

The Role of *Tunqin Guanxi* in Building Rural Resilience in North China: A Case from Qinggang

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of *guanxi*, particularly in its special form of *tunqin*, in building rural resilience in a poverty-stricken county in north China. The emphasis of this paper is placed on the nature and function of such *guanxi*. By presenting how *guanxi* is maintained, this paper also analyses the impact and effectiveness of local *guanxi* as a strategy to cope with poverty. Whereas *tunqin guanxi* appears to have built rural resilience in order to cushion villagers against life's upheavals, the maintenance of rural *guanxi* diminishes this resilience as scarce resources are spent on the exchange of cash gifts, thus aggravating local poverty.

Keywords: *guanxi*; *tunqin*; rural poverty; north China; rural resilience; cash gift exchange

Although hardly known to non-native speakers before the 1980s, the Chinese term *guanxi* 关系 has quickly gained currency in the English language in recent decades. *Guanxi* has been well documented as an essential part of all human-related activities in China, including personal matters, business transactions and politics. Yet, despite various discussions in the mass media and in-depth analysis in academic research, there is still much to be gained from further exploration of *guanxi* in its multifaceted forms and its various roles. This paper investigates the role of *tunqin* 屯亲, a special form of rural *guanxi*, in building rural resilience, and examines the impact of its maintenance with the exchange of cash gifts.

The research for this paper was carried out as part of a larger project on income and expenditure in rural Heilongjiang. The analysis presented here is based on six months of fieldwork conducted in Qinggang 青冈 county, Heilongjiang province, between late 2006 and mid-2007. In addition to government documents and published data, this study draws on evidence gathered

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from on-site observations and unstructured interviews with villagers, cadres and low-level officials. Interviews were conducted in private houses and local offices to ensure that interviewees were in their everyday surroundings and to demonstrate rural *guanxi* and its impact on individuals in the real world.¹

This paper proceeds as follows. It begins by reviewing the existing literature on *guanxi*, and then goes on to describe the poverty of the field site, setting out the background for the study. The third section contextualizes *tunqin*, a special type of *guanxi* in Qinggang, with an illustration of a rural household. This is then followed by a discussion of *tunqin* and its role in rural China. The fifth section examines the maintenance of *guanxi* and how this impacts on rural life. The paper then goes on to discuss the role of *tunqin guanxi* and its maintenance in building resilience in a poverty-stricken rural area before it concludes.

Revisiting *Guanxi*

As a term in the Chinese context, *guanxi* has been extensively elaborated on in academic studies both within China and overseas. Yet, even the most comprehensive definition is unable to capture all its multifaceted dimensions. Literally meaning relation or relationship, *guanxi* is closely related to social capital,² and in studies exploring social capital in China, *guanxi* is often depicted as its Chinese variant.³ It has been described as “a form of social network that defines one’s place in the social structure and provides security, trust and a prescribed role,”⁴ and also as a “mechanism by which individuals are able to achieve personal, family or business objectives through the formation of instrumental associations with appropriately positioned others.”⁵ Without a universally accepted definition, however, *guanxi* is usually understood by the simple term, “social connections.”

Two perspectives of guanxi

Scholarly accounts of *guanxi* generally emphasize two perspectives: institutional and instrumental.⁶ Such distinctions have often been identified as preordained versus achieved relations,⁷ where the former is characterized by the type of expressions and affections to be found, for example, in families and kinships, and the latter is featured with motivations and objectives mostly seen in business and work relationships, described as expressive and instrumental ties.⁸

1 Owing to the lack of local transport, the first author had to stay over in the village occasionally. However, this provided an excellent opportunity for the collection of valuable information.

2 Smart 1993.

3 Knight and Yueh 2008.

4 Hammond and Glenn 2004.

5 Bell 2000.

6 Gold, Guthrie and Wank 2002.

7 King 1991.

8 Hwang 1987.

In general, studies that look at the institutional dimension and the instrumental value of *guanxi* separately tend to relate to the specific rural/urban settings under examination.⁹ For example, urban *guanxi* has been identified as being more utilitarian,¹⁰ whereas rural *guanxi* is, as argued by Andrew Kipnis, connected more to community bonds based on kinship and *renqing* 人情 (human emotions).¹¹ These contrasts between rural and urban *guanxi* have divided perceptions so that the former is seen as more feminine and the latter as more masculine.¹² However, Yan Yunxiang argues that the binary opposition of emotional and instrumental dimensions of interpersonal relations is better understood as primary and extended *guanxi*.¹³ He proposes that primary *guanxi* stems from the self-core. Further from the self-centre, the moral or *renqing* dimension of *guanxi* extends and changes into more instrumental ties and becomes extended *guanxi*.

Urban guanxi

Most studies of the past few decades have focused on urban *guanxi* and how it is instrumental to advancing economic benefit. There has been much discussion of how *guanxi* can be used to acquire power, status and resources in China,¹⁴ and of the well-known “back door” strategies.¹⁵ Drawing from much of the analysis of urban *guanxi*, it is argued that the current form of Chinese *guanxi* is, to a certain extent, a product of the planned economy era when, owing to very limited resources, people had to resort to *guanxi* for whatever they needed.¹⁶ In this context, *guanxi* can be seen as an informal institution which substitutes for the market economy.¹⁷

The discussion of *guanxi* operating in the absence of market rules fits in with research on social networks and reciprocity in economics and political science against the background of economic growth that examines the relationship between institutional change and socio-economic development.¹⁸ As market mechanisms are developed, informal institutions will gradually diminish and will eventually be replaced by formal ones built on market rules.¹⁹ In studies of Chinese society, similar views are expressed: where the state has established market mechanisms, there is a decline in *guanxi* practices.²⁰ Some scholars,

9 Yang 1988; Walder 1988; Yan 1996a; Kipnis 1996.

10 Bian 1999; Yang 1994.

11 Kipnis 1996.

12 Yang 1994.

13 Yan 1996a.

14 Yang 1994; Logan, Bian and Bian 1999; May 2000.

15 Bedford 2011; Walder 1983.

16 Yang 1994; Walder 1988.

17 Xin and Pearce 1996; Hendrischke 2004.

18 According to Stiglitz, development is seen as “a change from a situation in which economic activity is embedded in social relations, to one in which social relations are embedded in the economic system.” See Stiglitz 2000, 65.

19 Putnam 1995.

20 Guthrie 2001.

however, maintain that *guanxi* is resilient and will not easily fade away unless the market operations depending on supply and demand are fully established, and Chinese society is transformed from a relation-based system into a rule-based one.²¹ During the transition period, *guanxi* practices have come in for criticism as they fuel the country's rampant corruption and are seen to be an impediment to China's development towards a modern society based on the rule of law and market mechanisms.²²

Rural guanxi

There has been less attention given to the role of *guanxi* in the rural context in the post-Mao period.²³ Yan Yunxiang's study of *guanxi* in a village in Heilongjiang province describes how *guanxi* perpetuated by gift exchanges has strengthened the local community and enhanced moral obligations.²⁴ Andrew Kipnis has studied the diversity of rural *guanxi* in a wide range of gift-giving practices and finds a correlation between material exchange and the closeness of *guanxi*.²⁵

Similar to urban *guanxi* that is "carefully initiated, preserved and renewed through the giving and receiving of gifts, favours and dinners or banquets," gift giving based on reciprocity also provides a central rule for rural *guanxi*.²⁶ A gift creates an outstanding obligation which is expected to be fulfilled. Favours have to be remembered and returned, although not always instantly. This concept of reciprocity is well documented in Yan's work in which he describes how villagers carefully maintained their *guanxi* by keeping a list of their gift-exchange activities.²⁷ As described by Fei Xiaotong, this concept of reciprocity can be dated back to a much earlier time in rural China. Before 1949, reciprocation was accepted as a tool with which to maintain connections among people in rural communities.²⁸ If one person owes another person a favour (*renqing*), an opportunity would be found to repay that favour with a bigger favour, so that the person owed the favour in the first place is now indebted to the person who owed him. This is a *renqing* investment. Yan also noticed that in rural Heilongjiang return gifts had to be more valuable. Apart from the inflation factor for the time elapsed since the favour was granted, villagers have to keep in mind the ever ongoing *renqing*.²⁹ In this way, exchanges based on reciprocity escalate as *guanxi* grows tighter, and more material goods and resources are needed to support a closer *guanxi*.

21 Yang 2002; King 1991.

22 Gold, Guthrie and Wank 2002.

23 Notable exceptions are Yan 1996a; 1996b; 2005; 2006; 2012; and Kipnis 1996; 1997.

24 Yan 1996a; 1996b.

25 Kipnis 1996.

26 Yang 1988.

27 Yan 1996a; 1996b.

28 Fei 2013a.

29 Yan 1996a.

Owing to the complexity of rural China, and especially because of its rapid development in the reform years, further research is required into the diversified roles of *guanxi* in rural communities in order to understand better whether it is more instrumental as manipulated by urbanites, or if it reflects more emotional content, as argued by Kipnis.³⁰ In reality, the instrumental and affective roles of *guanxi* cannot be mutually exclusive, and the dichotomy might have been much corroded in the development of the complex rural society. Therefore, the authors of this paper believe that rural *guanxi* must be studied in its specific context to understand the mixture of its instrumental and affective aspects. In fact, it is a specific social and economic background that shapes *guanxi* in its specific form. Yet, the role of *guanxi* in relation to its context is still an under-researched issue and deserves further examination. This paper intends to remedy this by providing in-depth analysis.

The current study is not a longitudinal study, nor does it attempt to provide a full picture of rural *guanxi* during economic transition. However, it contributes towards a fuller understanding of such a continuous change, and especially how *tunqin guanxi* is developed and functions in a poverty-stricken county.

The Field Site, Qinggang County

Administratively, Qinggang falls under the jurisdiction of Suihua 绥化 prefecture in west-central Heilongjiang province. Located in the hinterland of the fertile Songnen plain 松嫩平原, Qinggang is one of the province's grain-producing counties. It covers an area of 2,685 km² and has a population of around half a million, 72.9 per cent of which is rural. Since 2001, it has consisted of four district communities, 15 towns and townships, and 165 villages.

Local poverty

At first glance an ordinary county in north China, Qinggang is unique for two reasons: poverty and corruption. It was designated as a “national poor county” under the state's Poor Area Development Programme for poverty reduction. In 1994, 592 counties were identified as “national poor counties” when the state decided that counties with a per capita rural income of less than 400 yuan in 1992 should be designated as poverty-stricken.³¹ Qinggang was included among the 592 counties as its per capita rural income in 1992 was 299 yuan, well below the 400 yuan national threshold.

Once an area has been designated as a “national poor county,” it is entitled to funds from the state in three forms: special loans for poverty reduction; work for poverty relief (*yigong daizhen* 以工代赈), which provides work opportunities

30 Kipnis 1996.

31 See the Eighth Seven-year Poverty Alleviation Reinforcement Plan (1994–2000), issued by the State Council in 1994, available at: <http://news.sina.com.cn/2004-08-25/17534137022.shtml>. Accessed 12 January 2017.

building local infrastructure instead of providing poverty relief funds; and capital investment for local development. In order to qualify for state funding, some counties in Heilongjiang competed with each other for the “national poor” title.³² Once given the “national poor” designation, therefore, it would be unwise to have the title removed. However, this is what happened to Qinggang in 2001 when a substantial increase in per capita income was reported – from 751 yuan in 1993 to 2,300 yuan in 1998 – a very high rural income which was not actually realized until after 2008.

In fact, rural income remained low in Qinggang, despite the county’s close geographical proximity to the two richest cities in Heilongjiang, Harbin and Daqing 大庆.³³ Qinggang lies 120 kilometres to the north of the provincial capital Harbin and 90 kilometres east of Daqing. However, location has not helped Qinggang raise its rural income. For years, rural income in Qinggang had been around half of the provincial average and the situation did not appear to improve in 2007, when field research for this article was carried out (Figure 1).

Local corruption

In addition to poverty, Qinggang is also known for an infamous court case in 2005, the biggest bribery scandal concerning the selling of positions in Communist China at that time. Ma De 马德, the former committee secretary of Suihua municipality, was convicted of receiving substantial sums of money in bribes (over 6 million yuan) from officials at the municipal level and lower levels of government in exchange for appointing them to higher positions. A total of 265 officials were involved, including the former head of the Ministry of Land and Resources, who was previously president of Heilongjiang Provincial Political Consultative Conference. Two officials from Qinggang were also involved. One of them had bribed Ma with 500,000 yuan in order to be appointed county governor.

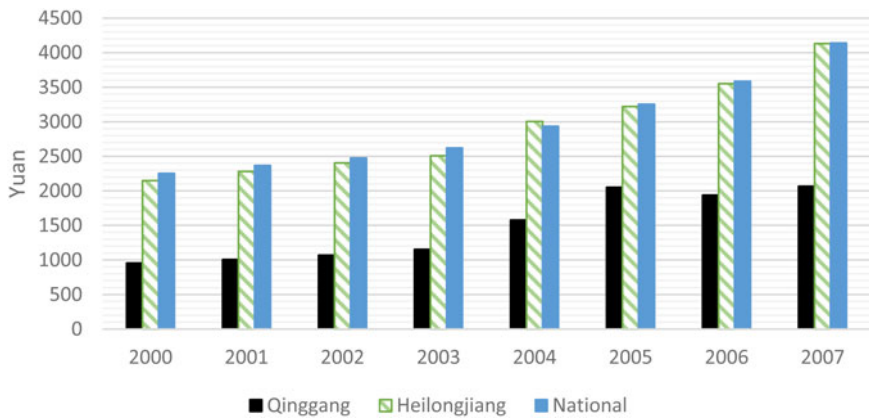
This case brought Qinggang notoriety and people were curious about why the position of county governor would be worth so much money. Inevitably, they wondered how much money a county governor would be able to make in such a poverty-stricken place where 40 per cent of the rural population still lived below the national poverty line and the average per capita income was less than 2,000 yuan in 2005.³⁴

32 Local governors of a “national poor county” were reluctant to reveal how much state funding would be available, but during a previous fieldtrip to another national poor county in Heilongjiang, local researchers found out that state funding was more than the fiscal income (84.85 million yuan) for that county in 2005.

33 Harbin, the provincial capital, and Daqing, an important oil-producing city, are the richest cities in Heilongjiang. Official data show that for years urban incomes in the two cities have been higher than the provincial average, indicating the special status of Harbin and Daqing in terms of economic development.

34 The national poverty line was set at 785 yuan in 2007.

Figure 1: Rural per capita Income in Qinggang, Heilongjiang, and China



Source:

Heilongjiang Statistics Yearbook 2009; National Statistics Yearbook 2009.

(colour online)

For the current study, the case of Qinggang is worth researching not only for its poor economic development but also for its special political background. This has provided a particular rural context in which villagers have developed poverty-coping strategies along with a specific form of local *guanxi*.

Contextualizing Rural *Guanxi*

The Guan family provides a good illustration of the role rural *guanxi* plays in Qinggang. The Guans are an ordinary rural family with four members in Z Township of Qinggang. They should have been able to manage their 6.6 *mu* 亩 of farmland and gain extra income by doing some casual off-farm work during the slack season, just like any other rural household.³⁵ However, their lives changed in 1996 when Guan lost his right leg in a hit-and-run traffic accident. Medical treatment following the accident immediately landed the family with debts as, at that time, there was no medical insurance for farmers and all medical expenses had to be self-funded. Over the next ten years, Guan and his wife worked hard to pay off their debts, but this work destroyed their health. Guan had liver disease and his wife suffered from various illnesses but she was never formally diagnosed because she could not afford to see a doctor in a hospital. Just when their debts were almost paid off, their 14-year-old youngest daughter was diagnosed with leukaemia in 2006. This diagnosis came before the new rural cooperative medical service was introduced to Qinggang, and again, they had to fund the treatment themselves. The medical treatment in the initial 70 days cost 80,000 yuan. Further treatments were expected to continue for the next six years at a cost of 16,000 yuan per year. This was an astronomical sum of money for an ordinary

35 One hectare equals 15 *mu*.

rural family whose income came mainly from the 6.6 *mu* of land they farmed for maize production.

Guan's efforts to survive

Guan once asked for help from the local government, kneeling in front of the township governor, but to no avail.³⁶ He was told to return and ask the brigade (village) secretary to take him door-to-door fundraising.³⁷ However, the village secretary refused to help, telling Guan that, “there are so many families with difficulties. Once I raise funds for you, there are others who are ill. Who shall I help?”

Having failed to secure any financial assistance from the township government, Guan and his wife raised funds by renting out their contracted land which they had just planted with crops.³⁸ They also tried to sell their house, but no one would buy it, even for the low price of 2,000–3,000 yuan in total. After exhausting all financial avenues, they finally obtained help in the form of a 7,000 yuan grant from the county government. The money came in two stages, the first payment was for 4,000 yuan and the second 3,000 yuan. Guan went to the civil affairs office in the county government where he was told that the government would be able to offer him some help and that the local civil affairs officer in his home township would send the money to his home. When the local officer arrived with the money, he asked Guan to give him 500 yuan saying that, as civil affairs assistant, he had expended a lot of effort on Guan's behalf, indicating that he had used his *guanxi* with the upper-level government to get the money for Guan. Guan replied, “you cannot take the money! This money is to save my child's life!” But the local officer would not leave, and said to Guan, “you give me the money this time and, in the future, if there is anything good, I won't forget you.” Considering that he was the local officer and that the family would have to ask for his assistance again, Guan reluctantly gave him 500 yuan. When the second payment of 3,000 yuan was issued, the officer took another 500 yuan, only this time he did not even ask Guan's permission.³⁹

The financial assistance from the government did not fully cover the Guans' expenses, and so they resorted to taking out a high-interest loan of 20,000

36 To kneel down in front of others (except to seniors) is considered to be very humiliating, as by doing so one is assumed to abandon all dignity in exchange for one's life or help.

37 Communes were dismantled in the early 1980s in Heilongjiang but villagers in Z Township continue to use the terms they used in the planning era, such as commune and brigade. Commune generally refers to the township government, and brigade refers to the village.

38 It is considered extremely unwise to lease land with crops as any investment in seeds and labour is lost.

39 Guan did not say anything about the commission when he was interviewed during the day. It was the girl who told the first author about it during a night-time chat in her room. She also said that, as a civil affairs assistant, the local officer would take commission for all the money he applied for on behalf of villagers. If a villager received more than 1,000 yuan, he would take 500 yuan; if the total amount was less than 1,000 yuan, he would take 100 yuan. The next morning, the author confirmed this information with Guan.

yuan from loan sharks. They had been turned down in their application for a loan from the local rural credit cooperatives because they were considered to “have no capability to repay.”⁴⁰ The interest rate of the private loan was said to be 30 per cent, and interest each year was as high as 6,000 yuan, which was more than the income they made from their land.

Help from local guanxi

In the case of the Guans, it appears that the government and its formal institutions in this poverty-stricken county failed to offer adequate support, and their situation was made worse by local corruption. In the end, it was Guan’s fellow villagers, through the local *guanxi* network, who offered various forms of assistance to help the family in their hour of need.

Cash contributions. On hearing that Guan’s daughter needed money urgently for treatment, villagers gathered round the Guans and contributed as much as they could. According to local residents, the Guans were such nice friendly people that all those living in the *tun* went to Guan’s house and offered help. The villagers were generous in their contributions and the money proved to be life-saving as the girl survived the emergency treatment.

It seems that the Guans asked for financial help several times afterwards. During the field research, when Guan took the first author to one villager’s house and told the hostess the purpose of the visit, the woman smiled with relief and said frankly, “I thought you had come again for money!” Although the villagers were not rich people and could not keep donating cash, they never stopped helping in other ways.

Food treats. The Guans was living extremely frugally. Apart from a sack of flour provided by the government, the only food grain that could be found inside the house was maize. When staying in their home for dinner, the first author was treated with pancakes, corn porridge and runner beans (grown in their backyard), the best food they could prepare. Villagers said there was usually only staple food for the family. In addition to the runner beans, their only vegetables were leeks and cucumbers grown in the backyard in summer. They spent every penny they had on medical treatment for their daughter, but could not afford anything nutritious for her. Their daughter was much loved and pitied by their fellow villagers, who often took her to their homes for delicious food at dinner times. This, according to the villagers, was one of the ways they could continue helping the family.

40 Rural credit cooperatives are financial institutions in rural areas which collect rural residents’ savings and lend mainly to agricultural projects and township and village enterprises. The lending decisions are highly influenced by local governments. See Cousin 2007, 6.

Employment assistance. As the Guans were deeply in debt, their eldest daughter was soon forced to drop out of school. She became the youngest migrant worker from the village and began working in a location far from her home. Similar to findings from other studies, most of the migrant workers from Z Township were making a living either as factory or construction workers, or else in the service industry in the cities. Young males worked in factories making sofas or jewellery boxes, and some worked on construction sites. Those with special skills would work as chefs. Young girls usually ended up in hotels and restaurants working as waitresses. However, Guan's eldest daughter was only 15 and was unable to apply for formal employment. By going through the local *guanxi* network, she managed to gain an introduction to and secure work in a clothes factory in a small city. She worked in the factory every day from 6 am to 12 pm for 300 yuan per month, with food and accommodation provided. It was expected that this help would alleviate the family's financial burdens.

Household help. The Guans' house was in a very poor condition. However, the walls and ceiling were covered in white paper and plastic sheets when the fieldtrip was conducted. These improvements came via their local *guanxi*. According to one local woman:

The family's condition is like this. You came this year, the house looks better. There are some plastic sheets covering the ceiling, given by this or that one in the *tun* during the past spring festival. If you came last year, without those plastic sheets, I doubt if you could come in being such a tidy young lady. It seems the house is going to collapse because of the big cracks and is leaking. The open windows couldn't be closed. And the doors! Who would buy such a house? Last year, they said they would sell the house at whatever price, as long as someone would like to take it. Even for only two or three thousand [yuan], we would save our child. Who would take it? No one! You see how pitiful they are.⁴¹

Owing to Guan's physical disability, local people often helped his family by doing farm work and other household chores. Such help was also offered to others in the community when they were in need, especially women and the elderly whose husbands and children had migrated for work. In general, the various forms of mutual assistance among the villagers in the poverty-stricken community has effectively helped people like the Guans to overcome household hardships.

Conceptualizing *Tunqin Guanxi*

In reality, local people use the term *tunqin* to refer to their fellow villagers and for those within their *guanxi* circles.

41 Interview conducted by the first author with Zhao, a female villager, at the Guans' house, 30 March 2007.

The definition of tunqin

According to Yan, the word *tun* is a local term for village, and *qin* means kin, so that *tunqin* literally means relatives living in the same *tun*.⁴² Currently, *tunqin* mostly appears in literary works and newspaper reports, and there has been little academic research done on this type of *guanxi* in rural China. Of the few studies where *tunqin* is mentioned briefly, most have cited Yan's work,⁴³ believing *tunqin* to mean fellow villagers who are "co-living relatives,"⁴⁴ or "relatives of coresidence."⁴⁵ In other words, it is believed that the term refers to people living in the same area who consider themselves as belonging to the same family, regardless of whether there is a consanguineous connection or not.⁴⁶

In this article, however, we argue that, according to the above definitions, Yan's explanation of *tun* is inaccurate in that unlike villages with certain administrative functions, a *tun* is formed naturally so that a village and a *tun* might not share the same boundary. For example, in Guan's township there were 17 villages including 58 *tuns*, indicating that a *tun* is on average much smaller than a village. Such a spatial difference has physically encouraged people in a *tun* to set up a closer relationship than fellow villagers.

Tunqin as a unique rural fictive kin relationship

Observations from our field research confirms that *tunqin guanxi* refers to a connection that is more than the connection between fellow villagers. Guan would address everyone he met from the village as if they were relatives, for example greeting them as auntie or brother-in-law. And, despite only being in his mid-thirties and having two teenage daughters, he was called "grandpa" (*laoye* 姥爷) by some young children. He later explained that was because they were *tunqin*. He had referred to people in this way since he was young, and for generations villagers had automatically established a "quasi-relative/kin" relationship. It appeared complicated, but people there knew exactly what their corresponding positions were in the network.

Our observation and interview data have shown that some villagers in Z Township had established a close network based on *tunqin*. As well as addressing each other as if they were family, villagers also visited each other whenever they liked and felt at home at whichever household they visited. For example, it was not unusual to find a visitor sitting on the bed cross-legged, smoking and relaxing as if he or she were the owner of the house. And if when cooking a mother was short of a leek, she would simply tell her daughter, "pick up some from your

42 Yan 1996b, 108.

43 Yan 1996b; 2012; Du 2009.

44 Yan 2012, 132.

45 Yan 1996b, 108.

46 Dong 2012.

auntie's backyard!" Of course, the auntie in this case is not a consanguineous relative but a *tunqin*.

The practice of addressing others as if they were relatives without the connection of consanguinity has been noticed by Kipnis in Fengjia 冯家.⁴⁷ Kipnis compares this to Fei's findings that kinship terms are extended in the village regardless of surname to show one's psychological attitude and level of respect towards the other.⁴⁸ This fictional kinship has been described by Fei as being the result of *guofang* 过房 (pseudo-adoption), similar to the *baiganxin* 拜干亲 (fictive kin making) documented by Yan.⁴⁹

We, however, have found *tunqin* to be different from pseudo-adopted and fictive kinships in that either *guofang* or *baiganxin* usually involves a ritual act, yet no such custom is found to be associated with the setting up of *tunqin guanxi*. Besides, according to Yan, *tunqin* is "created through individual cultivation rather than the preexisting membership for anyone born into the community."⁵⁰ This also differs from the current study because Guan's *tunqin guanxi* was created by his forebears through their individual efforts and passed on down to him and his children. Such *guanxi* is inherited from one generation to the next and is a preordained relationship for descendants.

Tunqin as a flexible type of rural guanxi

Yan once translated *tunqin* as "intimate fellow villagers," but found that part of the original meaning concerning the similarity between co-residence and kinship ties was lost in the translation, indicating the importance of the link between location and intimacy regarding the term *tunqin*.⁵¹

So far, all of the above definitions of *tunqin* have shown that the term is location specific.⁵² However, regionalism only explains *tun*, the location, but it is not enough to form "*qin*," the intimate or close relationships. Evidently, when outsiders settle in a rural community, they are not accepted automatically or invited by the indigenous villagers to become part of their "*qin*" or kin. Very often, there are conflicts between settlers and the original villagers.⁵³ This is because a settler's kinsfolk are back in his home village where his ancestors lived. As argued by Fei, regionalism is inseparable from consanguinity.⁵⁴ Take household registration as an example. One's original home place, known as *zuji* 祖籍 (ancestors' hometown), is still recorded in the registration booklet. However, in reality,

47 Kipnis 1996.

48 Fei 2013a.

49 Fei 2013a; Yan 1996b.

50 Yan 1996b, 108.

51 Ibid.

52 The existing literature documents *tunqin* mostly in north China, such as in Heilongjiang province, although it is also found in research on rural Hubei. See Zhao, Yang and Zhao 2010 and Liao 2011. In other rural areas, people use different terms to refer to similar relationships, for instance, the term "friends" is used generally by people in the Li minority village in Hainan. See Zhang 2009.

53 Zhao, Yang and Zhao 2010.

54 Fei 2013b.

one's father or even grandfather may never have even set foot in this *zuji*, which is inherited from one's ancestors. This phenomenon leads Fei to comment that regionalism is "the projection of consanguinity into space."⁵⁵

By the same token, in Qinggang, geographical location alone is not sufficient for the establishment of a *tunqin* relationship. Qinggang's history can be traced back 150 years. It was a hunting area for the royal family during the Qing dynasty and was mostly uninhabited except for the occasional visiting nomads. Land reclamation started in 1851 when a total of 230 households of Man nationality (*manzu* 满族) were relocated to settle along the Tongken River 通肯河 (near Z Township today), and six *guantun* 官屯 (official *tuns*) were set up.⁵⁶ Guan, as a Man ethnic minority, might be one of the original settlers' descendants. Over generations, lineage groups have gradually developed in the local areas. As the region developed, more migrants arrived and formed geographical relationships with the local people. As the communities have grown, through working and living together, and most likely through marriage, the mutual penetration and interaction of consanguinity and geographical ties have combined to form *tunqin*.

For Fei Xiaotong, consanguinity is the foundation of an identity society while regionalism forms the basis for a contract society.⁵⁷ In a society built on the former, *guanxi* is based on human feelings (*renqing*), whereas in a society linked by the latter *guanxi* is based on contracts. Therefore, according to Fei, it is impossible for businesses to exist in a society built on consanguinity. However, non-natives or new settlers residing in the same place are different. As marginalized residents in the consanguineous communities, newcomers are able to disregard *renqing* and thus become more confident and flexible when transacting business. Fei explains how in this way people in rural Yunnan would discourage their close relatives from joining the same *cong* 踪, the local "money club," but would invite their friends to become members.⁵⁸ In analysing conflicts between rural relatives, Yan also observes that, "without the money, relatives should have been able to keep very good relationships."⁵⁹

As a combination of both consanguinity and geographical ties, *tunqin* may be maintained through *renqing guanxi* as close as in consanguineous relationships, and it might also solve problems like new settlers with purely geographical ties. If needed, *tunqin* might be based more on personal intimacy and less on rules, or vice versa. Therefore, compared with blood and geographical ties, *tunqin* is more flexible. With the exact location unfixed, *tunqin* is located between the instrumentalism of urban *guanxi* and the emotional content of rural *guanxi*, thus it plays a comparatively competent role in rural Chinese society owing to its elasticity.

55 Ibid.

56 Guan 1987.

57 Fei 2013b.

58 Fei 2013a.

59 Yan 2012, 135.

Tunqin as a coping strategy against rural poverty

The question remains of what status *tunqin* carries in a certain rural community. Previous studies that refer to *tunqin* suggest that it is not a close relationship in rural China. For example, Liao Wenbi finds *tunqin* to be just above the basic line of gift exchange, and Yan Yunxiang has also ranked it below voluntarily constructed friendship and fictive kinship.⁶⁰ However, we found *tunqin* to be a far more intimate relationship than has been described by others. Why?

Existing literature appears to indicate that the status of *tunqin* in a rural community is associated with what coping strategies villagers have available to them. For example, in Hubei, where lineage dominates the very traditional rural society, *tunqin* is simply a term similar in meaning to friendship.⁶¹ Yan found that in the village of Xiajia 下岬 in Heilongjiang where villagers have better economic opportunities, the *tunqin* relationship is not as close as that of good friends or of fictive kinsmen.⁶²

Based on our observations in Qinggang, we argue that where there is a low level of economic development, ineffective government assistance and pervasive official corruption, villagers tend to turn to informal institutions such as *guanxi* as one of the few remaining coping strategies available to them in times of need. In this context, *guanxi* in its *tunqin* form has become more prominent and important in rural life.

Maintaining Rural *Guanxi*

Similar to other geographic areas examined in the existing literature, gift-giving activities in Qinggang are extremely important in maintaining rural *guanxi*.

Obligatory cash gifts

When explaining why they had to give cash gifts, villagers claimed it was because they were in *renqing* debt, most probably because they had received money as gifts from others on previous occasions. *Renqing* has a literal meaning of human emotions. It is a kind of sociable emotion between people which needs to be nurtured and strengthened through social exchanges. The closer the *renqing*, the more expensive the gift. Higher value gifts also further enhance existing *renqing*. The exchange of gifts driven by *renqing* requirements creates more intimate *guanxi*, which in turn encourages more exchange activities to foster more *renqing*. The whole process is realized through gift exchanges based on the traditional Confucius ethical code of *lishangwanglai* 礼尚往来, or etiquette demands

60 Liao 2011; Yan 1996b.

61 Zhao, Yang and Zhao 2010.

62 Yan 1996b. Although both are located in Heilongjiang province, Xiajia is much better-off than Qinggang. Rural per capita income in Yan's field site was 5,422 yuan in 2007, but only 2,067 yuan in Qinggang (Heilongjiang Statistics Bureau 2009). It is believed that differences in economic development provide important indications for the study of rural *guanxi*.

reciprocity. As one villager explained, “isn’t there a saying of *lishangwanglai?* They give us 500 [yuan] for my son’s wedding, I cannot give back 400.”

Interestingly, there were times when the villagers were invited to an occasion even though they had no special relationship with the host, as one villager, Li, explained:

The other day, I ... met Chen xx, Chen xx asked me to have a drink [for a family occasion]. You see, we are not relatives, so I cannot say we are friends, just acquaintances from the same *tun*, and the same brigade. He told me to have a drink, and I said OK, OK.⁶³

To accept such an “invitation,” Li had to pay at least 50 yuan to Chen, according to the usual practice, in order to show that he was giving a reasonable gift. From his conversation with Chen, it is clear that Li attended the “drink” because he and Chen were both in the same *tun* and therefore he had no choice but to attend. Otherwise, he would be considered by others as eccentric and lose face.

Increasing the cash gifts

Over the years, the practice of giving gifts has undergone great changes along with the economic and cultural development in rural China. For example, in earlier years, people gave presents rather than cash. In an interview, a former village Party secretary gave an example of gift-giving many years ago when one of the villagers was about to marry. As village secretary, he collected 47 yuan from 47 households and bought a clock for 49.5 yuan for the couple (he contributed the extra 2.5 yuan himself). However, the days when it was acceptable to give a thing as a gift in Heilongjiang are long gone. Nowadays, it is only acceptable to give cash; instead of gifting actual goods, the value of the goods has been converted into cash, similar to the concept of *ganzhe* 干折.⁶⁴

Over the years, the value of cash gifts has kept increasing. In the 1930s, gift-giving expenses for ceremonial occasions in rural China accounted for one-thirtieth to one-fortieth of the total income of each household;⁶⁵ in the 1990s, such expenses were as high as one-fifth of a villager’s annual income, and were found to be regressive in that less well-off families tended to spend more proportionally than rich rural families.⁶⁶ In Qinggang, the amount expended on these giving activities each year was also high compared with the local rural income of several thousand yuan on average for an individual household. As shown in the above example, at least 50 yuan had to be given for normal *guanxi*, and up to 200 or 300 yuan would be given for occasions involving close relationships, such as a relative’s wedding. Clearly, this level of gift-giving has become a tremendous burden for many families.

63 Interview with Li, a male peasant, Qinggang, 30 March 2007.

64 Yan 2005; 2006.

65 Fei 2013a.

66 Yan 1996a.

The impact of giving cash gifts

What remains unchanged is the large number of occasions which require gifts. In rural Heilongjiang, the numerous money-giving occasions mostly involve a feast. The above example of Chen's drink is a typical one. By attending the feast, a closer relationship is formed between the host and the guest. However, the impact of giving cash gifts has been great on rural households. There are reports that giving money for big occasions has become an unavoidable and increasingly onerous obligation for Chinese farmers.⁶⁷ In some extreme cases, some villagers think up ways to recoup the money. For example, a story circulated in the local area that one farmer was so angry about having to give so much money in gifts that he invited his fellow villagers for a feast to celebrate his newly built hen-house! According to a retired village secretary:

This [giving of cash gifts] is really ... you say, is it a custom or problem? I am not sure. It has been handed down from our ancestors. What is the point? You just can't win! You see, it is supposed to be voluntary ... but something like: hi Old Zhang, Old Wang, my child is getting married and I would like to invite you for a drink [to the wedding feast]. He is not actually saying he is asking for money [so it is hard for people to refuse]! ... Ordinary people would say that's the most important moment of my family, and I just invite you for a drink ... you see this ... there is no solution!⁶⁸

During interviews and informal conversations, villagers would complain about giving cash gifts whenever their expenditure was mentioned. They considered such money giving to be obligatory, while their role in the process was passive. One woman further commented, "It would be great if we could spend the money – several thousand *kuai* 块 – on our own family!" But she also indicated that it was a tradition and custom that nobody was able to change.

No matter how pointless and wasteful in nature the villagers found the exchange of cash gifts to be, or how reluctant they were to partake in the process, the giving of cash gifts plays a vital role in the maintenance of the local *guanxi*. However, even though what is given is expected to be returned based on the reciprocity of gift exchange, it does impose a great financial burden on villagers. Taking the rural community as a whole, over the years more and more resources have been put into the exchange of cash gifts, much of which have been spent on the provision of food and drink on the special occasions.

Discussion

This article has discussed how rural *guanxi*, and in particular *tunqin guanxi*, builds resilience in a poverty-stricken county in north China, and how the

67 For more about the impact of cash-gift giving in rural China, see "Two weddings, two funerals, no fridge," *The Economist*, 30 November 2013, <http://www.economist.com/news/china/21590914-gift-giving-rural-areas-has-got-out-hand-further-impooverishing-chinas-poor-two-weddings-two>. Accessed 29 November 2016.

68 Interview with a retired village secretary, 27 March 2007

maintenance of rural *guanxi*, in the form of reciprocal gift and money exchanges, impacts on rural life.

Tunqin is a special type of rural *guanxi* found in Qinggang. Its uniqueness lies not only in the way it is built up and cultivated by individuals in the form of kin relationships that are consolidated through the generations, but also in its elasticity in that it comprises both instrumental and institutional elements that are found in urban and traditional rural *guanxi*. It can be argued that *tunqin* has become an effective and successful form of *guanxi* that works within and for the rural community. Currently, rural China is undergoing a transitional stage in that traditional institutions have been undermined by the communist regime while new ones are still under construction.⁶⁹ This is reflected in the evidence from Qinggang: villagers gained little benefit from the stagnating local economy, and market rules and necessary formal institutions were far from well established. This, accompanied with local corruption, deprived villagers of their fair share of and access to resources so that people had to resort to *tunqin*, the quasi-kinship, to get what they needed. Therefore, it is the scarcity of available resources and unavailability of coping mechanisms that make the role of *guanxi* more prominent.⁷⁰ When economic development is slow, with undeveloped formal institutions and insufficient government support, *guanxi* is one of the few coping strategies available to those in urgent need of help.

However, the maintenance of local *guanxi* among villagers is costly. Reciprocity might ensure that what is given out is returned eventually, yet it does impose a great financial burden on villagers in the present. Over the years, taking the rural community as a whole, more resources have been invested in cash gifts, leaving the villagers more impoverished and with fewer resources of their own.

To summarize, we argue that rural *guanxi* provides contingent support for villagers and cushions them against unexpected financial upheavals when formal institutions are not accessible. However, maintaining local *guanxi* through the exchange of cash gifts further diminishes rural income in such a poverty-stricken region. The maintenance of *guanxi* in order to ensure help at some future point in time has thus become the ultimate and maybe unexpected result of villagers being deprived of chances for development and even for survival. However, by maintaining *guanxi*, villagers are diminishing what few resources they have and this ultimately undermines rural resilience. As argued by some Chinese scholars, villagers nowadays are trapped in a vicious circle of cash-gift giving.⁷¹

This research is based on what was observed in Qinggang at a certain point of time in a changing rural community. As noted by Kipnis, rural *guanxi*-based gift

69 He 2013.

70 Yan has noticed that poor families in Xiajia spend more proportionally on cash gifts. Similar to the findings in this research, we believe that poor families have fewer resources and options to help themselves in times of need. Therefore, they have to rely more on *guanxi* as one of the few coping strategies for survival, and in turn have to spend more on its maintenance.

71 Chen 2012; Hou 2011.

giving has been anything but static since 1949.⁷² It is expected that in the future, when development brings prosperity to the region, the rural *guanxi* in Qinggang will almost certainly display a different profile, as resources and their availability are among other factors that will reshape the development of future *guanxi*.

Biographical notes

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摘要: 本文以中国北方贫困县为例,探讨了关系,特别是屯亲这种特殊的关系形式,对构建农村社会弹性修复力的作用。通过描述关系的维护,文章同时还分析了关系作为抵制贫困的措施所产生的影响。本文的分析表明,屯亲关系看似增强了村民抵抗生活变故的能力,但是村民间为了维持关系而进行的礼金交换却更多地消耗了农村的稀缺资源,从而削弱了其弹性修复力、加剧了当地的贫困状况。

关键词: 关系; 屯亲; 农村贫困; 农村弹性修复力; 礼金交换

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72 Kipnis 1996.

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