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Beyond the Dining Table:

Reconfiguring Commensality in the Lives of Chinese Students in Sweden

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Abstract

This thesis explores how Chinese students in Sweden navigate and reconfigure the practice of eating together in transnational and digital contexts. Drawing on the theoretical framework of commensality, community, and conviviality, it examines how students sustain shared eating practices amidst cultural differences, spatial constraints, and technological mediation. Through qualitative methods including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and analysis of interactions on social media platforms, the study reveals that communal eating takes both embodied and virtual forms. From group cooking to digital food sharing and WeChat-based coordination, students develop hybrid strategies of "fragmented togetherness" that blend intimacy and distance. Rather than seeing digital mediation as a loss of tradition, this research shows how platforms enable new modes of sociality and emotional anchoring. Rather than viewing digital mediation as a loss of tradition, the research demonstrates how online platforms enable new modes of sociality and emotional anchoring. At the same time, it situates digital interactions within the broader spectrum of embodied and relational eating practices, highlighting that students' experiences of "eating together" encompass both face-to-face and digitally mediated encounters. In doing so, the thesis contributes to broader discussions on migration, food practices, and the evolving meaning of "eating together" in a globally connected world.

Keywords: Commensality, Chinese international students, Digital food practices, Community building, Conviviality, Social anthropology, WeChat, Xiaohongshu

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1. Introduction

Food is far more than sustenance. It is a sensory, social, and symbolic medium through which people construct identity, navigate cultural boundaries, and maintain relationships across time and space (Counihan, 1999; Fischler, 1988; Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). Among the many practices that make food socially meaningful, commensality—the act of eating together—stands out for its capacity to shape how individuals experience belonging, exclusion, intimacy, and distance (Douglas, 1975;Grignon, 2001; Sobal, 2000;).

Chinese food culture places a strong emphasis on communal dining. Whether at home, school, or in restaurants, meals are typically structured around shared dishes and collective rhythms (Anderson, 1988; Chang, 1977). Eating is an act of care and connection, governed by deeply embedded cultural norms rooted in Confucian ideals of harmony, reciprocity, and familial hierarchy (Wu & Cheung, 2002; Liu, 2021). In contrast, Swedish eating practices are often more individualized, with an emphasis on personal autonomy and a structured approach to meals based on individual schedules and functional concerns. Meals tend to be regular, nutritionally oriented, and typically served as individual portions on separate plates, reflecting a pragmatic approach that emphasizes health, efficiency, and self-management (Mäkelä et al., 1999; Warde, 1997).

For Chinese students living in Sweden, this cultural divergence creates a unique site of friction and negotiation, and the students often find themselves navigating between these two food worlds. Such negotiation can involve emotional labor, identity work, and culinary improvisation (Ray, 2004; Hage, 2010).

This thesis investigates how Chinese students in Sweden sustain and transform the practice of eating together within a transnational context, bridging physical and digital spaces. It asks how these students navigate cultural, spatial, and technological constraints to maintain commensality, and what strategies they develop to balance

intimacy, social connection, and emotional well-being. In particular, it examines how shared meals are enacted in dormitories, kitchens, and other physical spaces, how digital platforms such as WeChat and Xiaohongshu facilitate community-building and emotional exchange, and how embodied and digital practices together shape conviviality, relational dynamics, and expressions of care. By approaching eating together as a flexible, adaptive practice, the study highlights how students actively rework tradition in response to new social and material contexts.

The research employs qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and analysis of social media interactions, to capture the interplay between embodied and digitally mediated commensality. In doing so, it situates Chinese students as active agents who creatively navigate the complexities of migration, crafting hybrid forms of "eating together" that sustain community, intimacy, and emotional anchoring. Ultimately, this thesis contributes to scholarship on migration, food, and digital culture, showing how shared meals—whether in dormitories, restaurants, or online—function as living sites of negotiation, care, and belonging in a globally connected world.

2. Eating Together through the Three Cs: Commensality, Community, Conviviality

For Chinese international students living in Sweden, everyday practices like eating together take on layered social and cultural significance. These shared food practices reflect how migrants navigate unfamiliar environments, sustain ties to home, and negotiate new forms of community. To make sense of these dynamics, this chapter brings together three intersecting theoretical perspectives: commensality, community, and conviviality. Each framework offers a different analytical entry point—ranging from the embodied act of sharing meals, to the symbolic construction of belonging, to the negotiation of difference in diverse settings. Together, they provide a cohesive lens for understanding how eating together becomes a socially and culturally generative practice within transnational student life.

2.1. Commensality

The term commensality is commonly defined as the practice of eating together, derived from the Latin *com mensa*, meaning "sharing a table." Although the concept appears straightforward, it encompasses diverse meanings and practices that vary widely across cultural and social contexts. What constitutes a "shared meal" differs significantly depending on the setting. In some cases, it involves eating from the same dish; in others, the emphasis lies on the temporal and spatial co-experience of eating, even if the food items differ. Commensality occurs in a wide range of social settings—from intimate family dinners to formal banquets, as well as informal communal gatherings in dorm kitchens or cafés.

Beyond the diversity of shared meal forms, the material and spatial conditions under which meals occur play a crucial role in shaping commensality. Domestic architecture, kitchen arrangements, or institutional dining settings may either enable or constrain shared eating practices (Wilk, 2006). These material arrangements are not neutral; rather, they reflect and reinforce social values and hierarchies (Miller, 2010). For example, in contexts such as student housing, the availability of shared cooking facilities or communal spaces for dining can significantly influence the formation of food-related social practices. Temporality is another key dimension. Daily routines, cultural meal schedules, and institutional timetables structure when and how commensality is possible or desirable. As Lefebvre (2004) suggests, social rhythms govern the experience of time and, by extension, shared eating practices. These rhythms may differ cross-culturally, creating friction or negotiation in transnational settings.

Scholars emphasize that commensality is not simply the physical co-presence of individuals during a meal; rather, it is a profoundly social practice characterized by cooperation, mutual recognition, and the performance of cultural norms (Douglas, 1972; Fischler, 2011; Grignon, 2001).

Commensality plays a central role in shaping social relations. While often celebrated for its capacity to foster cohesion and belonging, it also operates as a medium through which social boundaries and hierarchies are constructed and maintained. Fischler (2011) argues that sharing a meal fosters a sense of community and collective identity, a view echoed by Simmel (1994), who sees dining together as a practice that generates intimacy and mutual understanding. As Mennell, Murcott, and Otterloo (1992) note, the act of eating together can signal inclusion and solidarity, while its absence may reinforce exclusion or social distance.

Yet commensality is not inherently egalitarian. As Douglas (1979) and Goody (1982) demonstrate, the structure of shared meals—who sits where, who serves or is served, and what is eaten—often reflects and reproduces social hierarchies. Even family meals, commonly idealized as spaces of unity, can reinforce generational authority or gendered roles (Murcott, 1982; Ochs & Shohet, 2006).

In migratory and transnational contexts, commensality acquires new layers of meaning. Rather than simply reproducing cohesion, shared meals often become arenas for negotiating memory, identity, and adaptation. Sutton (2001) highlights how food functions as a powerful medium through which migrants engage with nostalgia and cultural continuity. At the same time, they must navigate unfamiliar food environments and social expectations. As Ray (2004) and Hage (2010) suggest, the disruption and reconfiguration of commensality in these contexts can serve both as a strategy of belonging and as a form of cultural resistance—particularly when dominant food systems marginalize or exoticize migrant cuisines.

These complexities are especially evident in multicultural or international settings such as among international students. While shared meals can provide comfort and forge social ties, they may also surface tensions around taste, etiquette, and moral values. Lupton (1996) and Julier (2013) observe that expectations around reciprocity and participation can become sources of pressure or exclusion. Likewise, Heldke (2003) and Mol (2008) argue that the act of eating together may not resolve

but rather expose cultural differences, challenging the idealized image of commensality as always convivial.

In recent years, the proliferation of digital technologies and online platforms has given rise to what scholars term digital commensality—the practice of eating together mediated by digital means. While commensality has traditionally implied physical co-presence and shared meals around a table, this concept has expanded to include new forms of sociality that occur across screens and networks (Lupton & Feldman, 2020). From livestreamed cooking sessions to food-sharing apps and social media posts of meals, digital commensality reflects a transformation in how food-related intimacy, belonging, and conviviality are enacted in contemporary societies.

The emergence of digital commensality can be situated within a broader shift toward mediated social life, in which digital platforms increasingly structure interpersonal interaction. Lupton and Feldman (2020) define digital commensality as any digitally mediated experience of eating with others, emphasizing how such practices may replicate, modify, or replace traditional forms of co-eating. They identify a wide range of configurations—from synchronous video meals on Zoom or Skype, to asynchronous social sharing through Instagram—that enable people to feel "together" despite spatial separation.

Scholars have highlighted the emotional and affective dimensions of these practices. For instance, Lupton and Feldman (2020) emphasize that digital forms of eating together—such as sharing food images or participating in virtual meals—are rich with affective engagement, enabling users to express care, nostalgia, and solidarity. Through visual and textual interactions like emoji reactions, comments, and hashtags, digital commensality simulates the sensory and emotional co-presence of physically shared meals. In diasporic or transnational contexts, such practices become particularly significant, enabling individuals to sustain cultural foodways and emotional bonds despite geographic distance ((Lin, Pang, & Liao, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated interest in digital commensality, as social distancing measures rendered traditional communal dining difficult or impossible. Research conducted during this period points to the ways digital eating practices were not merely stop-gap measures, but meaningful adaptations that facilitated new rituals of care and community. Wang et al. (2021) suggest that these forms of mediated eating offered psychological benefits by preserving a sense of normalcy and relational closeness.

However, digital commensality is not without its limitations and ambivalences. While often framed as innovative or empowering, some scholars caution against overly celebratory narratives. The lack of sensory co-presence—such as taste, smell, or physical interaction—can render digital meals less satisfying or emotionally rich (Lupton & Feldman, 2020). Moreover, access to digital devices, stable internet, and platform literacy are not evenly distributed, leading to unequal participation in mediated commensal practices (Lupton, 2020). These dynamics point to the material and infrastructural dimensions of digital commensality, which are often overlooked in more idealized accounts.

From a sociological perspective, digital commensality can also be understood as part of the broader platformization of food culture (Johnston & Goodman, 2015). Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube not only mediate food-sharing but also structure visibility, popularity, and value through algorithmic systems. Food-related content becomes commodified, influencing how people present meals, interact with others, and understand shared eating as a performative act. In this context, commensality may shift from an intimate, reciprocal exchange to a form of curated self-presentation or social capital accumulation (Abidin, 2016).

At the same time, digital commensality can foster new forms of community-building and inclusivity, especially for those who may be marginalized in traditional food settings. Online food communities—such as those centered around veganism, or migrant diasporas—use digital spaces to share knowledge, experiences,

and support (Lewis, 2018). These virtual gatherings can offer safe and affirming environments where users negotiate identity, belonging, and care through food, often in ways not possible in physical spaces.

Further, scholars have begun to theorize digital commensality through posthuman and multisensory frameworks. Drawing from sensory anthropology and digital media studies, authors such as Pink (2015), Couldry and Heppet (2018) emphasize that eating with others online involves not only human-to-human interaction, but also entanglements between humans, technology, and environments. Elements like camera angles, the sound of eating through a microphone, and the lighting of a livestreamed kitchen all contribute to how presence and relationality are constructed. In this sense, digital commensality is not a degraded version of "real" eating together, but a distinct mode of food-related sociality, with its own material, sensory, and symbolic properties (Pink, 2015; Pink et al., 2018; Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

Ethical and political questions also emerge in relation to digital commensality. The increasing integration of food sharing into data-driven platforms raises concerns about surveillance, commercialization, and digital labor (Obia, 2022). When eating becomes content, users may find themselves under pressure to conform to aesthetic standards or algorithmic norms, potentially distorting the meaning of shared meals. Additionally, food-sharing apps and delivery platforms, while enabling new forms of sociality, often rely on precarious labor and exploitative logistics, complicating the convivial image of digital food culture.

2.2. Community

Classic sociological theories laid the foundation for understanding community as a form of collective belonging, rooted in shared values and geographical proximity. Tönnies (1887, 2001) distinguished between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society), positing that communities were intimate, emotionally

connected groups, often marked by close-knit family bonds, local relationships, and shared traditions. Émile Durkheim (1912, 1995) offered another early theoretical perspective, emphasizing the role of collective consciousness in binding individuals together through shared values and norms.

However, such early perspectives tend to assume a static and often idealized model of community, one less suited to capturing the complexities of contemporary life marked by migration, mobility, and technological mediation. For many international students, the experience of community is rarely fixed or spatially bound; Chinese students in Sweden, for example, illustrate how community is continually reshaped across cultural, institutional, and digital spheres. This evolving context calls for theoretical approaches that reflect the fluid, practiced nature of community as it is lived through everyday experiences such as cooking and eating together.

From the late 20th century onwards, scholars began to reconceptualize community as a symbolic and performative process. Cohen (1985) argued that communities are constituted not merely by geographical proximity but by shared meanings and symbolic boundaries. In this view, individuals construct a sense of belonging through rituals, shared practices, and everyday performances that demarcate insiders from outsiders. For Chinese students abroad, activities like group cooking or food-related conversations function as rituals that re-establish cultural continuity while fostering interpersonal intimacy. These practices do not rely solely on physical space but instead create affective and symbolic spaces of community.

Delanty (2003, 2010) extends this performative understanding by viewing community as a site of continuous negotiation rather than fixed identity. He suggests that community is not a bounded entity but a discursive and relational process shaped by broader social, political, and cultural forces. Instead of assuming harmony or consensus, this framework foregrounds complexity and contradiction. Chinese students in Sweden, for instance, must navigate institutional norms, linguistic barriers, and cultural unfamiliarity. In such contexts, food-sharing is not only an expression of

cultural identity but also a strategy for negotiating belonging in an unfamiliar social environment. Eating together becomes a way to both assert agency and adapt to local realities.

This shift toward processual understandings of community is complemented by social capital theory, which focuses on the relational and resource-based dimensions of social life. Bourdieu (1986) introduced social capital as one of several forms of capital, defining it as the actual and potential resources embedded within social networks. These resources facilitate cooperation, access to information, and collective action, although they are unequally distributed. Putnam (2000) further developed the concept, arguing that strong social ties—particularly those grounded in trust and reciprocity—promote civic engagement and social cohesion. For Chinese international students, networks of co-nationals, friends, and roommates serve as critical forms of social capital, helping them manage the practical and emotional challenges of living abroad. Food-related activities, such as planning group meals or grocery shopping together, become important channels for generating and maintaining these ties.

Digital technologies add another dimension to how communities are formed and sustained. The concept of virtual communities emerged in the 1990s, when Rheingold (1993) theorized how online interactions could generate meaningful social bonds despite the lack of physical proximity. More recently, Baym (2015) has shown how social media platforms enable individuals to maintain relationships, share cultural content, and co-construct meaning across distance and time. Platforms such as WeChat, Xiaohongshu, and Facebook are crucial tools through which Chinese students in Sweden maintain transnational ties while also cultivating local support networks. Sharing cooking experiences or food-related content online fosters community both asynchronously and in real-time, extending communal practices into the digital realm.

Nevertheless, scholars caution that digital community-making is not without complications. Couldry and Mejias (2019) and Zuboff (2019) argue that social platforms often commodify social relationships and mediate interaction in ways that reinforce surveillance and extractive economies. While digital spaces offer opportunities for maintaining social and cultural ties, they may also expose users to forms of algorithmic control and commercial exploitation. Digital documentation of meals—through photos, videos, or livestreams—can blur the line between personal expression and public performance, raising questions about privacy, labor, and digital agency.

The role of food as a medium of community-building has been well established in both anthropological and sociological literature. Sutton (2001) and Fischler (2011) underscore the symbolic and affective power of food in creating shared experiences, sustaining cultural memory, and expressing identity. For migrants, food becomes a way of maintaining continuity with the home culture while simultaneously engaging with the host society. Among Chinese students in Sweden, shared meals serve as both comfort and resistance: comfort in the sense of offering familiarity, and resistance in the sense of asserting cultural presence in a foreign environment. These food rituals allow students to temporarily recreate "home" and to articulate belonging through taste, texture, and conversation.

Importantly, community is not only about sameness but also about negotiating difference. Anderson's (1983) concept of "imagined communities" emphasizes how individuals experience a sense of collective identity even in the absence of direct interaction. Hage (2010) builds on this by showing how migrant communities are often constituted through shared symbols, narratives, and aspirations rather than physical proximity. In the context of Chinese students eating together in Sweden, the act of sharing a meal is both lived and imagined—it connects them not only with their immediate peers but also with broader diasporic imaginaries. Through food, students

can negotiate hybrid identities, express care, and foster solidarity, all while navigating the tensions of cultural difference.

In summary, community is no longer understood as a bounded or fixed entity, but as an evolving and relational practice shaped by symbolic meanings, social capital, digital technologies, and everyday rituals like eating together. For Chinese students in Sweden, community is constructed not only through shared language or national identity, but also through the sensory, emotional, and symbolic act of sharing food. This theoretical lens provides a foundation for analyzing how food-sharing practices function as a mode of community-making in transnational student life.

2.3. Conviviality

The concept of conviviality has evolved significantly since its original articulation by Ivan Illich (1973), who introduced the term in *Tools for Conviviality* as a critique of industrialization and the alienation it produced. Illich positioned conviviality as a state of human flourishing rooted in autonomy, creativity, and meaningful engagement with the world. For him, conviviality was not simply about getting along or being sociable, but about the ability of individuals to exert control over their own tools, environments, and social relations. A convivial society was one where technologies and systems facilitated, rather than hindered, personal freedom and collective participation.

Although Illich was writing primarily in the context of technological alienation, his framing of conviviality as an ethical and relational mode of being has since been taken up and expanded by sociologists and anthropologists to examine everyday life in increasingly diverse and complex societies. In particular, conviviality has come to describe the mundane, lived processes through which individuals negotiate cultural, ethnic, and linguistic difference without necessarily resolving it—what Gilroy (2004) famously termed "a convivial culture."

Paul Gilroy's (2004) formulation of conviviality emerged out of a concern with the post-imperial condition in Britain, where former colonial subjects were now entangled in the cultural and political life of the metropole. In *After Empire*, he argued that multicultural urban life was not only defined by conflict or policy-driven integration but also by everyday acts of coexistence, humor, empathy, and interaction. These ordinary forms of togetherness, while never free of tension, were nonetheless meaningful in shaping social belonging. In Gilroy's framing, conviviality does not denote harmony or sameness, but rather the capacity to live with difference without reducing it to a problem that must be solved.

This shift in the theoretical use of conviviality coincided with broader anthropological interest in the micro-politics of urban life and the "everyday" as a site of social negotiation. Vertovec (2007) proposed the concept of "super-diversity" to describe how contemporary migration has led to increasingly intricate social landscapes, especially in urban settings. In such contexts, conviviality has been used as a heuristic to understand how individuals navigate these layered differences—not only in ethnicity and language, but also in migration status, legal recognition, class, and religiosity—through gestures of interaction, avoidance, cooperation, or negotiation in public and semi-private spaces.

Applied to the case of international students—such as Chinese students in Sweden—conviviality provides a useful framework for examining how individuals "eat together" not only as a cultural act but also as a relational practice. Eating becomes a site where the familiar and the unfamiliar converge, where shared practices such as hotpot or dumpling-making rituals provide comfort and bonding, while simultaneously revealing tensions around regional identity, class background, or gender roles. These subtle negotiations of sameness and difference unfold through acts of sharing, humor, exclusion, and care, all of which are embedded in convivial practice.

Scholars such as Wise and Velayutham (2009) have further nuanced the idea of conviviality by pointing out its limitations and possible romanticizations. In their analysis of multicultural interactions in urban Australia, they argue that while convivial encounters are common, they can coexist with underlying structural inequalities and latent forms of racism. They caution against seeing conviviality as an inherently progressive or harmonious phenomenon, instead suggesting it should be studied alongside conflict, discomfort, and ambivalence. These tensions are particularly salient in migrant and diasporic contexts, where power differentials may be masked by seemingly casual or friendly interactions.

This critical edge is echoed in Wessendorf's (2014) ethnography of Hackney, East London, where she introduces the idea of "commonplace diversity." In her work, conviviality appears not as deep engagement or solidarity, but as a kind of "light-touch tolerance"—a coexistence marked by politeness, avoidance of confrontation, and everyday routines of cohabitation. In many cases, people live with diversity not through intercultural dialogue or mutual understanding, but through strategic indifference, fatigue, or habituation. This perspective helps to challenge the assumption that multicultural living necessarily results in increased empathy or solidarity.

Recent scholarship has called for a decolonial rethinking of conviviality, particularly in response to its Eurocentric underpinnings. Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2010) argues that many studies of conviviality fail to account for the historical legacies of colonialism, racial capitalism, and imperial violence that shape everyday social relations. She proposes a decolonial conviviality that centers affect, embodiment, and emotional labor, especially as performed by racialized and migrant subjects. In her view, conviviality must be understood not as a flat or universal condition, but as a situated, historically inflected practice in which power is always at play.

This perspective is particularly relevant when considering how Chinese students navigate everyday life in Sweden—a country often praised for its inclusivity, yet not

entirely immune to forms of structural inequality, cultural stereotyping, or institutional challenges faced by non-European students. In this context, eating together is more than an act of cultural continuity; it also becomes a practical and affective strategy for managing the subtle and sometimes explicit forms of social exclusion that can arise in academic and public spaces. Shared meals provide moments of comfort and recognition, but they also involve careful emotional work, especially when students face language barriers, visa insecurities, or subtle forms of everyday discrimination.

Conviviality thus emerges not simply as a descriptor of sociable interaction, but as a deeply complex field of practice. It is enacted through rituals of food-sharing, humor, collective labor, and emotional expression. At the same time, it is constrained by unspoken boundaries, unequally distributed capacities for inclusion, and the broader structural conditions in which migration and diaspora unfold. For Chinese students in Sweden, commensality becomes a crucial arena where conviviality is made, felt, and sometimes denied—a space of both possibility and negotiation.

By bringing together the concepts of commensality, community, and conviviality, this thesis develops an integrated framework for understanding the social dimensions of eating together among Chinese students in Sweden. Rather than treating food as a backdrop to student life, these concepts help reveal how shared meals function as meaningful sites where belonging is performed, relationships are cultivated, and cultural identities are negotiated. Commensality offers an entry point into the embodied and relational dimensions of shared eating, illuminating how everyday food practices mediate intimacy, reciprocity, and emotional connection. Community, in this context, is not a given but a dynamic process—emerging through the repeated acts of gathering, remembering, and negotiating belonging across spatial and cultural boundaries. Conviviality deepens this analysis by foregrounding the ambivalent, often uneven encounters that characterize intercultural life, drawing attention to the subtle ways in which care, discomfort, exclusion, and solidarity co-exist within shared

spaces. Together, these concepts do not merely describe eating together; they provide a critical lens to interrogate how Chinese students in Sweden reconfigure kinship, cultivate resilience, and forge belonging in conditions shaped by displacement, precarity, and multicultural contact. Taken together, these frameworks enable a nuanced exploration of how eating together becomes a key practice through which Chinese students make sense of their lives abroad, connect with others, and navigate the shifting boundaries of identity and belonging within the broader landscape of transnational migration.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach to examine the practices of commensality among Chinese students at Lund University, Sweden, focusing on both physical and digital eating practices. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and social media analysis to capture a comprehensive picture of embodied and digitally mediated commensality.

3.1. Semi-structured Interviews

The primary method for data collection is semi-structured interviews, which provide flexibility while ensuring coverage of key research topics. A total of eight Chinese students from Lund University were selected for in-depth interviews using purposive sampling. The sampling method ensures diversity within the sample, with participants chosen based on variables such as gender, academic discipline, duration of stay in Sweden, place of origin in China, and type of housing (e.g., dormitories, private apartments). These criteria are designed to ensure the sample reflects the varied experiences and backgrounds of Chinese students, providing a richer understanding of how different factors influence eating practices.

Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and was conducted in Mandarin Chinese to allow participants to fully express their experiences and cultural perspectives. The interviews took place in a variety of settings, including on-campus

cafés, students' apartments, and parks. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accurate capture of their responses. Recording allows for detailed transcription and analysis, reducing the risk of omitting important nuances or non-verbal cues that might be missed in handwritten notes. The semi-structured format allows for both pre-determined questions and spontaneous probing, enabling participants to freely share their thoughts on how eating together plays a role in their lives, how they've adjusted their food practices in Sweden, and the significance of virtual meals in maintaining connections with family and friends back home.

Informants Profile

To ensure the confidentiality and privacy of informants, all namesused in this study are pseudonyms.

Yuhan (early 20s), is currently enrolled in a Master's program. She lives in a corridor-style student accommodation in Lund and has been in Sweden for less than one year.

Daniel (mid-20s), is pursuing an undergraduate degree in the science field. He lives in Malmö, renting a private room through an online housing platform.

Caicai (early 20s), is studying for a Master's degree in a social science field. She lives with her partner in a two-bedroom apartment in Lund and has been in Sweden for nearly two years.

Juan (late 20s), is enrolled in a humanities Master's program. She rents a room in a Villa located in a village just outside Lund.

Yue (early 20s), a postgraduate student in a media-related discipline. She shares a studio apartment in Malmö with another student.

Jiaqi (mid-20s), is studying Economics at the Master's level. He currently lives alone in a studio apartment in Lund.

Qian (late 20s), is doing postgraduate work. She rents a private room in a shared flat in Lund, found via a Swedish housing website. She has lived in Sweden for almost two years.

Tae (late 20s), a Master's student in an IT-related program, resides in a corridor-style accommodation in Lund provided by the university.

3.2. Participant Observation

To complement the interview data, I conducted participant observation between February and May 2025, to gain firsthand insights into how Chinese students eat together and how these practices adapt across physical and digital settings. During the fieldwork, I attended various communal meals, including dinners in shared kitchens at student housing, informal gatherings in private apartments, and group meals in local restaurants. This allowed me to observe the everyday social practices, food-sharing arrangements, meal preparation processes, and small rituals—such as how students decide who cooks, who brings ingredients, or how dishes are shared at the table. I paid particular attention to moments when cultural norms from China were maintained or negotiated in the Swedish context, for example when students adapted recipes to local ingredients or improvised with limited kitchen facilities.

Although the formal participant observation took place from February to May, I had already begun engaging in communal meals earlier, such as New Year gatherings, which gave me an initial sense of the food-related dynamics among Chinese students. These pre-fieldwork encounters helped me build rapport with participants and sensitized me to the kinds of practices I later examined more systematically.

In addition to these in-person gatherings, I also collected data about students' digital food-sharing practices. I focused on how students extend the social act of eating together into online spaces. To do this, I joined several WeChat groups where students coordinate shared meals, exchange recipes, or post invitations. Within these chat groups, I observed how food-related messages, emojis, photos, and short videos circulate to maintain connections and coordinate offline gatherings.

Beyond group chats, I documented how students use WeChat Moments and Xiaohongshu to share photos or short videos of what they cook or eat—sometimes to keep in touch with family and friends back home, sometimes simply to share daily life with other students. Whenever possible, I asked participants to show me examples of their posts and explain why and how they share them. Some students also described watching mukbang (livestream eating shows) alone or with friends online as a way to feel accompanied while eating. To capture this, I noted the platforms they use, how they talk about these shows, and how they sometimes comment or share clips with others.

These digital observations were embedded into my broader ethnographic practice: I did not rely only on what participants told me in interviews, but also requested permission to take screenshots of selected chats or posts they were comfortable sharing. I complemented this with fieldnotes describing the context and meaning of these online exchanges, including who shares what, how others react (comments, likes, emojis), and how digital interactions overlap with offline invitations and gatherings. All digital data were anonymized in my notes, and I took care to only include content that participants explicitly agreed to share for research purposes.

3.3. Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were foundational throughout this research process to ensure respect, trust, and protection for all participants. Before involvement, each participant provided informed consent after receiving clear information about the study's aims, procedures, and potential risks or benefits (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). They were assured that their identities would remain confidential and that all collected data would be securely stored, anonymized, and handled in accordance with ethical standards (Berg, 2009). Participants were also informed of their absolute right to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative repercussions. Furthermore, they were offered opportunities to review and approve interview transcripts to ensure accurate and comfortable representation of their experiences.

In collecting and analyzing digital materials, the research strictly excluded any private digital communications, analyzing only publicly available content to protect participants' privacy and digital boundaries (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Throughout the study, particular attention was given to cultural sensitivities within the diverse participant group, striving to maintain respectful and ethically sound interactions that honored varied backgrounds and experiences.

My position as an insider researcher—a Chinese student currently enrolled at Lund University—granted me unique access to the everyday social environments of my participants. This dual role facilitated natural, organic engagement in communal meals and digital interactions, providing richer, more nuanced insights into the practices of shared eating among Chinese students in Sweden. However, this proximity also required heightened reflexivity to critically examine my own potential biases and to avoid over-identifying with participants' narratives (Holmes, 2020; Cuthill, 2015). To navigate this, I maintained a detailed reflective journal throughout the fieldwork, capturing emotional responses, moments of surprise, and instances of discomfort. This practice helped me delineate personal experience from objective analysis.

Moreover, balancing the roles of peer and researcher necessitated continuous transparency about research aims and ongoing consent processes. Given the close-knit nature of the student community, I exercised particular care in safeguarding confidentiality and recognizing subtle power dynamics, thereby fostering trust and minimizing harm (Kennedy et al., 2024). Overall, these ethical considerations were integral to conducting respectful and responsible anthropological research.

3.4. Data Coding and Analytical Approach

After completing data collection, I manually transcribed all interviews in Mandarin. Fieldnotes from participant observation, descriptions of digital interactions, and selected screenshots from platforms like WeChat and Xiaohongshu were also

organized. I adopted a hand-coding approach, which allowed me to work closely and reflexively with the data throughout the analysis process.

The coding process followed a thematic analysis framework. I began with several close readings of the transcripts and fieldnotes to immerse myself in the material. During these readings, I annotated the margins with emerging keywords, recurring phrases, and significant patterns—this constituted the initial open coding phase.

From there, I grouped related codes into broader thematic categories that reflected key aspects of the research questions and theoretical framework. These included, for example: commensality, digital commensality, negotiation and adaptation of food practices, community, emotional and symbolic meaning of meals. Digital data—such as screenshots, message exchanges, and online posts—were also hand-coded using thematic labels.

4. Research Context: Chinese International Students at Lund University

This study focuses on Chinese students at Lund University, one of Sweden's leading institutions, which attracts a large number of postgraduate and exchange students from different regions of China. Despite their diverse backgrounds and differing levels of prior international experience, these students commonly face similar challenges when adjusting to Swedish food culture, social environments, and daily life routines.

4.1. Living Arrangements and Domestic Food Spaces

Among Chinese students in Lund, the majority reside in student housing, either provided through Lund University Accommodation or arranged via private rentals. A prevalent form of housing is the corridor-style apartment, where each student occupies a private bedroom but shares a communal kitchen and dining space with two to seven others. These shared kitchens are modest yet functional, typically outfitted with basic stovetops, ovens, sinks, and shared refrigerators. Despite their simplicity,

these kitchens often become the central locus of daily life, serving as both practical cooking spaces and sites of informal social interaction.

Within these communal kitchens, shared meals manifest in both planned and spontaneous forms. Some gatherings are intentionally organized, such as hotpot nights, or weekend dinners inspired by traditional Chinese festivals. Others arise more organically, triggered by chance encounters in the kitchen—students preparing food at the same time may pause, exchange ingredients, or decide to eat together. These interactions, though seemingly casual, carry social significance: they allow students to negotiate shared domestic routines, cultivate familiarity, and establish micro-communities within the larger housing environment. In this sense, food functions not merely as sustenance but as a medium through which social bonds are enacted and maintained. The act of cooking side by side, discussing recipes, or sharing utensils becomes a subtle performance of mutual care and inclusion.

Beyond corridor-style accommodations, some students live in studio apartments or small two-bedroom flats, often seeking greater privacy, quieter spaces for study, or residence with partners or close friends. These private settings afford more personalized cooking experiences and the capacity to host more deliberate gatherings. Weekend dinner parties, holiday celebrations, or experimental cooking sessions become possible in these spaces, providing students with opportunities to cultivate a sense of home and continuity with cultural traditions from China. The contrast between shared and private kitchens highlights the ways in which domestic space shapes social dynamics: communal kitchens encourage improvisation, negotiation, and accidental conviviality, whereas private apartments enable intentional, curated forms of hospitality.

In both contexts, cooking and eating are inseparable from broader patterns of social life. The corridor kitchen is a space where multicultural encounters occur, where students learn not only about ingredients and recipes but also about the rhythms, preferences, and social norms of others. Private apartments, meanwhile, offer a stage

for cultural continuity, identity expression, and affective intimacy. Across these domestic food spaces, the simple act of preparing and sharing meals becomes a lens through which the interplay of privacy, community, and cultural negotiation can be observed, revealing the centrality of food in shaping both everyday life and diasporic belonging.

4.2. Lund and Malmö: Everyday Mobility and Food Access

Lund, where this research is based, is a small and historically rich university town in southern Sweden. While it serves as the academic center for Chinese international students at Lund University, the town itself offers limited access to Asian food resources. There is one main Asian grocery store in Lund which carries a modest selection of Chinese staples such as rice noodles, frozen dumplings, and instant hotpot ingredients. Several Chinese restaurants are also located in town.

Due to the limited range of products and prices in Lund, many students choose to live or regularly travel to Malmö, a larger city just 15 minutes away by train. Malmö is home to a broader and more diverse selection of Asian supermarkets. These stores offer a wide variety of fresh vegetables, tofu, frozen seafood, spices, condiments, and niche ingredients that are essential for preparing home-style Chinese meals. Group grocery trips to Malmö—especially on weekends—are common among students, often involving friends coordinating to shop together and sometimes cook a shared meal afterward.

Malmö also hosts a wider array of Chinese and pan-Asian restaurants, some of which are known within the student community for offering "hidden menus" —Chinese-language menus shared through platforms like WeChat or Xiaohongshu. These menus include more traditional dishes designed for group dining, such as stir-fried dishes, soups, and hotpots meant to be shared among two or more people. While not always visible to non-Chinese customers, these menus allow students to recreate more familiar, collective dining experiences even when eating out.

This mobility between Lund and Malmö plays a practical role in students' food lives, enabling access to culturally specific groceries and shared dining experiences that are otherwise difficult to maintain in a small Swedish university town. However, the cost of train and bus tickets can be relatively high for students. To manage expenses, many take advantage of informal ticket-sharing practices: in WeChat groups, those with monthly passes often rent out their tickets to others at a discounted rate, usually half or two-thirds of the normal price. These arrangements not only make travel more affordable but also illustrate how students creatively adapt to structural constraints while maintaining their food-related routines.

5. Eating Together, Apart: Commensality, Community, and Conviviality

This chapter brings together the main findings of my fieldwork and situates them within the broader theoretical framework of commensality, community, and conviviality. Rather than treating these dimensions as separate or mutually exclusive, my analysis demonstrates how they are continuously entangled in the everyday lives of Chinese students in Sweden who gather, share, and perform "eating together" across kitchens, restaurants, screens, and digital platforms.

In line with the ethnographic tradition of social anthropology, my results are not presented as detached data points but as moments where mundane acts of preparing, sharing, and representing food become meaningful social practices. During eight in-depth interviews and multiple episodes of participant observation—both in physical settings like student apartments and restaurants, and in digital spaces such as WeChat groups and xiaohongshu—I encountered how students reconfigure the act of commensality to navigate life in a foreign country.

One clear pattern that emerged is that commensality, for these students, does not strictly depend on co-presence in a single physical place. While some gatherings happen around crowded dormitory tables or shared meals in common kitchens, these are often extended or amplified digitally: food photos are shared in private group

chats, video calls turn solo dinners into remote family meals, and watching mukbang (live or recorded eating broadcasts) provides a sense of ambient togetherness even in physical solitude. These layered modes of connection illustrate what scholars such as Spence et al. (2019) describe as digital commensality—the symbolic and sensory work of "eating together" mediated by technology.

Yet what struck me equally was how fragile, negotiated, and sometimes contested these forms of togetherness can be. While food sharing can generate warmth and solidarity, it also brings moments of exclusion, awkwardness, or hidden tensions. Deciding who cooks, who is invited, who contributes money or ingredients—these small negotiations reveal how commensality is never neutral. At the same time, the emotional atmosphere—what Gilroy (2004) calls conviviality—cannot be taken for granted: students improvise ways of caring for each other through meals, but this caring is often entangled with expectations, informal hierarchies, and subtle obligations.

By tracing how Chinese students eat together—whether through steaming pots in small kitchens, or through smartphones and laptop screens—I argue that commensality becomes a generative site for understanding how mobile subjects maintain connections to multiple worlds at once. Sharing food here is not merely a retention of cultural tradition; it is an adaptable strategy that weaves together the bodily, the technological, and the emotional. This practice creates spaces of comfort and familiarity in an otherwise uncertain and sometimes isolating transnational context.

In what follows, I draw on selected ethnographic scenes and interview excerpts to show how commensality, community, and conviviality are constantly produced and redefined in these students' everyday routines. The discussion moves through three interlinked perspectives: first, I explore how students enact commensality in constrained yet creative ways, blending physical and digital practices; next, I show how these acts generate and test the boundaries of community, making visible who is

included and who is not; finally, I reflect on how the shared atmosphere of eating together can be both joyous and fraught, offering warmth and recognition yet demanding constant affective negotiation.

By weaving these elements together, this chapter aims not just to describe what happens when Chinese students eat together in Sweden but to highlight what these moments reveal about belonging, adaptation, and the reimagining of kinship and solidarity in an age of migration and digital mediation.

5.1. Commensality: Embodied and Digital Practices of Eating Together

Commensality operates as both a social and symbolic process that structures relationships and belonging. For Chinese students in Sweden, commensality takes on layered forms, encompassing not only the embodied and material act of sharing food in physical proximity, but also digitally mediated encounters that sustain kinship and friendship ties across distance. In what follows, I distinguish between embodied and digital practices of commensality to highlight how students negotiate presence, absence, and intimacy in everyday life abroad.

5.1.1.Embodied Commensality: Materiality, Space, and Temporality of Eating Together among Chinese Students in Sweden

For Chinese students living in Sweden, embodied commensality assumes particular significance as a lived, sensorial, and material practice through which they negotiate the challenges of displacement, cultural difference, and the demands of academic life. The shared meal becomes an intimate site where bodily experiences intersect with social belonging, offering comfort and continuity amid the uncertainties of migration.

This section unpacks embodied commensality along three interrelated dimensions: materiality, spatiality, and temporality. Together, these reveal how eating together is a

deeply sensory and social practice that is both constrained by and constitutive of the international student experience.

Materiality: Food, Objects, and the Sensory Texture of Togetherness

Material elements—ingredients, cooking utensils, and shared dishes—play a fundamental role in mediating embodied commensality and the formation of affective bonds among Chinese students living in Sweden. Counihan and Van Esterik (2013) argue that food serves as a primary site where culture, emotion, and social relationships intertwine, and this interplay is particularly vivid in diasporic contexts where material practices help sustain identity and community. These material practices do not merely support eating together; they make togetherness tangible, turning the act of commensality into a multisensory experience of belonging.

One small but recurring routine described by participants is going grocery shopping with friends to prepare shared meals. Yuhan, describes weekend trips to Asian supermarkets with her friends not merely as practical errands but as deeply embodied cultural acts infused with emotional and symbolic weight:

> "We usually go to the store together to look for Chinese spices and ingredients. We joke about our 'Chinese stomachs' needing those flavors. Cooking with these ingredients and following traditional recipes helps us feel connected to home, even when we are far away."

This practice exemplifies what Mintz (1996) identifies as the cultural embeddedness of food acquisition and preparation—acts that do more than sustain the body; they sustain identity. The deliberate selection of specific spices or ingredients is not a functional decision but an embodied performance of cultural memory. It affirms a structure of taste shaped over time through socialization, family rituals, and national foodways.

Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus is particularly useful here: the preference for certain ingredients and methods of preparation reflects internalized dispositions that guide action without conscious deliberation. Yuhan's reference to her "Chinese stomach" articulates a visceral attachment that cannot be entirely rationalized—it is a socially conditioned embodiment of culinary taste. The sourcing ritual thus becomes a practice through which international students reassert a culturally structured way of being in the world, one that resists the implicit dietary norms of the host society.

Moreover, the act of preparing food with culturally specific ingredients becomes a form of embodied memory work. It sustains a particular tempo of domestic life—what Lefebvre (2004) calls "rhythmanalysis"—through the repetition of movements, smells, and textures that are both materially real and symbolically loaded. These moments preserve continuity with home, but not through nostalgia alone; rather, they materialize through practice, through doing food in ways that feel legitimate and orderly.

Beyond ingredients, shared dishes such as dumplings and hotpot act as collaborative rituals requiring cooperation and coordination, reinforcing group cohesion through embodied labor. Rozin (2005) conceptualizes shared meals as collective performances in which joint labor and participation embody social bonds. This dynamic was vividly illustrated during a dumpling-making event observed during fieldwork. Participants gathered around a crowded kitchen table, engaged in the tactile choreography of rolling dough, stuffing fillings, and folding dumplings while engaging in playful conversation and laughter.

Caicai, recalls the affective and sensory significance of this ritual:

> "Making dumplings together reminds me of New Year's Eve nights back home. Every year, we'd spend hours folding dumplings while watching the Spring Festival Gala on TV. It's more than just cooking—it's sharing memories and feeling like family."

This quote reflects how the embodied practice of food preparation functions as a medium for transmitting cultural memory and affective belonging. Lu and Fine (1995) argue that the sensory textures of food—its smells, tastes, and tactile qualities—serve as vehicles for cultural memory and identity. The sensory environment created by collective cooking evokes a shared familiarity that offers emotional comfort, helping migrants negotiate feelings of displacement.

The symbolic significance extends beyond food ingredients and preparation to the material objects involved. Items such as chopsticks, rice cookers, and communal pots carry what Appadurai (1986) terms the "social life of things," where objects act as tangible mediators of identity, social relations, and cultural continuity. Yue highlights this when describing her rice cooker, which she brought all the way from home:

> "I brought my rice cooker from home, even though it took up a lot of space in my luggage. But I need it—for cooking rice, making soup. I have to eat rice; without it, I feel like I have no energy, haha... I also packed chopsticks, thinking it might be hard to find ones here. It's not just convenience—these are things I grew up using every day. Using them here isn't only about making food; it's about holding on to a way of doing things that feels proper and grounded. We always cook rice in a rice cooker. And we use chopsticks to pick up dishes."

This testimony reveals that these objects are embedded in a set of embodied habits and culturally ingrained routines that constitute Yue's habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). The insistence on cooking rice with a rice cooker and eating with chopsticks is not merely practical but reflects a deeply ingrained cultural logic. The use of familiar utensils and appliances reproduces embodied cultural knowledge and daily rhythms that provide stability in an otherwise unfamiliar environment.

Furthermore, Csordas (1993) emphasizes the role of embodiment in cultural memory. The sensory experiences associated with these objects—the clicking sound and the warm rush of steam escaping from an electric rice cooker, the tactile sensation

of chopsticks, invoke an affective resonance that anchors students in a familiar bodily and cultural world. Sutton (2010) further elaborates on how sensory engagement is a powerful mode of cultural knowledge and social belonging. The aroma, texture, and taste of food reconstruct embodied memories and cultural worlds, counteracting the alienation common in migration. In participant observation during a hotpot gathering, the bubbling broth, fragrant steam, and rhythmic passing of ingredients fostered a multisensory atmosphere. Mei, a participant, expressed:

> "When the hotpot broth bubbles and the aroma fills the room, it's like we're back on the streets of home, eating with family and friends. The taste, the smell, the sound—they remind us who we are and where we come from."

This illustrates how sensory qualities materialize belonging beyond verbal communication, facilitating affective community formation and cultural continuity.

Spatiality: The Social and Symbolic Meanings of Eating Spaces

Physical space plays a crucial role in shaping embodied commensality among Chinese students in Sweden. For these students, dining spaces are not neutral or passive backgrounds but actively produced and negotiated environments where social relations, cultural meanings, and identity are continuously constructed and contested. Due to limited housing options and the high cost of living, many students reside in small dormitory corridors with shared kitchens. These spatial constraints heavily influence when, where, and how meals are shared, often requiring delicate negotiation with roommates and corridor-mates.

In Lund's student housing system, many Chinese students live in corridor-style dormitories with communal kitchens shared by 3 to 8 residents. These kitchens are often small, minimally furnished, and governed by both formal rules and informal norms. Before organizing a group meal, students commonly seek roommates' consent to ensure shared use of the space and respect for differing schedules and habits. This negotiation illustrates how eating together here is not just about food but also about

claiming and managing space for collective conviviality amid spatial scarcity. As one master's student, Tae, described:

> "We have a WhatsApp group for everyone in the corridor. If you want to invite people from outside to join a meal, you need to inform the group in advance and get everyone's approval. It's kind of an unwritten rule. After the meal, you're expected to clean the kitchen immediately and make sure it's back to its original state—otherwise people start complaining."

Tae's account shows how commensality in shared kitchens is constrained by spatial scarcity and shaped by micro-politics. Students often use social media (like WhatsApp or WeChat groups) to negotiate kitchen time and resolve conflicts. The act of cooking together thus becomes a process of claiming space—a momentary reconfiguration of institutional architecture into a temporary "home."

Beyond dorm kitchens, eating also extends into the public spaces—such as the university cafeteria, local restaurants, and Parks. However, these spaces often present ambivalent experiences of belonging. Several students described discomfort navigating Swedish-only menus or dealing with unfamiliar food norms like eating alone or not sharing dishes. Juan remarked in an interview:

> "When I go to the restaurant, the menu is in Swedish, and sometimes I don't understand all the options. It makes me hesitate and feel like I'm not really part of the place, Sometimes, even at Chinese restaurants, the dishes served don't feel authentically Chinese, which adds to that sense of disconnect."

Even when eating at Chinese restaurants, many students noted a disconnect. Some dishes were "Swedish-Chinese," modified to local tastes. Several students pointed out that some dishes commonly found in Chinese restaurants in Sweden would be rare—if not entirely absent—in restaurants back in China. A particularly striking example is the frequent pairing of meat with bamboo shoots in stir-fries. Others mentioned the presence of deep-fried banana as a dessert item—something

few had ever encountered in a Chinese restaurant at home.“It’s coated in batter and deep-fried, then served with a sauce” remarked one student from Beijing. “It doesn’t feel like a Chinese dessert at all. It’s more like something invented for local taste, not something we’d see back home.” Even more surprising, some so-called Chinese restaurants included sushi on the menu. As Tae, put it:

> “The ‘Chinese food’ here feels like it’s been translated twice—once for ingredients, once for people’s expectations. It looks like what we know, but it doesn’t feel right. Sometimes it just makes me miss even the school canteen food in China.”

Such culinary encounters reveal how food becomes a site of friction between memory and adaptation. The restaurant becomes a symbolic space where authenticity is contested—not in an absolute sense, but in relation to embodied memory, sensory expectation, and communal rituals of consumption. These experiences further reinforce students’ turn toward home-cooked meals and informal gatherings, where they can reclaim control over taste, ingredients, and the social rhythms that give food emotional weight.

For example, students often create improvised dining spaces. During warmer months, they organize picnics in parks. At one such gathering I attended recently, we brought food containers with rice balls, sandwiches, fruits, and homemade juice. Seated on the grass, passed dishes around, played music, and chatted in Mandarin. As my friend, commented:

> “In the park, there’s no kitchen schedule, no complaints about smells, no menu we can’t read. We just bring what we like, sit together, and relax. Everyone contributes something small, and it doesn’t matter if it looks perfect or matches—it’s about sharing, not impressing. We can laugh freely, play music from our phones. It feels more relaxing than cooking in the dorm kitchen, more spontaneous, more ours. ”

These outdoor gatherings represent an important spatial intervention—moments where students reterritorialize public space (Appadurai, 1996) by infusing it with their own rhythms, aesthetics, and social practices. Through collective eating and sensory exchange, they mark these spaces as temporarily “theirs” .

In conclusion, eating spaces among Chinese students at Lund University are dynamic, affectively charged. From negotiating corridor kitchen rules to reimagining public parks, these students actively shape the spatial conditions of commensality. Spatiality here is not merely about location—it is about access, negotiation, aesthetics, power, and cultural memory. As Chinese students navigate the spatial terrain of Swedish student life, they continuously remake eating spaces into sites of familiarity, intimacy, and resistance—producing a lived sense of “home” far from home.

Temporality: Time, Rhythms, and the Migrant Student Life

Time is another crucial dimension of embodied commensality. The daily and weekly rhythms of student life—influenced by class schedules, workloads, and social commitments—shape the possibilities and constraints for eating together.

Many students expressed that shared meals served as temporal anchors, marking transitions between academic labor and social relaxation. For example, Friday dinners often functioned as regular rituals for reconnecting after a busy week, providing a sense of stability amid uncertainty.

Juan, reflected on this temporal aspect:

> “We’re busy with classes and assignments during the week, but on Fridays, we come together to eat, relax, or even throw a party. It’s our way to unwind and enjoy each other’s company after a hectic week.”

The temporality of meals also interacts with the seasonality and calendar of migration. Students who arrived in Sweden for the autumn semester described how

initial weeks were marked by solitary eating and adjustment, while over time, they established routines of group cooking and eating.

Important cultural festivals, such as the Lunar New Year, which falls on the first day of the first lunar month (usually between late January and mid-February), and the Mid-Autumn Festival, celebrated on the 15th day of the eighth lunar month (usually mid-September to early October), became moments of intensified embodied commensality, loaded with emotional significance. Organizing these feasts required logistical effort but provided powerful affective rewards, reinforcing belonging and cultural memory far from home.

During a Mid-Autumn Festival gathering I attended, students carefully arranged mooncakes, tea, and decorations. The ritual of sharing food became a performative act of cultural resilience and identity assertion in a foreign context.

At the same time, temporality is often contested and uneven. Academic pressures, visa insecurities, and financial constraints sometimes disrupt or limit opportunities for commensality. Students frequently reported feelings of fatigue and isolation that interfered with the desire or ability to share meals. Yuhan, a master's student, shared:

> "During exam weeks, eating together feels like a luxury. Everyone's just too tired or stressed to cook or hang out. Sometimes it's easier to eat alone just to get through the day. I end up grabbing instant noodles or reheating something simple, and it feels almost mechanical—like survival rather than enjoyment. Even when friends suggest cooking together, I often decline. It's not that I don't want company; it's that the weight of assignments, deadlines, and worry about grades makes shared meals feel almost impossible. Eating alone becomes a way to conserve mental energy, even if it comes with a sense of missing out or quiet loneliness."

This duality resonates with Wessendorf's (2014) concept of "commonplace diversity," where conviviality coexists with fatigue and indifference. Embodied

commensality thus emerges as a negotiated practice embedded within the temporal realities of international student life, reflecting both the desire for social connection and the constraints imposed by structural pressures.

5.2. Digital Commensality: Negotiating Intimacy, Belonging, and Performance in Transnational Eating Practices

As shown in the previous section, embodied commensality among Chinese students in Sweden is deeply enmeshed in material, spatial, and temporal dimensions. The shared physical presence around meals — in student apartments, or restaurants — grounds belonging through tactile, sensory, and affective engagement. Food preparation, eating rituals, and spatial arrangements co-produce a sense of community and identity in the immediate, embodied moment.

However, the lived realities of transnational migration and the constraints of distance impose significant challenges to maintaining such embodied togetherness. Informants frequently described moments when geographical separation, academic pressures, or institutional limitations prevented physical gatherings. For many, the need to sustain social ties and cultural continuity despite these barriers necessitated an extension of commensality into digital realms.

In this context, digital commensality emerges not as a mere supplement but as a vital and evolving mode of eating together. It enables participants to negotiate intimacy and belonging across physical divides through mediated practices such as video-call meals and engagement with online eating broadcasts (mukbang). This shift highlights how digital technologies reconfigure traditional notions of commensality, expanding its temporal and spatial reach while introducing new dynamics of presence, performance, and cultural mediation.

Drawing on ethnographic data, the following section examines these digital practices in detail, revealing how they both replicate and transform embodied eating

rituals, and how students actively navigate the ambivalences and possibilities that digital commensality entails.

5.2.1. Video-Call Meals: Negotiating Presence and Absence

One of the most salient findings from my observations and interviews is how video-calling platforms, primarily WeChat video calls, serve as vital tools for recreating a sense of shared presence during meals. Many participants emphasized that eating "together" over video calls with family or friends in China helped alleviate homesickness and maintain emotional bonds. As Biocca, Harms, and Burgoon (2003) argue, social presence—the sense of being together with others through mediated communication—depends on both perceptual cues and interactive engagement. In this context, video-mediated meals allow participants to co-experience temporal simultaneity and perform ritualized acts of togetherness, creating what Gergen, McNamee, and Barrett (2001) describe as digitally sustained relational spaces.

During an evening of participant observation in a small apartment, Caicai, set up her phone on a stand in the kitchen as she prepared dinner. She then initiated a video call with her mother, who was cooking simultaneously in Chongqing. The two exchanged greetings and comments about their meals, showing ingredients and techniques through the screen. Caicai explained in an interview:

> "Even though we are thousands of kilometers apart, this makes me feel like we are sharing the same table. It's not just about food, but about being together, even if only virtually."

In such moments, the kitchen is transformed into a translocal affective node, a place where sensory cues, familial rhythms, and emotional labor converge digitally. As Miller and Sinanan (2014) argue in their ethnography of social media use, digital communication practices are not simply about connection—they are about continuing intimacy, about sustaining "the ordinariness of being together" across distance. For Caicai and others, video-call meals serve precisely this function: they allow

participants to embed emotional connection into daily routines, creating a form of *virtual kinwork* (di Leonardo, 1987).

However, these meals are not frictionless. The technology often fails to replicate the subtle affective signals that accompany physical commensality. Yue, another student, was frank about these limits:

> "Sometimes the connection is bad, or my family is busy and distracted. It feels like I am just eating alone with a screen in front of me. It's comforting but also a little sad."

Yue's comment reveals a central tension in digital commensality: while the video-call affords a sense of presence, it also amplifies the feeling of absence. The limits of connectivity—buffering, ambient distractions, dropped calls—reveal the fragility of this presence. As Csordas (1993) reminds us in his writing on embodiment, the sensory and affective dimensions of co-presence—smell, warmth, touch—are constitutive of what it means to be with someone. In the absence of these dimensions, presence becomes partial, shadowed by a residual sense of distance.

This ambivalence resonates with what Madianou and Miller (2012) describe in their work on "polymedia" among transnational Filipino families. They argue that digital technologies offer not just connection but new forms of emotional labor, where users must navigate which platforms to use, how to time calls, and how to manage the emotional expectations of "being there." For my participants, coordinating mealtime video calls often involved scheduling around work, accounting for time zone differences, and managing their own states of mind.

Jiaqi, for instance, described how she sometimes avoided these calls:

> "If I'm too tired or feeling down, I don't want to pretend everything is okay. I know my mom will worry if I look sad. So sometimes I just say I'm busy and eat alone. It's not that I don't want to see her, or that I don't care about sharing

> meals with my family. It's just… some days, I don't have the energy to put on a happy face or explain why I feel off."

Her statement illustrates the performative labor of virtual co-presence. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) notion of the "presentation of self" in everyday life, in this case, the "front stage" is a digitally curated kitchen scene, and students must sometimes opt out when the emotional cost of performance is too high. It also reflects an affective tension: the very technologies that offer proximity can impose new pressures to appear emotionally available.

Yet, in other moments, students used video-call meals as a space of relational repair. After a few days of tension with her mother, Juan decided to cook her mother's signature dish—sweet and sour spare ribs—and initiate a call home.

> "We didn't really talk about what happened. I just showed her the dish, and she smiled and said, 'Looks good, similar to what I made' That was all. No big conversation, no apology. But it felt like things were okay again."

In such acts, food becomes a mediating object, a gesture of reconciliation where words may fail.

Furthermore, video-call meals are not limited to the family domain. Several participants described organizing group video chats with friends dispersed across different time zones, in which everyone would show the meal they had prepared. Jiaqi, a master's student based in Sweden, described how she and her close friends—now living in Germany, the Netherlands and US—maintained their connection through what she called a "shared mealtime window."

> "We don't cook the same thing or try to synchronize, really. But we each bring our food to the screen, show it off, complain about how tired we are, or talk about what we made."

These virtual gatherings, while loosely structured and often filled with laughter, function as ritualized acts of connection and care. Rather than reproducing a single shared table, they establish a mosaic of parallel dining spaces—each shaped by local ingredients, personal habits, and shifting time zones, yet linked through mutual presence and affective attention.

As Gilroy (1993) reminds us, diasporic life is not solely marked by absence or nostalgia, but by the creative reassembly of belonging. Through these shared meals over video calls, students enact a form of diasporic solidarity—informal, DIY, technologically enabled, yet deeply emotionally resonant.

5.2.2.Mukbang as Virtual Eating and Cultural Connection

Beyond video calls, the popularity of mukbang videos among Chinese students in Sweden represents a distinct form of digital commensality that is asynchronous but culturally and emotionally potent. Mukbang, a genre originating from South Korea, features hosts eating large quantities of food on camera while interacting with viewers through comments or live chat.

In interviews, many students described how watching mukbang videos during solitary meals provided a sense of virtual companionship, reduced feelings of loneliness, and reinforced cultural belonging. For example, Mei explained:

> "When I eat alone in my dorm, I watch mukbang videos. It feels like someone is sharing the meal with me, talking about the food and sharing their experiences. Sometimes, I even try to make the same dishes because the food they eat looks really appealing."

This turn to mukbang highlights how digital media enables a form of simulated companionship during solitary eating—a way of satisfying the desire for social presence when face-to-face interaction is absent. As Wang et al. (2021) argue, watching others eat online can ease loneliness in ways comparable to "cloud-based

commensality" via video calls, though it is less interactive and more individualized. For international students, this privatized mode of participation was not only a coping strategy for eating alone but also a channel through which cultural nostalgia and a sense of belonging were sustained.

> "Sometimes the mukbanger eats spicy squid or street barbecue," said Daniel. "That hits me."

Mukbangs thus serve as cultural memory machines, transmitting sensory cues—visual, auditory, gestural—that evoke tastes of home. For diasporic viewers, mukbangs re-stage the familiar in the unfamiliar, offering fragments of cultural continuity.

Participant observation of online viewing habits showed that mukbang videos served multiple functions: entertainment, comfort, cultural nostalgia, and even informal cooking tutorials. Students often discussed recipes or food brands mentioned in videos, integrating these into their own cooking practices in Sweden.

However, unlike video-call meals, mukbang is inherently performative and highly mediated—far from private acts of nourishment. Hosts craft elaborate performances, engaging in exaggerated eating behaviors, leveraging audiovisual cues, and interacting dynamically with audiences to foster viewer engagement. This form of content is deeply intertwined with commercial imperatives and platform affordances (Choe, 2019).

Some students expressed critical perspectives on this commercialization. Qian remarked:

> "Mukbang is fun, but it's also very staged. The hosts add filters to the food to make it look perfect, and sometimes it feels more like a show than real eating. It's entertaining but different from eating with friends."

This ambivalence reflects Couldry and Mejias's (2019) critique of digital sociality as entangled with platform economies and surveillance capitalism, where social relationships risk commodification. Digital commensality via mukbang thus embodies contradictions: it offers connection and cultural continuity but is mediated by market logics that shape and sometimes distort social interactions.

This tension between authenticity and spectacle aligns with Duguay's (2016) critique of curated digital intimacy, where online personas are simultaneously intimate and monetized. Mukbang, while mimicking the casual messiness of everyday eating, is often a carefully produced spectacle—a form of affective labor designed to evoke presence while maximizing engagement. Mukbang, then, becomes not a replacement for real companionship, but a ritualized coping mechanism. Much like Berlant's (2011) concept of "cruel optimism", it offers hope of connection while simultaneously reminding viewers of their solitude.

At the same time, mukbang consumption fosters informal culinary education. Participants frequently discussed recipes or ingredients seen in videos, sometimes attempting to replicate them. As Daniel explained:

> "I've learned so many new recipes—now I feel like I'm basically a chef! Sometimes I watch a mukbang video just to see how they handle certain ingredients. I take notes, try to replicate the dishes at home, and even tweak them based on what's available in Sweden."

Still, participants wrestled with the unidirectional nature of the experience. Qian summarized it thus:

"They talk, I listen. They eat, I eat. But we're not really together."

This reflects the limits of mediated commensality: the structure of sharing is present, but the reciprocity is absent. Unlike video calls, mukbang lacks the mutual responsiveness that characterizes human eating rituals. Yet its popularity

persists—precisely because it allows viewers to suspend disbelief and dwell, if only briefly, in a simulation of togetherness.

Mukbang's popularity among Chinese students in Sweden thus highlights the ambiguous entanglement of nostalgia, consumption, and emotional survival. It is a form of digital sustenance, both emotional and aesthetic, that operates at the intersection of ritual, performance, and commodification. Its consumption is not merely passive; it is imbued with longing, adaptation, and, at times, resistance to loneliness.

5.3. Hybrid Practices: Blurring Boundaries Between Digital and Embodied Commensality

For Chinese students in Lund, digital and embodied forms of commensality are rarely experienced in isolation; rather, they intersect in creative and dynamic ways, producing what can be understood as hybrid practices. These practices involve both extending physical meals into digital space and incorporating digital content into embodied encounters, challenging conventional boundaries of presence, participation, and relationality. Hybrid commensality thus provides a lens to understand how sociality, cultural knowledge, and affect circulate across spatially and temporally dispersed communities.

One clear manifestation of these practices occurred during a student hotpot gathering I attended. While seated around the simmering pot, several participants livestreamed the meal on WeChat, inviting friends and family abroad to join virtually. The physical gestures of communal eating, became performative acts visible to a dispersed audience. Distant participants contributed in real time through comments, and culinary advice, effectively co-creating the social atmosphere. Here, the meal became a multi-sited encounter: embodied presence intertwined with digital co-presence, extending conviviality beyond the immediate physical space. In contrast, students frequently watched mukbang videos together in group chats, exchanging

food-related emojis, comments, and playful reactions. Watching mukbang videos together in group chats is a common example. Participants exchange food-related emojis, humorous reactions, and culinary commentary, effectively transforming solitary consumption into a shared social experience.

In conclusion, the ethnographic examples from Lund demonstrate that hybrid commensality is a creative, relational, and affectively charged phenomenon. By blurring boundaries between digital and embodied space, students negotiate inclusion, intimacy, and cultural continuity, sustaining diasporic networks across distances. These practices underscore that contemporary commensality is not fixed or singular but exists in multiple, overlapping registers, produced through everyday acts of care, humor, and culinary engagement, both online and offline.

5.2. Community beyond Proximity

For Chinese students in Lund University, community is not a static category but a lived, negotiated, and sometimes fragile set of relations continually performed through everyday practices like cooking, chatting on WeChat, or eating together.

As this chapter will demonstrate, food becomes a vital medium through which these students craft and sustain their sense of community, both materially and symbolically. Community here is not bound by geography, but rather emerges through repeated interactions, shared tastes, and mutual support—especially in the absence of familiar familial and cultural structures.

One student, Jiaqi, who arrived in Lund for a two-year master’s program, reflected during an interview:

> “Before I came, I thought I’d meet people in class and we’d naturally become friends. But the truth is, it's hard. Everyone is busy, and people just go home after lectures. It was only through cooking with other Chinese students that I felt like I found ‘my people’.”

Jiaqi's experience underscores the role of embodied and affective practices in building social ties. Unlike formal student networks or institutional support structures, these informal food-based gatherings offered a way to "feel at home" in a setting that often felt alienating. The shared preparation of gathering dinners in cramped corridor kitchens, grocery trips to Asian market, became emotionally charged moments of care, familiarity, and belonging.

These community-making practices are not isolated to physical settings. Digital platforms such as WeChat and Xiaohongshu serve as both extensions and amplifiers of community. Through photos of shared meals, recipe exchanges, livestream cooking sessions, and food-related memes, students co-create digital spaces of intimacy and recognition. These spaces are essential not just for maintaining bonds with fellow Chinese students in Sweden but also for staying emotionally tethered to families and friends in China.

At the same time, the formation of community is rarely smooth or apolitical. Power asymmetries—based on gender, region, language, or class—shape how food-related roles are distributed and evaluated. Conflicts over kitchen space, divergent tastes, and unequal labor in group meals reveal the negotiation and tension underlying what might appear as harmonious community life. As Bourdieu (1986) suggests, the social field is never flat: capital, symbolic or otherwise, is always unevenly distributed. Who gets to host, who does the cleaning, who gets praised for their "authentic" cooking—all these micro-dynamics reflect broader questions of social positioning.

What becomes clear through these food practices is that community is not just about being together. It is also about working together, recognizing one another, and sometimes confronting difference. Community among Chinese students in Sweden is enacted through layers of obligation, affect, and performance. This chapter aims to explore these layered dynamics in depth.

5.2.1. Group Cooking as Bonding Ritual

In both interviews and participant observation, group cooking emerged as one of the most prominent practices through which Chinese students in Lund cultivated and performed a sense of community. Participants often described a recurring temporal rhythm to these shared meals, typically anchored around weekends. As Juan explained,

> "We might not talk that much during the week, but as soon as someone mentions cooking on the weekend, everyone shows up. It's like an unspoken agreement."

This regularity underscores the role of group cooking as both a social and temporal structuring device, providing predictable opportunities for interaction amidst the otherwise fragmented schedules of student life abroad.

The act of preparing a meal together involved a collective mobilization of labor, distributed informally yet efficiently among participants. Some students took responsibility for purchasing groceries, others managed the preparation of ingredients, while one or two—often volunteers or those with less culinary confidence—handled cleaning afterward. Through this cooperative division of labor, students temporarily enacted domestic structures reminiscent of family life in China, while simultaneously generating new, peer-based social bonds. The process was performative: each gesture, from chopping vegetables to stirring sauces, carried social meaning, signaling competence, care, and willingness to contribute.

From an anthropological perspective, these practices can be interpreted as ritualized acts. Drawing on Cohen's (1985) framework, community is not merely defined by shared background or co-presence, but actively constituted through repeated "symbols and rituals" that distinguish insiders from outsiders. Within these student groups, cooking together functioned as such a ritual, marking trust, mutual care, and inclusion. Invitations to participate in meal preparation and the unspoken rules governing task allocation became symbolic markers of belonging.

The sensory dimensions of these shared meals further reinforced their communal and mnemonic power. The aroma of garlic sizzling in oil, the rhythmic chopping of vegetables, and the playful negotiation over proportions of sauces all contributed to a multisensory experience that anchored students' memories and sustained cultural continuity. These embodied interactions provided not only a sense of comfort and familiarity in a foreign environment but also a medium through which culinary knowledge, humor, and affective bonds circulated. In this sense, group cooking functioned as both a social and pedagogical space, simultaneously cultivating friendship, trust, and cultural identity.

5.2.2.Mini-Communities in Kitchens and Dormitory Corridors

Beyond the event of the meal itself, the spatial context in which these meals unfolded—namely, the shared kitchens of dormitory corridors—also played a crucial role in shaping the performance of community. As I mentioned before, the kitchens in many student corridors at Lund are small, often shared by 2 to 8 students from different countries. Within such spatial constraints, Chinese students developed what can be described as mini-communities grounded in tacit cooperation and micro-routines.

In one observation, I noted how tasks during a group meal were distributed almost seamlessly: one student wash the vegetables while another simultaneously chop the meat; a third prepare the rice while yet another set the table. Students developed what Bourdieu (1986) would describe as a form of social capital rooted in habitual collaboration: the kitchen became a site of trust, competence, and reciprocal recognition.

A particularly striking comment came from a student named Tae, who lived in a corridor where Chinese students were a small minority:

> "There aren't many Chinese students in this building, so when we cook and eat together, that's really when we catch up on life—what's been going on lately,

how people are doing, maybe someone shares a funny thing from class. It's our time to reconnect."

At the same time, these kitchen-based communities were fluid rather than permanent. Participants described how core group members would shift over time due to academic workloads, changes in dormitory assignments, or evolving social dynamics. Still, the structure of togetherness remained curiously consistent: a few students gathered around a modest kitchen, taking turns at the sink, chatting while rinsing vegetables, or standing nearby waiting for the soup to boil. These repeated configurations formed what Ingold (2011) might call "taskscapes"—ongoing constellations of activity through which people experience the world in common.

As Caicai, reflected:

"We don't always cook with the same people. Some graduate, some move out, but somehow the pattern stays. Someone always takes charge of the rice; someone else cut the vegetables. It's like we pass down unspoken roles."

Here, community is not rooted in fixed membership but in embodied repetition. The choreography of preparing and sharing food becomes a means of social continuity—a kind of micro-ritual that survives even as individuals come and go.

Crucially, these micro-communities were not simply replications of Chinese culinary culture transposed into a Swedish setting. Rather, they were adaptive responses to local constraints and possibilities. The shared corridor kitchen, with its limited stovetops, scarcity of utensils, and impersonal layout, was not designed for the intimacy of communal dining. And yet, it became precisely that: a space of mutual accommodation, where community was actively produced through compromise and cooperation. Juan observed:

"The kitchen is small, and the electric stove takes long time to heat up, yes, we don't have gas stoves. But it becomes warm when we're all there. We prepare

> together. We wait for each other to finish. We clean together. That kind of feeling—you don't find it in class."

According to Delanty (2003), community should not be seen as a harmonious essence but as a process of negotiation and shared world-making. The warmth Juan describes is not aesthetic, but relational—built from small gestures of care and co-presence.

The flexibility of these communities also reflected students' awareness of emotional and social bandwidth. In some cases, participation was informal, opt-in, and responsive to mood. As Yuhan, explained:

> "Sometimes I just want to cook alone, listen to music. But other times I'll message the group and say, 'Anyone want to eat together tonight?' It's not official, but it works."

This spontaneity produced what anthropologist Marianne Constable (2001) might call a "community of moments": not a stable collective, but an intermittent, affectively charged assemblage of people drawn together by timing, mood, and hunger.

5.2.3.Community in Digital Spaces

While the shared kitchen may serve as a physical nucleus for communal life among Chinese students in Sweden, digital platforms offer a parallel—sometimes even primary—arena for cultivating and sustaining community. In a transnational, high-mobility context, WeChat groups, Xiaohongshu, become spaces where identity is rehearsed, relationships are negotiated, and communal belonging is continuously reassembled.

WeChat Groups as Infrastructure of Everyday Sociality

For most Chinese students at Lund University, WeChat functions as an essential infrastructure for social life. Interviewees repeatedly emphasized that nearly all their campus-related interactions with other Chinese students—be it organizing events, borrowing utensils, selling and buying things or sharing informations—took place in WeChat groups.

One particularly illustrative example of digitally mediated food-related community-building is the “Lund Life Group”, a WeChat group that initially formed to share everyday information—from second-hand furniture to visa tips—but gradually became a multifunctional hub for organizing meal gatherings, coordinating grocery runs, exchanging recipes, and maintaining cultural intimacy. What began as a utilitarian space soon took on affective and social dimensions, operating as a kind of digital agora for Chinese students navigating life in a foreign country.

During participant observation, I saw how simple prompts—such as ‘Who wants to go to a Chinese restaurant in the nearby town this weekend?’ or ‘Does anyone know where to buy pork stomach in Malmö?’—frequently led to lively threads of emoji responses, logistical planning, and eventually offline commensality.” But more than that, the group became a digital infrastructure for what Baym (2015) terms relational labor—the everyday effort to sustain meaningful connections through mediated interactions.

Daniel, one long-time group member, noted during the interview:

> “Even if you’ve never met someone in person, just seeing them post food photos, or joke about overpriced mushrooms makes you feel like they’re part of your daily life.”

Beyond sharing recipes and cravings, the group also became an important logistical platform. When Asian supermarkets in nearby cities (like Malmö or Helsingborg) released updates about fresh shipments of niche ingredients—such as enoki mushrooms, dragon eyes, durins—store owners would sometimes post

announcements directly in the group. These would quickly trigger a relay-signup format: “Add your name, products you need and quantity,” often culminating in bulk orders and coordinated pick-ups.

These routines reflect Ito et al.’s (2010) notion of networked publics—fluid communities that emerge through sustained, technologically mediated coordination. In the absence of shared canteens or spontaneous sociality common in Chinese campus life, digital networks like the “Lund Life Group” provide a surrogate infrastructure for cohabitation and collective survival.

Importantly, the group also fosters what Herzfeld (2005) calls cultural intimacy: those subtle, often humorous, exchanges that bind members through shared habits and frustrations. For instance, informants frequently joked about the inexplicably high price of some products in Swedish supermarkets, such as chili, over 200kronor for one kilo—or the experience of buying products like cucumber, eggplant “by the piece” rather than by weight. These moments of informal humor helped metabolize the alienation of living in a culinary unfamiliar environment, transforming micro-irritations into community glue.

Beyond student-to-student interaction, the group also created a dynamic of intergenerational mentorship. Doctoral students or long-term residents often served as informal guides—offering cooking advice, immigration tips, or reviews of local Chinese restaurants. Jenny, a PhD student, reflected on her role within the group as one of informal mentorship and guidance: she described it as being “like a big sibling,” explaining that when a new member posted questions such as ‘Where can I buy luosifen?’ it was immediately apparent that they had just arrived in Sweden. In these moments, more experienced members often stepped in to offer practical advice, share culinary tips, or suggest local restaurants, creating a supportive network that extended beyond simple information exchange and fostered a sense of belonging for newcomers.

Thus, the group isn't only about information or nostalgia—it functions as an ethnoscape (Appadurai, 1996): a mobile, digitally sustained community of practice where food serves as a medium for memory, adaptation, and affective repair. The boundary between online and offline is porous: one post about craving Mapo tofu could trigger a hotpot party; a shared photo of xuemeiniang (Snow Skin Mochi) could lead to someone saying, "Come over, I'll show you how to make it."

Jiaqi, another student, described:

> "At first I joined just to lurk. But then one day someone posted about her favorite restaurant. We ended up meeting, went to that restaurant together, and now we become friends and hang out together a lot".

In this way, the "Lund Life Group" illustrates how digital platforms can generate not only logistical solidarity but emotional architecture—spaces where food is both discussed and enacted, imagined and consumed. These digital exchanges do not merely reproduce old models of community; they actively reshape what belonging looks like under conditions of migration, precarity, and diasporic longing.

Xiaohongshu: Performing and Consuming Diasporic Food Culture

Unlike the semi-private and utilitarian environment of WeChat, Xiaohongshu operates as a public-facing platform where food becomes both content and performance. Here, Chinese students in Sweden not only document their meals but also reflect on their lives abroad, often positioning themselves as micro-influencers or knowledge brokers.

Posts with titles like "What a Chinese student in Sweden ate today" or "How to make authentic baozi " blend instructional cooking content with aesthetic presentation and personal narrative. These posts typically feature step-by-step guides, carefully composed food photography, and reflections on themes such as homesickness, culinary experimentation, or cultural pride. They often garner comments, reposts, and

reactions from fellow students and diaspora audiences, creating what Couldry and Mejias (2019) term “datafied communities”—social formations generated not only through shared cultural practices, but also through algorithmic amplification and quantifiable visibility (likes, shares, bookmarks).

Rather than static expressions of identity, these food posts become dynamic performances of diasporic selfhood, mediated through platforms like Xiaohongshu or WeChat Channels. They allow students to publicly articulate care, resilience, and creativity, while simultaneously participating in what Abidin (2016) describes as “calibrated amateurism”—the strategic presentation of everyday life as both authentic and optimized for engagement. In these contexts, cooking becomes both a private act of self-soothing and a public gesture of cultural continuity, curated for an imagined audience who “gets it.”

In one example, a student posted a series of images of her first attempt to make mooncake using ingredients she found in the local supermarkets. The post received over 300 likes and dozens of comments from other overseas students, who shared their own hacks or asked questions about where to buy specific ingredients. While these interactions may appear superficial, they reflect a deep-seated desire to maintain cultural continuity and emotional resonance through food. The affective labor that goes into staging, photographing, and narrating food practices online is not merely expressive—it is constitutive of diasporic identity.

According to Heldke’s (2003), food is both a practice and a form of knowledge production. In the digital context, that knowledge is performative: it requires both presentation and participation. Students become co-creators of a shared diasporic food discourse, one that sustains a sense of being “in it together,” even across different cities, meal schedules, and affective states.

Between Support and Surveillance: The Ambivalence of Digital Community

Digital communities play a complex and often ambivalent role in the social lives of Chinese students in Sweden. While these platforms—WeChat, Xiaohongshu, and other social media—facilitate connection, cultural continuity, and practical coordination, they also introduce new forms of pressure, comparison, and self-monitoring. Several participants articulated a tension between the affordances of digital connectivity and the performative demands such platforms impose. On WeChat, some expressed anxiety that their cooking skills—or even basic kitchen hygiene—might be judged by peers. On Xiaohongshu, the emphasis on aesthetically appealing, Instagram-like meal posts created additional pressure. As one student reflected, the images she encountered were “so perfect and colorful” that she often refrained from posting her own dishes, worried they would appear “plain or boring.” Here, the digital space becomes simultaneously a site of relational support and a locus of self-surveillance, highlighting the ambivalent nature of online community.

This ambivalence reflects a broader tension between the facilitation of social bonds and the intensification of performativity. Digital platforms mediate interactions in ways that extend beyond traditional sociality: every post, photo, or comment becomes a visible, curated artifact subject to evaluation by peers. In this sense, digital food sharing functions as a form of relational labor, echoing Baym’s (2015) argument that maintaining online connections requires sustained effort, attentiveness, and emotional work. Students negotiate the maintenance of intimacy, the expression of care, and the management of self-presentation simultaneously, often under conditions of limited time, resources, or emotional bandwidth. This labor is not neutral; it is structured by social norms, aesthetic expectations, and the implicit pressures of comparison. Shoshana Zuboff (2019) warns that such platforms commodify interaction, converting relational life into data streams subject to quantification, visibility, and subtle forms of control. In the case of food sharing, then, digital community is not merely a social resource—it is also a field in which emotional, cultural, and performative labor circulates, sometimes unevenly rewarded or recognized.

Furthermore, digital platforms can reproduce and even amplify preexisting hierarchies of intimacy, creating boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. In several WeChat groups observed, a small cluster of highly active users—often friends who knew one another offline—dominated conversation threads. Their rapid, dense exchanges and frequent references to shared experiences—past group meals, joint grocery trips, or photos from previous meetups—established what Goffman (1963) might describe as "interactional privilege." For newcomers, particularly those who had recently arrived in Sweden, such interactions could appear opaque or alienating. Lili reflected on her experience: "They always reply to each other's messages really fast, like they already have their own circle. I sometimes typed something but deleted it—it felt awkward to interrupt." This illustrates how offline social capital—existing friendships, shared histories, or comfort with group norms—translates into online visibility and conversational dominance. The core group subtly shapes what is visible, what is responded to, and which forms of participation are valorized, effectively creating an informal hierarchy.

This hierarchy has material and affective consequences. Conversations about organizing dinners, visiting restaurants, or preparing shared meals often revolve around the tastes, preferences, and schedules of the core members. Those outside this circle may feel excluded from both planning and recognition, even if they wish to participate. Such patterns demonstrate that digital communities, while ostensibly open and inclusive, are structured by prior intimacies, relational histories, and implicit gatekeeping. Newcomers or less socially confident students must navigate these dynamics carefully, balancing their desire for connection with the perceived risk of awkwardness or judgment.

Yet ambivalence is not simply experienced as alienation. Some students engage strategically with these dynamics, using selective posting, emojis, or private messages to negotiate visibility while minimizing exposure to judgment. Others find ways to contribute indirectly, by sharing tips, asking for advice, or commenting on posts

without fully joining the core exchanges. These strategies illustrate the nuanced labor of participation in digital communities: students constantly manage both affective connection and self-presentation, cultivating relationships while monitoring their own inclusion and reception.

The ambivalence of digital food communities, therefore, lies in their dual function as spaces of support and surveillance. They offer emotional sustenance, opportunities for cultural continuity, and practical coordination, but simultaneously expose participants to comparison, judgment, and implicit hierarchies. Food-centered exchanges online are thus sites of social labor, aesthetic negotiation, and relational management. By attending to these tensions, we can see how digital platforms mediate not just communication but also power, belonging, and affective experience, revealing the complex, layered dynamics of contemporary diasporic conviviality.

5.3. Conviviality without intimacy: "You don't have to be close to eat together"

> "We weren't really that close—we just happened to live in the same dorm building. Someone would say, 'I'm cooking tonight,' and that was that."
> — Tae, April 2025

In much of the literature on eating together, commensality is often linked to intimacy, care, or established social bonds (Simmel 1997). However, what I observed among Chinese students in Lund suggests a different entry point: you don't have to be close to eat together. Shared meals were often initiated among acquaintances, semi-strangers, or newly added WeChat contacts. The table did not follow friendship; it frequently preceded it.

This inversion challenges assumptions about conviviality as rooted in existing warmth. Instead, what emerged was a form of low-threshold sociability, what Wessendorf (2014) might describe as "light-touch conviviality." Meals offered a low-stakes setting where the pressures of verbal fluency, academic performance, or cultural fluency were temporarily suspended. Participation was enabled not by

personal closeness, but by mutual availability and spatial proximity—especially in dorm clusters, where shared kitchens became informal points of congregation.

A recurring story from my fieldwork involved students being invited to join dinners after minimal contact. Juan recalled:

> "One time I was waiting for the bus when a Chinese girl started talking to me. We exchanged contact info, and a few days later she invited me to her place for dinner. I didn't know anyone else there, just her."

Such interactions reflect what Gilroy (2004) describes as the capacity to live with difference without resolving it. Conviviality here was not necessarily about building deep friendships or long-term solidarity. Rather, it was about the possibility of togetherness, made material through food and ritualized cooperation—someone brings meat, another preps the dipping sauces, a third washes vegetables. The social glue was not emotional closeness but shared rhythms: boiling, chopping, plating, eating.

Interestingly, these gatherings often involved little self-disclosure. Several participants noted that their fellow diners were "people I still don't know that well." In some cases, meals ended with polite goodbyes and no further contact. And yet, the act of having eaten together had significance: it created what one participant called "a shared timestamp" in an otherwise fragmented and mobile social life.

The importance of access, rather than deep intimacy, reflects Paul Rabinow's (1977) insight that sociality often emerges not through grand narratives but through mundane co-presence. Sitting together, handling the same ladle, or debating how long the soup should simmer—these simple bodily acts created openings for connection, generating what might be called potential friendship: not necessarily deep bonds, but doors left ajar. Wessendorf (2014) similarly observes that diverse communities often maintain coexistence through routine encounters and soft boundaries rather than elaborate dialogue, highlighting how everyday interactions sustain social life. Laurier

and Philo (2006) further emphasize that ordinary spaces and practices—such as a passing encounter in a café—can produce subtle forms of sociality, allowing presence and engagement without requiring intense emotional investment. In Lund, students' shared food practices functioned in this way, offering "spaces of approachability" that enabled casual, low-pressure interaction across differences in language, culture, or culinary skill.

Importantly, this casual conviviality functioned as emotional infrastructure in a context where many students reported feeling socially isolated or linguistically alienated in academic settings. Cooking together became a way to sidestep those pressures: "No one judges your accent when you're stirring the hotpot," joked one participant.

Thus, conviviality in this setting should be understood less as a condition of existing warmth and more as a method of initiating proximity. Shared meals allowed students to test the waters of potential belonging, to try out the idea of being-with-others in a relatively forgiving space. The table became a place where one could not yet be close, but still belong enough.

Yuhan reflected on a casual dinner she hosted at her place:

> "I didn't know their names at first. But after the dinner together, we started following each other on Xiaohongshu."

In this way, eating together was less the outcome of community than its possibility in motion. It was not about who you already were to each other, but what might emerge from a shared meal. Conviviality, then, was not the evidence of closeness—it was a method for making it thinkable.

5.4."Food is the main character": Emotional anchoring and indirect expression through meals

> "You don't really need to say much. When we sit down and eat, the mood changes. It's the food doing the talking."
> — Caicai May 2025

In the emotionally complex terrain of migration—where language, belonging, and identity feel precarious—food often becomes an expressive medium. Among Chinese students in Lund, shared meals acted as what Berlant (2011) might call "structures of feeling": embodied scenes through which emotion, memory, and sociality are communicated, often indirectly. In Caicai's words, "Food is the main character."

In participant observation, I noticed that emotional atmospheres often shifted around food. A birthday marked without family could still be warmed by a homemade cake and a shared bottle of wine. Food became not merely sustenance, but emotional infrastructure—a way to hold and reframe feelings without the need for overt articulation.

> "Sometimes you're just too tired to talk about how hard things are. But when someone makes a dish like your mom does, it feels differently. It's like—okay, I'm still alive."
> — Fieldnotes, participant comment, April 2025

The emphasis on indirect expression aligns with broader patterns in Chinese communicative norms, where emotional restraint and implicit care are often culturally valued (Yan, 2009). Cooking for others, offering a second serving, or making someone's favorite dish often served as coded gestures of comfort and solidarity. These gestures created what Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2010) would describe as affective economies—flows of emotion and care embedded within material practice.

Importantly, these exchanges often circulated along gendered and classed lines. Female students were more likely to be seen cooking for a group, and sometimes subtly expected to do so. Yet others used food labor to assert agency: cooking as a

way to resist isolation, gain social standing, or signal cultural competence. As one student commented, “I’m not talkative, but when I cook Sichuan food, people come.”

In this way, conviviality was not evenly distributed. The ability to anchor social scenes through food—by knowing what to cook, how to source ingredients, or how to host in a dorm kitchen—became a kind of affective capital (Skeggs, 2004). Students who grew up cooking and good at cooking were often more confident in these roles. Others watched, followed, helped or stayed silent. What appeared on the surface as casual bonding was also shaped by unequal fluencies—in language, in cuisine, in social performance.

But even those on the margins found subtle ways to participate. A student who didn’t cook often brought fruit or offered to clean up. Another who followed a halal diet came to gatherings and “just drank tea” while chatting with others. These acts illustrate what Wise and Velayutham (2009) refer to as “micro-practices of encounter”—moments where cultural or personal differences are not erased but rendered livable.

This also meant that not every gathering was harmonious. In one dorm, a participant told me about a dinner where someone casually said, “I don’t understand why some people like eating organs? so disgusting”. No one addressed the comment directly, but the mood shifted. This brief moment of awkwardness—what Sara Ahmed (2010) terms an affective misalignment—did not escalate, but it lingered, subtly reshaping future interactions.

Still, food provided a forgiving medium. Like I mentioned before, in cases where verbal apology or confrontation felt too heavy, someone might make or bring food, or share a snack without explanation.

These emotional rituals—often mundane and easily overlooked—constituted the lived texture of conviviality: a space where not everything is said, but much is felt.

They allowed for ambivalence, repair, and recognition, enacted not through ideology but through food sharing.

As anthropologist Sarah Pink (2015) argues, sensory and material environments are not just settings for social life—they are themselves agents of sociality. For Chinese students in Sweden, food did not just accompany conviviality. It made it possible.

5.5.Fragmented Togetherness: Humor, Hesitation, and Social Withdrawal in WeChat Groups

WeChat groups formed a vital digital infrastructure for Chinese students in Lund, functioning less as formal communication hubs and more as spaces of ambient sociability. These groups were rarely tightly moderated or purposeful; instead, they became loosely coordinated spheres of interaction where invitations, jokes, updates, and silences coexisted. Yet beneath the surface of apparent liveliness, these groups revealed a deeply uneven rhythm of participation and relational labor.

At first glance, some of the group chats appeared vibrant: dozens of messages would flood in on a weekend evening, or after a viral Xiaohongshu post about a new restaurant nearby. But ethnographic attention to who speaks, when, and how revealed a subtle hierarchy. Often, only a small subset of members sustained most of the interaction, while the majority either watched silently, or responded minimally.

This asymmetry reflects what Nancy Baym (2015) calls relational labor: the ongoing, low-level effort people put into maintaining ties over time and across media. In these WeChat groups, this labor was not evenly distributed. Some students took initiative to suggest meals or check in on others; others hovered quietly, occasionally emerging to comment on food photos. Participation was not binary but scalar—ranging from active engagement to passive monitoring.

Such users, became what might be called "affective anchors"—not leaders in a formal sense, but consistent presences around which convivial rhythms formed. Others "lurked," but their presence was not insignificant. Following Taina Bucher's (2020) discussion of algorithmic silence, these silences were not necessarily expressions of disengagement. Instead, they reflected both individual social preferences and platform affordances: the ability to read messages without replying, to signal presence through emoji, or to delay response until one feels safe or socially fluent.

In several cases, group chats revealed a kind of ambient co-presence (Licoppe, 2004): a sense of "being together" that did not depend on active speech but on shared timing, familiarity with group norms, and mutual observability. Some students described checking the group during lunch breaks or before bed "just to see what people are up to," even if they hadn't posted in days. This passive engagement provided a background sense of belonging, especially for students who felt too shy, new, or linguistically uncertain to speak up.

However, this digital conviviality was not without its boundaries. Over time, many groups developed what could be described as inner and outer circles. The inner circle was composed of friends who already knew each other offline and extended their rapport into the chat: inside jokes, nickname usage, continuity from prior conversations. The outer circle often consisted of students who had been added but never truly integrated—watching, hesitating, unsure how to join a conversation already in motion.

As one participant reflected:

> "They would say things like, 'Same as last time?' and I didn't get the reference. I felt like I was just observing, not part of it."

Humor, often considered a hallmark of group intimacy, here functioned as an index of existing closeness—a barrier as much as a bridge. Those outside the inner

circle frequently interpreted jokes as signals of exclusion rather than invitations to join. In this sense, humor was a practice of informal gatekeeping, creating emotional atmospheres where “belonging” had to be slowly negotiated or earned.

Silences in the group chat were similarly charged. While momentary lulls were common—especially during exam weeks or holidays—extended silences could produce discomfort or uncertainty. Students sometimes interpreted them as signs of interpersonal conflict or declining interest. Others used silence strategically as a form of social withdrawal—to avoid unwanted obligations, awkward social dynamics, or emotional labor.

In one case, a student recalled:

> “I posted asking if anyone wanted to go to a food festival together. No one replied, I didn’t post again after that.”

This form of silence—what Ahmed (2010) might call affective misalignment—can rupture the fragile trust that group conviviality depends on. Yet unlike face-to-face settings, digital platforms allowed students to withdraw without confrontation. Leaving the group was not that common, but “ghosting” it—muting notifications, never replying—was common.

Importantly, this fragmented togetherness did not always feel negative. Many students valued the group precisely because it allowed for low-pressure engagement. The ability to “just watch” offered a buffer zone for those navigating social anxiety, or fluctuating desire for company. My friend told me:

> “I didn’t like starting conversations in the group or replying to things right away. However, sometimes when I have a bit of free time, or right before going to bed, I’ll check to see what people are saying. Even if I’m just reading, it still feels like I’m part of it somehow.”

In this way, WeChat groups exemplified a digitally mediated conviviality that was partial, uneven, but still affectively meaningful. Through shifting rhythms of speech and silence, humor and hesitation, students sustained a network of loose ties—a "light-touch" sociality where presence didn't always require performance. This form of connection, though often overlooked, became an essential layer in how Chinese students made sense of life abroad: offering not just practical information or dinner plans, but a quiet infrastructure of recognition, possibility, and co-presence.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore how Chinese international students in Sweden rework the practice of eating together in their everyday lives abroad. Drawing on the conceptual lenses of commensality, community, and conviviality, it examined how eating together is not only a cultural tradition but also a form of emotional labor, social negotiation, and creative adaptation in transnational contexts. While the initial expectation might be that migration and cultural dislocation would lead to a weakening of communal eating practices, this study has shown that Chinese students have developed flexible, hybrid strategies—both embodied and digital—to preserve the core values of commensality in new forms.

Through a combination of semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and analysis of digital media practices, this research found that eating together among Chinese students is often marked by what can be called "fragmented togetherness." This includes both physically shared meals in kitchens or restaurants and digitally mediated forms of co-presence through platforms like WeChat and Xiaohongshu. These practices are not simply remnants of home culture transplanted into a new setting; rather, they are actively reimagined to fit the rhythms and constraints of student life in Sweden.

One of the key findings of this study is that commensality is not a static or purely physical practice. Students maintained a sense of being together even when they were

not eating in the same room or at the same time. In this context, digital commensality played a crucial role. Group chats, food photos, shared Xiaohongshu reviews, video-call meals and even watching mukbangs offered students ways to simulate the emotional intimacy and shared experience of eating together, even across time zones or when physically alone. These digitally mediated practices allowed them to feel seen, connected, and culturally grounded in a foreign environment, offering what might be called a "light-touch" form of sociality—low-pressure yet affectively meaningful.

Importantly, these digital and fragmented practices did not render the experience of eating together shallow or less significant. Rather, they offered emotional anchoring in the form of informal interactions, affective exchanges, and spontaneous invitations. Some students shared stories of posting food related photos, writing comments in Xiaohongshu, or replying with emojis in wechat groups. These gestures, though small, accumulated into a quiet infrastructure of mutual recognition and support. At the same time, the dynamics within group chats also revealed hierarchies and exclusions. As seen in the analysis of WeChat groups, a few individuals often dominated conversations while others remained silent or only reacted passively. These silences, while sometimes benign, were also interpreted as social withdrawal or even emotional rejection. In this way, conviviality and vulnerability were deeply entangled.

The findings also revealed how community was built not through grand gestures or formal gatherings but through everyday acts of care—organizing hotpot dinners, helping someone source ingredients from an Asian market. These acts formed what could be called micro-communities: small, emotionally resonant groups that were both more sustainable and more protective than broader social networks. Many students articulated that they did not seek large-scale integration or performative closeness; instead, they appreciated the flexibility of eating together without needing to be emotionally exposed. This dynamic of "being together without being close"

resonates with current scholarship on conviviality, especially in contexts marked by uncertainty, fluid belonging, and emotional labor.

Although most students found ways to maintain some form of eating together, these practices were often shaped by ambivalence, subtle social cues, and pragmatic considerations. Rather than being sites of deep intimacy or clear obligation, shared meals frequently operated in an ambiguous space—where friendliness did not always imply closeness, and participation did not necessarily require emotional openness. Students sometimes preferred collective dining for its convenience or sense of familiarity, while at other times they withdrew, citing academic pressure, social fatigue, or a desire for personal space. In these moments, food became less about community as a fixed structure, and more about fleeting connections, quiet forms of care, or even polite detachment. Eating together, then, was not only a practice of inclusion but also a way of managing boundaries in a shared but transient environment.

In answering the core research questions, the study has shown that Chinese students in Sweden do not abandon commensality; they adapt it. Their food practices reveal a pragmatic and emotionally intelligent response to the constraints of migration and cultural adjustment. Rather than resisting the individualistic tendencies of Swedish food culture or wholly conforming to them, students craft hybrid routines that balance tradition, personal well-being, and social reality. Shared meals—whether through a hotpot dinner in someone's dorm or a comment under a food photo—function as a form of cultural continuity and emotional survival.

In broader terms, this research suggests that food, particularly eating together, continues to be a crucial site for navigating migration, identity, and emotional life. It contributes to a growing body of literature that sees commensality not as a fixed tradition but as a living, adaptive practice that responds to new material, spatial, and technological realities. The digital dimension of this study opens further questions about how platforms mediate and reshape the affective experience of food. Mukbangs,

in particular, reveal how watching others eat has become a form of proxy-sociality—a way of satisfying emotional and sensory needs in the absence of physical company. While these forms of mediated commensality do not replace embodied intimacy, they complicate our understanding of what it means to "eat together" in the digital age.

Future research could extend this study by comparing different diasporic student populations, exploring the role of class or regional background in shaping food practices, or focusing more deeply on gender and emotional labor. Additionally, as platforms and algorithmic cultures evolve, new forms of digital food sharing and parasocial eating will likely emerge, raising further questions about authenticity, performativity, and emotional fulfillment.

In conclusion, the Chinese students in this study show us that commensality is both persistent and pliable. Despite cultural difference, logistical barriers, and emotional challenges, they continue to eat together—in fragments, across screens, through silence and laughter. Their practices reflect not only a longing for home, but also a capacity for improvisation, resilience, and the making of new forms of belonging. In the spaces between embodied meals and digital co-presence, between hotpot and emojis, they create a mode of being together that is no less meaningful for being partial.

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