

## Book Review

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Yanjie Bian. 2019. *Guanxi: How China Works*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

To so many people around the world, Chinese or non-Chinese, China means *guanxi* or China is a *guanxi* society. Also, to so many people inside and outside the academia, however, what *guanxi* exactly means and how *guanxi* specifically forms, manifests, and functions over time in and beyond China remain unclear, mysterious, and even controversial. The most focused and solid research effort to conduct an overdue comprehensive overview of the *guanxi* literature is represented by Yanjie Bian's *Guanxi: How China Works*.

This authoritative book will be a must-read and must-have book for everyone interested in *guanxi* and China. Its author, Yanjie Bian, is one of the top experts in the sociology of *guanxi*. Similar to other books in Polity's China Today series, this book aims to serve as a text for college and postgraduate courses on China. The prevalence and impacts of *guanxi* in China are out of question. *Guanxi* is one of these ideas we must understand in order to understand the past, present, and future of China, Chinese people, and their behaviors and attitudes. There has been proudly a seven-decade-long research tradition on *guanxi* in both the Chinese and English worlds. But books like this one wholly and fully devoted to *guanxi* have been rare and desperately needed.

This book offers a balanced, thorough, and critical review of existing work on *guanxi*, including Bian's own three decades of systematic research efforts. It immediately begins with clarifying the diverse and confusing conceptualization of *guanxi* and defining related concepts such as *guanxi* networks and *guanxi* capital. Then, it clearly pins down the viable roots or the dynamic establishment and maintenance of *guanxi* and *guanxi* networks in disparate spheres of social life (i.e., daily interaction, social eating, and social events of cultural significance such as New Year celebration and exchanges), and documents the composition of *guanxi* networks and the class and urban-rural inequality in the access to advantaged *guanxi* networks. Next, it devotes the bulk of its attention to an extensive assessment of research on the sorting and stratifying consequences of *guanxi* in diverse aspects (i.e., economic, political, scientific, military, and legal) and at different levels (i.e., individual, organizational, institutional) of contemporary China over time. The book concludes with summarizing the logics of *guanxi*, highlighting the social structure of *guanxi* networks and its shaping influences on positional social structures, and proposing urgent future research directions.

This book is rich with concepts and theories for interested readers. Conceptually, highly motivated to advance the measurement and examination of *guanxi* and expand its explanatory power across cultural and disciplinary boundaries, Bian links *guanxi* closely with concepts well studied by the social network analysis (SNA) approach. He describes the culture-specific meanings of *guanxi* in

China using colloquial and Confucian concepts. But he emphasizes more the necessity and importance of applying the SNA approach to refine the conceptualization of *guanxi* using standard and generalizable SNA concepts. He provides his own definition of *guanxi* as a dyadic tie with three attributes (personalized, sentimental, and resourceful), and underlines and employs a list of SNA concepts (e.g., role type, tie strength, tie multiplexity, route of connectivity, and embedded resources) as relational forms of *guanxi*.

This book generously maps numerous theories and theoretical frameworks on *guanxi*, and can serve as an exceptionally valuable theoretical guide. When addressing the long-disputed question of what is *guanxi*, Bian compares three theoretical models and discusses their similarities and differences (see Chapter 1). When appraising the inconsistent findings on the impacts of *guanxi* favoritism on job allocation, he not only introduces the long-lasting debate between a pair of competing theses (decline versus resilience) but also proposes his *guanxi* dynamism model based on the dichotomized typologies of institutional uncertainty and market competition (see Chapter 3). When evaluating the influence of *guanxi* in the business world, he develops a business founding model based on the cross-classification of network and market images (see Chapter 4). When assessing the literature on the *guanxi*-organization relations, he identifies eight different theoretical perspectives (see Chapter 5). In the concluding chapter, he articulates four internal and external logics of *guanxi* and praises the earliest relational approach to Chinese social structure in the modern era proposed by Fei Xiaotong (see Chapter 7).

This book is highly compelling and accessible, methodologically and empirically. Although Bian himself is primarily a quantitative researcher, in the book, he covers both quantitative and qualitative literatures. Quantitative studies analyze various survey data sets and test theories. Bian, for example, reports seven groups of strong quantitative evidence and demonstrates the persistent and increasing impact of *guanxi* in the labor market (see Chapter 3). When presenting quantitative findings, Bian reduces the use of statistical terms for the purpose of readability and shares additional data tables on the book's webpage. Results from qualitative in-depth interviews help illuminate the actual building and functioning of *guanxi*. In addition, Bian's vivid description of his own personal stories and experiences in China brings readers closer to relevant concepts, theories, and structural contexts in China.

This lively book successfully answers many key questions on *guanxi*. As a stimulating book, it also opens the door for further questions. For example, the research efforts bridging between *guanxi* and SNA concepts have proved fruitful and helped minimize the cultural specificities of *guanxi*. But for the purpose of measuring *guanxi* validly and reliably, should we ask questions directly on *guanxi* or on general social networks? We probably should do both and then compare the strengths and weaknesses of the two methods. Also, this book subsumes *guanxi* networks and *guanxi* capital respectively under the umbrella of social networks and social capital. What are the relationships between *guanxi* and non-*guanxi* networks and between *guanxi* and non-*guanxi* capital? Do they reinforce or undermine each other? Do they function simultaneously or independently? Furthermore, social capital theory helps explain the positive impact of *guanxi*. What theory can interpret its exceptional negative effect (on trust in organizational management as shown in Chapter 5)? Finally, this book focuses on instrumental outcomes. What are the expressive consequences of *guanxi*?