

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. Emphasis of this paper is placed on the nature and function of such *guanxi*. By presenting the maintenance of *guanxi*, this paper also analyzes the impact of local *guanxi* as a strategy to cope against poverty. Whereas *tunqin guanxi* has appeared to have built rural resilience to cushion against villagers' life upheavals, the maintenance of rural *guanxi* further diminishes the resilience by spending more scarce resources on gift money exchange, thus aggravates local poverty.

Key words: *guanxi*, *tunqin*, rural poverty, rural resilience, gift money exchange

Introduction

As a Chinese term hardly known to non-native speakers before the 1980s, *guanxi* has made its way rapidly into the English language in recent decades. For years, *guanxi* has been well documented as an essential part in all human-related activities in China, such as personal life, business and politics. Yet, despite various discussions in mass media and in-depth analysis in academic research, *guanxi* in its multifaceted forms with various roles has always been so engaging for us to explore further. This paper investigates *tunqin*, the special rural *guanxi* in building rural resilience, and examines the impact of its maintenance with gift money exchange.

The current research has been carried out as part of a larger project on income and expenditure in rural Heilongjiang. The analysis of this article is based on six months' fieldwork conducted in Qinggang County, Heilongjiang Province over the period between late 2006 and mid-2007. In addition to government documents and published data, this study has drawn much evidence from on-site observations and from unstructured interviews with villagers, cadres and lowest-level officials. Interviews were conducted in private houses and local offices to make sure interviewees were in their everyday surroundings, so that the research is able to display rural *guanxi* and its impact on individuals in the real world¹.

This paper proceeds as follows. Section 1 reviews existing literature on *guanxi*. Section 2 describes the poverty of the field site, setting out the background for the study. Section 3 contextualizes *tunqin*, a special type of *guanxi* in Qinggang by illustration of a rural household. Section 4 discusses *tunqin* and its role in rural China. Section 5 examines the maintenance of *guanxi* and its impact on the current rural life. Section 6 discusses the role of

¹ Due to unavailability 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.

tunqin guanxi and its maintenance in building resilience in a poverty-stricken rural area before it concludes.

1. Revisit of *Guanxi*

As a term in the Chinese context, *guanxi* has been elaborated extensively in academic studies both within China and overseas. Yet, even the most comprehensive definition is insufficient in describing its multifaceted dimensions. Literally meaning relation or relationship, *guanxi* is closely related to social capital². In studies exploring social capital in China, *guanxi* is often depicted as its Chinese variant³. It is believed to be ‘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 described 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 treated as the simple term of ‘social connections’.

1.1 Two perspectives of *guanxi*

Scholarly accounts of *guanxi* have been conducted to emphasize two perspectives generally: institutional and instrumental⁶. Such distinctions have often been identified as preordained versus achieved relations⁷, where the former is characterised by expressions and affections such as in families and kinships, and the latter is featured with motivations and objectives mostly seen in business and work relationships, described as the expressive and instrumental ties⁸.

In general, studies separated out to look at the institutional dimension and the instrumental value of *guanxi* tend to relate to the specific rural/urban settings under examination⁹. For example, the urban *guanxi* has been identified as more utilitarian¹⁰ whereas rural *guanxi* is, as argued by Kipnis, connected more with community bonds based on kinship and *renqing* (human emotions)¹¹. These contrasts between rural and urban *guanxi* have divided perceptions on the former as more feminine and the latter more masculine¹². However, Yan argues that the binary opposition of emotional and instrumental dimensions of interpersonal relations is better understood as primary and extended *guanxi*¹³. He proposes the primary *guanxi* stems from the self-core. Further from the self centre, the moral or *renqing*

² Smart 1993.

³ Knight and Yueh 2008.

⁴ Hammond and Glenn 2004.

⁵ Bell 2000.

⁶ Gold, Guthrie and Wank (Eds.) 2002.

⁷ King 1991.

⁸ Hwang 1987.

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

¹⁰ Bian 1999; Yang 1994.

¹¹ Kipnis 1996.

¹² Yang 1994.

¹³ Yan 1996a.

dimension of *guanxi* extends and changes into more instrumental ties and becomes the extended *guanxi*.

1.2 Urban *guanxi*

For the past decades, most studies have focused on urban *guanxi* and how it was instrumental to advance economic benefits. It has been widely discussed that *guanxi* can be used to acquire power, status and resources in China¹⁴, such as the well-known ‘back door’ strategies¹⁵. Much from the analysis of urban *guanxi*, it is argued that the current Chinese *guanxi* has been, to much extent, a product in the era of the planned economy, when people had to resort to *guanxi* for whatever they needed due to the very limited resources¹⁶. In this context, *guanxi* can be seen as an informal institution which substitutes market economy¹⁷.

The discussion of *guanxi* as a substitute for market rules fits in with the examination on social networks and reciprocity in economics and political science against the background of economic growth, e.g. the relationship between institutional change and socio-economic development¹⁸. With the development of market mechanism, the role of informal institutions will reduce, and be replaced by formal ones based on market rules¹⁹. In the studies of Chinese society, similar views are expressed: when the state has established market mechanism, there is a decline of the *guanxi* practice²⁰. Some scholars, however, are more hesitant by insisting the resilience of *guanxi* that it will not easily wither away until the market operations depending on supply and demand are fully established, and the relation-based Chinese society changed into a rule-based system²¹. During the process of transition, there have been more critics than compliments on *guanxi* as it fuels the country’s rampant corruption, and is seen as an impediment to China’s developing towards a modern society building on the rules and mechanism of law and market²².

1.3 Rural *guanxi*

Comparatively, there has been less examination on the role of *guanxi* in the rural context in the post-Mao period, except a few studies represented by Yan and Kipnis²³. In Yan’s study of *guanxi* in a village in Heilongjiang Province, he describes how *guanxi* perpetuated by gift exchanges has consolidated the local community and enhanced the moral obligations²⁴.

¹⁴ Yang 1994; Logan et al. 1999; May 2000.

¹⁵ Bian 2015; Walder 1983.

¹⁶ Yang 1994; Walder 1988.

¹⁷ Xin and Pearce 1996; Hendrischke 2004.

¹⁸ According to Stiglitz (2000), 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.’

¹⁹ Putnam 1995.

²⁰ Gutrie 2001.

²¹ Yang 2002; King 1991.

²² Gold et al. 2002.

²³ Yan 1996a, 1996b, 2005, 2006, 2012; Kipnis 1996, 1997.

²⁴ Yan 1996a, 1996b.

Kipnis has studied the diversity in rural *guanxi* in a wide range of gift-giving practices and found the congruence 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’²⁶, gift exchange based on reciprocity also provides a central rule for rural *guanxi*. A gift creates an outstanding obligation, and is expected to be paid back. Favours have to be remembered and returned, although not always instantly. Such concept of reciprocity is well documented in Yan’s work in which villagers are found to have carefully maintained their *guanxi* by keeping a gift list in their exchange activities²⁷. As described by Fei Xiaotong, this concept of reciprocity can be dated back to much earlier time in rural China. Before 1949, the on-going reciprocation had already been well accepted as a tool to maintain connections among people in rural communities²⁸. If one owed another person’s a favour (*renqing*), he would find an opportunity to repay with a bigger favour, making others owe him more *renqing* debts, thus made his *renqing* investment. Yan has also noticed the more valuable return gift in rural Heilongjiang. Apart from the inflation factor for time elapse, villagers have to keep in mind the ever on-going *renqing*²⁹. In this sense, the exchange based on reciprocity is in fact spirally escalating in that when *guanxi* is getting closer, more material goods and resources are needed for supporting a closer *guanxi*.

Due to the complexity of rural China, and especially its fast development in the reform years, further research is required to understand the diversified roles of *guanxi* in rural communities. Whether it is more instrumental as manipulated by urbanites, or reflects more emotional content as argued by Kipnis³⁰? In reality, the instrumental and affective roles of *guanxi* could not 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 instrumental and affective aspects of the ties. In fact, it is the certain social and economic background that has shaped *guanxi* in its specific form. Yet, the role of *guanxi* in relation to its context is still a little researched issue, and deserves further examination. This paper intends to fill in the gap by providing in-depth analysis on this.

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

²⁵ Kipnis 1996.

²⁶ Yang 1988.

²⁷ Yan 1996a, 1996b.

²⁸ Fei 2013a.

²⁹ Yan 1996a.

³⁰ Kipnis 1996.

2. The field site – Qinggang County

Administratively, Qinggang is within the jurisdiction of Suihua prefecture of Heilongjiang province. Located in the central-east of the province, Qinggang is in the hinterland of the fertile Songnen plain, being one of the grain producing counties of the province. It covers the territory of 2,685 km², and has a population of 0.5 million, of which about 72.9 percent are rural. Since 2001, it has four district communities, 15 towns and townships, as well as 165 villages.

2.1 Local poverty

As an ordinary county in north China at first sight, Qinggang is unique for two reasons: poverty and corruption. In 1990, it was designated as a ‘national poor county’ as part of the state’s Poor Area Development Program for poverty reduction.

In 1994, 592 national poor county were designated, when the state decided that all counties should be designated as poverty-stricken at national level if its per capita rural income was less than 400 yuan in 1992³¹. As for Qinggang, it was included among the 592 counties, as in 1992 its per capita rural income 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 loan for poverty reduction, work for poverty relief (*yigong daizhen*, to provide working opportunities for local infrastructure construction instead of providing poverty relief fund) and capital investment for local development. In order to acquire state funding some counties in Heilongjiang competed with each other for a title of ‘national poor’³². Therefore, once designated it would be unwise to have the ‘national poor’ title removed like what happened in Qinggang in 2001. This had been due to the reportedly substantial per capita income increase from 751 yuan in 1993 to 2,300 yuan in 1998, a very high rural income which was not realized until after 2008.

In fact, rural income remained low in Qinggang, although the county is geographically not far from the two richest cities in Heilongjiang, Harbin and Daqing³³. It is 120 kilometers north of the provincial capital Harbin and 90 kilometers east of Daqing. However, such location has not been helpful for Qinggang to 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 the fieldtrip was carried out (Figure 1).

³¹ See the Eighth Seven-year Poverty Alleviation Reinforcement Plan (1994-2000) issued by the State Council in 1994.

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 fund was more than the fiscal income (84.85 million yuan) for that county in 2005.

³³ Being the capital city and the one with rich oil resources in Heilongjiang, Harbin and Daqing are the richest cities in the province. Official data show that for years urban incomes only in the two cities have been higher than the provincial average, indicating the distinct status of Harbin and Daqing in terms of economic development.

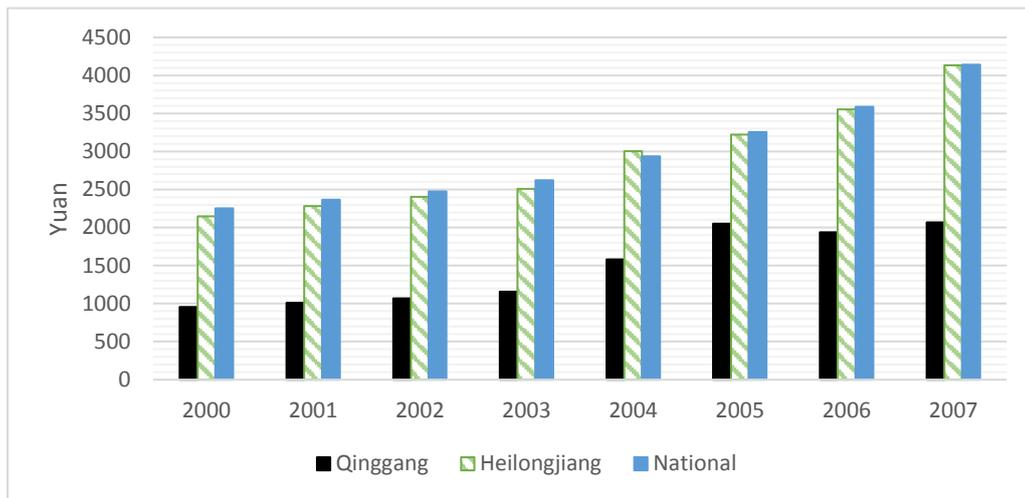


Figure 1 Rural per capita income Qinggang, Heilongjiang and China

Source: Heilongjiang Statistics Yearbook 2009; National Statistics Yearbook 2009

2.2 Local corruption

In addition to poverty, what also makes Qinggang distinct is a law case from 2005, known as the biggest bribery case concerning post selling in communist China by that time. Ma De, the former Committee Secretary of Suihua Municipality, was convicted of taking substantial sums of bribes (over 6 million yuan) from officials at municipal and lower level governments before appointing them 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 involved. One of them once bribed Ma with 500,000 yuan to be appointed as the county governor.

Through this case, Qinggang has become infamous and people have been curious about the driving force of buying a position of county governor with so much money. Inevitably, they wondered how much money a county governor would be able to scoop in such a poverty-stricken place where 40 percent of the rural population still lived below the national poverty line³⁴ with an average per capita income lower than 2,000 yuan in 2005.

For the current study, the case of Qinggang is worth researching not only because of its poor economic development but also its special political background. This has provided a particular rural context in which villagers have managed to survive poverty while the specific local *guanxi* is developed.

3. Contextualizing rural *guanxi*

In answering the role of rural *guanxi* in Qinggang, the Guans family provides a good illustration.

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

The Guans would be an ordinary rural family with four members in Z Township of Qinggang. They could have been able to manage their 6.6 mu³⁵ of farmland and gain extra income by doing some casual off-farm work during the slack seasons, just like other rural households. However, their life changed in 1996. In that year, Guan lost his right leg in a hit-and-run traffic accident. Medical treatment after the accident immediately indebted the family 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 had been working hard to pay off their debts, but hard 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. When their debts were almost paid off, their 14-year-old younger daughter was found ill and diagnosed as having leukaemia in 2006. This diagnosis came before the new rural cooperative medical service was practiced in 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 cost 16,000 yuan per year, lasting about 6 years. This amount of money was astronomical for an ordinary rural family, whose income came mainly from the total 6.6 mu of land for maize production.

3.1 Guan's efforts for survival

Guan once asked for help from the local government by kneeling down³⁶ in front of the township governor, but to no avail. He was told to return and ask the brigade (village)³⁷ secretary to take him from home to home for fund raising. However, the village secretary refused by telling him, '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 get financial assistance from the township government, the Guan couple raised fund by renting out their contracted land with newly planted crops³⁸. They also wished to sell their house, but no one would take it even for a low price of 2,000- 3,000 yuan in total. After exhausting as many sources as possible, they finally obtained financial help from the county government, with a total amount of 7,000 yuan. It came in two allocations, the first time 4,000 yuan and the second 3,000 yuan. Guan went to the civil affairs office in the county government where he was told the government would offer some help, and 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 and said as civil affairs assistant he made a lot of efforts for this, indicating that it was him that manipulated the

³⁵ Mu, measurement unit, 1 hectare = 15 mu.

³⁶ To kneel down in front of others (except to their seniors) is considered very humiliating as by doing so one is assumed to abandon his dignity in exchange of life or help.

³⁷ Communes were dismantled in early 1980s in Heilongjiang, but villagers in Z Township keep using the terms they once 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 was considered extremely unwise to lease land with crops as investment had already been made for seeds and labour.

guanxi with the upper level government for Guan to get the money. Guan replied, 'you cannot take the money! This is the money for saving my child's life!' But the local officer would not leave, lingered and said, '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 the family would have to ask for his future assistance, Guan gave him 500 yuan reluctantly. The next time, when the 3,000 yuan was allocated, the officer took away another 500 yuan without even asking for Guan's permission³⁹.

Even so in order to raise sufficient fund, the Guans had to take a high interest loan of 20,000 yuan from loan sharks, as the local rural credit cooperatives⁴⁰ would not allocate a loan because the Guans were believed to 'have no capability to repay'. The interest rate of the private loan was said to be 30 percent, and interest each year was as high as 6,000 yuan, more than their income from land.

3.2 Help from local Guanxi

It appears from the Guans' case in the poverty-stricken county that government and its formal institutions failed to offer adequate support, and the situation was further deteriorated by local corruption. It was the fellow villagers based on local *guanxi* that offered various forms of assistance to lift the family out of despair.

(1) Cash contribution

On hearing that Guan's daughter needed money urgently for treatment, villagers gathered to the Guans and contributed as much as they could. According to local residents, the Guans were nice and friendly people so that all living in this *tun* went to Guan's house and offered help. They contributed sympathetically, and the money proved to be life-saving that the girl survived the emergency treatment.

The Guans must have asked for financial help several times later. During the fieldtrip, when Guan introduced the first author to a villager's house and told the hostess the purpose of the visit, the woman smiled with relief and said frankly, 'I thought you came again for money!' According to villagers, they were not rich people and could not keep donating, but they never stopped helping in other ways.

(2) Food treat

The Guans was living an extremely frugal life. Apart from a sack of flour given 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

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 the night chat in her room. She also said as a civil affairs assistant, the local officer would take commissions for all the money he applied for villagers. When over 1,000 yuan was to be given to a peasant, he would take 500 yuan, or 100 yuan when the total amount was less than 1,000 yuan. The next morning, the author got confirmation about what she said from Guan.

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

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 on the medical treatment for their daughter, but could not afford anything nutritious for her. Their daughter was much loved and pitied by 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 as they were not rich either.

(3) Employment assistance

As the Guans was in deep debt, the older daughter of the family was soon forced to drop off school, and started to work as the youngest migrant worker from the village in a location far away from home.

Similar to findings from other studies, most migrant workers from Z Township were making a living either as factory/construction workers or in the service industry in the cities. Young males worked in the factories making sofa, jewellery boxes, and some worked on construction sites. Those with special skills would work as chefs. For young girls, their destinations were usually hotels and restaurants where they could work as waitresses. However, Guan's older daughter was only 15 and was unable to apply for formal employment. Therefore, she was introduced by the local *guanxi* to work in a clothes factory in a small city. There she worked from 6 am to 12 pm for 300 yuan per month with food and accommodation provided. With such help, it was expected the family could be less burdened financially.

(4) Household help

The Guans was living in a house in poor condition. The walls and ceiling were covered by white paper and plastic sheets when the fieldtrip was conducted. Such decoration was offered from their local *guanxi*. As commented by a 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 with 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 (Interview conducted by the first author on 30 March 2007 at the Guans with Zhao, female, peasant).

In fact, due to Guan's physical disability, local people often helped his family with 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 were away for migration work. In general, mutual assistance among villagers in the

poverty-stricken community in various forms has become an effective way for people to overcome household hardships like what happened to the Guans.

4. Conceptualizing *tunqin guanxi*

In reality, local people use a different term *tunqin* rather than fellow villagers to address their local *guanxi*.

4.1 The definition of *tunqin*

According to Yan, the word *tun* is a local term for village, and *qin* means kin⁴¹, so that *tunqin* literally means relatives living in the same *tun*. Currently, *tunqin* mostly appears in literary works and newspaper reports, and there has been little academic literature on this type of *guanxi* in rural China. Of the few studies where *tunqin* is mentioned briefly, most have cited Yan's work⁴², believing *tunqin* means fellow villagers who are 'co-living relatives'⁴³, or 'relatives of coresidence'⁴⁴. In other words, it is believed the term refers to the people living in the same area, who consider themselves belong to the same family as relatives, regardless of whether there is consanguineous connection or not⁴⁵.

However, the authors of this paper argue that, in the above definitions, at least Yan's explanation of *tun* is inaccurate in that unlike villages with certain administrative functions, *tuns* are formed naturally so that a village and a *tun* might not share the same boundary. For example, if we have a closer look at *tun*, 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.

4.2 *Tunqin* as a unique rural fictive kin relationship

Observation from the field has confirmed that *tunqin guanxi* appeared closer than simple fellow villagers. It would be a surprise to an outsider when he/she heard Guan address everyone he met as if they were relatives, such as auntie and brother-in-law. Of course, he was called by some young children as 'grandpa' (*laoye*) although he was only in his mid-thirties with two teenage daughters. 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 automatically established the 'quasi-relative/kin' relationship. It appeared complicated in a way, but people there knew exactly their corresponding positions in the network.

Observation and interview data for the current research have shown that some villagers in Z Township had established a close network based on *tunqin*. Apart from their address to each other, villagers visited each other whenever they liked and they felt at home whichever

⁴¹ Yan 1996b, 108.

⁴² Yan 1996b, 2012; Du 2009.

⁴³ Yan 2012, 132.

⁴⁴ Yan 1996b, 108.

⁴⁵ Dong 2012.

household they visited. For example, it is usual to find a visitor sitting on the bed cross-legged, smoking and relaxing, as if she/he were the owner of the house. When a mother was cooking but could not find any leek, she simply told her daughter, ‘pick up some from your auntie’s backyard!’ Of course, the auntie here does not refer to a relative by consanguinity but a *tunqin*.

The address of others as relatives in one’s kinship without the connection of consanguinity has been noticed in Fengjia where Kipnis compares this to Fei’s findings that kinship terms were extended in the village regardless of surname to show one’s certain psychological attitude and level of respect⁴⁶. This fictional kinship has been described by Fei as the result of *govan*, (pseudo-adoption), similar to *baiganxin* (fictive kin making) documented by Yan⁴⁷.

However, we have found *tunqin* different from pseudo-adoption and fictive kin on at least two accounts. First, either *govan* or *baiganqin* 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, fictive kin is ‘created through individual cultivation rather than the preexisting membership for anyone born into the community’⁴⁸. This differs from the current study because Guan’s *tunqin guanxi* was created by his older generations with their individual efforts, whereas for him and his children, such *guanxi* has been passed on from one generation to the next and become a preordained relationship for the descendants.

4.3 *Tunqin* as a flexible type of rural *guanxi*

Yan once translated *tunqin* as ‘intimate fellow villagers’, but has found part of the original meaning lost in the translation concerning the similarity between coresidence and kinship ties⁴⁹, indicating the importance of the link between location and intimacy regarding the term *tunqin*.

So far, all the above definitions of *tunqin* have shown that the term is location specific⁵⁰. However, regionalism only explains *tun*, the location, but is not enough to form ‘*qin*’, the intimate or close relationships. Evidently, new immigrants’ settlement in a rural community does not get accepted automatically by the indigenous villagers to become part of their ‘*qin*’, or kin. Very often, there are conflicts between settlers and original villagers⁵¹. This is because the settler’s kin is back in his home village where his ancestors lived. As argued by Fei,

⁴⁶ Kipnis 1996; Fei 2013a.

⁴⁷ Fei 2013a; Yan 1996b.

⁴⁸ Yan 1996b, 108.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Existing literature documents *tunqin* mostly in north China, such as in Heilongjiang Province, though 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, such as ‘friends’ are used generally by people in the village of the Li Minority in Hainan. See Zhang 2009.

⁵¹ Zhao, Yang and Zhao 2010.

regionalism is inseparable with consanguinity⁵². Taking household registration as an example, until today one's original home place, termed as *zuji* (ancestors' hometown) in the registration booklet is still recorded. Such *zuji* is a place that even his father or grandfather might have never set foot to. However, *zuji* is inherited from his predecessor, and this phenomenon leads Fei to comment decades ago that regionalism is 'the projection of consanguinity into space'⁵³.

By the same token, in Qinggang geographical location alone is not sufficient for the establishment of *tunqin* relationship. Qinggang's history can be traced back to 150 years ago. It used to be a hunting area for the royal family during the Qing Dynasty, mostly uninhabited except for some nomads occasionally. Land reclamation started in 1851 when a total of 230 households of *Man* nationality were relocated to settle along the Tongken River (near Z Township today), and 6 *guantuns* (official *tuns*) were set up⁵⁴. Guan, as a *Man* ethnic minority, might be one of the settlers' descendants. Over generations, lineage groups have gradually developed in the local areas. During the process of development there arrived more new immigrants, who formed geographical relationships with local people. In the advancement of the communities, by working and living together, and by marriage highly possibly, there have been mutual penetration and interaction of consanguinity and geographical ties so that *tunqin* has become the combination of both.

For Fei Xiaotong, consanguinity is the foundation for an identity society while regionalism is the base for a contract society⁵⁵. 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 of consanguinity. However, nonnatives or new settlers residing in the same place are different. As marginalized residents of the consanguineous communities, new comers are able to disregard *renqing*, thus become more confident and flexible in doing business. In this way, Fei explained why in rural Yunnan people would avoid their close relatives to join *cong*, the local 'money club' but invited their friends to become members⁵⁶. In analyzing conflicts among rural relatives, Yan also commented 'without the money, relatives should have been able to keep very good relationships'⁵⁷.

As *tunqin* becomes the combination of both consanguinity and geographic ties, the authors argue that it might be maintained by *renqing guanxi* as close as in consanguineous relationships, and it might also solve problems like new settlers with pure geographical ties. If needed, *tunqin* might contain more of personal intimacy and less of rules, or vice versa. Therefore, compared with blood and geographical ties, *tunqin* is more flexible. With the exact

⁵² Fei 2013b.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Guan 1987.

⁵⁵ Fei 2013b.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Yan 2012, 135.

location unfixed, *tunqin* is located between the instrumentalism of urban *guanxi* and the emotional content of rural *guanxi*, thus plays a comparatively competent role in rural Chinese society due to its elasticity.

4.4 *Tunqin* as a coping strategy against rural poverty

What remains a question is how the status of *tunqin* is decided in a certain rural community? Previous studies with reference of *tunqin* suggest that it is not a close relationship in rural China. For example, in Liao's research *tunqin* is believed to be merely above the basic line of gift exchange, and Yan has also ranked it below voluntarily constructed friendship and fictive kinship⁵⁸. However, in the present study *tunqin* is found to be a relationship much more intimate than described by others. Why?

Existing literature appears to have indicated that the status of *tunqin* in a rural community is associated with villagers' options of coping strategies in life. For example, in Hubei where lineage dominates a rural society with a long tradition, *tunqin* is simply a term similar to friendship⁵⁹. In addition, in Yan's Xiajia of Heilongjiang where villagers have better economic opportunities⁶⁰, *tunqin* is neither so close as good friends, nor as fictive kins⁶¹.

Based on what has been observed in Qingang, we argue that where economic development level is low with ineffective government assistance and pervasive official corruption, villagers tend to seek informal institutions such as *guanxi* as one of the few available strategies to cope with life setbacks. In this context, *guanxi* in its *tunqin* form has become more prominent and important in rural life.

5. Maintaining rural *guanxi*

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

5.1 Obligatory gift money giving

When explaining why they had to give, villagers claimed it had to be given because they were in *renqing* debt, most probably because they 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 by social exchanges. A closer *renqing* needs to be maintained with gifts of higher values, and the latter further enhances existing *renqing*. The exchange of goods driven by *renqing* requirement then helps to develop more intimate *guanxi* that encourages more exchange activities to foster *renqing*. The whole process is realized by gift exchange based on the principle of *lishangwanglai*, or

⁵⁸ Liao 2011; Yan 1996.

⁵⁹ Zhao, Yang and Zhao 2010.

⁶⁰ Although both located in Heilongjiang Province, Xiajia in Yan Yunxiang's work is much better off than the field site of the current study. Rural per capita income in Yan's research field site was 5,422 yuan per capita in 2007 and that for the current study was only 2,067 yuan (Heilongjiang Statistics Yearbook, 2008). It is believed that difference in economic development provides important indications for the study of rural *guanxi*.

⁶¹ Yan 1996b.

etiquette demands reciprocity, the traditional Confucius ethical code. According to a villager, 'isn't there a saying of *lishangwanglai*? They give us 500 (yuan) for my son's wedding, I cannot give back 400.'

It is interesting to note that there were times when the villagers were invited for an occasion, yet they had no special relationship with the inviter, as one villager explained:

The other day, I ...met Chen xx, Chen xx asked me to have a drink (a family occasion). You see we are not relatives, 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. (Interview conducted on 30 March 2007 with Li, male, peasant)

To attend such an "invitation", he had to pay at least 50 yuan to Chen according to usual practice to show what he gave was a presentable gift. From his conversation with Chen, it is clear that he attended the 'drink' because, as he said, Chen was someone he was acquainted with in the *tun* and therefore he had no other options but to attend. Otherwise, he would be considered by others as eccentric and lose face.

5.2 Increasing gift money giving

For decades especially since the communist regime took over, gift giving has experienced great changes with the economic and cultural development in rural China. For example, in earlier years people gave gift in kind rather than in cash. In an interview with one villager, a former village Party secretary, he 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). However, the days are gone when a gift in kind was acceptable in Heilongjiang. Instead, all gifts have been converted into money, similar to *ganzhe*, the conversion of material goods into monetary in Yan's work⁶².

Over the years the value of gift money has kept increasing. In the 1930s, gift giving expenses for ceremonial occasions in rural China were recorded as 1/30 to 1/40 of the total income for each household⁶³, but in the 1990s such expenses were counted to be as high as 1/5 of villagers' annual income, and found to be regressive in that less-well-off families tend to spend more proportionally than rich rural families⁶⁴. In Qinggang, the amount of the expenditure for 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 mentioned in the above example, at least 50 yuan had to be given for normal *guanxi*, and for close relationships up to 200 or 300 yuan would be given, such as a relative's wedding. Clearly, these gift

⁶² Yan 2005; Yan 2006.

⁶³ Fei 2013a.

⁶⁴ Yan 1996a.

activities have been a tremendous burden for many families.

5.3 Impact of gift money giving

What holds unchanged is the large number of occasions for gift giving. In rural Heilongjiang, the numerous money-giving occasions mostly involve a feast. The above example of Chen's drink is a typical one. By going to the feast, a closer relationship between the holder and the guest was established. However, the impact of gift money on rural households has been great. There are reports that giving money for big occasions has become an unavoidable and increasingly onerous obligation for Chinese farmers⁶⁵. In some extreme cases, some would think of ways to take the money back. A story even went in the local area that a person was really angry about giving out so much gift money. He then invited his fellow villagers for a feast for his newly-built henhouse! According to the above retired village secretary:

This (gift money giving) 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 (thus unable 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... cannot find a cure!
(Interview conducted on 27 March 2007 with a retired village secretary, male)

During interviews and informal conversations, villagers would complain about gift money giving whenever their expenditure was mentioned. They considered such money giving obligatory, while their role in the process was passive. A woman further commented, 'you see, if we could use the money for the family...the several thousand *kuai* (colloquial language for yuan). Isn't it good enough?' But she also indicated that it was a tradition and custom, and nobody was able to change.

No matter how pointless and wasteful in nature the villagers found the gift money, or how much they were reluctant to give, gift money has played a vital role in the maintenance of the local *guanxi*. However, even though what is given out is expected to be returned based on reciprocity of gift exchange, it does impose a great financial burden on villagers' current life. Taking the rural community as a whole, over the years more resources have been taken away as gift money, much of which has been consumed as food and drink on the special occasions.

6. Discussion

⁶⁵ For more about the impact of gift giving in rural China, see *The Economist*, Nov. 30, 2013, Two weddings, two funerals, no fridge; Social customs and inequality, available at: <http://www.economist.com/news/china/21590914-gift-giving-rural-areas-has-got-out-hand-further-impooverishing-chinas-poor-two-weddings-two>

This article has discussed rural *guanxi*, especially *tunqin guanxi* in building resilience in a poverty-stricken county in north China, and the maintenance of rural *guanxi* as well as its impact on rural life by reciprocal gift money exchanges.

Tunqin is found in Qinggang to be a special type of rural *guanxi*. Its uniqueness lies not only in its construction with individuals' cultivation yet in the form of a kin relationship consolidated by generations, but also in its elasticity containing both instrumental and institutional elements as found in urban and traditional rural *guanxi*, thus becomes more competent in the rural community.

Currently, rural China has been in the transitional stage that the traditional institutions have been undermined under the communist regime while the new ones are still under construction⁶⁶. This is reflected in evidence from Qinggang that villagers were hardly benefited from local stagnated economic growth, and that market rules and necessary formal institutions were far from well established. This, accompanied with local corruption, deprived villagers of their fair share and access to resources of various forms so that people had to resort to *tunqin*, the quasi-kinship, for what they needed. Therefore, it is the scarcity of available resources and unavailability of coping options that make everything more acute⁶⁷. When economic development is slow, with undeveloped formal institutions and insufficient government support, *guanxi* has become one of the few coping strategies available for those in urgent need for help.

However, the maintenance of local *guanxi* among villagers is costly. Reciprocity might ensure what is given out is to be returned in a long enough period of time, yet it does impose a great financial burden on villagers' current lives. Over the years, taking the rural community as a whole, more resources have been taken away as gift money, leaving the villagers more impoverished with fewer resources to access to.

To summarize, we argue that rural *guanxi* provides contingent support for villagers to cushion against unexpected financial upheavals while formal institutions are not accessible. However, the maintenance of local *guanxi* with gift money exchange further diminishes rural income in such a poverty-stricken region. The maintenance of *guanxi* to seek potential help has thus become the ultimate and maybe unexpected result of villagers' being deprived of chances for development and even for survival, but doing so has become the very reason for villagers to further lose available resources and to undermine rural resilience. As argued by

⁶⁶ He 2013.

⁶⁷ Yan (1996a) has noticed that poor families in Xiajia spend more proportionally on gift money giving. Similar to the findings in this research, we believe that poor families have fewer resources and options to help themselves out of despair. Therefore, they have to rely more on *guanxi* as one of few coping strategies for survival, thus have to spend more on its maintenance.

some Chinese scholars, villagers nowadays have been trapped in a vicious circle of gift money giving⁶⁸.

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 giving has been anything but static after 1949⁶⁹. It is expected that, in the future, when development brings about prosperity to the region, the rural *guanxi* in Qinggang would almost certainly display a different profile, as resources and their availability are among other factors that will reshape the development of future *guanxi*.

⁶⁸ Chen 2012; Hou 2011.

⁶⁹ Kipnis 1996.

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