



## Chinese culture of interdependence and relations in education – *guanxi* in school practice

**Abstract:** The aim of the article is to discuss the Chinese educational culture in the context of the pursuing *guanxi* tradition. The article answers the question what *guanxi* is and how it is applied in the Chinese educational system. The subject of research is the educational system and *guanxi* culture and its practical implications. In the article, the existing studies are used of Chinese and other foreign authors. The qualitative research method involves analyses of secondary sources which outlined the methods and principles of operation of the old Chinese tradition of regulating social relationships in education in the network of three-sided personal relations: school-home, parent-teacher, and students-teachers.

**Keywords:** comparative education, education in China, educational system, *guanxi*

### Introduction

When one begins to interpret and learn about a particular educational system, usually the first field of interpretation involves educational problems occurring in a given country or the results of international comparative studies. This is a result, and it could be also said a product, of a number of component factors, such as the country's economy, history, geography, and culture. In order to better understand the laws that govern educational systems and what these problems and the results of international comparative studies really show, a deeper cultural analysis and interpretation of education is needed. By studying the cultural conditions of educational systems, one is able to enter the process of cognition of a particular system and to provide

research tools and methods, among others, by comparative studies – comparative pedagogy, in which the explored subject of the article is located.

The presented article brings theoretical considerations that are of great importance for science – also in the field of comparative education. Science advances through technological development, but also through addressing significant issues. Formulating inspiring descriptions, which is characteristic of comparative education, encourages exploration and drives the development of science. Comparative education describes and analyzes educational phenomena, explains and examines how education changes and what influences it. Inspirations and qualitative analyses of foreign and local literature contribute to the dissemination of science and an exchange of scientific ideas. The interpretation and exploration of the existing research by authors from different cultural backgrounds makes the knowledge filtered – the local readers can use it to better understand what is happening in the world in a particular field of education. The multitude of descriptions and interpretations contributes to the improvement of the quality of science and education, where understanding is the first step to change. As my research method, the secondary source qualitative analysis was used, which resulted in building cultural and educational knowledge based on it and supported by the results and conclusions drawn from the re-analyzed data. I used Chinese and foreign studies as the sources of analysis, which allowed me to gain a dual perspective. The purpose of the following article will be, firstly, to analyze the social phenomenon of *guanxi* and an attempt to explain it. This will be followed by direct references and practical applications of *guanxi* in the educational system, in the network of school-home, parent-teacher and student-teacher relationships. In the selection of the foundational research for the analysis, the criteria were as follows: the researcher's background and the selection of examples relating to Chinese traditions with an educational context. I have chosen examples of the practical application of *guanxi* which show the three-sided perspective of the relations of people participating in the educational process, culturally entangled in the parent – student – teacher network.

The conducted analyses are important for Polish and foreign readers, due to the fact that higher education is increasingly internationalized. Chinese students are increasingly becoming an important element of the learning landscape, e.g. in Poland. According to UNESCO (2023) statistics, over one million Chinese students are enrolled in tertiary education institutions abroad, their tuition fees are a considerable source of income for many universities, and they have become a significant component of the Chinese

presence worldwide. Poland hosts 62.091 mobile international students and 26.496 of them are Chinese. Their culture and previous educational experience affect how they study, what educational relationships they have with lecturers and classmates, how they conduct research, and many more things. Understanding the cultural context of students' learning is necessary for the good functioning of higher education institutions in the world during the internationalization era. This proves the importance of understanding how students learn and how culture influences it.

China and its cultural determinants of education constitute an interesting research subject, and considering the significant role of the Middle Kingdom in the world, it is also an important and interesting topic. China needs to be observed, but it is also important to make every effort to learn about it. It is impossible to explore Chinese education without placing it in the cultural context. According to Margaret Mead (1943), education is a cultural process, a socially significant activity undertaken by human beings and in most cases it constitutes a significant part of human biography. It should be added that it is a faithful reflection of the principles, laws and traditions of the society. In the case of China, the strong Confucian framework is significantly marked (Mańkowska 2020), however, only its interpretation from different perspectives gives a complete picture of the whole and enhances the familiarization with this complex country and its people. Obtaining a complete view is possible only and exclusively through the application of an interdisciplinary approach in the analysis, which was conducted by George Z.F. Bereday in his comparative studies (Wojniak, 2018). In this article, an element of contemporary Chinese culture will be characterized, namely the networks of interdependence of various members of society, on the basis of the literature on the subject called *guanxi*. In China, *guanxi* practices are present in various systems: the political, health care and educational ones.

### ***Guanxi* – a personal connection, a network or a relationship?**

The applications of *guanxi* are present in every aspect of Chinese life and are often the subject of local and foreign scholarly considerations. Among international researchers, the interest in the phenomenon of *guanxi* in an educational context has been present for several years. Researchers from around the world have been trying to understand how this tradition works, what it consists in, and how it can be used, for example, in creating university mergers with China. In a purely business partnership, the need to know

the prevailing culture and social rules is obvious. The discussion of *guanxi* in sociological studies mainly focuses on interpreting the role of *guanxi* in the transitional economy of the China mainland. The literature mentions two alternative standpoints in the context of the practical use of *guanxi*. It is argued that *guanxi* is best interpreted institutionally, as an element of social organization characterized by underdeveloped rules (as conceptualized and interpreted by the Western culture) (Gold, Guthrie and Wank, 2002). The second standpoint emphasizes the importance of the Confucian heritage in treating *guanxi* as an integral part of Chinese culture (Hwang 1987; Yang 1994). Most sinologists agree that the concept of *guanxi* derives mostly from the Confucian tradition (Hwang 1987; Yang 1994). It is interesting to note that this tradition has been planted on the European soil and functions, for example, in the form of the European Guanxi organization bringing together young people, between 18 and 40 years of age from Europe and China, who can cooperate with each other on certain principles. This involves an increasingly popular and used on the old continent principle of cooperation and networking. It is an important knowledge base in cooperation with China as well.

Let one therefore look at how *guanxi* tradition is interpreted in the literature. It has been described by Chinese and non-Chinese authors as a “personal connection”, “relationship”, or “network” in which the people of the Middle Kingdom function on a daily basis and which helps them deal with difficult issues or solve problems of various kinds (Yang, 1994). The influential Chinese sociologist Xiaotong Fei (1992), in his famous work *From the Soil* (first published in 1947 in Chinese and translated into English in 1992), depicted the functioning of Chinese people in complex social structures as the image of a wave formed by a stone thrown into a pond. Each individual is surrounded by a series of concentric circles formed by their own social influence. Each network of social relationships has a centre. Each circle extending away from the centre becomes more and more distant. It is in this arrangement that the network of interpersonal relationships and the *guanxi* in question function.

Western translations of the Chinese word *guanxi* are increasingly using two types of definitions. The first interprets and translates the *guanxi* system as “connections”, while the second translates it as “relationships”. Jacobs defines *guanxi* as particularistic relationships. Gold, in turn, states that “*guanxi* is a relationship of power” (Gold, 1985, p. 660), because it is connected with controlling precious goods or the access to them, which gives power over

others. For Yang, *guanxi* refers to the interpersonal or personal relationship (Yang, 1994). It is worth mentioning that a few scholars have expanded the term *guanxi* from its original meaning (“relationship”) to “exchange”, “resources”, and even “social exchange process”, arguing that “the concept of *guanxi* is complex and multifaceted” (Fan, 2002, p. 545). *Guanxi* is not practiced with everyone, but only with the people with whom one has or will have a good relationship, and for this to occur, both parties need to ensure correctness and sincerity. The second condition for building a network of relationships is time. The *guanxi* tradition is not only time-consuming, but organizationally and morally involving. Many hours of conversations spent at joint meetings and dinners will pass before the cooperation partners decide to build a network of relationships with each other. Yet, from the Chinese point of view, building networking in this way is profitable, even though it may be spread out over time. Some studies have used a source-based theory, taking *guanxi* as a kind of organizational resource (Luo, 2000). Another interesting interpretation of *guanxi* is that it functions as a form of social capital (Qi, 2013). I believe that this perspective accurately interprets this tradition, because leveraging social capital in China has a centuries-old tradition and is widely used and accepted. Numerous scholars point out that *guanxi* is a “special form” or a “variety” of the social capital (Gold, Guthrie and Wank, 2002; Qi, 2013). In this framework, one can say that in the Chinese view, social capital is the ability of participants to provide benefits through membership in social networks or other social structures (Portes, 1998). Academics, foreign scholars working in Chinese universities, whom I interviewed, explained the *guanxi* tradition through its literal interpretation. According to my interlocutors, *guanxi* means: *who you know* or *connections to many things*.

Building a network of relationships is done on many levels and in many ways. In China, but not only there, it is good to know people from many industries, to maintain relationships and positive relations with them. Modern *guanxi* is built in many ways, one of the most current methods belongs to various social network groups or *what's ups* first, and then these acquaintances are transferred to the real world in face-to-face meetings. It is interesting to note that in practice *guanxi* refers to certain activities that for many interpreters of social reality may have clearly instrumental characteristics and only by placing them in a Chinese context can they be understood. Foreign studies of *guanxi* in many cases link it to corruption, or directly interpret it that way. This is most often due to the application of their own cultural patterns in interpreting a foreign culture and its practical implications. It should

be emphasized that when used for legal purposes that do not infringe on public interests, *guanxi* can be an extremely useful way for members of a relationship network to deal with their legitimate personal or business affairs. The practice of *guanxi* only breaks down when the exchange, or transaction, involves corrupt activities, or when one or more parties to the relationship in the *guanxi* network act outside the law (Li, 2018). Corrupt practices can be found in China and unfortunately some *guanxi* activities can be indirectly linked to them. It is argued that it is China's current political system that is responsible for a lax legal system in which corruption and the practice of *guanxi* have "merged" and taken a different direction from the original (King, 1998).

### ***Guanxi* at the school system**

The cultural phenomenon of *guanxi* is also present in educational practice. *Guanxi* in the school system is evident in the network of school – home, parent – teacher, and student – teacher relationships. The first example of *guanxi* tradition is the situation of a child from the countryside whose parents want a better future for their child, and their goal is to send their child to a secondary school in a large city other than their home one, which will increase the child's chances of getting into a good university. Because the child is not registered in that city, the situation seems to be hopeless, but the parents will do their best to find a solution. As a rule, the school career of children in China is planned from early childhood or determined directly by the socio-economic status of the family. For this purpose, parents will use the network of social relationships they have, i.e. family, friends, acquaintances near and far, and anyone else whom they will owe some kind of debt in the future – yet, they will also expand their social network. In order to obtain registration with the school district, the child's mother will sign a contract with a company that provides employment and employee housing at the destination, although she will physically work from her current place of residence. This opportunity will be arranged for her by a friend of a friend. The child's father, on the other hand, will have a direct relationship with the director of the facility to which he wishes to send his child. He will have several meetings with the principal and convince them to accept his child as a student at that school. In this way, both the principal and the father increase their social networks of interrelation. The family whose child has been admitted to the school through the use of *guanxi* must ensure that in

the undetermined future they will repay the people who made it possible for them to reach their goal and not lose face by, for example, failing or refusing to help, should those people ever ask them to return the favour. The above example, in the process of using *guanxi*, completely ignores the issue of money (fee/payment), while the issue of interdependence and exchange is strongly outlined, where people skilfully use the social capital known and available to them to achieve their goal, in this case an educational one.

Another example of using the *guanxi* tradition is the use of teacher's knowledge and status by the representatives of this profession. A teacher in China assumes the role of a sage who shares their wisdom with their students, and this is how they are perceived by the society. A teacher is the person who has a significant impact on the future of the learner and parents are aware of teachers' capabilities, so they do their best not to fall into disgrace and maintain a good relationship with the school staff. Teachers in China have opportunities to favour, recognize, write positive reviews, give more attention to some students and less attention to others. The teacher's attention is something that distinguishes students and can produce positive results. The teacher in the classroom has some both symbolic and tangible power. They can send someone to distant desks in the classroom, symbolically steer someone away from knowledge, or not give a child enough attention during a lesson or task. Especially at the secondary level, this is educationally and socially degrading for students and their families. In many cases, the symbolic removal of knowledge and the relegation of students' needs to the background strengthens teachers' positions. By choosing to do so, teachers show that they can do this and that they apply this "privilege". Degradation of a student may result from several reasons: insufficient knowledge of the student (students, especially in secondary schools, are required to make superhuman efforts to acquire knowledge), lack of preparation for classes, unrequited favour, and insufficient respect shown to the teacher. On the other hand, the teacher can show personal involvement in the student's affairs, which, although formally forbidden, is condoned by the society. This occurs in the form of giving extra lessons in special afternoon schools (only children from the *guanxi* network are admitted to the so-called tutoring courses) or arranging a place in the best afternoon courses for selected students (places in the best courses are also reserved for students from the network), which are conducted in the afternoons or weekends by school teachers. Creating a *guanxi* network also means giving gifts to teachers (not necessarily money, but e.g. vouchers), inviting them to family celebrations (also very personal

ones) or celebrating together, obviously not with all students' family members, but with those from the "network".

Parents also function in the network of *guanxi* relationships. Both parties, i.e. parents and teachers, care about good, proper connections and relationships. These work best when parents have the support of significant teachers or the financial support to invest in their child's education. The relationships and bonds between Chinese teachers and parents are very distinctive and woven with threads of varying thickness, figuratively speaking. Chinese parents and teachers want them to be correct and profitable (not necessarily financially), because then both parties gain. In China, a teacher's relationship network is not frowned upon – especially valuable are those with an extensive network of opportunities needed by students and the teachers themselves. It is in everyone's interest to have a large coverage of the relationship network.

At the end of this, between the threads of this web (also in the figurative sense), there is a student and their need to learn. Students are completely subordinated to the currents that are organized for them by parents in conjunction with teachers. They submit to the educational plans cut to size, often traced from a *guanxi* template, and remain obedient to their parents and teachers to the very end.

## Conclusion

Finally, it is worth considering why the *guanxi* tradition is so prevalent in China. Firstly, it is the practicality that leads the Chinese to value personal relationships. If their use of these relationships leads to the achievement of their goals, it is not uncommon for them to devalue the rules and laws of the society. The scattered culture makes the Chinese feel comfortable with vague rules and restless with defined and established rules. The business or professional life is always mixed with social life, and the line between the latter and the former is blurred. The Chinese have a distinctive world view and look for connections between situations and connections in everything (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2012). In this sense, the institutional causes of *guanxi* mentioned earlier are also influenced by specificity and the scattered culture. The imperfect, flexible and changeable rules of law binding in the Middle Kingdom are not only the result of the political and economic system, but are also strongly influenced by the Chinese culture. In education, in the parent-child-teacher relationship, every effort is made to



create a network of relationships that is as extensive and neat as possible and that is primarily practical. In this constellation of arrangements, teachers and schools hold symbolic power in their hands – the access to the desired goods, as well as parents with their networks that can prove useful to the school or the teacher. In such an arrangement, from the point of view of individuals, no one loses, everyone gains, which is why *guanxi* practices discussed here are not subject to moral social judgments as long as they are within the legal framework. According to the Chinese interpretation, it is a *win-win* situation, where everyone is further enriched by new relationships and dependencies. Rushed and hasty negotiations are frowned upon, and time and hurry, contrary to Western beliefs, are “not money”.

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