

Rethinking Guanxi

Towards an Ethical Imagination of Asian Sociality

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Within the four seas, all men are brothers¹
Confucius

A man begins his self-cultivation by serving his parents well and
he cannot serve his parents well unless he knows the people, and one cannot know
the people well unless he knows the way of Heaven²
Confucius

I

Guanxi is a powerful concept: not only as a tool to grasp the essence of Chinese sociality but also as a sociological challenge. It challenges the sociological mind with two connected but different questions. In itself it describes Chinese sociality in a value-neutral fashion. However, it is not merely the description of a fact. As illustrated in phrases such as “YouGuanxi jiu MeiGuanxi, MeiGuanxi Jiu YouGuanxi” (有關係就沒關係，沒關係就有關係³), it also carries an element of wisdom.

It is a word of wisdom because it contains practical and thereby ethical implications. To be faithful to the Weberian conceptualization of objectivity, one must inevitably assume it is possible to draw a distinction between value-judgments and value-neutral descriptions. But Guanxi challenges that assumption (or conviction) in that it is a description of reality only as long as it serves as a practical guide for arranging one’s priorities. This concept questions whether or not it is possible to clearly divide the two dimensions. Guanxi questions the nature

of rationality. Is it a purely epistemological faculty as exemplified by the Cartesian dictum: *cogito ergo sum*? Or is it a sort of performance as it unfolds in the very connection between knowledge and practice in responding to the demands of life?

The idea of Guanxi serving as a performative bridge between knowledge and ethics is of unique significance for sociology. Zygmunt Bauman denies the possibility of value-neutral sociology outright because in his eyes sociology “cannot but be, knowingly or not, an inquiry into the ways in which ethical rules are made by humans and for humans”. In a nutshell, societies are ‘coordinated choices’, only one option among many. Like all choices, any given society may be good or bad, but in each case it may be made better than it is. To make the factual possibility of change for the better constitutes “a moral act”. On the level of fact, the sociologist is to see a society as a set of ‘coordinated choices’ and thus possibilities for its improvement. On the level of value, the sociologist faces the choice of whether or not s/he should work on those possibilities. As long as the sociologist sees a given society as a collection of ‘coordinated choices’ and likewise possibilities for its improvement, s/he then faces those possibilities as demands for a moral decision on his or her part. If this is intrinsic situation of the sociologist “the ‘ethical neutrality’ often demanded of sociologists is either hypocrisy of self-delusion”⁴. In this way, I think, Guanxi is promising as a guide in the search for theoretical and practical alternatives to the epistemologically oriented division of practice and theory.

This essay serves as the initial step in a broader project of elaboration of the theory-practice nexus present in the concept of Guanxi and its ethical implications. Here I will discuss the question of how to grasp the particularity of Chinese sociality and then explore possibilities for overcoming the particularist dilemma found in Guanxi through an examination of the concept of self-cultivation “XiuShen” (self-cultivation, 修身). Lastly, to locate the further possibility of elaboration of the ethical implication of Guanxi or Chinese sociality in its contribution to the *futures* of humanity in the making, some points of the current agenda of *futures studies* will be discussed, issues concerning “colonization of future” in particular.

II

If Guanxi is a powerful tool for understanding Chinese sociality, then in what way is it related to the particularity of the constitution of Chinese society? If one regards Chinese society as “a society essentially based on ethics”⁵, then what is the place of Guanxi in the construction of Chinese ethicality and how does it reveal the particularity of Chinese society or its culture?

Zhai XueWei explains the high value of “Renqing Mianzi” (sympathy/face, 人情面子) in Chinese society as linked to “the way that Renqing Mianzi works fits to QingLi Shehui (society grounded by sympathy, 情理社會). In other words, in societies primarily constituted by law, institutions and reason, Renqing Mianzi might be left without a significant role to play. For this reason, there are fundamental limitations for research based on a Western socio-cultural framework. The “Western man” or “Chinese scholars influenced by exchange theory”, cannot see “the incomparably immense concrete value” of Renqing Mianzi.

It is not that Chinese sociality does not possess social elements that might be explained in terms of social exchange, indeed the type of power that is based on Renqing (sympathy, 人情) is earned in the process of “Bao he Qian” (borrowing and repaying, 報和欠). But the power related to Mianzi (face, 面子) is quite

different in nature as a kind of power emerging from “the connectivity of Guanxi”⁶. If one is not careful in recognizing the kind of power related to Mianzi, one’s understanding of Chinese sociality “might not transcend the theory of individual strategy of impression management”.

Now the question is how to understand the “incomparably immense concrete value” of Renqing Mianzi that lies “beyond calculation”. In other words, in exactly what ethical sense should one evaluate the size of this value that is “beyond calculation” and emerging from (or implied in) Guanxi?

Zhai XueWei writes that Renqing and Mianzi, regardless of operational differences, are both connected to “particular relation”. To be specific, in the context of Qingli Shehui (society grounded by sympathy, 情理社會), Chinese people compromise norms, reason and institution for Renqing and Mianzi. Nevertheless, by doing so, they win “incalculable social resources, non-institutional social support and the privileges in daily life that mobilizes others by prestige”.

Seen in this light, the ethical implications of Chinese sociality in daily life encounter a rather clear and decisive difficulty, namely that the “incalculable,” and “incomparably immense concrete value” of Guanxi lies in its present or potential power to mobilize others and propensity that the power formed in and through Guanxi is used from the perspective of “particular relation”. That said, how might one avoid rather obvious possibility that particular relation is mobilized for the power of Guanxi to promote special interests and, as a result, the operation of Guanxi compromises the public good?⁷

At this point it is worthy to note that Zhai XueWei considers the situation from the opposite side: from the individual. Mianzi which allows one to enjoy incalculably immense power is originally “sense of self and identity that is constructed precisely by positive or negative evaluation of the person at issue”. In other words, “if one wishes to earn favorable social esteem, he, above all, needs to reflect on what (and how) he himself does”. This is why “Confucianism repeatedly emphasizes noble moral integrity and self cultivation”.

For Zhai XueWei, an understanding of Mianzi as something to be earned through moral integrity and self cultivation is an “idealistic model” and as such it is “utterly difficult to be realized in the actual Chinese Society”. He believes that “the philosophy to build one’s moral integrity has not yet been carried out in China”⁸.

In a way Zhai XueWei suggests where to search for a way out of this conundrum in the negative tone of his analysis. If one follows the distinction between universalism and particularism, one might construe that Chinese sociality has a tendency to work according to a particularist framework.⁹ This tendency might prioritize “particular relation” and private interest and as a result might fall prey to the particularist trap of jeopardizing elements of the public good such as justice, which, from the universalist perspective, should be maintained by norms, institution and reason. The question is then whether or not there is a way to rethink/overcome this negative element in Chinese sociality.

III

This question, however, faces yet another problem of perspective: that of how to see (evaluate) the particularity of Chinese culture. Contemporary Chinese sociology faces a dilemma. The dilemma lies in the way they see Chinese culture. Cheng BoQing summarizes the situation by an uneasy self contradiction of Chinese

sociology. “Most ridiculous happening is that because it has been our old habit to see our own culture as an obstacle to modernization, now through the China’s current achievements and especially its economic miracle that took the world by surprise, that we are put in the odd position of providing an excuse (for the old habit to see Chinese culture as an obstacle to modernization)”¹⁰. If this is indeed the case, then what is the appropriate perspective from which to grasp Chinese culture? To quote Cheng BoQing again, current academic attention on topics such as “Mianzi”, “Renqing”, “danwei (work-unit, 單位)” is nothing but “self description based on Western framework”.

Indeed the heart of the matter is to find a way to study Chinese culture without distorting its possibilities and limitations from a “native’s point of view”. However, Cheng BoQing argues, it is not easy to relate Chinese concepts such as Tianxia (world, 天下) or idea that “there is Dao (the way, 道) to bring the world together” to the “academic space of current sociology”. Why so? What keeps one from bringing the innate resources of Chinese culture to the academic space of current sociology?

Cheng BoQing’s critique of Fei XiaoTong provides a clue. In brief, Cheng BoQing sees Fei XiaoTong as but another victim of an enduring perception of Chinese culture based on unreflectively applied Western frameworks. For Cheng BoQing, Fei XiaoTong’s understanding of Chinese culture is “biased” mainly due to its distinction between “individualism” and “egocentrism” in the analysis of Chinese sociality. Upon reading Fei XiaoTong’s argument that “in these elastic networks that make up Chinese society, there is always a self at the center of each web.... this notion of the self amounts to egocentrism, not individualism”¹¹ Cheng BoQing interprets what Fei XiaoTong calls “individualism” as “grounded by idea of equality and a concept of constitutionality” and representing the basis of Western sociality, while “egocentrism” represents the basis of Chinese sociality.

At this point Cheng BoQing makes a rather hasty move and assumes that Fei XiaoTong regards Chinese people as “egoist” because of the “egocentrism” that grounds Chinese sociality. It is a hasty assumption simply because “egocentrism” is not necessarily “egoism” and it is this hasty interpretation that, I think, might result in a failure to grasp the full meaning of Fei XiaoTong’s interpretation of Confucius, and particularly the concept of self-cultivation Xiushen (self-cultivation, 修身).

In quoting Zhongyong (『中庸』), Cheng BoQing argues that Fei XiaoTong failed to see “loftier dimension of Dao that works like the heaven and the earth and grows all things”¹² because he focuses on the lower (micro) level of morality. Interestingly enough Cheng BoQing provides the idea of “QiJia, ZhiGuo, PingTianXia” (support the family, govern the nation, bring peace to the world, 齊家, 治國, 平天下) as an example of the “loftier dimension of morality”. However, the present quotation lacks an important part, that is, precisely the word XiuShen (self-cultivation, 修身). It is important because XiuShen is exactly the point at which Fei XiaoTong’s concept of “egocentrism” connects to Confucian ethics.

Fei XiaoTong writes “Confucius paid a lot of attention to the word Tui (spread out, 推), in the sense of ripples expanding out from the center. He first recognized the centrality of the self. Noting that one should “do to others as one would have done to oneself,” Confucius explained that one should “control oneself and conform to rituals” (KeJiFuli, 克己復禮). By exercising such self-restraint, one cultivates

moral character. Attaining control over one's inner self, one then can Tui (spread out, 推), can extend oneself out into other circles of human relationships... The path runs from the self to the family, from the family to the state, and from the state to the whole world”¹³.

Now that it is clear how Fei XiaoTong connects his concept of “egocentrism” to Confucian principle of “XiuShen”, therefore, even if Fei XiaoTong argues that “Everything worthwhile rests on an ideology in which the self is central”, it does not follow that this ideology necessarily leads to egoism. Rather this ideology might contain a unique way of connecting the individual dimension to larger dimensions of morality and a way to resolve the dilemma between particularism and universalism.

Strictly speaking, there is no causal necessity between “egocentrism” and “egoism” by which one invariably results in the other. As mentioned above in terms of innate danger in particularist tendencies, “egocentrism” might indeed turn into an egoistic attitude that prioritizes particular relations and individual interests to the public good. However when firmly grounded in the idea of XiuShen, it becomes a self-reflective movement that facilitates ethical consistency throughout different dimensions of social life.

What brings about the difference between these possibilities? It is the difference of perspective concerning “ego”(ZiWo, 自我) in “egocentrism”. If one sees the ego in question as something fixed and given, then one is trapped in its locality. If one sees the ego in question as something to be cultivated and elaborated as in the concept of XiuShen however, one is liberated from its locality to the extent that one understands the ego in its locality together with its limitations and possibilities.

In addition to this difference of perspective on the locality of the ego, there is yet another distinction to be considered, namely the difference between whether one regards the self as the center of interest and to be protected and extended outward or as the center of responsibility to be reflected and renewed as one's life becomes intertwined in various types and dimensions of Guanxi.

From the perspective of this analysis, I think, Fei XiaoTong's concept of “egocentrism” coupled with the Confucian idea of self-cultivation XiuShen can become a critical attitude that reflects upon one's ego in its locality as something to be cultivated and elaborated and, in and through the process of cultivation and elaboration of one's ego as the epicenter of responsibility, serves as one's ethical guide in different dimensions of social life.

The discussion so far is also related to the problem of what Cheng BoQing calls the “native's point of view”. Even if observation and analysis of Chinese culture from the western framework distorts implications of Chinese culture, how does one decide what a “native point of view” or “Chinese culture” is in the first place? Whenever one calls, names, or observes, one is already delimiting the field of perception as something to be called, named or observed. The very process of delimitation of the field of perception presupposes a distance: a distance between the seer and the seen.

Now the question is whether there is any way to gain the distance to call, name, observe or analyze the given field of perception as “Chinese culture” from the “native's point of view”, or in other words, whether or not there is a way to understand “Chinese culture” from within in order to grasp its unique potentials to contribute to humanity.

I think Confucian concept of XiuShen has deep implications in this context

especially in terms of the nature of the required distance between the seer and the seen as mentioned above because, I believe, above all the concept of XiuShen reflects a sociological understanding of Chinese society based on the lived experience of Confucius himself in that it is a practical suggestion or an ethical commitment to motivate ethical resources available within the actuality of Chinese sociality. What Confucius attempts to accomplish is to locate an ethical path from the actual sociality that constitutes Chinese society to the loftier ethical ground of humanity such as Ren (benevolence, 仁), Li (providence, 理).

In other words, if such loftier ethical grounds were not understood and recognized as actualities within the locality of concrete sociality then they remain rootless. In ZhongYong Confucius maintains that “a man begins his self-cultivation by serving his parents well and he cannot serve his parents well unless he knows the people, and one cannot know the people well unless he knows the way of Heaven”. For Confucian ethics, one’s commitment to cultivate oneself, support the family, govern the nation and bring peace to the world expresses one’s ethical integrity. As moments of ethicality, XiuShen (self-cultivation, 修身), QiJia (support the family, 齊家), ZhiGuo (Govern the nation, 治國), PingTianXia (bring peace to the world, 平天下) are not separated from each other. They are not mutually exclusive ethical enclaves but interrelated sites of revelation of the underlying ethical commitment. Furthermore, the process of self-cultivation has no pre-defined end. It is not a linear process that a completion of one step leads to another towards a pre-established final goal. Rather it is a self-renewing process that questions one’s ethical consistency in different dimensions of sociality.

Seen from this perspective, XiuShen has a unique place. It is indeed a beginning. But this beginning is not something to be completed and then set aside once and for all. It carries its ethical meaning of beginning if and only if it serves as an unending initiation of one’s “learning” to be ethical at any moment of one’s social relationship to the others¹⁴.

Here one might return to the observation of Zhai XueWei. As for him, to understand MianZi in its inner connection to XiuShen is an “idealistic model” and it is utterly difficult to be realized in the actual Chinese society”. Indeed one might agree that “the philosophy to build one’s moral integrity has not yet been carried out in China”. But I think Zhai XueWei’s distinction between “idealistic model” and “the actual Chinese Society” can and should be reconsidered from a Confucian perspective.

If one follows the idea of “when a man speaks, he should think of his acts; when he acts, he should think of what he says” (YanGuXing, XingGuYan, 言顧行, 行顧言¹⁵), something “ideal” is “ideal” if and only if it is an actual working guide of one’s behavior to realize it. In other words, is it not that the very distinction between “idealistic model” and “the actual Chinese Society” already puts a distance between the two and makes “idealistic model” empty on the one hand, the “the actual Chinese Society” blind on the other? Confucian ideals are not something distant from one’s concrete situation as transcendental universal imperatives that are imposed on human behavior from beyond and above, rather it is as a perennial question that guides one to reflect one’s own performative ethicality in its consistency in the spectrum of one’s locality in relation to self, family, nation and the world.

Concluding remarks

Amidst the aggressive ebb and flow of current social change, one wonders: What is the present role of sociology for the *futures* in the making? To examine the concept of future thematically in terms of Chinese sociality, to say nothing of Asian sociality is beyond the scope of this essay¹⁶. There are, however, points of connection between ways of envisioning the future and thinking of Asian sociality in terms of its socio-historical potentials that deserve immediate attention.

As attempted in this essay to an extent, to have a vision of future within the present landscape of Asian sociality more or less depends on how far or radically one can take a critical stance to the current self-image of Asian sociality. What is involved in such a critical stance and what should be sought in taking it? One might find a theoretical guide for the task in Zygmunt Bauman's project to emancipate the theory of postmodernity from modernity by looking into how the "emancipation" in question is performed¹⁷. For Bauman, the emancipation of the theory of postmodernity would not be possible without its emancipation from sovereign totality or order of modernity, from its consequential "colonization of future"¹⁸ to be specific. It is *time* that is to be liberated and thus it is necessary to fundamentally reestablish one's engagement with time.

Indeed, the exploration of Asian sociality for its potential to liberate the future from the sovereign totality of modernity would need to be radical as "to think the unthinkable...rather than be a victim of totally colonized future" and imagine that Asian sociality can be "a source of its own alternatives"¹⁹. In other words, Asian sociality is summoned to perform "a game of dissenting visions"²⁰ and to disobey the "Western master narrative"²¹ which would not settle for anything less than the "complete assimilation of all non-western societies into western civilization"²² possibly culminating in the realization of F. Fukuyama's Hegelian scenario of "The End of History".

In sum, considering that the very question of colonization of the future is being raised here and now in the context of Asian sociality, disobedience to the monolithic definition, determination or fixation of future, should be directed not only towards the Western conception of future as imposed from the outside, but also to that which already frames one's relation to the future from within Asian sociality. Here lies the unique challenge of Asian sociality for the Asian contribution to the future of humanity in that to liberate Asian self-image, self-interpretation from the definitive grip of Western modernity is not different from, but a constitutive step of Asian endeavor to "move one future to a plethora of futures"²³. To face and work through the present predicament of Asian sociality in its particularity constitutes an essential element of the universal significance of Asian contribution to the future of humanity.

If in fact, sociology is a product of modernity, and Western modernity in particular, then the task of the current essay might be to further probe the sociology that lies at the heart of Confucianism: A Confucian sociology that, in its ethical commitment to humanity, offers us a critical opportunity to question the ethical constitution of modernity itself that is taken for granted as the foundation of sociology and ourselves as sociologists today.

C. R. Mills saw the power of "sociological imagination" in one's ability "to translate personal troubles into public issues into their human meaning"²⁴. For sociologists who study Chinese sociality, to imagine the sociology from which, I

believe, Confucius developed his ethics is one way to gain the renewed sociological imagination needed today and to perform “the imaginative capacity to *think traditions forward*”²⁵ as a way to imagine *a future with an Asian face* among other plural possibilities²⁶.

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Notes

- 1 四海之內皆兄弟, Analects, 『論語』
- 2 思修身, 不可以不事親。思事親, 不可以不知人。思知人, 不可以不知天, ZhongYong, 『中庸』
- 3 The phrase might be translated approximately as follows: With connection one is provide with possibilities, without it one faces liabilities.
- 4 Bauman, *Conversation with Zygmunt Bauman*, 45.
- 5 “一個倫理本位的社會” 梁漱溟, 『中國文化要義』. cf. Fei XiaoTong, *From the Soil, the Foundations of Chinese Society*, 翟學偉, 『人情, 面子與權力的再生產』.
- 6 關係的關聯
- 7 In AnHui province, a group of young men was arrested for gambling but because the young men had Guanxi with an influential organization in the province, they were not only released but even went to the county government to demand the police men that arrested them to be fired. In a city near the Yangzi river (揚子江), police raid a house and confiscated the drug they had. But after a phone call from some place, not only did the police apologize to avoid 禮 but returned the opium by the police escort (翟學偉 *ibid.*, 172).
- 8 翟學偉, *ibid.*, 143
- 9 A scene from the movie “中華英雄” (A Man Called Hero)
兩位恭喜發財, 恭喜發財
不知道兩位來喝茶還是來住店?
我們先準備住下。然後我有點事請你幫忙。
人離鄉間。四海之內皆兄弟也。大家都是中國人。何必客氣呢:
Blessings to you two gentlemen for your greater fortune!
Is it to have some tea or to stay?
In either case, let us prepare for your stay. Later I have some work that I need your help.
Once one leaves the hometown, within the four seas, all men are brothers.
Everybody is Chinese. Make yourself at home.
- 10 成伯清, 中國文化と社会学の中国化, 411-412.
- 11 Fei XiaoTong, *From the Soil, the Foundations of Chinese Society*.
- 12 大的聖人的道路, 發展化育萬物, 像天一樣崇高
- 13 Fei XiaoTong, *ibid.*
- 14 One cannot emphasize the importance of the concept of “learning” in Confucius too much. The Analects begins precisely with topic of “learning” in combination

with constant perseverance and application: “Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application? (學而時習之，不亦說乎?)”

- 15 ZhongYong, 『中庸』.
- 16 What is required here would be a study of the Asian concept of time.
- 17 Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*.
- 18 Bauman, *ibid.*, 190.
- 19 Sardar, *Islam, Postmodernism and Other Futures*, 258.
- 20 Nandy, Bearing Witness to the Future: the “Other” Dimension of Future Studies.
- 21 Galtung, *Peace and Conflict, Handbook of Peace and Conflict Studies*, 398.
- 22 Sardar, *ibid.*, 254.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 255
- 24 Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, 187.
- 25 Sardar, *ibid.*, 255. Italics are mine.
- 26 I have approached the cosmopolitan outlook of humanity in terms of human plurality facilitated by dialogue in Lee, In Search of Cosmopolitan Space: A case for Human Plurality.

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