasons. "Studying up" has long been advocated in anthropology (Nader 1969), yet the practical barriers to doing so remain significant. While participating in high-level, luxury business or government banquets is extremely common in Beijing, taking part in these was difficult for us as researchers.

Interview questions focused on what types of seafood are popular to consume and why, what sorts of topics get discussed during banquets, the personal backgrounds of individual consumers, and the social norms and rules at play during banquets. Restaurants were initially selected through the popular Chinese cuisine website *dianping.com*, and this technique was supplemented by field visits, introductions, and subsequent snowballing. Targeted restaurants were those that included seafood as a significant or primary aspect of their cuisines. To ensure representativeness, restaurants with different locations in urban Beijing, different regional cuisines and different expense levels were included. Consumers were identified through personal contacts of research assistants and included consumers from a range of economic classes and regions from around China. Interviewees from the trading sector were selected through field visits to the largest seafood market, and through contacting key informants in relevant trading and cuisine associations. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin and subsequently transcribed into both Chinese and English. These transcriptions were then analyzed and coded for important themes that emerged. Data were

also sourced through observations during numerous visits to restaurants and markets, and the monitoring of media sources for articles related to food consumption.

Overview of luxury seafood consumption in Beijing

Although seafood consumption in banquets has been popular for many hundreds of years, the consumption of many types of luxury seafoods was previously confined mostly to Hong Kong and to southern provinces, particularly Guangdong, home to 粤菜 or Cantonese cuisine. Cantonese cuisine is one of the “great culinary traditions of China” (Swislocki 2009, 9), is closely associated with many of the forms of luxury seafood eaten in these banquets, and is viewed as a particularly high-status regional cuisine (Simoons 1991). Since the 1980s, Cantonese cuisine has become increasingly popular across the country, and many luxury seafoods typical of this cuisine are now found in major cities throughout the country (Fabinyi 2012).

The rise of Cantonese cuisine has seen strong demand for many forms of imported luxury seafoods from the Asia-Pacific in mainland China. Important types of seafood that are usually served in such banquets include: reef fish, such as Napoleon wrasse (苏梅), the leopard coral grouper (东星斑) and a range of other groupers; lobsters, in particular Australian lobsters; and other seafoods such as geoduck, shark fin, sea cucumbers and abalone. Dishes of these luxury seafoods frequently cost hundreds of US dollars in high-end restaurants (Fabinyi and Liu 2014).

Even though Beijing is not a traditional center of luxury seafood consumption, in recent decades it has become a significant consumer of luxury seafoods. The prominence of Beijing as the national capital and the second-most populous city in China also means that it is broadly a cultural “trend-setter” in consumption preferences. With regard to seafood consumption specifically, many of the seafood banquets that this paper focuses on are based around the practice of establishing and maintaining social relationships with government officials and business leaders. The large number of government agencies and high-profile institutions and businesses in Beijing means that it is a particularly useful site to examine consumer attitudes and practices in such banquets.

Beijing seafood restaurants have a range of dishes and banquet rooms that allow for different levels of consumption. At the lower level, “family” banquets will cost CNY50–150 per person, and will rarely include the most expensive seafoods. Weddings are also common at certain times of the year, and typically have set menus that are not overly expensive. The activities that all restaurants identified as most profitable were either business or government banquets. The costs involved in these “work” banquets vary significantly depending on the importance of the occasion and what dishes are ordered, but the most common response among restaurant operators was between CNY300–500 per person. Importantly, this figure does not include alcohol, which in many cases can form more than half of the cost of the banquet. Expensive Chinese spirits, in particular the highly priced *Maotai*, are usually consumed at these banquets, as are imported red wines. More expensive bottles of *Maotai* often cost between CNY5000–10,000, which means that a table of six or seven people can often spend well over CNY10,000–20,000. These banquets are usually paid for by the work unit rather than individuals.

The next sections detail our interview data from the seafood banquets. We focus first on distrust of the food system. We suggest that while the safety and authenticity of the food are important concerns for banquet consumers, and luxury banquets are seen as providing trust in the particular people chosen for relationship work, our data show that trust in abstract institutions is not enhanced, and may even be harmed.

Results

The food system: safety and authenticity

Following a series of major food safety scandals over a period of several years across China, food safety is now commonly regarded as one of the top concerns in regular surveys of Chinese consumers, and the issue is a common topic in Chinese academic and popular discussion (China Dialogue 2012; Yan 2012). Recent incidents, for example, include thousands of pigs found floating dead in the Huangpu River in 2013 (*South China Morning Post*, March 15, 2013), and fox meat sold as donkey meat in major supermarkets (*Reuters*, January 2, 2014). As Yan describes it, highly publicized food scares “have resulted in widespread social distrust of both food sellers and of the food industry as a whole as well as a deeply felt sense of insecurity – at any moment and through any imaginable or unimaginable channel the consumption of foodstuffs may result in food poisoning and even possibly death” (Yan 2012, 717–718). The causes of these problems in the food system are multi-faceted, and are related to the complexity of modern supply chains (Erickson 2008; China Dialogue 2012).

As with other sectors of the food industry, the seafood industry has also been hit by food scandals. In 2006, suppliers of turbot fish were found to be using a range of carcinogenic chemicals in order to increase production (*China Daily*, November 28, 2006). During the nuclear crisis in Japan in 2011, some restaurant operators reported a decline in demand for seafood from Japan (such as Japanese sea cucumbers and sushi), as consumers feared the potential effects of radioactive pollution. More generally, farmed seafood in China has generally long been associated with the heavy use of antibiotics (Broughton and Walker 2010). Much of consumers’ concerns with the seafood system are bound up with China’s weak regulatory system for traceability, which is a key priority for Chinese government and international efforts to reform China’s seafood sector (Hanson et al. 2011).

However, we found that among banquet consumers, more than food scandals or a concern with the safety of the food, there is a concern with the authenticity of the seafood. The preponderance of “fake” goods in the Chinese market is not restricted to the rip-off brand-name clothes and accessories well reported in the Western media; fake food is a common phenomenon as well.

Shark fin provides a good example of consumer concerns about authenticity. Our interviews showed that selling fake shark fins (using gelatin) is frequently practiced, resulting in concerns among seafood consumers about the authenticity of shark fin soup and a corresponding decline in consumption. These concerns were also highlighted in a CCTV report in early 2013 (CCTV, January 16, 2013). When we asked consumers and restaurant operators about the patterns of shark fin soup consumption, we found that all 19 restaurant operators who had sold shark fin reported significant declines in consumption. We had expected that the major factor behind this would be the impact of recent prominent environmentalist campaigns against shark fin soup consumption (Fabinyi and Liu 2014). However, consumers appeared to attach greater importance to the authenticity of the shark fins in the soup.¹ As one chef described:

Nowadays fake shark fin (假魚翅) is too common. There is less and less natural shark fin, while synthetic and manmade shark fin become more common. Except for those high-end restaurants, about 70% of restaurants are selling fraud shark fin. There is no guarantee that shark fin in those high-end restaurants is natural either.

A response from one consumer when we asked about shark fin consumption was typical of many when he stated: “Hasn’t it been said that there is too much fake shark fin on the market? After that, I don’t like it anymore and have seldom ordered it.”

The quality of other types of seafood can also be disguised. While sea cucumbers are regarded as being more difficult to synthesize than shark fin, one consumer explained how when he bought sea cucumber for home consumption he only bought sea cucumber that was imported from Russia, as “all the Chinese sea cucumbers are fake.” This may refer to a practice of using additives to artificially increase the reconstitution ratio of dried sea cucumbers (Purcell et al. 2014). Imported seafoods are generally regarded as being of higher quality and more trustworthy than domestic seafood. Similarly, having a fish kept alive until the last instant is a way of ensuring that it is fresh, a highly valued quality in Chinese cuisine. However, consumers are still wary about the freshness of the fish, as one explained:

You cannot know whether the one you order and the one served are the same. It all depends on the credibility of the restaurants, the flow of customers, and our trust for them. When you go to an unfamiliar restaurant, it is possible that they change another fish if they don't kill it in front of you after you order. This is all about the credibility of Chinese businessmen, while this probably won't happen in the western world. It's better with the steamed one because we can tell from their shapes. Normally we will look at the eye of the fish to tell whether it is grey or not. I don't know whether there's any new way to distinguish. For the quite expensive fish, people in the restaurants won't play those kinds of tricks. They won't take the risk for you to cancel the dish or ask for a refund or not come.

This quote from a consumer highlights two interesting points. First, eating steamed fish is not just a Cantonese cooking method that is perceived to make the fish taste better, but also a way of ensuring that the fish is really fresh. Second, going to a high-level restaurant is seen as one way of mitigating the risks of fake food and implies a greater level of trust. A manager of a very high-level restaurant made a similar point:

Guests trust such high-level restaurants, unlike the small restaurants . . . If we cannot provide fresh fish, we would rather claim we are short of them instead of providing the stale ones. We cannot afford to lose our guests, most of whom are super leaders from say, Sinopec [a huge Chinese oil and gas company], and national banks, and they can tell once there is something wrong with the taste for they eat such food frequently. We shall keep this philosophy and let guests think the money they spend here is worth it. Customers would like to spend 20,000 here if they regard it as worthy, but if the dishes are unsatisfying and cost less than 2000, they would never come again.

High prices and luxury are therefore perceived elements of ensuring the authenticity and safety of the food. Many restaurant operators work hard to reassure consumers of their trustworthiness to ensure the food safety and quality credentials of their business. In the elevators or the restaurant foyer area, consumers are frequently greeted with a range of plaques and certificates that attest to various official health and safety certifications.

However, these risk mitigation strategies are not always successful. Other restaurant operators, for example, were quite open about the economic pressures that lead them to adopt such practices that betray consumers' trust. They admitted to serving mixtures of fake and genuine shark fins, for example, suggesting that “you cannot tell it apart from the real after we process it.” Another was open about secretly serving frozen fish²:

We secretly change the fresh ones into frozen ones in the set of dishes in order to get the profits, we use many complicated cooking methods to cover the stale taste of these fish. The more complicated the cooking way is, the less likely customers are able to feel the original taste. If the fish has only been cooked for 8 minutes, you can tell the taste is different. The time is very crucial.

The authenticity of the food is also related to knowledge of origin of production and the supply chain, or traceability. In seafood restaurants, as with other food businesses in China, it is very difficult for the consumer to tell where the seafood comes from. As one

consumer noted: “We will order while looking at the aquarium and it will have labels telling where it comes from, such as ‘Australian lobster’. Well, we don’t know whether they are really from Australia or not.”

Not only consumers, but also restaurant operators themselves are often similarly unaware of seafood sources. Australia is frequently named as a source when operators may not be sure, perhaps reflecting the popularity of Australian lobster and the common associations of Australia with fresh, high-quality natural products in China. As one operator described, when buying fish from the wholesale market: “The product place is quite vague. If it is said to be from Australia, how can you tell whether it’s true? . . . They can say it’s from the moon, it doesn’t matter.” There is thus little trust even between restaurant managers and suppliers. Other restaurant operators, for example, confidently asserted that the Napoleon wrasse that they served came from Australia, despite the fact that this fish has not been exported from Australia for the food fishery since 2003 because of its protected status (Australian Fisheries Management Authority 2012). Another suggested leopard coral grouper came from America, another from Canada, where this tropical reef fish is not found. Others will be keen to reassure customers about the quality of their products, even if they are not sure, as one manager pointed out: “When customers ask about [whether the seafood is farmed or wild], we need to answer firmly that they are wild, instead of ‘let me check’ or fail to answer in the first minute. It is organic if we claim it is organic, and customers would just believe us.” When asked where the origin of his shark fin was, the same manager replied: “Mainly Australia, that’s what we tell the guests. But I’m not quite sure.” So even though luxury banquets are seen as providing some level of trust in the food system, in reality there are significant weaknesses to these strategies. The practices of some restaurant operators show the distrust is justified.

Consumers cannot know if the seafood they buy is safe, comes from where they are told it comes from, is produced and processed in a manner that they expect, or even whether it is real seafood at all. While consumers try to ameliorate these concerns by frequenting high-level restaurants, the problem is bigger than simply the restaurants – systemic problems exist throughout the supply chain, and remain difficult to surmount. In the next section, we examine the social element of luxury seafood banquets, and highlight how they are a response to a lack of trust in another broader societal institution – the economic system.

Economic system – social relationships and networking

In this section, we highlight the ways in which the consumption of expensive seafood in restaurants in China is in many ways a vehicle to establish and maintain social relationships, based on personal trust. As mentioned earlier, we do not speculate on the multiple causes on why there is a lack of abstract trust in China, but simply note that lack of trust in abstract institutions and a reliance on personal networks is an important part of economic life in contemporary China (Mason 2013; Osburg 2013). As our discussion below highlights, the relationships that are established in luxury seafood banquets are typically those in the elite realm of business and government. Eating together is a highly important part of the formation of these social relationships. This is highlighted by one regular seafood consumer:

Once I had to introduce [an acquaintance] to [another acquaintance]. I thought they were quite busy and made arrangements for them to talk over tea, instead of dinner. But I found that they were extremely polite and courteous with each other while having tea. I prepared a gift for both, but they still couldn’t get familiar and the atmosphere couldn’t lighten up. It seems that Chinese people can only get familiar and intimate over dinner. If people want to do business, they have to dine together.

This highlights the importance of the social setting of a banquet (e.g. outside formal work hours) as well as the specific inclusion of food. Food is important, and crucial to developing a social relationship. And, as one restaurant operator emphasized, seafood is of key importance in these settings: “we cannot call it a banquet without fish.” Seafood restaurants are considered to be high class and expensive, and a range of seafood delicacies are considered essential parts of these banquets.

Private businesses and government agencies thus use restaurant banquets as a way to establish the personal relationships that are necessary to successfully participate in their fields. Since most senior government and business officials are male, male customers tend to outnumber females in most restaurants, and the age groups appear to be biased to those of relatively senior workplace positions, usually aged above 30. For government agencies, their expenditure on luxury banquets are popularly referred to as “public fund expenditures” (公款消费). Restaurants often deliberately locate themselves in business or government districts. Several restaurateurs even noted that in addition to the Spring Festival (or Chinese New Year), the other boom in restaurant consumption comes when the government holds meetings of the National People’s Congress and the Chinese Peoples’ Political Consultative Conference. Restaurants often establish long-term relationships with particular companies or government offices that are based nearby, offering them discounts or flexible payment options. One restaurant, for example, was based near a military headquarters, primarily served military clientele and so was decorated accordingly with waitresses in military-style uniforms.

The importance of the role of government officials in seafood banquets was highlighted in 2013 after the new Xi Jinping-Li Keqiang administration came to power. The new administration immediately launched a crackdown on extravagant displays of wealth and corruption by government officials, specifically targeting banquets. Banquets and the spectacular forms of entertainment that take place at them are often indirectly associated with outright bribery and corruption, as well as the provision of sexual services (Jacka, Kipnis, and Sargeson 2013). The government crackdown appears to have had a significant impact on luxury seafood restaurants, with widespread reports of declines in sales (e.g. *China Daily*, May 3, 2013). Despite this current reduction in luxury banquets, the new policy actually highlights the importance of these banquets for the functioning of high-level business and government relationships. In a broader context where people have little faith in the institutions of the labor market to find them a job, or in the rule of law to ensure good business practices, banqueting remains a fundamentally important component of professional life in many fields as a stage for the establishment of personal trust (Jacka, Kipnis, and Sargeson 2013; Mason 2013).

Personal trust is established in the seafood banquet in part through the performance of various social norms that honor the guest, indicate their status and provide them with “face” (面子). These norms extend to the actual consumption of specific types of seafood, as one restaurant manager described:

The head and tail should be given to leaders, for they symbolize the beginning and end. The belly part is also tender. Other parts will be for other guests. After the fish is served, we need the leaders to do the “ribbon-cutting”, say, to have the first bite of the fish, after which the other guests would start eating. The more formal the occasions, the more rules need to be followed. On casual occasions, guests would never mind the sequence of eating or any other routines. A guest might pick out the fish eyes for the leader, wishing the leader would give him a higher look. Then the leader would give the fish belly to him, meaning they can confide with each other. The rules are also determined by local customs and type of food.

The host is expected to choose the particular dishes that are served, and these choices are also subject to norms of social etiquette. First, marine fish are – with a few exceptions – preferred in status over freshwater fish. The latter are generally considered to be common and cheap. As one chef described, “Rich people eat seafood. Those who are not so rich just eat freshwater fish.” Second, fresh seafood that is kept alive until the last moment possible is viewed as of a much higher quality when compared to frozen seafood. Third, Cantonese cuisine is viewed as a particularly high-status regional cuisine. Steaming is the preferred cooking technique in Cantonese cuisine for many of the luxury fish such as groupers, which is a way to preserve “the freshness and tenderness.” Fourth, wild-caught seafood is generally preferred over farmed (Fabinyi 2012). As Kipnis notes, “rare and delicious foods [in a banquet] make a specific event more memorable” (2002, 88). Particularly high-level dishes include the (endangered and technically illegal) Napoleon wrasse, imported Australian lobsters and shark fin soup.

Many of the more expensive seafoods are commonly referred to as “face dishes” (面儿菜) in China. The purpose of these dishes is not simply to “fill the belly,” but to show that the host respects and wants to honor the guests, or curry favor with them. It is “a way of showing sincerity and hospitality,” as one consumer described. Many of the chefs and managers were quite upfront about the motivations for choosing much of this seafood. Managers commonly made comments such as, “These fish [groupers] are rarely served in family dinners. They’re mainly offered in restaurants of superior standard as a symbol of a banquet.” Another chef noted that “they’d rather they [the seafood dishes] taste less satisfying as long as the splendour satisfies . . . For government banquets, they don’t care about the money. It’s the status and splendour that count.” When asked about the quality of dishes that he prepared, one chef admitted that they were “not that delicious. The nutrition doesn’t even exceed chicken soup. It’s just a matter of vanity, in my opinion.” In this way, the price of the dishes is what distinguishes their quality, not their taste or nutrition.

The splendor and sense of luxury is heightened by the setting of many of the restaurants. In the foyer of one particularly expensive seafood restaurant, a giant golden eagle, representing ambition in Chinese tradition, greets customers as they step out of the elevator. As the manager of this restaurant noted, “even if the service isn’t satisfactory, they’ve already forgotten in such a beautiful place.” In the corner of many Cantonese restaurants, there are shrines to Lord *Guan*, a deity associated with loyalty, trust and business, complete with daily offerings of steamed buns and fruits. A foyer of another restaurant held ornate antique vases in glass cases, with the manager pointing out that they were worth many thousands of US dollars. Most luxury banquets are held in private rooms, with gleaming chandeliers, other decorations and private bathrooms. The private nature of these banquets increases the sense of exclusivity and intimacy, further adding to trust. These practices serve to underscore Kipnis’s point that “elaborate banquets are memorable not only for the experience in itself, but also for the relationship to power that the elaborateness signifies” (2002, 88). In these cases it is both the host signifying his/her own status, and according respect to the guests.

As Otis (2009) has noted, luxury service in China is also gendered: female service staff commonly serve older men. While females will participate in banquets, masculine attitudes and practices are the dominant norm (Kipnis 2002; Mason 2013). Mason notes that the requirements and obligations entailed in attending these banquets are often in tension with what she highlights as the “individualized” goals and desires of women in China. Despite the hangovers, poor health and reduced productivity that ensue from banqueting, “the critical role that banqueting continues to play in professional contexts in contemporary China” (Mason 2013, 111) means that they are unavoidable.

The contemporary banquet culture has strong historical resonances in Chinese society. Indeed, one of the most famous historical paintings in China, “Han Xizai Gives a Banquet,” by Gu Hongzhong (937–975), highlights the centrality of the banquet in Chinese culture. Banquets have been an important part of elite Chinese society for even well before the period of Gu Hongzhong; Rawson notes that as long ago as the Shang period increasingly sophisticated banquets were held (1999, 43). As in current times, the ceremonial banquet at this time was “a method of communicating status” (1999, 47). Frequently this was for newly appointed position, or as Benn notes for the Tang period, celebrating victory or honoring favored officials (2002, 132–138). In Beijing, we observed several seafood restaurants that have explicit references to these historical traditions, by dressing staff in traditional costumes, and locating their restaurants in buildings designed to appear ancient.

While power and social networking have thus been important elements of Chinese banquets for many years, what is notable about modern forms of luxury consumption in China is that they have been greatly stimulated by the rapid pace of economic change since the 1980s, and the widening disparities between rich and poor. This means that modern consumption of luxury goods such as seafood is not necessarily a particularly “Chinese” form of consumption, but rather an “expression of economic power in an era of rapid economic growth” (Cartier 2008, 189). Indeed, in many ways, the emphasis on status, prestige and luxury in such banquets is what has been described in one review of how food has been used as a luxury for complex societies around the world over hundreds of years (Van der Veen 2003).

In this section, we have argued that the luxury and prestige in banquets provide one important foundation for the formation of personal trust between business and government elites. Through honoring a guest by eating together in luxurious surroundings with particular dishes that communicate status, individuals can establish the level of personal trust that is required to facilitate a mutually beneficial economic relationship. This social process becomes necessary where there is a lack of trust in the institutions of the economic system to operate effectively.

Discussion and Conclusion

The economic rise of China since the early 1980s has led to a corresponding increase in seafood consumption (Fabinyi 2012). While a great diversity of seafood is consumed across China, a particularly distinctive form of seafood consumption is that of luxury seafood banquets. In this paper we have highlighted two key themes that emerged from our research on luxury seafood consumption in Beijing: the centrality of concerns about food safety and authenticity, and the importance of establishing and maintaining social relationships to obtain success in professional contexts. These themes highlight the lack of social trust felt by consumers in two broader institutions of Chinese society; the food system and the economic system. While this argument may seem contradictory at first, consumers experience trust on two different levels: social or generalized trust with society, and personal or particularized trust with face-to-face networks (Giddens 1990; Rothstein and Uslaner 2005). Thus, because of the lack of social trust with the abstract institutions of society, they attempt to generate personal trust with new acquaintances. Ironically, it is the very lack of trust in broader social institutions that is a key driver behind the ongoing importance of banquets and their ability to generate personal trust. The very same process that has created a lack of broader social trust in Chinese society means that personal trust needs to be continually cultivated.

The first major feature of banquets we noted was the widespread skepticism, cynicism and fear expressed about food safety and authenticity. Wealthier consumers try to mitigate this lack of social trust through only attending expensive restaurants that are perceived to have products of higher quality, and buying particular dishes or styles of dishes that are perceived to represent higher quality and authenticity. In addition to the strategies outlined by Veeck, Yu, and Burns (2010) and Klein (2013) with regard to everyday shopping for food, luxury consumption is one strategy to have trust in the quality and authenticity of the food. However, the overriding theme in our interviews was that of distrust in the Chinese food system. Because of the ineffectiveness of regulation and traceability mechanisms in the Chinese food system (Hanson et al. 2011; China Dialogue 2012), there are in fact very few guarantees about the quality, origin or content of a particular seafood product. As the responses of some restaurant operators also indicated, the fact that their restaurants may be high-class does not mean that they do not tamper with their products. Banquets thus highlight the chronic lack of trust in the Chinese food system.

Secondly, the forms of social networking that take place during seafood banquets are largely about an attempt to establish personal trust. This form of networking becomes particularly important in a context where formal institutions are unreliable, or where there is a lack of broader social trust (Wank 1999). In the case of banqueting, there is a lack of trust in the institutions of the economic system to provide jobs, opportunities for promotion, and conduct business successfully. Key in establishing personal trust in seafood banquets is a performance designed to honor the guest and provide him/her with face. This results in elaborate social norms that are followed, including the choice of exotic and expensive seafood dishes. In a study of gourmet food journalism in the United States that draws on the theoretical work of Bourdieu (1984), Johnston and Baumann argue that social distinction is reproduced through the consumption of certain types of “legitimate” high-status foods (Johnston and Baumann 2007; see also Van der Veen, 2003), which are defined through the frames of authenticity and exoticism. In Beijing, the principles of social distinction operating through the consumption of certain types of seafood are also present, but there are different definitions of high-status foods, as well as other social processes that communicate status and prestige.

It is important to note that establishing personal trust goes well beyond the emphasis on luxury, the performance of rituals, the emphasis on prestige and the provision of “face.” As other authors have noted for banquets in China, it also includes an element of *ganqing* 感情 (human sentiment) to varying degrees (Smart 1993; Wank 1999; Kipnis 2002; Harmon 2014). In particular, alcohol is a key component of banquets, and repetitive toasting serves to create *ganqing* and personal trust among guests.

While banquets have long been prominent in Chinese society as a vehicle to generate social relationships, what is noteworthy is that they are still so popular and important in professional contexts. Although the importance of banqueting as a professional strategy varies among occupations (Jacka, Kipnis, and Sargeson 2013, 111–112), in the realm of business and government elites they appear central. Here, the question of change will be important to follow. The government’s anti-graft crackdown has continued and intensified since it originally began (*China Daily*, January 22, 2014). The broader and long-term effects of such regulatory efforts will be a major issue to observe in the coming years.

Luxury seafood banquets are a particularly important context in which personal trust is generated in professional contexts. Banquets are a necessary component of the formation of personal trust that forms the basis of such professional relationships, and that remain fundamentally important in elite contemporary Chinese society. Banquets remain important as a way to generate personal trust in large part because of the lack of broader

social trust in formal institutions. But the very same processes that have been used to create personal trust are also simultaneously reinforcing the broader lack of social trust, since this trust is created within exclusive relationships and relational networks. In short, the ritual mechanisms (such as luxury seafood banquets) for creating *ganqing* appear from outside the restaurant's private rooms as exclusivist, unfair, and even corrupt – thus ensuring the need, even among those aware of the relationship between banqueting and social distrust, for continual renewal of personal trust by just such means.

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Notes

1. In many Western countries, concerns about the environmental sustainability of the food and how it is produced are common themes among consumers. In China, these concerns are generally less important, where concerns for biodiversity and stocks of wild seafood are overshadowed by concerns relating to personal health and food safety (Fabinyi and Liu 2014).
2. We were surprised at the openness with which operators frequently admitted to these practices. These interviews took place outside the restaurants where they worked, which may have increased their willingness to talk about such matters.

Notes on contributor

Michael Fabinyi is a Society in Science - Branco Weiss Fellow at the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies, James Cook University, Australia. Neng Liu is a Professor in the Department of Sociology, Peking University, China.

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