

Key Culture Concepts: Guānxi 关系

Guanxi: The Chinese Cultural Concept

Commisceo Global

"Guanxi" (pronounced (gwan-shee) is one of the most powerful forces in Chinese culture. Though the direct translation of "guanxi" is "relationships", the concept as it is used and applied in Chinese culture is much richer and encompassing.

"Guanxi" does express the relationship of one person to another, or one party to another. However, more importantly the term also expresses an obligation of one party to another, built over time by the reciprocation of social exchanges and favours. If one has "guanxi" with another, one will be quick to do a favour, act on another's behalf and, depending on the depth of the relationship, do anything necessary for the other party. By establishing this type of relationship with someone, the other party is implicitly agreeing also to be available to reciprocate when the need arises. In such a way "guanxi" can be considered as a type of currency that can be saved and spent between the two parties. Like money, it is a resource that can also be exhausted, so one must be sensitive not to overextend the "guanxi" that has been established.

The exchange of favours does not have to be in like kind. So if one person helps introduce you to someone, it is not beyond the scope of the relationship for that party to then ask you to help get a visa to your country, or get their son into a foreign school. Failure to repay favours in this type of relationship is equivalent to not paying a financial obligation. If one cannot accommodate a specific request, one must find another way to make amends, perhaps by sending along a small gift to let the party know you are sorry you could not help and that you still want to maintain the relationship.

The reciprocal nature of "guanxi" and its implied obligations is the main reason why Chinese are reticent to engage in deeper relationships with people they do not know. To begin such a relationship may put you in a compromising position from which it is difficult to withdraw. Additionally, to establish "guanxi" with someone who later proves unworthy will also tarnish that party's reputation, so the Chinese would rather not begin a relationship with someone they do not know. Finally, in establishing "guanxi", that person or party may want to know up front what they hope to gain from the relationship, to insure they are not contributing effort or services without gaining something in return.

Given this background, if you would like to begin a relationship with a Chinese individual, group, or company, it is most expedient to be introduced by a mutual party who can vouch for you. But note that the intermediary is also expending "guanxi" to make the introduction so you will need to repay the favour.

Gifts are often used in "guanxi" to establish, or bring equilibrium to the relationship. If one is feeling too indebted to another, that person may bring a gift to bring the relationship back into balance.

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Also, if one feels that they have offended a party, or if they would like to increase the strength of the relationship to then ask a favour, they may give a gift. If you receive a gift from another, you do not necessarily have to return a gift, especially at that time. Try to determine the reason for the gift so that the problem is not further exacerbated. If you just brought a new customer to a business, the gift will be in response to favour. If someone had to back out of a deal, the gift will be an appeasement. However, if someone is trying to curry favour and you do not want to be engaged, quickly return a similar gift and you are released from that obligation. Not all gifts have elaborate motives behind them; often people are simply expressing gratitude for your presence or friendship.

<http://www.commisceo-global.com/blog/guanxi-the-chinese-cultural-concept>

Excerpt from *Encountering the Chinese*

Book by Hu Wenzhong and Cornelius Grove

No one who is routinely living or working among the Chinese can decide to remain wholly outside of the guanxi system. Any act of helpfulness or generosity, no matter whether given or received, begins to draw one into the network of reciprocal exchanges. And no one should wish to remain wholly outside the guanxi system, because it not only is the “lubricant” that makes much of daily life run smoothly but is also one of the chief means whereby a foreigner can begin to build positive personal relationships with ordinary Chinese people.

But the guanxi system has pitfalls for foreigners. One is that westerners have little sense of the level of giving and receiving that is appropriate for any given mixed-tier relationship. Gifts or favors of different values are appropriate for people at different levels in the hierarchy and for people at different stages in a relationship. Problems may arise if a non-Chinese gives or receives a gift or favor that is viewed as unusually large or small by the Chinese person involved. For example, if you were to accept from a Chinese a gift or favor that he or she viewed as unusually valuable, you would incur a heavy obligation to repay in some way or another. You would probably not be fully aware of the extent of this obligation and even less aware of when and how your guanxi partner might expect that obligation to be discharged.

Sometimes awareness of the extent of one’s obligations comes too late. For example, a Chinese who feels she has given a lot to you might decide that a suitable repayment would be for you to assist her in gaining entry to your country and finding employment there. Since you probably lack sufficient influence to make good on such a request, and since you may also have no inclination to use your influence in that way, your Chinese friend must face deep disappointment. In such a case, the Chinese may signal her displeasure by abruptly terminating the relationship.

The Chinese tend to assume that something similar to the guanxi system operates in the West and that you are a part of it. This assumption is true to some extent, of course, but in an individualistic culture such as that of the United States, personal influence is limited by

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considerations of objectivity and universalism, whereas in a collectivist culture such as China personal influence is promoted by the emphasis on subjectivity and particularism.

The Chinese carry their assumptions a step further. They assume that if you are influential enough to have a respected, well-paying job, then you must be influential enough to pull the strings necessary to bring about whatever they desire.

You cannot prevent your Chinese acquaintances from making false assumptions about obligation networks in Western society, and you cannot prevent them from trying to arrange to study or work in your country. What you can do, however, is avoid giving them any reason to believe you can guarantee that they will obtain their objectives through your intervention. Never promise more than you can deliver. Never imply that you have the ability to deliver. Will you write letters of recommendation? Perhaps yes. But don't let your Chinese friends believe that your recommendations will ensure acceptances.

Guanxi does not make it impossible for the Chinese to act on the basis of spontaneous feelings. You need not become obsessed about strings being attached to every little gift and favor you receive. But you should be suspicious in the unlikely event that a Chinese friend or acquaintance offers you a valuable gift. This gesture, no matter how spontaneous it may seem, has a very high probability of signaling that a major favor will be expected from you in the future.

Hu, Wenzhong, and Cornelius Grove. *Encountering the Chinese; 3rd Ed.* Boston: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2010.

Discussion Questions

1. Talk about the ideas of “networking” and “connections” in North America. How important are these things in daily life, education, work, emergencies, etc.?
2. What are some of the differences you can see between Western-style “connections” and Chinese-style “guanxi”?
3. What do you think about the strong emphasis on obligation and reciprocity in relationships in China? What are the benefits and drawbacks of seeing relationships in this light?
4. What role does gift-giving play in Western society? How does this differ from gift-giving in Chinese society?
5. Hu and Grove discussed some of the possible pitfalls for foreigners in the Chinese guanxi system. What are some practical things you can do to avoid these pitfalls?
6. What do you think some of the ties are between the guanxi system and face in Chinese society?
7. Due to the strong moral pull of obligation and reciprocity in Chinese culture, the Chinese highly dislike remaining indebted to another and will usually do everything in their power to keep the playing field equal. How do you think this might affect the way they hear and understand the good news?