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Guanxi Culture's Role in China's Great Power Diplomacy and Foreign Policy

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YE XUE, OCT 6 2023

China's foreign policy is an intricate tapestry woven from a multitude of complex factors. Culture is a contentious element in this context. Some argue that culture forms the foundation for leaders' perspectives and belief systems, influencing their policy approaches. Others downplay culture's significance, considering it a tool wielded by the government for its own ends. However, irrespective of whether one sees Chinese culture as an end unto itself or merely as a strategic instrument, the undeniable reality is that culture exerts a notable influence on Beijing's diplomatic and foreign policy calculus. It leaves an indelible mark on China's handling of its relations with other nations, drawing from the deep well of the Chinese concept known as *guanxi*.

While *guanxi* is often translated as "relationship" in English, its social and cultural significance stretches far beyond the conventional Western understanding of interpersonal connections. Originating from pre-modern Chinese society, *guanxi*, the "relationship with Chinese characteristics" is structured vertically and horizontally and signifies the level of intimacy in asymmetric relationships. The particular nature of their relationship defines their dedicating obligations and privileges, and the actions and tendencies of individuals are also influenced by societal expectations and the dynamics of the particularity of the relationships.

Against this background, social justice within these relationships hinges on the degree to which decisions align with their nature. *Guanxi* is thus better to be understood as a connection that determines mutual role conceptions and nullifies unilateral action based on self-interest. Consequently, the Chinese are particularly concerned about whether they have received the degree of respect that would correspond to their position in the relationship.

Relationship management in Western societies also focuses on mutually adjusted will and behaviour but follows a transactional logic in microeconomics. In contrast, the Chinese approach emphasises cultivating and optimizing relationships through reciprocal respect and appreciation. Chinese culture views relationships as ongoing and evolving processes, reflecting changing circumstances. This approach is strategic rather than altruistic. Chinese individuals operate under the assumption that future interactions will involve the same individuals as in the past and present, the hope to secure better future gains or mitigate future losses motivating them to maintain positive relationships, deepen trust, and consider others integral to their long-term self-interest.

Like many cultural adaptations, Chinese society has outlived the circumstances of its origin. Despite the contemporary influence of Western values, *guanxi* remains a vital, informal social institution that upholds the fabric of Chinese society. The contemporary practitioners of *guanxi* remain as willing as ever to realize their personal aspiration through cultivating their social network in a sophisticated and strategic manner.

Guanxi's emphasis on harmonizing and optimizing relationships holds political and international significance. Historically, evidence indicates that Chinese rulers viewed interstate relations as an extension of interpersonal connections. The Chinese empire aimed at establishing tributary relationships with others and preserving harmony within this system, with each side assuming position-related privileges and responsibilities. In these relationships, the Chinese empire sought to maintain its cultural and symbolic superior position rather than specific material gains. In

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return, tributary countries received recognition of their legitimacy, assurances of non-interference in domestic affairs, and tangible economic benefits.

The People's Republic of China's approach to its relationships with other nations exhibits echoes of its pre-modern diplomatic practices, and it is evident in its diplomatic language. How China refers to other states offers valuable insights into its perception of the nature of these relationships. Notably, China once referred to the Soviet Union as the "Elder Brother". This reference signifies, on one hand, the asymmetric nature of their relations, with the Soviet Union seen as being materially superior to China, placing the early PRC in a position of dependence relative to Moscow. On the other hand, it underscores the intimacy of their relationship rooted in ideological similarities.

During the reform and opening-up era, China positioned itself as a developing country and consistently adopted a humble and modest stance in its dealings with the international society. Its commitment to pragmatically aligning with the rule-based international order illustrates its dedication to nurturing positive relationships within the Western world to further its development goals.

Meanwhile, words suggesting intimate relationships still frequently appear in China's official diplomatic discourse. As of now, a total of seven different expressions for "good relationships" have appeared in China's diplomatic language, include "good brothers", "good relatives", "good friends", "good partners", "good neighbors", "good comrades", and "good comrades-in-arms". Since the early 1990s, these expressions have been integrated into China's partnership diplomacy. Establishing a partnership with China signifies a positive relationship, with the various types of partnerships indicating the depth of intimacy. From 1994 to 2016, a minimum of 134 countries joined China's diplomatic category of "good relations," comprising 77% of China's 176 diplomatic ties. For instance, in the case of China's all-weather strategic partnership with Pakistan, China's characterization of Pakistan has consistently remained at "Four Good" which stresses Pakistan is a "good neighbor, good friend, good partner, and good brother" to China.

More recently, as China has evolved into a major economic resource allocator and a provider of global public goods, it has become more confident in asserting its great power status. Guided by President Xi Jinping's doctrines of "great power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics" and "cultural confidence", China has exhibited greater ambition in promoting its vision of how international relations should function. This assertiveness is notably exemplified by initiatives such as "China-US type of great power relations" and "new type of international relations."

These initiatives underscore a relationship-centric approach to managing international interactions, emphasizing the value of appreciating and respecting each other's circumstances. This approach stands in contrast to the traditional state-centric management that is often practiced by Western governments, which relies on practicing the balance of power or homogenizing the political systems of others.

Relationship-centrism determines China's diplomatic preference for bilateralism instead of multilateralism as the spirit of reciprocity and mutuality can be more easily practiced in bilateral situations. In this sense, this normative practice has, in some way, caused an implicit tension with Western norms of transparency, fairness, and equality in diplomacy. In practice, China has employed various methods to institutionalize guanxi as a behavioural protocol for states when interacting with it. This includes measures to punish countries, as seen in the cases of Australia and Canada, for perceived disrespect to China's status. These punitive actions aim to pressure these states into reaffirming China's status and restoring stable relationships. China's willingness to use coercive means in diplomatic disputes has increased due to its citizens' growing conviction in their nation's great power status, leading them to urge their government to take a tougher stance against perceived disrespect. Simultaneously, concerns about relational security prompt China to accept symbolic compromises and seek ways to de-escalate intense relationships for both sides.

In the context of Australia-China relations, the successful thawing of tensions between these two nations can be attributed to Canberra's diplomatic finesse, complemented by a strategic blend of caution and policy concessions. Prime Minister Albanese's administration employed high-level diplomacy as a means of engagement with Chinese officials, effectively managing the conflict. The strategic policy concessions, which included the decision not to

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impose sanctions on Chinese officials and entities and the discontinuation of WTO legal proceedings against China, sent a clear signal to Beijing. These actions demonstrated Canberra's willingness to restore reciprocal relations with Beijing, although they are more symbolic and procedural rather than substantive. In response, Beijing reciprocated by lifting the 80.5% anti-dumping and countervailing duties on Australian barley. Foreign Minister Wang Yi also reassured Australia by promising to maintain policy continuity and stability towards Australia and continue to uphold the important positioning of the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Australia.

In his recent remarks regarding Canada-China relations, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said that there is no room for rapprochement with China due to China's increased difficulty in engaging with other nations. Perhaps Trudeau is correct; engaging with China has undeniably become more complex. However, this complexity also stems from Canada's need to genuinely adapt and contemplate how to coexist with a more influential China.

China's cultural emphasis on guanxi and its competitive dynamic with the United States motivate its commitment to maintaining stable relations with various countries. However, its great power status limits its flexibility and pragmatism in foreign policies when dealing with Western nations compared to the past. Consequently, resolving bilateral conflicts and restoring reciprocity increasingly relies on the other side to initiate compromise. Canada's economy is less intertwined with China compared to Australia, affording Ottawa more flexibility in choosing its approach—whether to assert its own identity or adopt a role expected by China. However, what Western states cannot dictate is the evolving and increasingly multicultural nature of the international order, and China as a non-Western great power is bringing its own cultural values and practices into the rules of the game.

About the author:

Ye Xue is a Postdoc research fellow at The China Institute, University of Alberta, and a non-resident fellow at China Studies Centre, University of Sydney. His research focuses on non-Western IR theory, international order, Chinese foreign policy and Chinese international students' overseas political participation. His academic works have been published in *The Pacific Review*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, *Pacific Focus* and *Asia Policy*.