GUANXI, TIE STRENGTH AND NETWORK ATTRIBUTES
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Abstract
Guanxi is discussed as a variant network form. A characterization of guanxi in terms of its cultural and institutional attributes is provided, paralleling accounts emphasizing respectively its expressive and instrumental qualities. Both are aspects of guanxi’s reputational focus. Tie-strength is considered in terms of differences between latent-structure networks, where tie-strength discerns patterned differences, and volitionally-constructed networks, where it does not. It is shown that as guanxi networks are constituted by iterated obligations, influence (a directing power) cannot flow through them. Obligation (a constraining power) marks the character of guanxi networks. Finally, the information opaque nature of guanxi, resulting from guanxi’s cultivated form and the obligatory relationships underlying it (requiring confidentiality and mutual monitoring of participants), is discussed. The adaptability of guanxi in different historical contexts, from imperial China to the present-day market reform period, is suggested throughout.

Introduction
Guanxi, literally ‘relationship’ or ‘personal connection’, is widely discussed in English-language social science (Qi 2012). The Chinese term typically remains untranslated in these sources – arguably because its full meaning escapes translation (Gold 1985: 659; King 1991: 68) – but it is nevertheless frequently understood through the terminology of network analysis. There are a number of reasons why guanxi has drawn increasing attention from sociologists in addition to the rise of China as a major global power. As well as its contribution to our understanding of such generally relevant phenomena as social capital (Qi 2013) examination of guanxi can inform strategies of sociological analysis. Indeed, it is the purpose of the present paper to consider the limitations of the network approach for understanding guanxi, and in doing so to address the nature of guanxi and misunderstandings associated with it.

A characterization of guanxi
Scholarly conceptualizations of guanxi vary significantly, with different accounts providing a cultural (Fei 1992; Hwang 1987; King 1991) or institutional (Guthrie 1998, 1999; Wank 2002) focus. There is agreement, however, on some basic properties. All accounts accept that guanxi involves social exchanges between persons who participate in long-term relationships. There is also
agreement that entailed in these relationships is commitment between participants and therefore both emotional attachment and a sense of reciprocal obligation. This set of characteristics is often summarized by saying that guanxi relations involve strong ties, a point to which we shall return. Beyond this agreement there is significant difference and possibly confusion.

One distinction found in the discussion of guanxi, and a source of some confusion, is the difference between its expressive and instrumental aspects (Gold 1985: 659; Hwang 1987: 949-53; Yan 1996: 226–29). Those who treat guanxi in cultural terms point to the importance of shared attributes of participants, especially in connection with kinship, place of origin or a bonding relationship including those of teacher-student, classmate or similar situational tie. This emphasis on identity markers in guanxi foregrounds its sentimental aspects; its expressive nature of gift-exchange is emphasized at the expense of its instrumental possibilities. Institutional accounts, on the other hand, notice the use of guanxi in business relations, in acquiring a government service or a job. In this context the transaction cost benefits of guanxi are emphasized and its rent-seeking possibilities noticed. These and other instrumental attributes of guanxi are held to stand in firm contrast to its expressivity.

A possible basis of this difference is the context in which guanxi operates. Expressive guanxi can be seen as predominantly rural; instrumental guanxi, urban; expressive, historical; instrumental, contemporary; and so on. Whereas guanxi in imperial China and in rural communities today may be regarded as a means of social bonding, and therefore expressive in its form and consequences, the engagement of guanxi during the Mao era, applied to circumvent rationing, and in the subsequent period of economic reform from the 1980s, in which much guanxi between business operatives and government officials is to procure administrative favours facilitating profit, it is seen as instrumental. The difficulty with distinctions such as these, including the dichotomy of ‘expressivity’ and ‘instrumentality’ itself, is that they do not necessarily refer to alternative forms so much as complimentary aspects of a complex set of relationships. So-called expressive guanxi frequently provides material benefits and in that sense could be regarded as ‘instrumental’; similarly, business guanxi is only possible when the participants are not only in personal relations with each other but committed to the propriety and decorum of their association, including reciprocal sentiments and obligations which maintain the relationship.

The supposed opposition between expressivity and instrumentality can be overcome if they are understood as second-order aspects of guanxi derived from a first-order characteristic. As in all relationships the benefits derived from guanxi are compound. As well as immediate benefits from guanxi exchanges there are future benefits because of the reciprocal and obligatory nature of guanxi. Also, the
benefits of guanxi relations are not only substantive in the form of material gifts, official preferment or some other instrumental advantage but also normative and especially reputational (Lin 2001: 157). Indeed, the payoff for the provider of a guanxi favour is enhancement of their public standing as a person of material means and moral capacities. The payoff for the recipient of a guanxi favour is similarly enhancement of their public standing or reputation, through being regarded as sufficiently worthy to access resources controlled by others and held to be sufficiently reliable by them to fulfil future repayment obligations. In this sense the currency of guanxi relations, the purpose of their enactment and their aspirational outcome is enhancement of public standing and reputational profile. If public reputation is a symbolic resource at the centre of guanxi exchanges then their expressive and instrumental aspects are not in tension but together serve reputational enhancement.

The account of guanxi indicated here points to a number of interconnected characteristics. Guanxi is a practice of social exchanges, expressed through reciprocal favour-seeking and provision of benefit. The reciprocal nature of guanxi relations encourages continuity of engagement, entailing emotional attachment and a morally charged sense of obligation. As an enduring social relation a necessary requirement of guanxi is the social standing of the persons involved. Reputational profile is required for guanxi participation and is also a sought-for outcome of successful guanxi exchanges. From these characteristics a further aspect of guanxi can be noted, namely participants cultivate their relations through favour giving and receiving as means to achieve high reputational profile and associated benefits. Finally, guanxi exchanges never occur as isolated events; they are serially connected and configured in a network pattern, as shown below. Indeed, Chinese accounts of guanxi frequently refer to the network form of guanxi relationships with the term guanxiwang (literally, guanxi network).

*Tie-formation, tie-strength and guanxi*

While there are diverse approaches to guanxi they share a vocabulary of analysis in which network concepts play a meaningful role. The interconnectedness of guanxi relationships and the significance of tie-strength in the effectiveness and mobilization of guanxi encourages an appreciation of the apparent network form of guanxi by both students of Chinese society, who see the latter as comprised of interlocking social networks described by Fei (1992: 65–67) as egocentric and elastic, and also by network theorists (Wellman, Chen and Dong 2002).

Perhaps more than anything the network form of guanxi is indicated in the emblematic assimilation of the concept of tie-strength in discussion of the character of guanxi and the way it changes. The historic shift in China, from a clan-based society prior to 1949 to a Maoist state for two decades from the mid-
1950s and then to the post-1978 marketized society, is frequently portrayed in terms of the nature of the tie-strength of guanxi. During the Qing dynasty guanxi was based on strong ties associated with family, village or neighbourhood; during the Mao period it was founded on the strong ties generated through party militancy and political commitment. Since the economic reforms of the 1980s, with decreased dependence on state employment and increased geographic mobility, weaker-tie guanxi predominates. It is suggested that at the present time weak ties may be the basis of guanxi networks (Chang 2011: 326). On closer examination, however, the distinction between different levels of tie strength may be misleading for an understanding of guanxi. Before considering its application to guanxi it is necessary to first consider the concept of tie-strength.

The significance of the concept of tie strength, if not the concept itself, was brought into sociological discussion by Granovetter (1973: 1361) on an ‘intuitive’ basis when he wrote that the ‘strength of a tie is a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding) and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie’. In this sense ‘strong tie’ stands for kinship connections and ‘weak tie’ for connections between acquaintances. Tie strength is important in Granovetter’s ground-breaking article because he shows that while strong ties characterize well-defined groups weak ties may provide a link between them and, incidentally, function as conduits of non-redundant information that otherwise may not be available to individuals if communication were confined to those with whom they shared strong ties.

The concept of tie-strength since Granovetter’s formulation has been subject to more rigorous investigation. Marsden and Campbell (1984) empirically tested Granovetter’s intuitive model and found that ‘a measure of “closeness,” or the emotional intensity of a relationship, is on balance the best indicator of the concept of tie strength among those available to us’ (Marsden and Campbell 1984: 498). This is because ‘the use of frequency [of contact] as a measure of strength will tend systematically to overestimate the strength of ties between persons who are neighbours or co-workers, while the use of duration [of a relationship] as a measure of strength will overestimate the strength of ties between relatives’ (Marsden and Campbell 1984: 499). These authors reiterated that the usual predictors of tie strength are empirically robust, ‘kinship-based ties are stronger, while ties to neighbors or co-workers are weaker’ (Marsden and Campbell 1984: 499).

While kin on the one hand and neighbours and co-workers on the other are distinguished by the strength of the ties that connect them, strong and weak respectively, they nevertheless have something in common. People cannot choose their relatives, certainly; but also, they seldom choose their neighbours and co-workers. In standard network analysis tie strength and its differential indicators in
kinship and acquaintance are understood to be latent in the structural relationships in which people find themselves; ‘tie strength is a unidimensional latent construct’ (Marsden and Campbell 2012: 18). That is to say that the ties between persons constitutive of their relations that can be characterized in standard network terms are given in the interactions that persons engage in but which they do not consciously create themselves, nor need they be aware of them as strong or weak for them to possess the quality these terms describe.

The underpinning methodological characteristic of network analysis is to explain ‘the behavior of network elements … by appeal to specific features of the interconnections among the elements’ (Laumann 1979: 394). These interconnections are inherent in latent structures and independent of the social actor’s intentions, beliefs or values (Wellman 1983: 176). There is an acknowledgment of the role of cognition and agency (Podolny and Baron 1997; Wellman 1999) and also ‘identity’ (White 1992) in the network literature, so that as well as ‘measurement constructs’ social networks are ‘phenomenological realities’ in the sense that ‘[s]tories describe the ties in networks [so that a] social network is a network of meanings’ (White 1992: 67). But all of this is to refer to outcomes of a social actor’s place and relations in network structures. The primacy of latent structures is not challenged through acknowledgement of the agentic qualities embedded in them (Beckert 2003).

A characteristic feature of guanxi, on the other hand, is that the ties constitutive of it are intentionally formed and therefore volitional rather than latent. Guanxi relations are always cultivated. In his classic statement concerning Chinese networks Fei Xiaotong indicates that ‘[s]ocial relationships in China possess a self-centred quality’ (Fei 1992: 65). The metaphor Fei presents to explain the egocentric nature of Chinese networks is compatible with a distinction between strong and weak ties: ‘Like the ripples formed from a stone thrown into a lake, each circle spreading out from the centre becomes more distant and at the same time more insignificant’ (Fei 1992: 65). Strong ties are close to the self at the centre of the network and the ties at the outer ripples are weak. When Fei (1992: 65) says that these are ‘elastic networks’, however, he means that what constitutes a strong tie is not latent in the relationships themselves but determined by self-conscious decisions. He describes how the Chinese family grows and shrinks not simply through changing economic fortune but as a consequence of what social actors make of it. After briefly describing the changing fortunes and size of the Jia family in the classic novel The Dream of the Red Chamber Fei (1992: 64) goes on to recount a ‘more extreme case’, namely that of Su Qin, a character from the Warring States (480-221 BC) period of Chinese history, ‘who, after seeking his fortune for many years, returned home as a total failure. His wife refused to regard him as her husband, and his sister-in-law refused to regard him as her brother-in-
law’. This may be an extreme case of change in family fortune but not of the volitional element of Chinese social relationships.

While the family is the basic unit of Chinese society, not only historically but at the present time (Qi 2014), instances of an adult child refusing to recognize a parent or a parent an offspring are readily located (Chang 2010: 385–90). Thus the latent structure of kinship may be reduced by conscious intent, and it can be increased through the same mechanism; close friendship in China is typically disambiguated as fictive kin (Baker 1979: 162–67; Fei 1962: 87–94). The radically volitional nature of Chinese networks is a consequence of the normative nature of social ties, structured by role obligations. These obligations require certain context- and person-specific reciprocities informed and shaped by codes of decorum and ritual (Fei 1992: 74–8). While the relations in which a person is insinuated are necessarily prior to their performative engagement, in the sense that one is a son by virtue of having a father and mother, in Chinese society a son must demonstrate his worthiness as a son through fulfilment of the obligations of filial piety. In the absence of a conscious commitment to the tie and a satisfactory performance of the role obligations associated with it a relationship will be seen to be unfulfilled by both the primary participants and by other members of the community. In Chinese society roles are achieved through performance of obligations and elastic networks are therefore wilfully realized as a matter of agency and with a great deal of tactical and strategic consciousness.

The cultivated form of guanxi renders irrelevant the conventionally understood tie-strength characterization of network links. This is sometimes noted in the literature but it is not well understood. In an article that examines the use of guanxi networks in labour markets in China and which demonstrates the importance of strong ties in job acquisition Bian (1997) muses on the contrary incidence of direct weak ties leading to employment placement. He says that a ‘possible explanation for this finding is that tie strength is multidimensional … and thus a weak tie may involve a relatively high level of reciprocity and interdependence between the persons having the tie’ (Bian 1997: 381). But this conjecture not only effectively removes the distinction between strong and weak ties it also maintains a tie-strength focus when the question of tie-strength in the conventional sense may not be relevant.

In a careful ethnographic study of the role of guanxi in securing hospital treatment Chan (2013) shows that while guanxi typically operates through strong-tie links weak-ties may render favour if the person from whom the favour is sought has ‘sympathetic feelings’ for its potential recipient. Chan shows that sympathy itself will not translate into the provision of a favour but that in the context of a network link even a weak-tie mobilized through sympathetic feeling will effectively operate in a way indistinguishable from a strong-tie in terms of its
outcome. The point to draw from this account, which makes sense of Bian’s anomalous case, is that the outcome of guanxi networks cannot be adequately explained in terms of tie-strength and that conventionally defined tie-strength is an inadequate predictor of the behavior of persons within guanxi networks. A more reliable predictor is the extent or degree of felt obligation as a constructive element in a participant’s agency. The obligation may be activated by the interlocking shared attributions of kinship, place of origin or other situational tie, or by some other volitional construction, including ‘sympathetic feelings’. The point, though, is that in this context tie-strength is a proxy not of latent structures but of moral evaluations concerning where obligation may lay and how it may be discharged.

Direct ties or indirect connections

A feature of volitionally constructed networks is that the relation between network participants is determined not by latent structures and direct ties but by a conscious and strategic search for links with others that are frequently indirect and sought to yield outcomes conceived prior to the achievement of a link. Two caveats are required. First, the strategic search indicated above is necessarily along pathways constituted by latent structures of ties. But the volitionally constructed network is not meaningfully explained by tie-strength in these structures, as we shall see. Second, it is not proposed that volitional construction of networks is a unique feature of guanxi, for it is not (Michailova and Worm 2003).

An element of Fei’s characterization of Chinese networks, as egocentric, entails the idea that they operate through consciously purposive motives or intentions and opportunism (shili gui); the person at the centre of a network will recruit to it participants facilitating their enhanced reputational standing. This is a social not an economic resource. While guanxi may access economic resources, and is frequently applied to do so, it is, paradoxically, primarily directed to acquiring and expending social resources. It is therefore necessary to provide a nuanced qualification of the following statement: ‘guanxi is used to gain access to other social ties where useful resources are embedded … [it is] characterized by its ability to reach direct or indirect social ties that can provide help in achieving an instrumental goal’ (Lin 2001: 156). Along the chain of links in a guanxi network there is serial access to and provision of both social and economic resources, but in a way that is not always obvious.

Because of the peculiarities of labour markets in China a significant proportion of job seekers mobilize their guanxi networks to gain employment (Bian 1997, 2002; Hanser 2002; Huang 2008). In such cases guanxi is mobilized in order to achieve a tangible and instrumental outcome, namely the acquisition of paid employment. Some of the complexities of guanxi become apparent in considering its role in job-search. In arguing that guanxi plays a diminishing role in
labour markets in China’s reform economy Hanser (2002) contrasts the concept of *guanxi* with that of tie strength, drawing a distinction similar to the one presented here: ‘[t]here is more reciprocity involved [in *guanxi*], a greater sense of trust and obligation than is captured in the notion of a simple “social tie”’ (Hanser 2002: 142). Hanser (2002: 157) reports the case of Zhao Hui, who gained employment through a friend, but notes that Zhao ‘was able to keep her job because she is hard working’ not because of ‘bonds of trust and obligation with an employer’ (Hanser 2002: 156). The inference is that as *guanxi* includes relations of obligation, absent in Zhao’s relation with her employer, her acquiring the job through a friend indicates only a network tie not a *guanxi* tie. But this is ill-conceived. If Zhao got a job through a friend, call her Wang, then there is a *guanxi* obligation between Zhao and Wang. That Wang got a job for Zhao through her contact with an employer, call him Chen, means that Wang and Chen have *guanxi* obligations but not Zhao and Chen.

‘Commonsense’ might lead one to believe that if a person uses their network to acquire a job then, through the instrumentality of the network, they and not someone else acquired the job. This is the principle implicit in Hanser’s account. It is also suggested by Bian. In considering the use of personal *guanxi* networks in labour markets Bian (1997: 371) says: ‘the stronger the tie between job seeker and control agent, the more successful the job-seeker would be, because the control agent would feel obliged to do favors for someone to whom he or she was strongly tied’. In a later statement Bian (2002: 128) continues to imply that there is a direct link between job seekers and employers through *guanxi* networks, ‘in which job seekers connect to prospective employers and are matched to jobs’. Bian is more concerned with the application of *guanxi* to labour markets than with a detailed account of *guanxi* processes themselves. But in a more detailed account he qualifies the impression created by these statements:

When the job seeker and the control agent are indirectly connected through the intermediary, and strong ties exist between the job-seeker and the intermediary and between the intermediary and the control agent, then the job-seeker gets a job, the intermediary fulfills his or her obligations to and wins trust from the job-seeker, and the control agent does the same for the intermediary … Thus, the job-seeker may be in the intermediary’s debt, who in turn is in the control agent’s debt (Bian 1997: 372).

In formal terms the network obligations of *guanxi* are non-transitive. In the case mentioned in the previous paragraph, Zhao has an obligation to Wang, Wang has an obligation to Chen, but it does not follow that Zhao has an obligation to Chen.

The non-transitivity of *guanxi* relations arises from the particular nature of each person’s relationship with another, including the fact that the provision of a favour and the obligations that arise from it are exclusive to the persons within
their dyadic relationship. Only these relations are direct. And yet a person will be able to access a resource controlled by a socially distant other through their mobilization of *guanxi*. Zhao wants a job but has no contact with a person who can provide her with employment. Zhao asks a favour of Wang, to help her find a job. Wang does not have contact with an employer but agrees to help by asking an old classmate, Li, who is not part of Zhao’s network and who is in business, whether he can find a job for Zhao. Zhao is now indebted to Wang and Wang’s social standing is proportionately enhanced. Li agrees to help find a job for Wang’s friend and although he has no opening in his company a business associate is looking for an employee. Wang is now indebted to Li and Li’s social standing is proportionately enhanced. Li asks his associate Chen whether he has a job for a friend’s friend. There is a job and Chen employs Zhao. For this favour Li is indebted to Chen and Chen’s social standing is proportionately enhanced.

Each node of the network of indirect exchanges designed to provide Zhao with a job involves favour seeking and provision through which obligations arise and prior obligations discharged. Apart from the terminating exchange the resources imparted through these exchanges are primarily social, possibly involving small gifts including meals. The terminating exchange also operates through social resources of favour seeking and consequent enhancement of social standing, although an economic resource is also involved. The economic resource, a job, is part of the favour exchange but functions quite differently for Li and Chen than it does for Zhao. The job is given by Chen as a favour for Li and Li thereby has acquired a *guanxi* debt to Chen. Zhao now has employment but owes no *guanxi* debt to Chen; her debt is to Wang who is also remote from Chen. None of this is to say that direct *guanxi* links might not yield economic benefits to a participant. But the frequent indirect mobilization of *guanxi* reveals more clearly its character.

Having noted the non-transitivity of *guanxi* relations it is now possible to indicate their nature in terms of the other two formal properties of relationships. *Guanxi* is asymmetric in so far as its structure is different for each of its parts both within dyadic relations at the atomic level and within the network as a whole. There is also significant non-reflexivity in *guanxi* exchanges as a resource provided to members of the relationship lacks equivalence for them. As we have seen, a job is both a favour in which the recipient is not employed, as in the case of Li, and employment for someone who is not a direct recipient of the pertinent favour, as in the case of Zhao.

In his classic discussion of networks and labour markets Granovetter (1973) is concerned with information not favour and obligation. The resource distributed in *guanxi* networks, according to Bian (1997: 368, 371, 381), is not information but influence, the other resource routinely distributed through networks (Granovetter
1973: 1364). Bian (2002: 119) sees *guanxi* obligation as a means of influence: ‘social networks were used by job seekers to influence job-assigning authorities through intimate and reciprocal relationships of trust and obligation – or *guanxi* – so jobs could be assigned as favours to someone who was strongly connected, either directly or indirectly, to the authorities’. But there is an important difference between influence and obligation that distinguishes the latent network conduits of information and influence Granovetter refers to and *guanxi* networks. Simply put, influence is a directing power while obligation is a constraining power. This partly relates to the difference between a network of latent ties and one of volitionally constructed ties, but not entirely. Influence can flow through a network because it is indifferent to its conveyer whereas obligation is necessarily attached to particular persons who are circumscribed in its requirements. This difference between influence and obligation, and *pari passu* latent networks and *guanxi* networks, relates not only to influence but information. A feature of *guanxi* networks is the absence of information as a circulated resource, which sets *guanxi* apart from the types of networks amenable to standard network analysis.

**Guanxi networks, information opacity and secrecy**

In his discussion of job search and networks in China Bian (1997: 371) acknowledges information opacity associated with *guanxi*: ‘information was only a byproduct of influence received’. The privileged access to information through favour exchange may be a general condition of the ‘Chinese context’ but in the more limited arena of influence in labour markets discussed by Bian (1997: 369, 371, 382) information opacity is a consequence of the ‘unauthorized’ nature of attempting to influence control agents for job assignment. For this reason, according to Bian, information about job allocation through influence is not disseminated by participants. But the suggestion here that the withholding of job search information is a consequence of the unauthorized character of the *guanxi* favour ignores the generality of information opacity in Chinese networks. The provision of even innocuous favour and resources through *guanxi* is subject to confidentiality or information opacity seldom found in latent networks assumed by standard network analysis.

In discussing information conveyance and *guanxi* it is necessary to distinguish between information about the network, including whether network decorum is breeched, and information transmitted between *guanxi* participants in the course of the provision of a favour. Network referential information is exchanged between participants as a means of maintaining network compliance and assurance (Barbalet 2014). Information relating to requests for or offers of favour, on the other hand, is treated with confidentiality by the parties involved.
This is an important consideration because it indicates that guanxi is not a means of overcoming information opacity but its source.

In contradistinction to the argument that the use of guanxi in labour markets, and presumably in other ‘black’ areas, leads to secrecy between participants, is the idea that secrecy is a general property of guanxi exchanges. An alternative explanation concerning confidentiality between guanxi participants holds that there are social costs in failing to acquire a favour and also in refusing to provide one, so the interests of both parties are safeguarded by avoiding public disclosure or knowledge of their negotiations (Lin 2001: 158). This functional consideration is no doubt important, relating to the risk of loss of ‘face’ for unsuccessful negotiations of favour. But prior to the risk of failed negotiations are the ‘highly personal and particularistic’ ties in which negotiations for favour take place and which are achieved by personal- or self-disclosure that have been described as an ‘operating principle’ of guanxi relations (Chen and Chen 2004: 310, 316–17).

The strongly personal involvement between participants in guanxi relations both facilitates and reflects the way in which those relations are cultivated. The provision of social resources through guanxi and access to economic resources for their participants entails not only obligation but also trustworthiness. Trustworthiness in guanxi relations includes familiarity and close monitoring between those who may seek a favour or provide one (Barbalet 2014). In these circumstances the intimacy generated through mutual surveillance in dyadic interaction means that information about and associated with participants will not be readily circulated. There are thus social inhibitions against such disclosures. Even more telling against the possibility of information lucidity in guanxi is the cultivation of shared secrets in order to secure relational commitment.

In reform China, where market relations and geographic mobility weaken the possibility of close long-term monitoring of participants in guanxi relations and where self-disclosure has little purchase, a proxy or substitute for meaningful personal confiding operates in business guanxi. Company representatives and their clients in China are required to establish personal ties in cultivating guanxi even though they have no past basis for intimate bonding. In this context, ritual practices of excessive drinking and commercial sex become means for establishing the requisite reciprocal secret personal information facilitating a guanxi relationship. Research into business guanxi in Shenzhen found that business associates routinely engage prostitutes for their clients and themselves. Because prostitution is illegal in China and as the participants are typically married this practice served to ‘build up and strengthen guanxi ties for … the people involved [as they now] share secrets about each other and thus strengthened the sense of insider feeling, trust and particular ties’ (Tang 2014: 17–8). Confidentiality-generating bonding rituals productive of guanxi involving prostitution are widespread in China, possibly
introduced by Taiwanese businessmen who have long experience of maintaining *guanxi* in a market society (Shen 2008).

**Conclusion**

*Guanxi* is seldom treated in its own terms in the diverse and extensive literature that purports to report on its nature, application and incidence. Discussion typically exemplifies the theoretical framework in which it is placed. Thus cultural accounts may indicate its Confucian antecedents (Fei 1992; Hwang 1987; King 1991), or civil society prospects (Yang 1994); institutional accounts focus on the functional role *guanxi* plays in realizing pecuniary opportunities available to participants in different institutional environments (Gold 1985; Guthrie 1998; Wank 2002). The network-like qualities of *guanxi* invite treatment of it in terms of tie-strength and conveyance of influence. While sympathetic to the idea that *guanxi* relationships manifest a number of network qualities the present discussion has focused on the particular properties of *guanxi* and problems arising from standard network analysis to it.

It has been shown that *guanxi* networks form through cultivation of obligation rather than latent structural ties. The direction of empirical research suggested by this perspective includes investigation of the changing basis of obligation generated in dyadic exchanges of favour and especially the changing practices of and justifications for reciprocally constructed obligation in different social contexts. Research might also be directed to the formation and patterns of indirect ties, arguably characteristic of *guanxi* networks, arising from serial obligations of iterated stepped dyadic relations involving one member of contiguous dyads. Research attention to the concept and practice of obligation will not only enhance understanding of *guanxi* but inform our general appreciation of its constraining power that is both pervasive in social relations and neglected in the literature.
References


