4. *Networking for Reform and Revolution:* *Guanxi in the Shift from Mao to Deng*

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Reform and Revolution: China's 20th Century

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Introduction

Is it nepotism or just returning a favor? Guanxi (关系), a cultural concept, has its rough Western equivalents of "network" or "connections"; however, it cannot be accurately and concisely translated into English. In the backdrop of Chinese culture that grows around it, guanxi is mutualistic, informal connections that branch out into the political, business, and personal world; a system of intimacy and connections that socially oblige individuals to reciprocity: a form of social contract. Although guanxi was a pre-existing condition of China before 1949, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution became the historical accelerant of guanxi, which transformed into polarization, factionalism, and corruption. This was both a function and a result of formal institutional collapse and the creation of factions. How does that happen? How do the strongest familial bonds break, and how do traditional, Confucian relationships sour? This paper will answer these questions by exploring how the perpetuation of "Mao Zedong thought" encouraged division, creating chaos orchestrated by Mao that had lasting consequences for the reform era (1978 to the present). In that larger picture, this paper will first tackle the question of **why** guanxi became a necessary mechanism during the Cultural Revolution, using Zheng's article on the Red Guards at Qinghua University. This section will explore the features of political chaos and the conditions that led students to embrace factionalism, which resulted in polarization and the breakdown of institutional trust. The paper will then turn to the question of **how** these informal networks not only survived but became embedded within the post-Mao bureaucracy, economy, and society. By drawing on political, economic, and literary sources, it will examine how guanxi developed from a tool for survival into a lasting framework for influence, advancement, and access to resources in reform-era China.

Mao Engineers Division, Necessitating Guanxi

The national historical backdrop in China fostered stubbornness in student protesters. This is illustrated through Zheng's article, "Passion, Reflection, and Survival," about the Tsinghua Red Guards: "Wang vigorously challenged Kuai's point of view, and in the bloody armed battle to come, the two fought each other at the risk of their lives."[1] It would be reductive to describe this cultural movement as a coincidence or a temporary mass hysteria. This is especially given that the GPCR is a cultural movement involving students' willingness to sacrifice their lives for their beliefs and change (or the lack of change). This has a strong basis in guanxi as it analyzes the historical setting before the GPCR that empowered a cultural shift for guanxi. This section will consider historiography beyond the Cultural Revolution to understand this argument.

"They dedicated themselves to tearing up submissiveness by its cultural roots,"[2] is a quote that may seem to describe the context of the GPCR. However, it originates from Vera Schwarz's narration of the May 4th movement. What aspects of this quote create this assumption? It could be the use of the word "dedicated", as students of the GPCR committed actions based on "Their passions and political convictions."[3] It could also be the concept of "tearing up submissiveness by its cultural roots," as demonstrated by the fact that "The Cultural Revolution soon began to destroy people as well as culture [...] the Red Guard assault moved from uprooting the 'four olds.'"[4] The four olds included, most prominently, old culture. This establishes a cyclical pattern in the history of Chinese student movements in the 20th century. The same scapegoats and targets for change, despite the passage of 47 years, create similarities between the two movements. Overall, the national historical backdrop,

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[1] Xiaowei Zheng, "Passion, Reflection, and Survival: Political Choices of Red Guards at Qinghua University, June 1966-July 1968", pp. 31

[2] Vera Schwarcz, "May 4, 1919: A New Generation", in The Chinese Enlightenment, pp. 35

[3] Xiaowei Zheng, "Passion, Reflection, and Survival: Political Choices of Red Guards at Qinghua University, June 1966-July 1968", pp. 33

[4] Maurice Meisner, "Mao's China and After", pp. 339

through previously revolutionary student protests, helps explain why the Red Guards felt a relentless duty to create guanxi within student networks for change.

A secondary condition was established through Mao's vague call to action, inevitably creating contradictions between the Red Guards through unclarified doubt, out of which grew factions with differing interpretations of "Mao Zedong thought". Mao's description of the "Liu-Deng line", due to how it characterizes China's disgraced, "reactionary" path, illustrates how Mao exercised rhetoric through repetitive buzzwords. "Having the reactionary stand of the bourgeoisie, they have enforced a bourgeois dictatorship and struck down the surging movement of the Great Cultural Revolution of the Proletariat [...] How vicious they are!"[5] Through the use of buzzwords such as "reactionary" and "bourgeois dictatorship", Mao mirrored earlier practices at the Yen'an settlement, where Communist Party members used political labels like "Trotskyite" and "feudal" to diminish nuance and impose ideological conformity. Similarly, when Mao called for the persecution of "capitalist roaders" without defining who they were or what the persecution should entail, Mao Zedong Thought began to be an amalgamation of slogans rather than a system of tangible or practical guidelines. This ambiguity fostered informal alliances based on personal judgment, as formal institutional frameworks collapsed and political alignment based on those frameworks was depleted. As a result, factionalism emerged, and in the absence of trusted institutions, guanxi began to take deeper root in Chinese society.

People or Monsters?: Chaos Interlaced with Guanxi

As a result of the previous section, guanxi's networks are woven as individual survival mechanisms branching out into a nationally systematized chaos. This is epitomized

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[5] Michael Schoenhals, "China's Cultural Revoltion, 1966-1969: Not A Dinner Party", pp. 12

in the period of discord during the Cultural Revolution, especially in Bin County, which is the setting of Liu Binyan's *People or Monsters?* This section will explore what the previous phrase 'nationally systematized chaos' manifested at both the larger (economic and legal) and individual (personal life) scales while interpreting the time-sensitive nature of these changes to guanxi.

Perhaps an ideal example for the argument for 'nationally systematized chaos' is found in Liu's explanation Wang Shouxin's "embezzle[ment of] public funds to build her houses" in the context of how "there were many other houses built through embezzlement of various sorts."[6] Through widening his scope, Liu displays that his work is relevant due to Wang's corruption within Bin County compared to the rest of the nation. She was simply a microcosm of what guanxi had devolved into. Accordingly, corruption evolved into a normalized adaptation of this society, rather than an abnormality. The methodology becomes bartering for survival, which descends into exchanges into luxury. As Liu notes, "Wang Shouzin's exchanges widened, and as her needs increased, she had to figure out a way of increasing her sources of goods while lowering their cost."[7] Self-preservation became an increasingly central concept as Wang decided she wanted more after her basic requirements. Thus developed a system of people who "follow [each other] closely."[8] Loyalties through strategic ties and flattery defined a newly emerging informal system.

Additionally, to develop a comprehensive understanding of Liu's work, one can explore the chaos' scale, organized structure and why became so dysfunctional, within one paragraph of his reportage. Liu demonstrates scale through use of phrases like "general" to describe the "decline in social morality." Next, Liu demonstrates an organized structure

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[6] Liu Binyan, "People or Monsters?", pp. 86
[7] Liu Binyan, "People or Monsters?", pp. 65
[8] Liu Binyan, "People or Monsters?", pp. 52

within the chaos through mention of the "gradual legalization of criminal activity." The continued usage of legal frameworks to decipher the acceptable and unacceptable creates a sense of organization despite the discord. Ultimately, Liu identifies the typical divisional collapse through how the "distinction between legal and illegal ha[d] become quite blurred."[9] This suggests that the legal framework used was no longer based on rule, rather, just a pool of exceptions. Consequently, the flexibility of the rule of law becomes widespread, and bringing justice depends on who someone knows.

In terms of personal life, guanxi became a tool for individuals to survive. Reciprocity became a necessity when framework collapse was imminent, and no member of the Red Guard was fully aware of the complete ideal of behavior. An example of this transformation of guanxi was the rediscovery of marriage as a tool for social mobility, which took on unprecedented importance. "Thus in-law relationships, and in-laws-of-in-laws relationships, came to overlie relationships that were already doing quite well [...] In terms of extent alone, these in-law relationships had become twice as important as they ever were in feudal society."[10] This has the implication of families presenting higher-level cadres as model candidates for their marriageable children. Marriage becomes part of the strategic toolkit for familial and self-preservation, reinforcing guanxi. This was a result of a rising allure for material gain, as "these people could think of nothing but their desires for material improvement, political power, and influence."[11] Ironically, one of Mao's 'olds', 'old habits' materialises, albeit in a reformed, unprecedented manner, through marriage for social mobility.

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[9] Liu Binyan, "People or Monsters?", pp. 86
[10] Liu Binyan, "People or Monsters?", pp. 87-88
[11] Liu Binyan, "People or Monsters?", pp. 62

Guanxi in these individual relations became a time-specific issue through the introduction of the GPCR's effect on relationships.

> A change of equal importance (not to say of even greater importance) was the new layer of political relations by the Great Cultural Revolution. Those who belonged to the same "faction" shared each other's tribulations, shielded each other, and in a few short years became like brothers to people who had started out as total strangers! [...] the relationships between Communist Party members and between revolutionary comrades paled by comparison.[12]

Through this excerpt, Liu explicates the primary relationship between guanxi and the GPCR; the sense of connection made through "tribulations" and an ideal of reciprocity created in division. However, Liu enables the reader to comprehend how this evolved into a network through a following quotation: "In Bin County, it's hard to figure out how people are related. It's as though they carry special switches with them and if you get involved with one person, you're suddenly involved with a whole network."[13] Factionalism's core, loyalty, is no longer based on whether members share ideologies, rather, experiences and favors. Overall, guanxi amid the GPCR is defined by its toolkit of loyalty, flexibility of law, marriage and experiential nature for the creation of bonds.

Guanxi Lives and Lasts

The prior section demonstrated that the GPCR established guanxi as an informal system in place of institutions with defined frameworks. This section will discuss how China's reform era was marked by an effort to legitimize formal institutions. However, reliance on guanxi mitigated its disappearance. As a result, guanxi remained embedded within Chinese life, including within post-Mao bureaucracy and economy. Discussing the larger, regional factions spread across the nation with "chains or networks of personnel linked leaders in Beijing to provincial, county, and even the primary units (danwei) to which each individual in China belongs", Oksenberg and Bush argue that the "cement holding these

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[12]Liu Binyan, "People or Monsters?", pp. 88
[13]Liu Binyan, "People or Monsters?", pp. 88

networks together was guanxi."[14] Guanxi, as a result, remained a critical feature during the

Reform era. With Deng unable to match Mao's power, especially as a figurehead with a

resounding cult of personality, smaller struggles for power emerged throughout the country,

and factionalism survived. Hence, Deng and his inner party pursue consensus-building, as

reflected in the Tiananmen documents from Zhongnanhai. The period was marked by deep

reliance on factional trust, endorsing intra-party networks. This introduces the fact that the

post-Mao system was deeply broken, and clinging onto legitimacy was only possible through

consensus from the inner-party, trickling down. [15]

However, Deng's political reforms are not central to his legacy; rather, his utilisation

of practical and hence effective economic reforms defines his impact. Within that practical

approach, guanxi existed as a mechanism for economic growth. Koo and Yeh explain that

"measures for economic growth and reform were basically initiated and carried out locally

rather than by orders from the central authorities," and that "the key to their economic

success was rural industrialization."[16] A result of these key measures was the authority's

decentralization to local cadres rather than higher-ranking officials in Beijing. This

decentralisation's consequence was a rise of guanxi, as grey areas were filled by an informal

network.

However, the reform era's embrace of guanxi marked some contrast to the GPCR's

reliance on guanxi. For instance, Wang Anyi's *The Destination* features sent-down youth

finding support through half-baked networks. Guanxi, as a result, was a band-aid to those on

the margins of society, filling in some gaps but not extensively. However, some concepts

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[14] Michel Oksenberg and Richard Bush, "China's Political Evolution, 1972-1982", pp. 10
[15] Liang Zhang, "The Tiananmen Papers", pp. 193
[16] Anthony Y. C. Koo and K.C. Yeh, "The Impact of Township, Village, and Private Enterprises' Growth on State Enterprises Reform: Three Regional Case Studies", pp. 332-333

from the GPCR's variation of guanxi remained. In Ah Cheng's *King of Chess,* the chessmaster and narrator maintain a relationship through the experiential, not the ideological, which was an important factor in the characterization of guanxi during the GPCR. As a result, guanxi served as even more of a temporary solution to the opportunity gaps present in the Reform era.

Conclusion

Conclusively, the roles that guanxi filled were as varied as the needs of each historical moment, from the outbreak, middle, and end of the GPCR to the reforms of the post-Mao era. Forged and reinforced by the Cultural Revolution, guanxi stands as a reminder of the persistent gaps in institutions or the absence of institutions altogether. While guanxi allowed for flexibility and, at times, encouraged innovation and economic growth, it came at the cost of strong legal frameworks that could have fostered transparency and the consistent enforcement of the rule of law. More broadly, the legacy of the Cultural Revolution, expressed through guanxi, endures quietly in everyday practices, from business meetings held over tea ceremonies to negotiations conducted in karaoke bars. Despite modernization and institutional reform, guanxi continues to trace its influence across every crevice of Chinese society.