Book Review

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Ji Ruan, *Guanxi, Social Capital and School Choice in China: The Rise of Ritual Capital*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, 194 pages.

This book examines why and how the Chinese use *guanxi* to secure admissions in key schools. In China, students must pass the Provincial Exam (*zhong kao*) and the National Exam (*gao kao*) before they can secure admission to highly regarded senior high schools and universities. Senior high schools in China fall into two categories: the regular schools and the key schools. The number of places available in the key schools is highly inadequate compared to the number of students applying for admission, since the vast majority of parents hope and expect that their children will secure admission in the key school. Some key schools in China have worked around the problem of shortage of places by opting for the dual registration system. Under this system, some of the available places are reserved for students who pass the entrance examination, while the remaining are reserved for students who have not passed the qualifying examinations, but whose parents are willing to pay a higher tuition fee in exchange for a prized seat. In terms of methodology, the author uses an ethnographic approach and collected data through participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

The relationship between *guanxi* and social capital is well discussed in this book. *Guanxi* is a cultural concept that explains the personal relationships of the Chinese. The author explains that the Chinese rely on traditional Confucian cultural concepts to define the relationships between two individuals. For example, the Five Cardinal Relationships (*wu lun*) defines basic personal and interpersonal relationships, including the relationships between the government and the country's citizens, parents and offspring, husband and wife, siblings, and friends. The definitions govern how relationships are treated and what rules, ethics, and personal interactive practices apply to each relationship, depending on the level of intimacy and social distance between the individuals. The author reviews the major theoretical and conceptual works of major Chinese social anthropologists, such as Fei Xiaotong's concept of ego-centered social relationships, K.K. Hwang's model of three types of personal ties (the expressive, instrumental, and mixed), Yan Yunxiang's model of two types of *guanxi* (primary and extend), and Chang Xiangqun's model of four types of Chinese reciprocity-based (*wanglai*) personal relationships (generous, expressive, instrumental, and negative).

Based on these works, the author proposes the concepts of close *guanxi*, moderate *guanxi*, and distant *guanxi* to differentiate personal relationships among people of different social distance and personal intimacy. The idea of close *guanxi* bears close resemblance to Hwang's expressive tie, Yan's primary *guanxi*, and Chang's expressive *wanglai*. The concept of moderate *guanxi* is akin to Hwang's definition of mixed tie, while the notion of the distance *guanxi* is much like Hwang's instrumental tie, Yan's extended *guanxi*, and Chang's instrumental *wanglai* (p. 61). All of these categorizations can predict the different social and ethical behaviours the Chinese will exhibit depending on the social distance and personal intimacy they share with the other individual. Depending on the different types of *guanxi* between individuals, individuals may display differing levels of attachments and frequency of interactions.

How is *guanxi* related to social capital? Since the components of social capital include social networks, norms, and sanctions, the author considers Chinese *guanxi* as one of the components essential for building social capital. In order words, *guanxi* is not independent of social capital; rather, *guanxi* is one part of social capital. In this regard, the author is curious about how parents utilize their *guanxi* to help their children gain social capital, or in this particular instance, admission to the key school.

Following the theoretical discussion, the author attempts to analyze how Chinese parents employ types of *guanxi* practices to develop and maintain good personal relationships with the people who could help their children secure a place in the key school. The types of *guanxi* practices include ritualistic customs, giving money, using power, and *guanxi-guanxi* relations. Ritualistic customs involves demonstrating several kinds of tactical ritual behaviours, such as giving gifts, exchanging favours, giving face, and *ketao* (客套) to develop a relationship to achieve the goals of *la guanxi*. The aim of performing these ritual behaviours is to invoke mutual emotional attachment between the parents and the headteachers or the educational officials, and thus develop closer *guanxi* and intimate *ganqing* between them.

The author also illustrates why *guanxi* is used. He explains that his research uncovered two main reasons behind the use of *guanxi* in securing school places. The first reason is the institutional vague. The author points out that prior to the enforcement of the educational policy reform in 2011, most key schools in the two research locations reserved some seats for students who had failed to clear the high school entrance examination and for the *guanxi* students. According to a participant, who was a teacher in one of the city's school, the school reserved 100 of the 600 available seats each academic year for *guanxi* students. Further, the participant explained that government rules did not include any regulations or stipulations about how to allocate the school seats (p. 102). Owing to the institutional vague

and the dearth of the school enrollment regulations prior to 2011, schools had the flexibility to reserve seats for *guanxi* students, and thus, earn higher revenues and profits by charging the *guanxi* students higher school selection fees and donations. However, these *guanxi* practices negatively influenced school education in the two research locations. Corruption in the educational system is a serious issue and the author reveals that school officials and head teachers use their positions of power as a resource to gain financial favours or other resources (p. 107).

The second reason behind the use of *guanxi* is the prevalence of particularism, collectivism, and diffuse culture in local society in contemporary China. The collectivism cultural background means that the Chinese regard society as more important than the individual and subsequently, the interests of society as more important than the interests of the individual. As a result, they are quite willing to use societal *guanxi* (e.g., family, friends, kinship relationships, and so on) to influence the distribution of social resources. The fact that the Chinese find it difficult and awkward to reject requests from their societal *guanxi* has given rise to particularism, which in turn, influences the distribution of social recourses in China. In this study, the author claims that Chinese parents do not have any qualms about using their societal relationships to secure the place or a seat for their children in key schools. This cultural phenomenon is widely seen, especially in the research locations where the fieldwork was conducted. Subsequently, the author explains that most participants in the study did not see anything wrong in making or receiving these kinds of requests.

However, the author does note that not everyone could utilize *guanxi* practices successfully. He suggests that demonstrating the proper ritual behaviours during the processes of *la guanxi* might help parents achieve greater success in their quest to utilize *guanxi* for securing school placements. As discussed earlier, the Chinese demonstrate different social interaction behaviours and ethics depending on the level of social distance and interpersonal *guanxi*. As a result, when someone demonstrates an inappropriate behavioral ritual, it makes a negative impression on the other person and may adversely affect their *guanxi*. In this regard, the author proposes the concepts of 'Ritual Capital'. Ritual capital prescribes how people can successfully obtain social resources by performing the appropriate ritual behaviours to enhance their *guanxi* and interpersonal relationships.

Based on these findings from the fieldwork and interview data, the author concludes that there is the presence of a weak-strong-weak pattern related to ritual capital. According to the author, the Chinese demonstrate the expressive type of ritual behaviour to their close *guanxi*, comprising family and close friends. However, they would not expect to demonstrate these ritual behaviours in exchange for social resources and benefits from their close

guanxi. Demonstrating the expressive ritual is purely to express emotions and attachment for close *guanxi* and not for material gain. As a result, the Chinese get weak ritual capital from close *guanxi*. However, the author claims that the Chinese frequently demonstrate ritual behaviours toward moderate *guanxi*. By demonstrating the appropriate ritual behaviours toward moderate *guanxi*, people expect their moderate *guanxi* to help them to network with others to obtain useful information and social resources. The author believes that people must demonstrate a high degree of appropriate ritual behaviours to gain the necessary social resources, which means that ritual capital proves more useful in acquiring resources from moderate *guanxi*. Finally, the author points out that the Chinese would not demonstrate ritual behaviours toward distance *guanxi* because the social distance between them is too alienating to do so.

Based on his theory of the weak-strong-weak pattern of ritual capital, the author concludes that ritual capital is more useful for acquiring resources from moderate *guanxi*, and therefore, ritual capital contributes most to bridging social capital (p. 132). In other words, from the author's perspective, ritual capital is a part of an individual's social capital rather than an independent form of capital (p. 131).

This book includes hence demonstrates three key ideas. First, the book demonstrates how Chinese parents utilize their *guanxi* so their children can secure a place in the key school and obtain a larger share of social resources. The author shows clearly that parents apply different types of *guanxi* practices depending on the social distance with different *guanxi*. The author also proposes a weak-strong-weak model to explain how different *guanxi* practices and different ritual behaviours can help obtain social resources and accumulate social capital. Further, the author explains the features of *guanxi* closeness as a continuum that is ever changing, adaptable, and personally subjective, rather than something that is constant and unchanging. This book also demonstrates how and why *guanxi* is used in the context of school placements. The author found four different types of *guanxi* practices and two key reasons for the use of *guanxi*. In this regard, the book enriches our understanding of how and why people use *guanxi* for school placements. Next, the author proposes the idea of ritual capital and suggests that an individual who demonstrates the appropriate ritual behaviours to their *guanxi* stands to gain social resources and social capital. In this regard, the author contributes to the ideas of the social capital theory. Finally, the author indicates that ritual capital is more useful for acquiring resources through a person's moderate *guanxi*, and concludes that the ritual capital mostly contributes to bridging social capital.

For future research directions, this book points out that ritual behaviours matter; however, ritual behaviours are not exclusive to China, and each

country around the world is likely to have its own ritual customs. Therefore, it would be interesting to examine and empirically test how the ritual behaviours in various countries influence their people's personal relationships and their social capital.

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