

The Chancellor of Ghent University has the honour of inviting you to attend the public defense of the doctoral dissertation of

Yixuan Guo

Title of the doctoral dissertation:

The Communicator in Question: Scientists, AI, and GM Food Communication in China

The public defence will take place on **22nd of October (Thursday)** at **17:00** CET in the E3 Auditorium, Blok E, at Campus Coupure, Coupure Links 653, 9000 Ghent. An [online Teams link](#) is available for joining.

You are warmly invited to the reception that will follow the defense. Please confirm your attendance **before 13th of October**, through [this form](#) below or to Yixuan.Guo@UGent.be https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScMfbLJ876LkNuGiFdUD93BGtYse3bzdKXGly8wzo6YrTmi_A/viewform

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Abstract of the doctoral research

Genetically modified (GM) food remains one of the most contested topics in contemporary science communication, with public skepticism particularly pronounced in China. This thesis examines GM food communication in China through the lens of communicator trust, bridging the supply side (who is willing to communicate) and the reception side (who is trusted) across four empirical studies.

Study 1 systematically reviews 89 publications on experts' perspectives on agri-food biotechnology, showing that expert evaluations are heterogeneous and shaped primarily by professional characteristics. Study 2 surveys 321 Chinese scientists and extends the Theory of Planned Behavior with topic-specific beliefs, revealing that scientists' own attitudes toward GM food exert an indirect effect on their willingness to engage. Study 3 experimentally examines 319 Chinese consumers' trust in a scientist communicating about GM food, showing that moral character cues and perceived objectivity shape trust asymmetrically, with trust mediating effects on purchase intention. Study 4 investigates 298 Chinese university students' interactions with a non-directive AI chatbot, finding that trust in AI functions as a conditional gatekeeper rather than a direct driver of attitude change.

Together, the four studies demonstrate that GM food communication is a trust-mediated process in which the same professional characteristics that shape willingness to communicate also condition how the public evaluates communicators, and that AI extends rather than replaces this trust dynamic.

Brief Curriculum Vitae

Yixuan Guo is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Agricultural Economics at Ghent University, Belgium. Their research centers on agri-food biotechnology and its public communication, with particular attention to communication practices that support the public in reaching autonomous decisions about these technologies.

Prior to the PhD, Yixuan obtained a BSc in agricultural economics from Northeast Agricultural University in Harbin, China, and an MSc in agricultural economics from China Agricultural University in Beijing, China.

Building on this agricultural economics training, Yixuan examines new food technologies through the lens of science communication, with public trust as a central thread. Their studies look at trust in scientists, trust shaped by the communicator's affiliation and moral character, and more recently trust in AI as a new communicator of science, asking how source characteristics, message framing, and communicator identity shape whether the public comes to trust scientific claims on contested food topics.

Yixuan works primarily with quantitative methods, drawing on experiments and surveys to study the relationship between science and the public. The research takes an open stance toward multiple ways of evaluating outcomes, with the aim of a more democratic practice of science communication.