

Chinese Relational Sociology: An Analysis of the Theoretical Paradigm of Guanxi Studies in the Chinese Context

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Received: June 13, 2024

Accepted: July 5, 2024

Online Published: July 31, 2024

doi:10.5539/ass.v20n4p59

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v20n4p59>

Abstract

The concept of *Guanxi* refers to social ties that are empowered by cultural specificity in Chinese societies, with its purpose of motivating and utilizing embedded resources in networking structure and practices under the principles of Confucius regulation and norms set by actors. In this paper, the author comprehensively analyzes theoretical and empirical contributions to guanxi studies in the Chinese context, initiating further directions for its development. Currently, guanxi studies are dominated by the main paradigm of network analysis, while the cultural elements of its connotation are interpreted via anthropological perspectives. This paper argues a “relational turn” led by Mustafa Emirbayer, Harrison White, and Jan Fuhse that contributes to the interactive analysis of cultural and economic values in Relational Sociology (RS), which leads to a more sophisticated interpretation. Such perspective of theoretical approach, argues (1) the combination of localized and universal framework of theories in interpersonal communications, (2) moderation and inter-correlation in debates between constructivist and structuralist perspectives, and (3) interaction between economic and cultural elements.

Keywords: guanxi, Relational Sociology (RS), cultural anthropology, network analysis, favor, repayment, social exchange

1. Introduction

This paper argues the theoretical contributions of Chinese Relational Sociology (CRS), or Guanxi Sociology (GS). It also promotes the direction of guanxi sociology by introducing Relational Sociology (RS) which focuses on the interaction of cultural and economic perspectives to the localized school of guanxi studies.

Chinese Relational/Guanxi Sociology, or guanxi studies, is a theoretical paradigm of sociology Indigenous to China.¹ Such a research theme is based on exploring the socio-cultural phenomenon of localized social networks and communication, where economic patterns might be applied to interpreting its cultural elements. Current research in Chinese Relational Sociology is at its peak with the contributions of scholars globally aiming at exploring social connections in China. Mostly, it is famous for its network studies, capital paradigm, and analysis of the concept of cultural components. In addition, the empirical and theoretical debates on social networks, social intensity, and social capital have been steadily developing and advancing in the masterpieces of scholars in China, showing sophisticated, comprehensive, and abundant outcomes in this topic. As a major contributor, Bian Yanjie (2010) announced the establishment of Chinese Relational Sociology (Guanxi Shehuixue). He endorsed the sociology of social relationships in China, advocated for establishing an interdisciplinary social science theory of the Chinese version (with Chinese characteristics), and actively dialog with international scholars.

Currently, the paradigms of guanxi research start from two main pathways: (1) network analysis from the perspective of economics, and (2) macro-micro paradigm from the perspective of cultural anthropology.² However, some remaining research vacuums and questions make an integrated reconciliation of the two pathways necessary (which will be stated in the following sections). Therefore, the author begins with a general review of Chinese Relational Sociology and the origins of its relational research. In the theoretical overview section, the article argues the scholarly contributions of prominent scholars of guanxi studies under

¹ The analytical site might be extended to Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and Singapore. The studies might even be applied to Chinese communities in western societies including American, Canadian, and Britain.

² Cultural elements do not only exist in specific dimensions. In most cases, micro social behaviors or individual cultural interpretations come from collective shared cultural ideologies at macro levels.

different analytical lenses and the heterogeneous differences in their theoretical paradigms. It is worth mentioning that an imperative trend is the rise and prosperity of multi-dimensional and inter-disciplinary analysis. Therefore, the novelty of the paper lies in its attempt to interpret the internal harmonization of theoretical frameworks towards cultural significance and economic factors through the introduction of “Relational Sociology” with a “relational turn” perspective. Based on previous theories and empirical evidence, the author proposes a review and outlook of Relational Sociology proposed by Harrison White and expects to realize the goal of Chinese Relational Sociology of conducting international dialogue with international research field through the introduction of international sociological theories with a more general application (White, 2008). Through the re-examination of the *guanxi* theory, the article initiates and contributes to the conceptualization of *guanxi* studies that should be viewed as a sign of the Chinese academy communicating with the international academy. In other words, interpreting regional social practices through universal theories can provide exemplary standards for the theoretical construction of other cultural regions.

2. Chinese Relational Sociology: Locally Grounded Theory and Its Empirical Practice

2.1 Fei Xiaotong and the Foundation of Indigenous Relational Sociology

Chinese Relational (*guanxi*) Sociology (CRS) is based on the local environment with geo-cultural features, or it can be seen as a study rooted in the rural field and comes “from the soil”. Fei Xiaotong’s masterpiece *From the Soil* in the last century scrutinized traditional societies at the grassroots level. He conducted fieldnotes research in grassroots places including rural families and villages, exploring the fundamental features of Chinese interpersonal relationships. It is worth mentioning that as an agricultural state, relationships in Chinese rural areas are the mother type of their later variants in cities after industrialization. Such a study realized the intellectual transformation of academic cognition in local sociology from identifying specific phenomena to constructing a theoretical framework for its interpretation. Fei Xiaotong’s research contribution is an important attempt to refine abstract concepts, a typical example of which is his prose description of the corrugated features of the differential order pattern (Fei, 2019; Fei et al., 1992). In Fei Xiaotong’s view, the social circle of Chinese people presents a geometric feature of a concentric circle state from the inside to the outside, with those on the innermost side of the circle being kinship relationships with the closest sentimental connections, and those on the outermost side of the relationship being acquaintances or friends with relatively weaker social intensity. As a leading figure in Chinese sociology, Fei’s thoughts on Chinese relationships embedded in cultural concepts and practiced in the field became the cornerstone of the later systematic development of Chinese Relational Sociology.

2.2 The Dual Paradigm of *Guanxi* Sociology

Fei’s research made him the founder of the social theory of *guanxi* relationships. Subsequent scholars have stood on “the shoulders of a giant” and have contributed to the flourishing of Chinese *guanxi* studies today. Currently, research orientations are divided into two main paradigms. On the one hand, the term relationship (*guanxi*) comes from folk discourse. Therefore, the epistemological debates on *guanxi* make it the subject of research under the cultural studies paradigm. On the other hand, the conceptualization and measurability of *guanxi* and its sub-domains (like *renqing*, *favor*, *lishang wanglai*, *ziyuan* and other terms) have led to the development of the study of Chinese *guanxi* from an economic perspective. Therefore, it can be argued that the current study of relationships is divided into these two main paradigms.

2.2.1 Guiding Ideologies and Practical Norms of Relationships: The Contribution of Cultural Anthropology

This paper will first address the cultural perspective of relationships. First, the cultural tradition of relations originates from Confucian ideology at the macro-level on its micro-interactions between individuals as the collective guidance of social behaviors (Liang, 1949). Confucianism emphasizes social hierarchy and stabilized order. In relationships, bilateral relational structures are strictly controlled by established patterns of obligations and codes of behavior, and present their concrete forms through, for example, templates such as father-son, elder-younger brothers, husband-wife, and teacher-student (Barbalet, 2014, 2018). Second, the cultural kernel of relationships is also mined in terms of types of social connections rather than measurable scalar indicators (e.g., strength and breadth). A premise generally accepted by scholars is that the parent template for Chinese relationships is the family relationship, or the relationship with blood (Barbalet 2021). The bearer parties of a family relationship assume unconditional responsibilities and obligations, which are crystallized in the obligation of family members to help each other and support to the best of their ability. In terms of differential patterns of relationships, the communication patterns of family relationships (i.e., kinship) in the core circle also serve as models and examples for the variants of relationships in the outer circle. These variants include pseudo-familial *guanxi*, friendships, and acquaintanceships. Scholars of the micro-interaction paradigm have also discussed from

an anthropological perspective how these relationships are reinforced by ritualized social behaviors that mask the absence of blood ties (Bunkenborg & Hansen, 2019; Mao et al., 2021; Oxfeld, 2019; Ruan, 2017; 2021; Yang 1994).

2.2.2 Structural Modeling of Relationships and Network Orientation: A Structuralist Perspective on Socioeconomics

The article will continue to discuss the economic paradigm of *guanxi* research from a structuralist perspective. As another pillar of Chinese Relational Sociology, the economic perspective of relationships, or network analysis research, seeks to quantify the social characteristics, modes of operation, processes, and outcomes of relationships. Such an approach is reflected in the introduction of economic models and the concept of capital (Ruan et al., 1997).

Social capital and social networks are the concepts that this research paradigm focuses on. Lin Nan, a leading scholar at Duke University in the United States, has conducted in-depth studies of social capital in networking analysis (Lin & Smith, 2001). He conceptualizes social capital as a resource embedded in a network and capable of reaching actors through the operation of others and distinguishing it from individual human capital.³ Lin Nan (2001) also discusses the dualistic structure of relationships and proposes a discernment between symmetric and asymmetric models. Domestic scholars have continued their research on the economic dimension of relationships. Bian Yanjie, a renowned scholar, has devoted himself to the study of the economic paradigm of the concept of relationships and trying to conduct international dialog. Taking empirical studies such as discussing the impact of strong and weak relationships on social exchange networks in China, banquet networks, and worship networks as examples, he pointed out that the research on social relationships in China should be in dialogue with international theories on the premise that theories are rooted in the local society (Bian, 1997, 2017, 2018; Bian & He, 2022; Chen & Bian, 2015). In addition, a renowned scholar Zhang Wenhong contributes to the precise operation of social networks, measurement paradigms and methodologies, and the role of social capital in different fields through his research on the depth of social capital and social networks (2007, 2008, 2021).

2.3 A Brief Discussion of the Literature Review

In this paragraph, the article reviews the two basic perspectives of *guanxi* research, they are the economics paradigm of network research and the cultural anthropology dimension. It can be seen that the multidimensional studies of relationships are differentiated. As for the collection of empirical data, these studies have adopted two distinct methods, empirical fieldwork and statistical analysis of data, respectively. In the following, the author will try to point out how to construct a cultural-economic paradigm of neutralized *guanxi* rather than biased and substitutable alternatives by introducing the sociology of relations from international scholarship.

3. Relational Sociology: Narratives, Identities, Cultural Meanings, and Constructed Structures

3.1 The Future of Chinese *Guanxi* Studies: Voices of Skepticism

Overall, the current research on Chinese Relational Sociology is flourishing and presents an outstanding scene. Among scholars, some have raised rational questions and doubts about Chinese Relational Sociology, and these voices have pointed out the direction and path for the benign development of *guanxi* research.

In his theoretical analysis, Barbalet (2021) questioned the analytical use of the concept of *guanxi* by suggesting that current *guanxi* studies is not unified. It relies more on discursive narratives of folk wisdom and does not make the essential distinction between academic debate and folk discourse. The author believes that this question should be considered by scholars who inherit the study of *guanxi*. Therefore, in this paper, the author tries to throw light on this issue and partially proposes ideas and directions to answer this question.

3.2 Research Ideas in Western Relational Sociology: Integrating International Sociological Theories to Enhance Local Research

First of all, the author believes that local *guanxi* studies should absorb the strengths of international sociological theories to compensate for the over-reliance on local cultural concepts to a certain extent. To do so, the ontology of the cultural significance of *guanxi* and its concepts should be re-examined from a theoretical perspective. This paper argues that the 'relational turn' in the Relational Sociology in the academy is a means to this end (Prandini, 2015). Therefore, the author briefly describes the relevant approach to Relational Sociology.

The difference between the two paradigms of Relational Sociology is that Chinese Relational Sociology

³ It can be said that social capital refers to the function of other actors' human capital, including the introduction to certain connections, help in finding a job, or personal influence of promotion.

emphasizes the quantitative measurement of relational networks and structures (this paradigm, of course, is parallel to network research in Western academia). However, Relational Sociology emphasizes cultural content as the subject of study (Mische, 2011). Emirbayer and Goodwin (1994: 1446-7) argue that the explanatory power of network analysis has been achieved at the great expense of cultural content and process elements. Subsequently, Relational Sociology, with Emirbayer's (1997) proposal, was the origin of the theoretical initiative of scholars to scrutinize and review cultural content. Based on this, the school of Relational Sociology attempted to integrate the two main branches of cultural studies and social network analysis.

3.3 Relational Sociology and Its Major Contributors: The “Relational Turn”

A major contributor to Relational Sociology is Harrison White. He proposes that social networks are not a priori social realities, but rather phenomenological realities consisting of stories and identities (White et al., 2007b). This perspective sees narrative as a central driver of social connections in relevant perspectives and important vehicle for communication and exchange in this social context, and an important component of mixed paradigm research along with moral values, rules, and metaphors (Somers, 1994; Wood, 1982). This school of thought sees language as a source of action in shaping the meaning structure of binary relationships and the origin of the latter's further integration into social networks. This is because actors' relationships are interpreted by their relationships with participating and observing individuals through stories (White & Godart, 2007).

As an heir to the theory, Jan Fuhse's research partially continues the work of Harrison White (White et al, 2007a). Drawing on different research traditions in systems theory, social psychology, symbolic interaction, and anthropology, he has raised concerns about the meaning structure, and cultural content of network relationships (Fuhse, 2009, 2015). According to him, the mode of communication with cultural content is the origin of network structure (Prandini, 2015). Interpersonal interactions are guided by macro-cultural guidance as their principle and shape the meaning structure of the relationship through transactions, the latter carrying the actors' bilateral expectations of the relationship. The network structure is thus shaped by processual communication events rather than predetermined social displays per se (Fuhse, 2020, 2022).

4. Theoretical Extensions of Relational Research: The Trinity of Cultural, Economic and Structural Paradigms

In the above sections, the author discussed the theoretical constructions of Chinese Relational Sociology from different perspectives. The article attempts to argue for potential research directions in current guanxi studies through the Relational Sociology perspective of cultural categories. This is to answer Barbalet's questioning of the ontological and epistemological argument of the concept of guanxi. In this section, the author argues for a theoretical pathway towards a trinity of cultural, economic, and structural paradigms for the conceptualization of guanxi norms through a re-examination of Relational Sociology (Vilhena et al., 2014).

4.1 Distinguishing Academic Intentions from Civil Discourse

First of all, a distinction between the academic intent of the relationship and its sub-concepts proposed above and folk discourse is necessary. The sociolinguistic use of relationship comes from folklore, and the term itself circulates in, for example, social places such as banqueting activities that are considered sites of study. The relevant terms include “*renji guanxi*” (interpersonal relationships), “*renji jiaowang*” (interpersonal communication), “*enhu*” (favor), “*wanglai*” (exchange), and so on. Even the collection of “folk wisdom” is a familiar topic for people to talk about in social places. Based on this premise, the relationships discussed by scholars as “connections that mobilize social resources” have the same meaning for the social groups and members under academic study. In other words, this overlap leads to the implicit influence of folk wisdom on the construction of academic theoretical frameworks. Therefore, a re-examination of guanxi and its sub-concepts should begin with the cultural content of Chinese social relationships and a series of subsidiary concepts.

4.2 Reconstructing the Concept of Social Exchange: The Example of Favors And Returns

In this paper, the author proposes a reconstruction of the concepts of *favor* and *repayment* and calls for subsequent research to provide a comprehensive study of empirical argumentation for them.⁴ As an entry point for this process, the flow of favors and rewards is the central mechanism of binary relationships, which are the original primitive form and basic unit of social network relations. It can be argued that multiple asymmetric binary relationships are the units that construct an individual's social networking circle. The research focus of binary relationships includes social exchange as well as relationship types. Different relationship types relate to different attitudes towards social exchange. For example, both parties in a family relationship believe that help

⁴ Favor and repayment (reward) are sub-concept in the study of social exchange in mutual guanxi.

and favors should be unconditionally supportive, while acquaintances or friendships emphasize bilateral benefit-driven mechanisms. Regardless of the distinctive types of relationships, favor and reward are important cultural concepts in it. Therefore, the discussion in this paper begins with the concepts of favor and reward.

4.2.1 Inconsistencies in Economic-Cultural Integration

Currently, both anthropological research and network analysis paradigms view favors and rewards as synonymous with material flows in relationships. For example, gifts and direct monetary contributions, as well as non-material forms of help from the “human resources of others” (i.e., social resources) are seen as the ontological presence of favors and rewards (Lin, 2001). However, such an orientation ignores the cultural meanings in social exchange. If the measurement of favor itself is economically oriented, it will inevitably lead to the measurement of the absolute economic value of favors and rewards in social exchange in empirical studies. However, social exchange in asymmetry and the social behavior of giving favors such as “getting a job”, “making connections”, “going through the back door”, or “pulling strings”, are not only economical but cultural. The value of such social behaviors cannot be directly measured in the same way as the human and social resources of the actors. According to the assumptions of the economics perspective, any sort of help defined as a favor in social exchanges should be carefully calculated in terms of its monetary value that corresponds to different levels and be careful to repay it. Obviously, this is not the norm in social interactions. Besides, when scholar argues that it is the reputation that is put in the repayment from the favor-receiver to the favor-giver in social exchange, concise explanations of its value or meaning are still missing.

4.2.2 Cultural Meaning and the construction of Identity in Social Exchange: The Structure of Constructs and the Value of Embedded Meaning

The author discusses the lack of explanatory power of the economic paradigm in the face of the cultural empowerment. In this context, a distinction between cultural significance and economic value is necessary. Individuals or groups in social situations rely on the importance of the cultural dimension constructed by the meaning of the cultural connotation of the help to negotiate the social exchange of the relationship, rather than the value itself. Therefore, the academy does not convert the equivalent comparison of the value of each give and take and the price of money in social exchange.

From the relational sociological perspective of the cultural turn, favor and repayment can be understood as narratives that circulate in the social sphere. Such narratives can shape the relationship between two people in a social circle by constructing a story about the theme of “a favor that matters”. The circulation of the story itself reinforces the structure of the relationship. Subsequent social exchanges between the two people (e.g., the return of the beneficiary to the giver) are seen as part of the inability to fully repay the favor, as the favor is embedded in the relationship as a storytelling experience in a cultural sense, and becomes a part of the relationship (an emotional deposit).

The ontological analysis of favors and rewards allows for further discussion of the folk discourse of relationships versus that in academic research. It can be seen that in folk discourse, favor and repayment refer to material things in social exchange. This phenomenon can be reflected in unprocessed fieldwork data. On the other hand, in the academic world, favors and repayment stand in for narratives at the cultural level. Such narratives are expressed directly from the mouths of the respondents and also circulated in the circle through summaries and statements of individuals in the social sphere expressed verbally or in writing. As a counter-example, favor, and repayment without culturally meaningful assignments are material flows that are not considered to be accompanied by sentimental elements (exchange in symmetry).

Furthermore, favor and repayment as narratives can negotiate the identities of both parties through actors' transactions and structure relationships through cultural meanings. For example, in the asymmetrical relationship of the teacher-student paradigm of Confucian consciousness, the help given to the student by the party who is the benefactor (occupying the central position in the social network), regardless of its economic value, would be a favor that the student, as the subordinate party, would find it difficult to fully repay through any degree of economic return. This is the cultural meaning of asymmetrical structures. Besides, the mechanisms of shaping the structure of *guanxi* and forming transactions would be mutual. In other words, the transaction might shape the patterns and structure of *guanxi*, while the latter might function via order principles in cultural ideological collections to guide the transaction in the future.

4.3 Extension and Discussion of This Part

In this section, the article discusses two key concepts of social exchange as narratives ontologically. From the debate on favor and repayment, the author argues that research on the sociology of *guanxi* should further

scrutinize the meanings of the cultural dimensions of its concepts. For example, subsequent research could explore how cultural meanings form mechanisms for moving from binary relationships to relational networks. Or, subsequent research could focus on how cultural meanings and contents specifically structure different types of asymmetric relationships.

5. Conclusion

The article compiles and reviews the theoretical and empirical research on Guanxi Sociology in China and suggests potential research directions. Guanxi Sociology is a theoretical paradigm established by scholars of Chinese studies based on empirical experiences in local Chinese societies. The discussion in the article reviews two major paradigms of Chinese relational research, namely the network paradigm and the vision of cultural anthropology. Taking it as a basis, the article argues that the combination of Relational Sociology from schools outside the Chinese academy and guanxi studies in the Chinese academic field can produce complementary results. The argument advocates that subsequent relational research should introduce the theoretical paradigms of Harrison White and Jan Fuhse and integrate the elements of network structure, economic value, and cultural meanings into a unified theoretical framework. Such a theoretical premise would allow for a better interpretation of the cultural elements of relationships and their transactional outcomes in economic terms, as well as provide a broader perspective for the development of indigenous concepts.

Overall, the article presents new ideas on the direction of research in Chinese Relational Sociology at the theoretical level. Subsequent studies should provide solid and sufficient empirical data for this research vision. Chinese relational research is grounded in tradition and oriented to the future. It is an outstanding representative of Chinese sociological theory for internationalization. Therefore, re-examination and repeated discussion of the theory of Chinese Relational Sociology is necessary.

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Acknowledgments

Not applicable.

Authors contributions

Not applicable.

Funding

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Canadian Center of Science and Education.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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