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Dining at the Lake Hotel:

The Decline of a *Danwei* in Guangxi

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the transformation of the Lake Hotel, a state-owned *danwei* in Nanning, from 1952 to 2019, tracing its decline amid economic and political shifts. It situates the evolution of *danwei* institutions within China's transition from a planned to a market economy, highlighting the impact of privatisation, labour restructuring, and changing political ideologies. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and historical analysis, it first analyses workers' trajectories and aspirations, career stagnation, and declining job stability inside the *danwei*; then the evolution of culinary practices, from mass catering for elites to creative yet constrained "ethnic cuisine"; and finally, the growing politicisation of the hotel's mission and its adaptation to anti-corruption policies. This study argues that rather than disappearing, the *danwei* has been reshaped by neoliberal and authoritarian forces, balancing economic survival with ideological legitimacy. Through an analysis of the interplay between culinary innovation and sociopolitical constraints through time, the Lake Hotel serves as a case study of the way state-owned institutions navigate market pressures while maintaining their political role, offering insight into broader transformations in China's labour and consumption landscapes.

KEYWORDS: *danwei*, cooking industries, hotel, labour, consumption, market evolutions, Guangxi.

Introduction

As I had lunch at the Lake Hotel¹ in an almost empty dining room with a group of friends originated from Nanning, the capital of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, all in their sixties, one of them told me: "Before, it was the most upscale establishment in Nanning; now there's nothing innovative anymore." At that time in december 2019, my middle-class friends, mainly elderly teachers, tended to go to private luxury restaurants and hotels for special occasions, and referred to this public hotel as a once-luxurious establishment now fallen into disuse. Based on ethnographic fieldwork at the Lake Hotel conducted in 2018 and 2019, this article explores how market-driven profit and moral authority have evolved within a state-owned food-production work unit (*danwei* 單位). It shows how this work unit's rise and decline has been linked to the evolution of the public restaurant's culinary status. In an attempt to offset this decline and reassert moral and political significance, contemporary efforts seek to mobilise the work unit's former connections with China's political elites and with local elite cuisine. Through the case study of a state-owned restaurant in Guangxi, this article contributes to our understanding of the evolution of the public sector in China over the past 70 years, showing how it has been shaped by both market dynamics and social transformations.

The Lake Hotel opened in 1952, at the beginning of the Maoist era. Functioning as a *danwei*, a term dating back to the 1940s and referring to state-owned enterprises (Lü 1997), it has undergone significant changes over time. Chef Tang, a retired chef who was hired in 1960, and other "old chefs" (*lao shifu* 老師傅) recruited in the 1980s and still employed in 2019², recounted the different periods the hotel had gone through: a time of relative continuity of activity in the 1960s, largely due to banquets held for the urban elite; a significant period of recruitment and high customer occupancy from 1974; a culinary heyday from then until the early 2000s; and a phase of decline in both consumption and employment at the end of the 2000s. At the time of my fieldwork, the Lake Hotel was operating at a loss, and the "old chefs" hired in the 1980s testified to a sense of downgrading in working conditions and creative opportunities since their recruitment. Meanwhile, the consumer market in Nanning has flourished, as everywhere else in China, with the development of a massive number and variety of private restaurants and hotels. While work units remained a primary source of employment after the end of the Maoist era, by 2005, only 1.7% of

1. The name of the hotel and individuals mentioned are anonymised, except for public figures such as He Yikui and Kuang Bocai, who will appear later on.
2. At the Lake Hotel, the term "old chef" appears to be a situational term at the intersection of age, seniority, status, and collective destiny, and is commonly used by the cooks to refer to themselves and each other.

restaurant workers in Guangxi were employees of state-owned work units (*guoyou danwei* 國有單位).³ These observations can be made at the scale of the Lake Hotel: according to many of those I spoke to, the kitchen team went from around 700 persons in 1990 – the peak of the hotel’s history – to about 60 cooks in 2018. The *danwei* appears to have lost much of its former appeal – a decline that, in the case of the Lake Hotel, corresponds to a diminishing resonance among the younger generations and the reinforcement of political ideology, now articulated as a “political mission” in service of the “Chinese Dream.” From a micro-level perspective, this ethnographic study of the Lake Hotel will explore the complex relationship between culinary artistry and sociopolitical demands within the *danwei* from the 1960s to 2019, employing a historical and political anthropology perspective to illustrate how an ongoing intersection with the private sector has shaped the public sphere from within.

The Lake Hotel, as a workplace, an institution, and a segment of the consumer market, intersects with the literature on *danwei* in China, consumption in socialist settings, and to a lesser degree, workers’ aspirations. The evolution of the *danwei* attracted the attention of many China scholars during the reform era (Walder 1986; Solinger 1995). During these two decades, research showed partial continuity between past and present work unit structures (Lü and Perry 1997; Bian 2002) with various forms of “transitional hybridization” (Solinger 1997): based on a socialist market economy since the 1990s, the *danwei* continued to benefit from public investment and to provide social benefits to its workers. Parallely, other public and private production systems emerged (Arvanitis, Miège, and Zhao 2003). In fact, the private sector has never disappeared, as some scholars have argued, highlighting that hawkers and small traders have supported the socialist planned economy, with their regulation being essential to prevent its collapse (Feng 2011), and later facilitated the transition to a market economy following Deng Xiaoping’s reforms (Frost and Li 2024). Despite the coexistence of public and private sectors throughout the history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Solinger 1984),⁴ the increasingly autonomous private sector has largely supplanted the *danwei* system and, as this paper will demonstrate, is now influencing the transformation of the public system from within. The Lake Hotel, however, represents a special kind of *danwei* in that throughout its history, it has been a place of food production, not only for subsidised prepared meals in canteens, but also for an external market. It therefore holds a unique position in the literature on *danwei*, as it represents a consumer-oriented *danwei* and a creative workplace shaped over time by both market fluctuation as well as technical and political constraints. Scholarship on food under socialism has shown that throughout the twentieth century, the CCP has always oscillated between culinary sophistication and socialist austerity, using food as a symbol of past failures and future promises (Farquhar 2002; Swislocki 2009; Wang 2018).⁵ Yet, as this paper will demonstrate, the Lake Hotel has consistently depended on hosting officials as its primary source of revenue – even as early as the 1960s – suggesting that the anti-corruption campaigns of the 2010s represent not a rupture, but rather a reconfiguration of a long-standing model rooted in the hedonistic practices of Party cadres.

Finally, the evolution of the *danwei* is embedded in the changing work environment. In the 2000s, scholars focusing on labour structure within the *danwei* highlighted the emergence of new forms of

“patron–client relationships” (Xie and Wu 2008) and clear hierarchical distinctions among workers, aimed at increasing the *danwei*’s competitiveness (Cliff 2015). Career advancement remains limited, highly stratified, and gendered, with an “apathetic *danwei* mentality” that fosters acceptance of this restricted mobility (ibid.: 134). The case of the Lake Hotel nuances this perspective by showing that the stability once promoted – and later constrained – by the *danwei* is no longer perceived by employees as a mark of social distinction. Moreover, attachment to work is linked not only to the conditions that enable employees to perform their tasks effectively by playing the game (Roy 1959), but also to the spaces allowed for creativity, especially in the culinary profession (Fine 2002; Leschziner 2015). The Lake Hotel’s low profitability, along with the decline of social benefits and career prospects promised at the start of the reforms, has had profound consequences on both working conditions and employees’ trust in the *danwei* system – something its current “political mission” does not necessarily compensate for. Working in the private sector, with greater mobility but higher salaries, could appear better suited to the economic conditions and individual aspirations of the late 2010s. While the literature has shown that the *danwei* has demonstrated continuity throughout history, this article demonstrates that it is not only an “urban regime of public goods” (Solinger 1995), but also a place where inequalities are perpetuated.

The first part of the article focuses on workers’ trajectories, aspirations, and (loss of) attachment to work; the second on the evolution of culinary techniques and artistry within the *danwei* through different political eras; and the third on the campaigns and narratives that shape and legitimate the survival of the hotel *danwei*. If the narratives of the “old chefs” woven throughout this article are overwhelmed by novelty and tinged with nostalgia, their emotions provide a longitudinal perspective on the evolution of the *danwei*.

This research forms part of my PhD study on professional cooks in China, which led me to conduct fieldwork in various catering establishments, including the state-run Lake Hotel (Théry 2021a). Obtaining permission to enter a *danwei* was difficult, as the cooking teachers who had long been my gateway to the field deemed these institutions too “sensitive.”⁶ It was during a cooking competition that I attended at the Lake Hotel that the doors opened accidentally, thanks to a conversation with Mister Di, the director of the hotel’s Food Department. A few weeks later, I started an internship there. As the only woman and non-Chinese person in the kitchens, I joined the teams as a volunteer intern and anthropology student, observing and participating in culinary activities. My research materials comprise fieldnotes taken in the restaurant’s kitchen as well as during cooking competitions, team meals, and outings with colleagues. Interviews and informal conversations with cooks of several generations were

3. “餐飲業機構統計” (*canyin ye jigou tongji*, Statistics on establishments of catering industry), in 南寧統計年鑒 (*Nanning tongji nianjian*, Nanning statistical yearbook), 2005, Beijing, China Statistics Press, 299-300. I thank Monique Abud for providing these statistics, as well as the ones for footnote 16.

4. I thank Puck Engman for sharing these last three references.

5. This is also true in the Soviet context where, while luxury consumption was frowned upon, good food remained seen as a sign that the socialist system was working (Gronow 2003).

6. This fieldwork was made possible by my previous training in cooking in France and through the professional network I established in China while working at a French culinary school in Shanghai in 2013 and 2014.

either recorded or taken down as notes. Although I did not have access to the restaurants' management team, the chefs were all very open to answering my questions.

The dismantling of the danwei through the lens of workers' aspirations

From stability to stagnation: Generational shifts in culinary careers within the danwei system

When Chef Tang (80 years old, retired from the Lake Hotel) was first recruited in the early 1960s, the *danwei* was an attractive place to work:

An official and stable job like this in a *danwei* was highly sought after; many people wanted to be recruited. When you worked here [at the Lake Hotel], you became a civil servant. They provided you with social benefits; otherwise, we would have left in a hurry. With 40 *kuai* [per month], how could you live? A chef from Hong Kong came; he was surprised that we accepted working for so little. But I told him that it was enough for us; we needed little, and our salary belonged to the state. It was our contribution to the state. (Interview, 8 June 2019)⁷

During the Mao era and at the beginning of the reform era, the *danwei* offered advantages and social benefits that the small private sector couldn't provide. Perry (1997: 49) even recalls numerous protests by temporary or contractual workers from small businesses in Shanghai in 1956–1957 to obtain the same social benefits as those enjoyed by *danwei* employees. All looked for the stability promised by the *danwei*: "I was assigned a position (*fenpei* 分配) for life," recalls Chef Huang (pastry chef, 52 years old, 34 years of service). *Danwei* benefits, known as the iron rice bowl (*tie fanwan* 鐵飯碗), included housing allocation, a guaranteed fixed salary and job security (*laobao* 勞保), coverage of medical expenses, children's school admissions, etc. At the end of the 1970s, one-third of urban residents lived in apartments built and allocated by work units (Walder 2015: 92), and this was the case for many retired chefs who made their career in *danwei* hotels in Nanning, and kept their homes for life as Huang, Lin, and Tang did. Moreover, work units during and even after the Maoist era formed a small community. "The chefs from different *danwei* in Nanning used to run from one structure to another to lend helping hands; we were all like brothers (*xiongdi* 兄弟)," Tang recalls of the 1960s. Family ties or familiarity with the establishment were also common recruitment channels, functioning as a form of "inherited status" (Bian 2002). For example, Chef Huang and Chef Lin (cold station chef-de-partie,⁸ 60 years old, 34 years of service), both hired in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, were sons of cooks at the Lake Hotel.

Even in the 1980s, the staff quarters provided by the *danwei* still allowed for team mixing, reinforcing the bonds between chefs from different establishments both in private and at work, thereby constituting a large team of public chefs. The displayed loyalty – this "contribution" mentioned by Tang in the previous extract, or "adherence to the state" as Naughton (1997: 169) puts it – is transversal to the trajectories of the so-called old-chefs. Being assigned to a *danwei* implied being there for life, and the old chef's

career meant low mobility. *Danwei* were places of intimate and professional life that created a form of "organized dependence" (Walder 1986: 13) between employer and employees. But this did not last: starting from the 1990s, the advantages conferred by the *danwei* dwindled and social fractures between different generations of workers appeared within the *danwei*.

Lao Zhou was recruited at the Lake Hotel in 1987. He was assigned to the Ethnic Restaurant (*minzu canting* 民族餐廳)⁹ before moving to the cutting station at the Banquet Restaurant, where he remained for 15 years until 2019. Unlike Lao Zhou who enjoyed some internal mobility, Qin (55 years old, 29 years of service) spent his entire career cutting fruit at the Banquet Restaurant, without acquiring new technical skills or seeing any salary increase through his career. And while Chef Lin experienced greater mobility by moving from pantry worker to station chef, his feelings echo those of the other "old chefs":

Our salary hasn't even reached 3,000 *yuan* today.¹⁰ In general, *danwei* salaries are low, unless you rise to the status of manager. You can work hard, but you've already reached your salary ceiling. If my technical level has already met the expectations related to my salary, then I've reached my salary ceiling, and I will never earn more. So the old employees [*lao yuangong* 老員工] won't really bother to develop new dishes. It's the limits of salary capping. It kills the desire to pass things on to the younger ones; anyway, you earn the same amount. Him [he points to the young man helping in the kitchen], he's leaving. If I were him, I would have left quickly too. Here, you don't go up, and you don't go down either. You stay in the middle like this, and one day you're too old to leave. So, you can only wait here to grow old. (Interview, 18 August 2018)

For young people, most of whom are employed on temporary contracts, the public sector offers neither material comfort nor professional fulfilment. Most of them were recruited after their school internship, for only a few months, and would rather go to private hotels like Le Renaissance, a Cantonese restaurant where I also conducted fieldwork, located on the 18th floor in a fully glazed room overlooking Nanning and serving expensive and extravagant dishes known throughout the city. The kitchen team there was indeed made up of many young chefs, attracted by relatively high salaries and innovative food equipment and ideas. They weren't planning to stay; for these young chefs, such positions were just one step in a learning career that would take them to private hotels across China, following their Master. In these new prestigious venues, career progression is coupled with extensive geographical mobility, unlike previous generations of public sector chefs. These changes are in line with the aspirations of young male cooks, particularly in their aspiration and need for decent salaries.

7. All extracts from the discussion with Tang are from the same interview.

8. The hierarchy ranges from chef to sous-chef, then to chef de partie, and finally to cooks – from "head cook" to "queue cook."

9. As will be discussed below, several restaurants were added to the initial Banquet Restaurant in the late 1980s, including the Ethnic Restaurant.

10. The average salary in Nanning was RMB 7,400 in 2019 (including both private and public sectors), according to provincial government data: Nanning Municipal Bureau of Statistics 南寧市統計局, "南寧市2019年勞動工資統計數據解讀" (*Nanning shi* 2019 *nian laodong gongzi tongji shuju jiedu*, Interpretation of Nanning's 2019 labour wage statistics), 13 July 2020, <https://www.nanning.gov.cn/sjfw/sjjd/t4421293.html> (accessed on 6 June 2025).

The “retirement home”

The declining attractiveness of the public sector is particularly tangible in the Banquet Restaurant. Before I started my internship, Mister Di, the director of the Food Department, advised me not to spend too much time in the historic Banquet Restaurant: “There is nothing to see there.” I discovered in the early days of my fieldwork that this disdain was common: the cooks at the Ethnic Restaurant called the Banquet Restaurant the “retirement home” (*jinglao yuan* 敬老院). This designation referred as much to the age of the cooks as to their low activity: “They host a few receptions, and otherwise they rest,”¹¹ Chef Huang told me. Still, the chef of this restaurant, Chef Li (50 years old, 25 years of service), allowed me to spend some time in this kitchen, but as activity was low, it consisted mostly of sitting and chatting, either with Qin while he fed me leftover fruits, or in a corner of the kitchen where the cooks sat on stools to rest and smoke cigarettes (Figure 1). If this restaurant was once a lively venue for official banquets during the Mao era – as we will see in the next section – the activity now is sluggish and the equipment outdated: the chopping boards were cracked, the knives rusty, and the worktops too low, causing back problems for some cooks. In December 2020, I received a bitter message from Chef Lin informing me that many old chefs had “retired early” (*zaotui* 早退), all aged between 50 and 57.¹² The early departure of these chefs came just a year after Chef Wang (40 years old, 5 years of service, with a previous career in private restaurants) took over the management of all kitchens at the Lake Hotel. In the end of 2019, Chef Wang’s strategy was already openly the replacement of the old generations: “The young ones don’t want to work with the old chefs because they are difficult to manage. (...) Today, many have retired! And I don’t hire [permanent employees]” (Interview, 15 November 2019).

Figure 1. Resting time in the Banquet kitchen



Credit: Pierre Maillard, drawing based on fieldwork description.

Social mobility at the Lake Hotel applied only to executives and managerial positions but not the experienced “old chefs.” This unequal social stratification and hierarchical distinction led to the “fragmentation of the labouring class” (Lee 1999: 64) and simultaneously to the deterioration of their trust in the *danwei*. In 2019, the “old chefs” working at the Banquet Restaurant, still located on the ground floor of the old building, have gone from a promising career to a downgrading through various reforms in the public sector,

despite their permanent employee status. All these factors were both the result and evidence of a shift in the status of a hotel that had become unprofitable and poorly patronised, while the growing influence of the private sector progressively shaped the public sector. The dissatisfactions of the chefs are partly due to their poor working environment and decline in benefits such as privatisation of the housing system. But the fact that the hotel-*danwei* is no longer attractive to consumers or chefs is also due to the stagnation of the culinary repertoire. To better understand this, we need to go deeper into the production itself, from the early years of the Lake Hotel.

From big woks to small dishes: Patterns of creativity in a public hotel

The 1960s: Mass cuisine for the elite

I entered the staff quarters, located at the back of the Lake Hotel. It consisted of a series of courtyards, buildings with external staircases and peeling yellow paint, separated from each other by large mango trees and from the street by a long brick wall, giving a sense of an intimate and enclosed place. I climbed the stairs to a small apartment occupied by Tang’s children, grandchildren, and his wife. The yellow walls, as faded as the exterior plaster, were covered with damp stains, reflecting both the lack of maintenance of the Lake Hotel staff quarters and the modesty of the household. After a while, Chef Tang, an imposing man in his early eighties, sat across from me and looked at me through clouded eyes – he was starting to lose his sight. He sighed and repeated, “I’m old now,” and burst into tears. Aided by his daughter, who gently mocked him, we started the conversation:

Aël Théry: How did you start to work as a cook?

Tang: At the time, the chef (*shifu*) didn’t count for much. It was the 1960s, it was canteen cooking. The economic situation was tense and raw materials were scarce. We were a reception hotel, originally only open “internally” (*duinei* 對內) for officials’ meetings (*jiedai huiyi* 接待會議). It never stopped! At the time, we used to say, “The taxes of the nationalists are high, the receptions of the communists are many.” They were planned one after the other, non-stop, sometimes up to 1,000 people.

AT: There must have been many of you working in the kitchen.

T: Not at all! There were only about ten of us to prepare these meals, in huge woks, you can’t even imagine! You should have seen all the work beforehand, it was terrifying. We used big paddles to stir during cooking, it was no joke! [laughter]

11. Except when mentioned as a formal interview, the transcribed chefs’ words are from spontaneous conversations in the kitchen, sometimes written down in a notebook, sometimes recorded with a phone, collected in August 2018 and November and December 2019 – the precise dates won’t be given for space reasons.
12. The practice of “early retirement” (*tijian tuixiu* 提前退休), common in the public sector, allows employees who have worked for at least ten years to receive a pension equivalent to 60-90% of their last salary (Rochot 2019).

AT: And their expectations were probably quite high, right?

T: They were officials, but simple people; it couldn't be otherwise, except for some occasions when the standard was higher. Their only expectation was speed, that's why we had big woks. That's how we gradually learned, over about ten years.

Chef Tang was born in the late 1930s and started working at the Lake Hotel in 1960, a few years after the opening of the establishment. The Banquet Restaurant was the Hotel's only restaurant then, and it mainly hosted leaders' receptions. Chef Tang's mention of the "canteen" differs from those of the people's communes that provided food for the masses (Lü and Perry 1997), since he refers to a merchant canteen. Here, "canteen cuisine" refers to a limited culinary repertoire and elementary techniques on which Tang's professional practice was based: the large woks fixed on their base that he refers to did indeed limit the diversity of techniques and cooking.¹³ Tang's early career indeed coincided with the launch of the Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine, but even so, the urban *danwei* were places of relative food abundance, as evidenced by the banquets held throughout this period.

In the early 1960s, Nanning was home to several state-owned establishments that opened in the first post-revolutionary decade, and most were still operating in 2019. Chef He Yikui (75 years old), who worked at the Bright Hotel all his career from 1962 onward,¹⁴ recounted the lavish banquets he prepared at the time for "leaders" (*lingdao* 領導) such as Ho Chi Minh and Mao Zedong,¹⁵ emphasising the prestige of the profession, which lay in "serving the greatest." As Chef Kuang Bocai (71 years old, entire career at the Rivière Hotel) explained to me during an interview, while the clientele consisted mainly of cadres, differences existed among hotel *danwei* in the 1950s: some were dedicated to what Kuang called "an external clientele" (*waijiao* 外交) and "ordinary people," while others catered exclusively to an internal (*neibu* 內部) clientele made of Party leaders. He Yikui, Kuang Bocai, and Chef Tang, all belonging to the same generation and sharing similar professional trajectories, testify to little discontinuity during the revolutionary period. Without knowing more about the "ordinary clientele" mentioned by Kuang, it is still possible to state that the food in these hotels was dedicated to a select urban elite. Despite the rhetoric of a socialist ethic of frugality (Klein 2008), the 1950s and 1960s were not a period of austerity for everyone, but coincided with a time of access to good food – if not luxurious – for urban cadres. As Wang Di (2018) also recalls of teahouses and other upscale dining venues in Chengdu, such spaces were often concealed from the public and reserved for official banquets hosted for high-ranking cadres and foreign delegations, highlighting how the *danwei* became a site of pronounced inequality.

Moreover, as Chef Tang explains in his testimony of his early career, this period of relative abundance was also one of a shortage of cooks. This assessment is consistent with what Swislocki (2009) recalls of the 1950s, when the Party was so concerned with identifying a "mass" consumer base for Shanghai food culture that it largely overlooked the labour that went into preparing food. Klein even identified the rise of a "socialist culinary project" in Guangzhou in the 1960s aimed at spreading "knowledge about professional cooking techniques" to "cooks in households and work unit canteens" and "level[ing]

differences" (2008: 58, 64, 68). However, Chef Tang's testimony suggests that in the early 1960s, this was not the project of the hotel *danwei*, which functioned more as a site for reinforcing inequalities, positioning itself somewhere between an upscale restaurant and a communal canteen. The so-called mass cuisine (*dazhong cai* 大眾菜) prepared in big woks was reserved mainly for cadres and a select urban elite. This peculiar status, embedded within the labour unit, reflects the contradictions of the 1960s, an era caught between revolutionary ideals and the emergence of market dynamics.

The reconstruction of the profession (1980s–1990s)

If access to consumption in the 1960s was (already) conditioned by one's position on the social ladder, being a cook could be seen as a privileged position. The profession of cook was encouraged by training campaigns, and cooking competitions were sometimes held in production units to identify the best cooks and send them to work in canteens (Klein 2008; Yang 2012). This ended for a time in the late 1960s, when Tang recounts that cooks were "the target of criticism": "They said we had only professional but not ideological knowledge". While he couldn't claim that being a cook generally implied a bad class label at that time, his work at the Lake Hotel was interrupted in the middle of the 1960s as they joined the Cultural Revolution. Tang resumes his story just before the official end of the Cultural Revolution:

In 1974, there was a major recruitment campaign for young cooks. As soon as the opening period began, all the *danwei* were looking for cooks, everywhere. I went to Liuzhou [in Guangxi], and several *danwei* were asking for me. They were counting on this intermediate workforce: people between 30 and 40 years old, with a very good work capacity. I was married, not yet 40. And I was surprised: it had become very well paid to be a cook! Later, I understood that there was a shortage of cooks, of successors. The director of the Lake Hotel wanted everyone to come back in the district (*qu limian* 區裡面). She still had power there at that time, and she needed competent chefs. I knew her well; when I came back, her eyes lit up! (Interview, 8 June 2019)

Tang therefore returned to the "district" of his *danwei*, but production and consumption conditions had changed:

After the Cultural Revolution, I worked autonomously without hierarchy. I was able to learn as I wished and to create (*chuangzhi* 創製), to train and improve certain traditional things. That was progress. For a year, I developed dishes that until then were only boiled and fried in large woks. Small dishes, and small tables, that was an innovation of that time.

13. See for example 公共食堂適用菜譜 (*Gonggong shitang shiyong caipu*, Recipes for public canteens), a cookbook published in 1959 by Jilin People's Publishing House (吉林人民出版社), with contains recipes as simple as "sauteed meat with tomato" or "eggplant stew": <http://book.kongfz.com/280002/1660750842> (accessed on 7 June 2025).

14. In March 2018, I conducted interviews with each of these chefs in their homes, accompanied by two of their former younger disciples.

15. In January 1958, Chairman Mao Zedong visited Nanning to address two conferences. According to the Guangxi Tourism and Transportation website, he then stayed in Building No. 5 of the Bright Hotel.

Tang speaks about culinary innovation for the first time. The reduction in size and increasing number of dishes indeed lead to diversification, sophistication of techniques, and an increase in labour needs, a good example being the cold dishes (*lengpan* 冷盤):

For cold dishes, we did preliminary cutting in advance, and then we called on part-time workers, sometimes a dozen or even 20, to help us. They washed their hands, put on gloves and white jackets, and everyone had to follow the slicing models, no choice! And then, it developed very quickly. At that time [in the late 1970s–early 1980s], each round of competition led to very different versions of cold dishes. At the very beginning, they were mainly composed of marinated foods, laid out flat, rather rustic. In the second round, the team from Guilin created a work of art, but it was inedible. Afterwards, we modified it to make it both beautiful and tasty. Then, we announced a new constraint, that of innovating the bases.

The cold dishes referred to by Tang require dexterity from the chefs, especially in cutting and carving. These large platters representing animals, flowers, or landscapes were essentially placed on the table for display, and were sometimes not even consumed (Sabban 1983: 345). Costly in labour and raw materials, they were intended for a wealthy clientele. The reduced size and increasing variety of dishes led to diversification, sophistication of techniques, and increasing competence, learned at school and through competitions:

I taught at a school. The government wanted to invest in the expansion of the school, so they sent an evaluation team. I had opened the large reception hall for a major exhibition. I was extremely proud. It was a bit like a competition. On the long tables, we placed a dragon and phoenix chicken soup (*longfeng jitang* 龍鳳雞湯), half a galloping horse engraved in wood. It was the students who cooked; I directed them. We made dishes combining Western and Chinese cuisines. (...) After the meal, the evaluation team looked at me in amazement; they were convinced to invest. They hadn't imagined that we could innovate like that. We put a lot of energy into it. Since then, the school has become very large.

A new trend of sophistication in the profession was at that time made possible by the money invested in technical and human equipment, and supported by institutions. Indeed, all these events and initiatives were led by professional associations that emerged in the 1980s, such as the Guangxi Culinary Association (*Guangxi pengren xiehui* 廣西烹飪協會) or the Nanning Culinary Association (*Nanning pengren xiehui* 南寧烹飪協議). Founded by *danwei* chefs, these associations served as platforms for evaluating chefs through national exams and competitions that awarded prestigious titles of recognition.

The diversification of culinary offerings and the rise of high-end local cuisine (late 1980s–1990s)

In 1980, Guangxi had 10,432 hotels and catering establishments employing 57,310 people. By 1985, this number had surged to 53,972 (+400%), with a workforce of 126,252 (+2,000%).¹⁶

According to the cooks I met, the Lake Hotel had around 200 cooks between 1982 and 1985, and nearly 700 in 1990. This massive wave of recruitment reflects the proliferation of markets at that time, and the diversification of culinary offerings within the *danwei*, alongside a relative loosening of political control over the economy, while maintaining the stability of the existing structure. A new building was therefore built in the late 1980s. Tang describes it as follows:

At that time, we had difficulties getting certain materials that were not available in Guangxi; we had to pay bribes. Finally, the government provided the aluminium, and we were able to build the new building. Thanks to its immediate success, in a year and a half, we had repaid the two million the boss had borrowed. Oh, those were the days... You wouldn't believe me. Most ordinary people had never taken an elevator; it was the tallest building in Nanning. The Cantonese Breakfast Restaurant was full every day, and people were queuing outside for the Street Food Restaurant. There weren't many hotels like that in Nanning: receptions for more than 1,000 people!

This building was meant to accommodate new restaurants: the Ethnic Restaurant that opened in 1986 and served high-end local cuisine, the Cantonese Breakfast Restaurant serving luxury *dim sum*, the Street-food Restaurant, and a Western Restaurant that operated for only a few years in the 1990s. "The Street Food Restaurant alone had 300 employees and made a hundred thousand *yuan* in revenue per day," Chef Lin recalls.

The Banquet Restaurant, the oldest kitchen in the hotel, was still serving "mass cuisine" but no longer for the elites. In 2019, Chef Lin's daily menu at this restaurant primarily consisted of ten sautéed dishes and a few soups, mainly for low-budget weddings and other events. Consisting of pre-prepared dishes served buffet-style, which limits creativity, the banquet kitchen lacks the immediacy of cooking during rushed conditions that typically fosters camaraderie among cooks (Théry 2023). It is partly for this reason that other cooks at the hotel see it as a "resting" kitchen. "A bit of basic know-how is enough to make mass cuisine, banquet cuisine (*huiyi cai* 會議菜), and ordinary cuisine (*putong cai* 普通菜), let's say," Chef Lin commented to me during an informal discussion on August 2018. The interplay between banquet cuisine, mass cuisine, and ordinary cuisine has been reactualised in a contemporary landscape of consumption since the reform and opening up. Within a vast diversification of culinary offerings and an overall increase in the standard of living in China, "mass cuisine" now represents low-cost cuisine for the masses and exhibits a level of sophistication far beyond its previous iterations, reflecting shifting classifications across historical periods. Furthermore, the terms "mass cuisine" or "ordinary cuisine" also delineate specific clienteles: while officials frequented the Banquet Restaurant until the mid-1970s, they later shifted their patronage to the Ethnic Restaurant, which emerged as a hub of culinary innovation. Indeed, it was the Ethnic Restaurant that took the lead in elite cuisine for cadres:

16. Cumulative figures, including retirees, extracted from "餐飲業機構統計" (*Canyin ye jigou tongji*, Statistics of food and service industry), in 南寧統計年鑒 (*Nanning tongji nianjian*, Nanning statistical yearbook), 1992, Beijing, China Statistics Press, 538-39.

We set up the Ethnic Restaurant based on an idea from the old lady upstairs [Tang's neighbour, the now retired former manager of the Lake Hotel, and founder of the Guangxi Cooking Association]. I went with the Association to explore the Miao and Yao, to dig out recipes. (...) After the opening of the Ethnic Restaurant, we welcomed many government officials and received a lot of praise. We were extremely popular, experimenting with many dishes, adapting to the tastes of visiting officials, while serving them ethnic specialties (*minzu tecai* 民族特菜). (...) One of the things I am most proud of in this life is the opening of this Ethnic Restaurant. Many dishes were our own creations. For example, bitter melon flowers was a popular dish (*minjian cai* 民間菜). You have to wait for them to bloom; it's a seasonal dish, stuffed with tofu, steamed, and then pan-fried. (Interview, 8 June 2019)

For Chef Tang, the Ethnic Restaurant was the greatest culinary innovation of this time. This quest for the “ethnic” has been a way to transcend the barrier of previous cooking repertoires. If local cuisine remained popular throughout the Maoist period in other provinces such as Guangdong (Klein 2004), this was not the case in an economically disadvantaged province such as Guangxi, where local and wild ingredients were previously considered backward and a sign of scarcity. Starting from the 1980s, the Ethnic Restaurant became a place of creativity. First aimed at serving cadres, in 1991–1992, it opened to an “external” clientele, or what Tang refers as the “urban masses” (*shimin dazhong* 市民大眾). From then on, the term “reception” (*jiedai* 接待), once reserved for officials, now included a “private” clientele. Innovation was no longer reserved for officials: state elitism was commercialised. Finally, as the market expanded, the “masses” were granted access to similar venues and culinary offerings as the cadres. Public food services now faced competition from the private sector and were evaluated by an external clientele by the same standards as private establishments.

The 1980s and 1990s therefore marked a turning point in both the professional and consumer worlds. Ideas flourished, tastes became more refined, and aesthetics evolved. While elite-driven profitability had always been central to the *danwei*, a private clientele gained access to high-end cuisine through the market. This shift coincided with the rapid expansion of private enterprise, in contrast to the previously limited interplay among state-run units. By the early 2000s, however, the Lake Hotel was losing momentum, with significant drops in both occupancy and profit. Its revival was driven by a renewed focus on regional culinary traditions that had emerged in the second half of the 1980s. But this time, this emphasis on local “ethnic” cuisine was definitely a political project embedded within institutions, in order to broadcast and operationalise political agendas. Rather than erasing the *danwei*, the rise of market competition prompted a reassertion of its foundational purpose – a role in which ideological function and material production were deeply intertwined.

Legitimising the hotel *danwei* through new forms of politicisation

Blurring boundaries to circumvent directives

In 2019, the Ethnic Restaurant remained the principal source of income for the Lake Hotel, hosting groups of officials or wealthy families,¹⁷ but far less numerous and luxurious than many chefs recalled. Indeed, since the “eight regulations” campaign (*baxiang guiding* 八項規定) launched in 2013,¹⁸ extravagance has officially become unacceptable: receptions are significantly fewer, and profits are lower. This campaign aimed to fight corruption among government officials, including excess and waste in food and drink during receptions for government functionaries (Zhu, Zhang, and Liu 2017). It includes reducing and simplifying delegations and reception feasts. This fight against the corruption that both plagued and fuelled the public sector has played an important role in the declining frequency of banquets. While the promotion of frugality is not a new rhetoric,¹⁹ and anti-waste and anti-corruption campaigns are a means for Xi Jinping to consolidate his power within the Party, those policies have a direct impact on the practices of catering professionals.

During an official dinner to which Wang invited me, the hotel waitresses sang folk songs to Party cadres and urged them to drink. An amused guest started taking a video with his phone, but Chef Wang stopped him. Wang later explained to me the reason for this precaution:

Nowadays, we have regulations: officials cannot just go out to participate in this kind of banquet or if they do, they must declare it and report who is invited, who you invite, just to be able to legally participate. We are good friends [with this cadre], and everyone is aware that we should not take his photo. (...) Small private restaurants, maybe, but not state-owned high-end hotels; that's very taboo (*jihui* 忌諱). So, when he comes here, I have to protect him. (Interview, 21 October 2019)

The clients enjoyed exceptional treatment that evening. The menu was exquisite and the average cost of the dishes largely exceeded what the anti-corruption reforms allowed: salad of chilled vegetables in sesame sauce, fish head and tofu soup, steamed shrimp marinated in yellow wine, braised civet in terracotta pot, stir-fried snake skin with dried mushrooms, scallops and garlic-flavoured vermicelli, etc. The menu was crafted exclusively by Wang, as always when it comes to official receptions. Drawing on local products, Wang's cuisine falls within the ambiguous category of “ethnic” food. With tacit managerial

17. For purposes of comparison, a dinner menu at the Banquet Restaurant for eight people costs around RMB 1,000, or RMB 125 per person, while a bowl of noodles in Nanning costs in average between RMB 10 and 15 in 2019. Therefore, it is a restaurant for upper-middle class.

18. CPC Politburo 中共中央政治局, “十八屆中央政治局關於改進工作作風, 密切聯繫群眾的八項規定” (*Shiba jie zhongyang zhengzhi ju guanyu gaijin gongzuo zuofeng, miqie lianxi qunzhong de ba xiang guiding*, The 18th CPC Politburo's eight regulations on improving work style and maintaining close ties with the masses), 4 December 2012, https://www.spp.gov.cn/dj/c100027/201711/t20171109_320790.shtml (accessed on 8 June 2025).

19. Frugality is a cherished term that has never left the CCP, be it under Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, or Xi Jinping (Zhu et al. 2017).

approval, he exceeded the average spending limits set out in the eight regulations campaign. His menu operates at the margins of legality, with ingredients such as poached protected species (probably fish and snake) or linked to tolerated yet stigmatised practices, such as the use of dog meat. His culinary approach, shaped by professional experience, favours adaptability over fixed recipes, guided primarily by the availability of local ingredients (Théry 2021b). The removal of most senior chefs, the hiring of young temporary staff as mentioned earlier, and the relative freedom of provisioning positioned Wang as the primary catalyst for innovative proposals, a responsibility previously distributed among the different chef de partie, as Chef Tang testified. Centralising creative initiatives under his own authority is part of the new management strategies taken in the *danwei*. Wang thus exploits the ambiguity of his cuisine's repertoire to facilitate forms of clientelism, illustrating how political dynamics shape the creative margins; in response to declining profitability, the restaurant reasserts its political role as a strategy for market repositioning.

Going back to the orthodox rhetoric of work dedication

From the moment I entered the hotel, Chef Wang allowed me to roam freely, and always made a point of responding to my requests with complete transparency. His office was located in the same room as the storeroom, so the various discussions I had with him were always susceptible to being overheard, which was his way of emphasising that he had nothing to hide. He even showed me his salary grid on his phone as well as the internal employee management guide.²⁰ This guide consisted of 575 articles detailing penalties in the form of point deductions – a bureaucratic practice which can be found in many other spaces in China.²¹ Behind his desk, Wang explained the underlying stakes of his management methods:

The major difference from a private hotel is that here, we talk politics, but the owners of private establishments don't talk politics, they only talk about profit. Of course, nowadays we also have to make money, but we mostly talk politics, we talk about risks. When we say talking politics, we refer to the state leaders, what meetings are being held, what the expectations are, and you adapt to the budget they give you, and you must meet their needs. We talk politics, duty (*yiwu* 義務), contribution (*gongxian* 貢獻). Sometimes here, we lose over 10,000 *yuan* on hosting an official meeting, but we have to do it; it's a matter of mission (*jiang renwu* 講任務), political mission. (Interview, 21 October 2019)

Although what Wang means by "political" is not easy to determinate, he clearly uses this term in contrast to "profit," which he associates with the private sector and views as morally negative. As the number of official receptions declines and profits decrease, the "political role" of state-owned hotels becomes apparent through management methods – such as the previously mentioned bureaucratic point system. The fact that a Party secretary is part of the hotel team is testament to this. In an article published in 2015 in the journal *Corporate Culture* (*qiye wenhua* 企業文化),²² the Party secretary wrote:

Public hotel must assume their historical mission (*lishi shiming* 歷史使命) and social responsibilities in the new stage of building a moderately prosperous society (*xiaokang shehui* 小康社會), in realising the "Chinese Dream" and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation. (...) The main function of public hotels is to receive officials and to be competitive in the market. Yet many *danwei* directors believe that party-building work is a matter for the company's Party committee, and that employees' political consciousness is only part of individual thought, but that is not so. In order to improve employee motivation, the management must reform and improve the quality of food in the canteen, and allocate money for festive meals, except for departments that have not reached the annual turnover. The 900 cakes given to employees for their birthdays, or the assistance provided to them to cope with difficulties related to mourning or illness, have allowed employees to feel that they are reaping the benefits of the hotel's reforms. They feel closer to the company and have greater confidence, better creative initiative, and a new enthusiasm for the establishment of socialism with Chinese characteristics and the "Chinese Dream."

This article is a call, in orthodox Party rhetoric, for the remobilisation of the role of cadres in state-owned enterprises and the rebuilding of a cohesive community, in a context of resurgent nationalism initiated by Xi Jinping, here crystallised by the programmatic slogan of the "Chinese Dream." This discourse echoes the past role of the *danwei* as it evokes traditional paternalistic practices that bind Party cadres and workers. The restaurant sector is particularly porous to this discourse: hierarchical relationships and an ethos based on work and devotion are fundamental to the profession, participating in the intertwining of political and professional cultures. This echoes what Cliff calls the "reconstitution of *danwei*-like practices" (2015: 156), i.e. creating the illusion of stability by maintaining the structure while dismantling its characteristic components. Indeed, since the promises of job security, adequate material support, and social status are no longer upheld, political allegiance is no longer guaranteed and feels like an empty shell. Indeed, compared to the delinquency observed, these measures seem trivial. The politicisation of contemporary discourse serves as a way to legitimise the continued presence of the *danwei* by assigning it a moral role. Echoing past practices, this resurgence of the political role of the *danwei* is encapsulated in an orthodox morality and its related lexicon. However, this is not a complete return to the 1960s, as the definition of privilege has changed; nor is it a return to the "big wok" era, since luxury is now more widely distributed – a shift influenced by the market and the private sector. Finally, this "political mission" paradoxically means the circumvention of directives. In that respect, the core role of

20. With certain limitations inherent to each investigation, all my requests for interviews with the management and the human resources department were declined; therefore, I do not have access to the formal salary grid and the status of *danwei* workers.

21. This is described by Wang Di through the case of resident committees in Beijing that assign a certain number of points to "objects, individuals, and management and control tasks" (2013: 9). Difficult to evaluate, they are then made objective, measurable, and controllable.

22. For the sake of confidentiality, I cannot provide specific references.

the *danwei* remains unchanged: providing cadres with access to food privileges and hedonistic experiences while being a place of production and dissemination of political campaigns. What no longer remains is the trust of workers toward the *danwei*.

Conclusion

While seated outside the Banquet Restaurant, waiting for the end of the workday, I asked one of the cooks why they didn't eat at the canteen and preferred to go home instead. He replied, "The food here is rubbish (*laji* 垃圾). It's worse than pig food." The workers' loss of trust in the *danwei* is so deeply embodied that it manifests itself in their refusal to consume the food brought into the workplace. This erosion of attachment is due to multiple factors: the disappearance of benefits that previously attracted people to the *danwei*; the disappointment in unfulfilled promises such as career advancement and opportunities for creativity; the loss of prestige once associated with serving the elite; and the denial of workers' skills through a lack of recognition. Once relegated to the blind spots in the consumer market and creativity horizons, workers' aspirations are reduced to waiting for the end of their careers in a "retirement home." Throughout its history, the hotel *danwei* was not only a place of stability for workers but also a privileged space for an urban elite to enjoy a level of food consumption mostly denied to ordinary citizens; creativity was nevertheless limited to large woks and mass catering for the elite. Evolving from exclusive dining spaces for officials to being commercialised for the masses, these public catering institutions became a hub for innovation and professional growth, with the economic opening benefitting public-sector chefs and fostering

the renewal of the profession through associations promoting local cuisine, culinary exploration, and competitions. In the 1980s, the project led by Chef Tang was that of a socialist haute cuisine: local, sophisticated, and no longer reserved exclusively for the masses.

How should we understand the tears of Chef Tang at the beginning of our interview? Starting in the 2000s, the previously existing but relatively subdued private sector began to overtake the public sector. This trend continued into the 2010s under Xi's authoritarian regime, with the culinary-political project launched by Tang and other *danwei* chefs aiming to reshape the orthodox understanding and rhetoric of morality within the *danwei*. If public institutions previously defined the terms of culinary production, competition with the private sector introduced a new artistic dynamic. While condemning profit-driven motives associated with the private sector, the distinguishing path of the Lake Hotel is based on a discourse of morally-driven profit under the label of "political mission," which paradoxically relies on bypassing anti-corruption rules. As benefits dwindle and skills depart with the premature exit of chefs, creativity is now centralised in a single figure, the head chef Wang. The restaurants have emptied out, except for the officials, the clientele that the *danwei* is ultimately meant to serve.

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