The Development of Social Connections and Guanxi in China’s Reform Era

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Summary

Social connections are constantly developing features in any culture, and especially in one such as the Chinese, that has seen a unique shift from a poor developing country to an economic super power in mere decades. The goal of this article is to investigate the academic literature concerning the development of social connections and guanxi in the later half of the 20th century, during which China experienced extensive economic reforms that drastically changed the country and its social culture. It further analyses the very nature of guanxi, and to what degree it is a uniquely Chinese phenomenon.

The discussion is focused around some of the foremost scholars on guanxi, including Yanjie Bian, Mayfair Mei-hui Yang and Douglas Guthrie. I have studied and analysed their work alongside many others, determining the most prevalent theories on the topic and discussing their strengths and weaknesses.

All too conflicting reports exist concerning guanxi's development to make a conclusion one way or the other. It seems that the overall attitude towards guanxi use has shifted, with a growing dissent and suspicion towards it. There is not enough evidence gathered to support either the notion that the overall use has decreased, or that it has increased.

I have not found sufficient evidence to support the notion that guanxi differs greatly from similar concepts throughout other cultures, such as the Russian blat or the general term "to pull strings". More research ought to be done looking into this very basic element of Chinese sociological research, that has not yet been thoroughly explored. To a certain degree, I have found that a conclusion lacking evidence has been taken for granted without study.
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1 Introduction

The concepts of *guanxi* and *guanxi xue* are some of the most debated and studied in the field of Chinese anthropology and social psychology. Simplistically, *guanxi* can be defined as social relations that are utilised to achieve personal progress. *Guanxi xue* is "the art of *guanxi*", the actual utilising of *guanxi*.

The terms have been criticised as being vague and hard to differentiate from similar concepts, which makes the work in finding their origin, history and development throughout the years difficult. Many scholars disagree concerning the real impact *guanxi* has on Chinese society, as well as its origins and its development in the 20th century. It is the goal of this article to bring together and analyse the scientific evidence for *guanxi* and *guanxi xue*.

1.1 Methodology

In this article, I strive to:

1. define the concepts of *guanxi* and *guanxi xue*, what defines them as unique to Chinese culture, and what their early origins are.

2. analyse the phenomena's development in China's reform era, focusing on the period from the mid-1970's to late 1990's.

I chose this period since the concepts first started to appear in the English literature in the mid-1970's, (Gold et al., 2002, pp. xv) and since this was an era of great development in Chinese society, both economically, socially and politically. I have chosen to cut off the era of research at around the year 2000, as later data has not yet accumulated as well as that gathered in and before the 1990's. This era is the most important in understanding and studying modern Chinese culture and sociology, and is of great importance to solving social problems, to analyse the history of the nation, and for companies establishing themselves in China.

The analysis is focused around some of the foremost scholars on *guanxi*, including Yanjie Bian, Mayfair Mei-hui Yang and Douglas Guthrie, who all have written extensively on the topic. I study and analyse their work alongside others, determining the most prevalent theories on the topic and discussing their strengths and weaknesses.
1.2 Definition

The social phenomenon of guanxi is an abstruse one, the nature of which has been heavily discussed among scholars since it was first properly introduced to the English language in the mid-1970's, alongside the rise of Chinese economic reforms and the end of the Cultural Revolution. (Guo, 2001, pp. 70) (Gold et al., 2002, pp. xv) In the most direct translation, guanxi as a noun means "relationship", and as a verb "connect to".\(^1\) though its meaning as commonly used is different from such simplistic dictionary definitions. (Bian, 1994b, pp. 95) (Lin, 2011, pp. 441)

In the introduction to Gold, Guthrie and Wank's "Social Connections in China" (2002), which I consider one of the most overarching books on the topic, guanxi is defined as "particularistic ties" that are "based on ascribed or primordial traits such as kinship, native place, and ethnicity, and also on achieved characteristics". (Gold et al., 2002, pp. 6) Two people can be considered as having guanxi for coming from the same village, school or military unit, even if the two never met there and even if they are from entirely different generations. Guanxi can also be cultivated due to other coincidental ties such as the sharing of a mutual friend, and the guanxi can differ in degree depending on the closeness of the two parts — two people who come from the same district of Beijing have relatively weak guanxi, while two people who shared the same work force for several years have a much stronger guanxi.

Distinguishing elements

What largely separates guanxi from other types of social connections is according to most scholars this prerequisite of familiarity as well as "[e]lements of mutual trust and obligation". (Yang, 1994, pp. 111) Guanxi networks lead to a constant obligation to help one's connections on request, as well as a presumption of the repayment of such. This obligation comes both from the purely biological altruistic need to help a friend and from a desire not to lose face (mianzi) in front of the public.\(^2\) (Hsiung, 2011) According to Gold, Guthrie and Wank, "the

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\(^1\)The 2003 Chinese-English dictionary Xin Shiji Hanying Da Cidian lists six separate definitions, including "relationship", "influence" and "backdoor connection", though the latter is often considered more closely related to the concept of guanxi xue. (Yu, 2003, pp. 589)

\(^2\)The concept of face is somewhat more straightforward than that of guanxi, and is somewhat relatable to the concept of dignity or respect. Mayfair Mei-hui Yang defines it in her book "Gifts,
important point is that *guanxi* must be consciously produced, cultivated, and maintained over time* through these services, even though it can originate either consciously or naturally. (Gold et al., 2002, pp. 6)

The art of manipulating *guanxi*, often for personal profit, is called *guanxi xue* (literally “the art of *guanxi*”).³ and it generally has a negative connotation both in China and in the West, suggestion that the practitioner is “going in the back door”. (Gold et al., 2002, pp. 6) Utilising *guanxi xue* can for example be for a lower standing employee in a company to give a contact higher up gifts and services, consciously making the *guanxi* tie stronger before finally asking the contact to help him get a promotion.

Some scholars, however, stress that *guanxi xue* is often overly simplified and villanised when seen from a Western perspective. Mayfair Yang among others argue that while *guanxi* can be manipulated in a way of bribery or corruption, there is a distinction between corruption and everyday *guanxi xue* — *guanxi xue* is often performed with a less selfish motive, and corruption is purposefully done more obviously than *guanxi xue*, which is usually based on innuendo and not a straight out request. (Yang, 1994, pp. 62–63, 130–131) (Smith et al., 2012, pp. 136–137) Andrew B. Kipnis writes that “[w]hether one considers a specific act of ‘pulling’ *guanxi* a form of bribery really depends upon one’s point of view”, and argues that although most people agree that there’s a difference between bribery and *guanxi xue*, not all agree what the difference is. (Kipnis, 1997, pp. 149)

**Guanxi as an indigenously Chinese phenomenon**

According to many scholars (including Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (Yang, 1994) (Yang, 2002) and Yanjie Bian (Bian, 1994a) (Bian, 1997)) as well as a large section of the

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³The term is closely related to the phrase *la guanxi*, literally “to pull *guanxi*” and very much comparable to the etymologically similar Western concept of “pulling strings”.

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Chinese population and diaspora, guanxi is a specifically Chinese phenomenon, clearly distinguished from counterparts throughout the world.

Still, there are undeniable similarities between guanxi and some other systems in other parts of the world, the most cited being blat, a Russian concept that like guanxi often is translated to "social connection" and which often is blamed for Russian corruption, much like guanxi has been blamed for Chinese corruption. (Yang, 2002) Other examples include the Arabic wasta, the Brazilian jeitinho, and the concept of "pulling strings", which appear in many Western countries. (Smith et al., 2012)

To one degree or another, some have argued that guanxi is no more than the Chinese term for social connections, albeit with subtle cultural differences that distinguishes it from other terms throughout the rest of the world. This is still a minority opinion, while another group, which includes among others Douglas Guthrie (Guthrie, 1998), hold that while guanxi is a concept unique to Chinese society, it is not as deeply rooted in the Chinese culture as has been claimed by others. Guthrie instead hold that it is a result of the Cultural Revolution of 1966–1976, and that it is now diminishing as China’s globalisation and economic liberalisation increases. (Guthrie, 2002, pp. 37–38) (Guthrie, 1998, pp. 254–255)

The true impact guanxi has on Chinese society, both in the 21st century and in the past, is still very much debatable. According to scholars such as Liang-Hung Lin, it "profoundly influences Chinese society in commercial activities, business ethics, and organizational behaviors" (Lin, 2011, pp. 441), and according to a great deal of the Chinese population at large it is "absolutely essential to successfully complete any task in virtually all spheres of social life." (Gold et al., 2002, pp. 3)

Most scholars do agree that guanxi is indeed a real, indigenous social phenomenon, albeit perhaps highly comparable to similar other, distinct phenomena with their own nationalistic characteristics.

1.3 The origins of guanxi

The origins of guanxi are under intensive debate. There are two basic schools of thought: either it is the remnant of ancient Confucian ethics and ideologies centuries past, or it is a result of how the Chinese population was treated by the government in the Cultural Revolution in the second half of the 20th century.
The two ideas are far from mutually incompatible, however, and most scholars today argue that both Confucianism and the Cultural Revolution play a role in making guanxi what it is.

**Confucianism**

Confucianism (*ruxue*), an ethical and philosophical system that originated around 500 BC, is often seen as the progenitor of 20th century guanxi systems. In the core of Confucianism lie humanism and altruism, as well as the concept of filial piety — the basic virtue of respecting and being good to one's parents and ancestors. This also covers what has become known as the "five bonds" or "five relationships" (*wu lun*): ruler to ruled; father to son; husband to wife; elder brother to younger brother; friend to friend. (Luo, 1997) (Lin, 2011, pp. 443–444)

According to most attempts to define the origins of guanxi, it is defined as being *based on culturally Confucian origins*, similar to how Western ethics often are defined as being based on culturally Christian origins. It is difficult to evaluate the exact influence Confucianism has had on guanxi, but it is undeniable that the influence is there. (Nitsch and Diebel, 2007, pp. 968) (Lin, 2011, pp. 441) Kipnis writes that "it would be a mistake to view Confucian 'culture' or 'tradition' as a sort of unmoved mover in a Newtonian logic of social causality", but he also points out that guanxi must be studied in the context of Communist China, and that the practices of guanxi "are not merely 'remnants' of tradition, but rather [...] activated or vitalized in present village life." (Kipnis, 1997, pp. 66–67) While it would be foolish to deny Confucianism’s influence on guanxi culture, it also brings little to the table when discussing 20th century history of the phenomenon.

**The Cultural Revolution**

The Cultural Revolution (*wenhua dageming*) was a decade of political distress from 1966 to 1976, set in motion by political leader Mao Zedong with the mission to destroy traditional and capitalistic values in order to reinforce socialism. The period was a chaotic and disruptive one for many citizens, especially for intellectuals, students and political divergents. (Saich, 2011, pp. 53–66)

Many scholars hold the view that the modern phenomenon of guanxi has its
roots in the Cultural Revolution, and that the system was formed as a result of the sudden lack of social order, which led to a need to rely on social connections in order to survive. (Guthrie, 1998) (Yang, 1994)

Under leftist influence, the leadership strove to eliminate all remnant bourgeois tendencies within individuals and to build a structure of strict surveillance and asceticism to ensure this. It attempted to extend bureaucratic control over production and allocation of goods and services and to restrict the collective and individual sectors. As a result, it became necessary to seek irregular channels to acquire a wide range of goods and services from food, clothing and bicycles to housing, medical care, residence permits and permission to marry. So people of necessity relied on establishing guanxi with the cadres or others who could provide these things.
— Thomas Gold (Gold, 1985, pp. 668–669)

This view is also shared by Yanjie Bian, who suggest that reported guanxi use increased immediately after the Cultural Revolution, and that this is evident in job searches of the period, arguing that as those state appointed to hand out jobs would prefer applicants to whom they connected, applicants would start consciously forming connections — guanxi — with the officials.4 (Bian, 1994a, pp. 972)

In hindsight, it may seem ironic that one of the purposes of the Cultural Revolution was to eradicate such phenomena as guanxi, and yet by all accounts the result was that the use of guanxi increased. One of the ideas behind the Cultural Revolution was the concept of removing the "Four Olds" — old customs, old culture, old habits and old ideas — from Chinese culture, to replace superstition, non-communist ideology and religion with scientific reasoning, communism and atheism. This was done through, among other acts, the destruction of temples, burning of genealogy books, redesigning of traditional folk songs, and punishing of intellectuals, who were seen as the personification of the Four Olds. (Barnett, 2010)

4Bian researched guanxi use for job searches in the period 1949–1988, and released a paper summarising his results in 1994. (Bian, 1994a) I will let his paper speak for itself concerning the period before and during the Cultural Revolution, though I discuss his further results in the 2.2.2 section of this paper.
Considering Confucianism one of these elements of old thought that had to be removed from Chinese society, Mao led an active campaign against the philosophy throughout the first half of the 1970's. (Gregor and Chang, 1979) As a result, due to guanxi’s tight connection with Confucianism, many sources of guanxi were also destroyed. (Kipnis, 1997, pp. 141) The end result can be seen as a resurrection of old Confucian customs in a modern light, in which guanxi post–1976 is both an old Confucian thought system frowned upon by the Chinese government, and a more modern result of the government’s own actions.
2 The reform era development of *guanxi*

While relatively little research has been done that focuses on the development of *guanxi* use in the Chinese reform era, the research that do exist follow two primary schools of thought: according to some scholars, including Mayfair Yang and Yanjie Bian, *guanxi* use increased in the 1980's and 1990's; according to others, such as Douglas Guthrie and Amy Hanser, the use instead decreased. The different researchers also lay different weight on how much the very nature of *guanxi* has changed, versus how it has simply increased or decreased in a more simplistic fashion. There are also differing views on the reasons behind the change in nature and use, not necessarily mutually incompatible.

2.1 A stricter bureaucratic system

In multiple venues, most extensively his 1999 book "Dragon in a Three-Piece Suit: The Emergence of Capitalism in China". Douglas Guthrie has argued that as stricter rules and a bureaucratic system was defined and put in place in the beginning of the reform era, both on state level and on firm level, the significance of using *guanxi* decreased. (Guthrie, 1999, pp. 178) Guthrie suggests that with clearer economic and social guidelines as part of the economic reform, it became more difficult to use *guanxi* to the same extent as previously, to the degree that it lost its purpose and its previous cost effectiveness. (Guthrie, 2002, pp. 38)

While many China scholars view *guanxi* as a deep-seated cultural fact of Chinese society, I view *guanxi* as an institutionally defined system — i.e. a system that depends on the institutional structure of society rather than on culture — that is changing in stride with the institutional changes of the reform era. (Guthrie, 1998, pp. 254–255)

Guthrie’s conclusion is based upon 155 interviews he conducted with Chinese officials and industrial managers in 1995. In his analysis of the interviews, Guthrie argues that the overwhelming opinion was that *guanxi xue* in business was "unnecessary and dangerous" due to the enforcement of laws and restrictions.

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5The book was preceded by a 1998 article, "The Declining Significance of *Guanxi* in China’s Economic Transition", (Guthrie, 1998) and later followed up by a chapter in his co-edited book "Social Connections in China". (Guthrie, 2002)
prohibiting what in hindsight can be seen as a form of corruption. (Guthrie, 1998, pp. 255–256) He is however also clear to distinguish between guanxi xue and guanxi, arguing that "there is a growing emphasis on the distinction between social relationships and the use of these social relationships". (Guthrie, 1998, pp. 281) While the attitude towards guanxi xue was overall negative, guanxi was seen as an important part of doing business, although "secondary to the market imperatives of price and quality". (Guthrie, 1998, pp. 281) In his article, Guthrie publishes quotes from some of his interview, reflecting the views held, such as in this example:

When people rely on "guanxi practice" for procedural matters (kao guanxi xue ban shouxu), as they did in the past, society becomes very messy (luan). In the old system, if you wanted to get procedures done, you had to make sure you knew people in the right places, you had to try getting procedures passed by relying on the people you knew. You had to talk to many people, and the process always took a long time. It wasn't always certain you would know the right people to get procedures taken care of. But now it's all very clear. You just follow the laws and make sure that you follow all of them closely. Things happen much more quickly today. (Guthrie, 1999, pp. 175)

Guthrie's conclusion of the interviews was heavily criticised by Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, who disagrees that guanxi xue decreased since the 1970's. She argues in her article that it instead increased after the Cultural Revolution, as it "declined in some areas of life but found new breeding grounds in others." (Yang, 2002, pp. 463) She criticises Guthrie for assuming the honesty of his interviewees, as she considers guanxi xue to be "something that most [Chinese] people practice, to varying degrees of effectiveness and artistry, but few people would admit to publicly." (Yang, 2002, pp. 461) Yang argues that as guanxi in recent years has been seen as more and more closely related to corruption and bribery, which is frowned upon by both the Chinese government and the Chinese people, most if not all Chinese officials and managers would deny employing it for personal gain.

Yang further criticises Guthrie's expectations of guanxi as a misunderstanding of how it is employed. Guthrie wrote that he would have caught obvious guanxi use during his short visits to the factories, allowing him to compare the manager's
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story with what actually happened. (Guthrie, 1999)

Other studies performed seem to correlate with Guthrie’s conclusion that guanxi isn’t that important in business spheres. In a recent 2012 article covering data collected 1996–2001, Michael Troilo and Jun Zhang concludes that guanxi with China’s governing Communist Party is of little important to entrepreneurs, but they also found that guanxi with family and friends is more important. This correlates with Guthrie’s idea of guanxi no longer being used in getting around laws and regulations, due to stricter rules, and it also adds the nuance of using guanxi in order to for example recruit employees. (Troilo and Zhang, 2012) A study performed in 2004–2005 by Simeon Djankov et al. similarly found that a person’s paternal or maternal relations to Party members or directors had no effect on them becoming entrepreneurs. (Djankov et al., 2006)

The conclusions are echoed in a 2009 article by Justin Tan et al., in which managers of SME:s were interviewed concerning the development of guanxi use in their business throughout the last few decades. The authors concluded that it had indeed decreased significantly from the late 1970’s. They develop upon the theory established by Guthrie, writing that while good guanxi with governmental agencies benefited in the 1970’s when the agencies had close to unlimited control over the system, it helped little in the late 1980’s and 1990’s, when the center of control shifted from the government to the market. (Tan et al., 2009, pp. 550–551)

One interviewee writes:

In the first twenty years, I tried to maintain good relationships with local governments, and the enterprise really benefited from it. But in the last few years of the 20th century, I found that all things had changed. The good relationships with local governments didn’t bring me sales. Instead, I felt that I couldn’t adapt to the new rules of the market economy. Maybe, development was just a dream for me. As long as the enterprise survived, that in itself was a big achievement for me.

— Mr. Zang, CEO of Dragon & Tiger (Tan et al., 2009, pp. 551)
2.2 A counter social force to government control

Yanjie Bian has written some of the most extensive work on *guanxi*. His largest premise is that *guanxi* is an undeniable, vital part of the Chinese society. According to Bian, “all Chinese live in a web of social relationship”, and “individuals cultivate and utilize their social connections in order to satisfy their personal interests.” (Bian, 1994a, pp. 972) Bian argues that *guanxi* is a counter force to bureaucratic control, that has increased significantly as rules and restrictions have become clearer in the reform era.

Bian’s conclusions are based on a series of studies he executed, in which he interviewed workers concerning with which method they applied for their first job. With a variation in when this first job was acquired, Bian could discover a pattern showing which generations of workers used *guanxi* to what degree. *Guanxi* was not used a great deal in the period 1961–1976, when the division of work was controlled the most by the state. It then increased in use throughout the late 1970’s and 1980’s, correlating with the state giving up more and more control over the work force. (Bian, 1994a, pp. 972–974)

![Figure 1: Graph showing the correlation between direct state involvement and *guanxi* use in job searches, according to Bian’s 1994 data. (Bian, 1994a).](image)

In a later study with data covering 1992–1997, Bian further showed that the use of *guanxi* had continued to rise, further correlating with decreased state control. In his conclusions 69% used *guanxi* 1992–1997, compared to 57% in
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(1977–1988). He argues that for example managers in the 1990’s had a much larger personal control over who they chose the employees compared to the state assigners of the 1970’s, who had to abide by strict protocols. While the use of guanxi to get a good employment in the 1970’s still occurred, it was much harder and therefore less common than in the 1990’s. (Bian, 2002, pp. 121)

Clearly, guanxi was a counter social force to government control of jobs in all historical periods, and its widespread use in the 1980s was a response to the relative relaxation of such control. (Bian, 1994a, pp. 999)

2.3 Changing predominant spheres

Mayfair Mei-hui Yang argue that it is a fallacy to assume that the use of guanxi either increases or decreases, but that it probably also changes its spheres, becoming less common in one area of social life but more common in another. While Guthrie sees the decrease of guanxi use in job searches as a sign that it decreases overall, it’s possible that it simultaneously increased in areas where it was previously less prevalent, such as in applying for a passport or a loan. (Yang, 2002, pp. 463)

Guthrie has previously critisised Yang for coming to conclusions in her book “Gifts, Favors and Banquets” (1994) that aren’t supported by her data, claiming that her quoted interviewees don’t support the conclusion she argues for. (Guthrie, 1998, pp. 260–261) Guthrie contends that guanxi use in business spheres decreased significantly in the reform era, and that it in the mid-1990’s was secondary to the role of pricing and product quality. (Guthrie, 1998, pp. 281)

According to Guthrie’s interviews with Chinese business men, the guanxi phenomenon is uniforming more and more with social relations in general, as they are in both the Eastern and Western hemispheres, becoming less and less of an indigineously Chinese phenomenon. (Guthrie, 1998, pp. 254) (Guthrie, 2002, pp. 43)

Yang simultaneously argues that guanxi hasn’t decreased at all in the business

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652 % used “predominantly strong ties” while 17 % used “predominantly weak ties’, while 16 % got the job “all by [themselves]”, 52% + 17% adding up to 69 %. (Bian, 2002, pp. 121)
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spheres, but has indeed increased as its part in the originally largest sphere — to survive in the personal life — decreased as the objects and services it was needed to get, such as television sets, train tickets and daycare positions, became more commonplace.

Yang compares guanxi to the similar Russian social phenomenon blat, which appeared in the Soviet Union in the 1980’s. When common citizens struggled to get basic wares needed to survive, it became necessary to rely on social connections to get by. After the fall of communism in 1991, blat changed from being in the personal sphere to being used in the business sphere, for example when companies wanted to decrease their tax costs, relying on social connections and blat to get around the law. (Ledeneva, 2008) Yang argues that the same happened, albeit with a slower evolution, with guanxi starting in the 1970’s, as it in the next few decades decreased in the social sphere and increased in the business sphere. She accuses Guthrie of denying corruption as a large problem even in the turn of century China, and argues that the reason for the increase in corruption largely is due to the increase in guanxi use in business. (Yang, 2002)

2.4 Influence on job searches

Amy Hanser has argued that concerning Chinese youths job searches, the use of guanxi changed drastically in the decades leading to the late 1990’s. Through interviews with job searching youths in 1998, Hanser researched both the use of and the attitudes towards guanxi. Her conclusions in this specific section of guanxi research is compatible with both Guthrie’s overall conclusions, and Yang’s theory concerning guanxi’s changing spheres — that the use of guanxi in job searches has decreased drastically, and that the attitude towards it closely resembles that previously noted by Guthrie. (Hanser, 2002, pp. 137) She notes that “there was significant reliance on formal job search methods and a measured degree of skepticism about the effectiveness, and at time appropriateness, of using guanxi.” (Hanser, 2002, pp. 160)

Hanser suggests that the decrease may be a result of searches for specified areas of work becoming more common in the 1990’s. The more qualifications for their speciality the searcher had, she argues, the less the searcher needed to use guanxi to secure an employment. (Hanser, 2002, pp. 138,151–156)

The ways in which youths could get jobs also increased drastically starting
in the 1970's. While youths originally were given employment without as much as a choice, in the 1990's the possibilities were abundant, as China politically moved to a much freer job market with less governmental involvement. (Hanser, 2002, pp. 145–148)

Hanser is however careful not to argue that guanxi no longer has any influence. In her interviews it is clear that most use guanxi to some degree, but that it is generally considered as having a secondary role. For example, guanxi can be used to get in contact with an employer, or to give a good first impression, but is much lesser used to actually seize the employment. (Hanser, 2002, pp. 138)
3 Discussion

3.1 Inescapable problems

There are inescapable problems in the study of guanxi that I believe fully explains the variation in different scholars' conclusions on the topic.

First and foremost, after forty years of study there is yet to surface an entirely agreed upon definition of guanxi and guanxi xue. Many scholars still disagree on whether these are indigenously Chinese phenomena, Asian phenomena, Confucian phenomena, or just Chinese words for social connections as they appear throughout all cultures on Earth. As in the entire field of cultural studies, avoiding personal bias is here a herculean task, and I argue that the mere fact that guanxi is generally considered indigenously Chinese may be enough to reinforce this unconfirmed idea. Is guanxi really culturally different from the Russian blat or the Western concept of pulling strings? I have yet to see an experiment proposed that would falsify this.

At the same time, the 20th century Chinese culture is not easy to study, due to its extremely turbulent history and its oppressive regime. It is difficult, though maybe not impossible, to compare today's fairly easily obtained data to that of the 1960's and 1970's, when objective researchers had little insight to China.

3.2 The big picture

Too little data has accumulated on the topic, and the date that has been collected is largely with differing hypotheses, to the extent that all a researcher has is bits and pieces, and it's hard to see the big picture.

The largest body of data on the topic is that of Yanjie Bian, impressively covering the second half of the 20th century. Bian showcases a clear correlation, arguing that guanxi use increased after the end of the Cultural Revolution, in the wake of the economic reforms throughout the 1980's and 1990's (see figure 1).

There are however some problems with this result, the most obvious being that the first data point (>1949) doesn't correlate well with the others. The most satisfying explanation of this would be to assume that guanxi was already around long before the Communist regime, when state involvement was much
less than it would later be, and that a correlation between the two formed when the Communist government started having a real impact on the people.

Taking the first data point out of the graph makes for a clear correlation, but I fail to find a satisfying reason to do so in the first place, other than to give Bian’s theory evidence. There is also a remaining problem, that the overall study has all too few data points to prove causation from correlation. I can’t exclude the possibility of a third factor that correlates with both guanxi use and state involvement, something Bian fails to take into account in his study.

In his criticism of Bian’s work, Douglas Guthrie has pointed out that Bian’s interviews only showed when a job searcher attempted to use guanxi to acquire a position, while it didn’t show whether or not it worked. Guthrie argues that it’s possible that guanxi is indeed used by job searchers, but that it may not really help them, and may even hinder them in acquiring a position. (Guthrie, 2002, pp. 40–42) I do think Guthrie’s point is valid, but I also argue that it is irrelevant. The point of Bian’s study, as well as this article, is not to discuss to what extent guanxi has an effect, but to what extent it is used, no matter the result.

3.3 Attitude changes

What I most prominently see in many studies on the topic, is that the general Chinese attitude towards guanxi changed dramatically in the reform era. In many interviews, the 1990’s attitude towards using guanxi for personal gain is apathetic or even antipathetic, and especially Guthrie’s and Hanser’s research clearly shows a general skepticism towards it.\(^7\)

It is still difficult to judge to what degree this is a real change, and to what degree it is an artefact of misremembering. It is possible that such an attitude existed to a similar degree before the reform era. All we have to go on is 1990’s recollections from decades past. There are no comparable studies performed in the 1960’s and 1970’s, and with this in mind it is near impossible to make a conclusion on how the attitudes have changed. I do however find it difficult to deny that the state of guanxi in the 1990’s is not as vibrant as Bian and others would make it out to be.

\(^7\)Examples have been cited previously, see for example (Guthrie, 1999, pp. 175) and (Hanser, 2002, pp. 160).
4 Conclusions

In this article, I have analysed the different theories concerning guanxi’s development in the Chinese reform era up until the turn of the century, considering to what degree it has increased or decreased in use. I have further attempted to bring together differing opinions on what defines guanxi as anything different than the more general term “social connections”.

Considering guanxi’s development as a phenomenon in the reform era, all too conflicting reports exist to make a firm conclusion one way or the other. While a good case has been made by among others Yanjie Bian showing that guanxi use increased after the Cultural Revolution, the exact opposite is put forth with good evidence by among others Douglas Guthrie. It seems that the overall attitude towards guanxi has shifted, with a growing dissent and suspicion towards the use in the 1980’s and 1990’s. There is not enough evidence gathered to support either the notion that the overall use has decreased, or that it has increased.

I have not found sufficient evidence to support the notion that guanxi differs greatly from similar concepts throughout other cultures, such as the Russian blat or the general term “to pull strings”. More research ought to be done looking into this very basic element of Chinese sociological research, that has not yet been thoroughly explored. To a certain degree, I have found that a conclusion lacking evidence has been taken for granted without study.
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References


