

Chinese Social Networks in an Age of Digitalization: Liquid Guanxi

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Practices of *guanxi*, the Chinese expression of interpersonal connections, have received much attention within the social sciences in recent decades. Scholars have engaged in debates on the significance of *guanxi* in contemporary China, how *guanxi* practices of network building and rebuilding have adapted to institutional changes, and on moral dilemmas related to these practices. Few studies to date, however, have examined how *guanxi* practices have evolved with the rise of social media platforms through which much *guanxi*-related activity is now cultivated and maintained.

In *Chinese Social Networks in an Age of Digitalization: Liquid Guanxi*, Anson Au examines how the rules of *guanxi* have changed as *guanxi* practices play out on social networking services (SNSs) in contemporary China. Drawing on interviews with Chinese youth aged 18 to 29 and statistical data from the Chinese General Social Survey, this book argues that the rules of *guanxi* are being rendered “liquid” as they are facilitated by the technical capabilities of SNSs. Drawing on Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of liquid modernity, Au theorizes that SNSs are enabling the disintegration of older ways of practising *guanxi* by eroding social and geographical boundaries and facilitating greater individual agency in networking.

The volume consists of seven chapters. The first, “Digitalization in China and the rise of social networking sites” introduces the context: a rapidly digitalizing country which is home to over a billion social media users. The notion of *guanxi* is defined here as “an intricate system of rules about networking that lords over every social relation in the land” (p. 3). Chapter two, “Liquid *guanxi*: rewriting the rules of networking” introduces these rules as they pertain to five aspects: tie formation, tie maintenance, tie activation, geographical proximity and information flow. Au draws on sociologist Fei Xiaotong’s seminal work, first published in 1947, *Xiangtu Zhongguo* or *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society* (University of California Press, 1992), in theorizing the concept of (il)liquidity across these rules. Each of the subsequent four chapters focuses on one or two of these aspects of *guanxi* practice, examining how the rules related to each are shifting towards greater liquidity.

Chapter three, “Liquid *guanxi* and homophily: new rules of tie-building,” proposes that the rise of SNSs has shifted networking practices away from role-based obligations, which create social boundaries by promoting connections among individuals of similar status. SNSs, Au emphasizes, allow users to transcend such boundaries and form connections based on shared values rather than shared status, facilitating more personalized networking decisions and promoting more value homophily in *guanxi* practice. Chapter four, “Liquid *guanxi* and social currency exchanges: new rules of tie-maintenance”, examines how the maintenance of *guanxi* ties has evolved through digital interactions such as “likes” and comments. These interactions serve as social currencies which enable the maintenance of larger networks and more ties, while enhancing recipients’ status due to their publicly visible and quantifiable nature.

Through the continuous exchange of social currencies, SNSs also foster more flexible and emotionally engaged interactions. Chapter five, titled “Liquid *guanxi* and emotionality: new rules of tie-activation,” argues that older practices of *guanxi*, focused on instrumental exchanges, leave little



room for expressiveness. SNS use, however, enables more emotionally driven interactions that deepen investment in relationships. It also facilitates networking with distant others, as chapter six, “Liquid *guanxi* and social support: new rules of proximity and information flow,” emphasizes. In older *guanxi* practices, physically close ties are considered more reliable and resource-rich, and information flow is restricted. SNSs, however, overcome geographical constraints, facilitating connections with both nearby and distant others and promoting freer information exchange.

The final chapter, “Liquid *guanxi* and Chinese modernity: toward a digital agora,” synthesizes the liquefying transformations of *guanxi* into a broader narrative about a changing Chinese modernity – one which, Au argues, is moving towards a new public sphere termed a “digital agora,” akin to the agora of ancient Athens. This new realm allows public expression and communal engagement, revitalizing trust in weak ties, signalling a shift away from what Fei Xiaotong termed “amoral familism” – a family-centric moral framework.

The concept of liquidity is useful for conceptualizing many aspects of *guanxi* practice in the digital era, highlighting the increased fluidity of interpersonal communications and the ease with which connections are now formed and maintained. However, the notion that *guanxi* was, prior to this era, an unchanged product of a Confucian social structure, is problematic. As scholars have long noted, *guanxi* is not an inflexible, essentialized phenomenon; its practices continuously evolve in response to new social institutions and structures. Au’s argument that long-standing principles of conducting *guanxi* are being overthrown by digitalization – “solids in the midst of being melted by SNSs” (p. 120) overlooks the profound social and economic changes that have influenced *guanxi* practices. Digitalization alone did not, for example, bring about a shift towards more expressive interactions or the cultivation of distant ties. Moreover, hierarchical roles and social boundaries, far from disintegrating, persist and often intensify online (see e.g. Xiaoli Tian, 2021, “An interactional space of permanent observability: WeChat and reinforcing the power hierarchy in Chinese workplaces,” *Sociological Forum*, 36: 51–69.)

This issue is linked to another regarding the generalizability of the study’s findings. Conducted in Hong Kong, with most interview participants (43 out of 50) from Hong Kong and seven from mainland China, the study focuses on SNSs popular in the Hong Kong region, with Facebook and Instagram the most frequently mentioned platforms. While the author claims that the findings represent the broader Chinese population, it is difficult to see how they provide a comprehensive understanding of SNS use across China. Hong Kong’s social media landscape is distinct from mainland China’s, where Facebook, Instagram and other international SNSs are banned and accessible only via illegal virtual private networks, the use of which is difficult to verify. The distinct features of WeChat, China’s most widely used SNS, are not explored in detail. This omission is significant as *guanxi* practices play out in unique ways on WeChat. A central argument of the book is that “content, exchange, and network composition are all information that is visible and permanent on SNSs” (p. 22), however this is not applicable to WeChat, which limits public visibility of content and allows selective sharing. Indeed, such features align with long-standing *guanxi* practices emphasizing privacy and closed circles. Consequently, the study’s portrayal of SNS practices does not fully capture regional variations in *guanxi* dynamics.

These issues aside, Au is to be commended for this in-depth study of *guanxi* and its complex evolution in the digital era. The book provides valuable insights into SNS use and networking behaviour among youth in Hong Kong’s unique digital ecosystem, with the concept of liquid *guanxi* effectively capturing the increased flexibility and adaptability of these practices online. This makes it a significant contribution to the social science literature on *guanxi* and Chinese sociality more broadly.