

**THE PROPER MEAL, SOCIAL CAPITAL, AND JIA REN GUANXI  
IN URBAN CHINA**

Alvin C. Burns, Louisiana State University  
Ann Veeck, Western Michigan University  
Yu Hongyan, Sun Yat-Sen University  
Xia (Linda) Liu, Louisiana State University

**ABSTRACT**

Representations of the “proper meal” have been studied as a symbol of the idealized family and as a means to define the roles and power distribution among family members. In the context of China’s rapidly changing urban environment, this study examines how family members depict “proper meals” to understand the role of the family in perpetuating Chinese values. Chinese culture is uniquely underpinned by Confucian tenets of order, harmony, and relationships that are embodied by a complex system of relating to others called Guanxi. We conclude that Jia Ren Guanxi which is specific to family relationships perpetuates five aspects of the Chinese proper meal: (1) tasty and nutritious food, (2) warm and pleasant atmosphere, (3) relaxed and cheerful mood, (4) light and happy conversation, and (5) all family members present. We conclude that the Chinese proper meal propagates three types of social capital: identity, emotional, and social norms. Social capital, in turn, reinforces Jia Ren Guanxi. We point out that diminished observance of the Chinese proper meal may reduce Chinese social capital with important implications for the relational nature of Chinese society.

References available upon request