Received: 15 April 2024 | Revised: 5 September 2024 | Accepted: 6 September 2024

DOI: 10.1111/1468-4446.13151

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

WILEY

# A conceptual refinement of ritual: The case of *guanxi*

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## Abstract

Informal affective bonding through which social resources are deployed, known as *guanxi*, is significant in social, political, and economic relationships in present-day China. *Guanxi* is sociologically understood as a form of social network and also as a type of social exchange. In addition, *guanxi* is regarded as a kind of or derived from ritual practices. Ritual aspects of *guanxi* are critically examined. The concept of ritual is distinguished from Confucian *li*, with which *guanxi* is often associated. Rituals held to be supportive of *guanxi* are examined, three distinct conceptualisations of ritual are identified, and ritual is differentiated from social practice, ceremony, and rite. Finally, emotions in *guanxi* ritual are briefly discussed, comparing Collins' approach with an account from the early Chinese theorist Xunzi.

**KEYWORDS**
'as if', ceremony, Confucian *li*, *guanxi*, rite, ritual, social practice

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

*Guanxi* is an affectively-based relationship common in China and Chinese cultural areas through which participants form dyadic social connections that provide benefits of various kinds. The cultivation of *guanxi* requires reciprocal exchange of favours or gifts, through which arise obligations to support a *guanxi* partner. The norms of *guanxi* are widely understood to be inculcated in and managed through ritual enactment. The case of *guanxi* is drawn upon here to develop a sociologically meaningful conceptualisation of ritual in a field where the term is used loosely and ambiguously.

Discussion begins with an account of *guanxi* and how it has been conceived as ritual engagement. Next, the Confucian notion of *li* is distinguished from the concept of ritual. In the third section ritual aspects of *guanxi* are treated, provoking distinction between three conceptualisations of ritual. The following section differentiates ritual, social practice, ceremony, and rite. Finally, the relevance of emotion to ritual is considered through comparison of Collins (2004) account of interaction ritual chains and an implicit theory of ritual in an exposition of funeral practices provided by the classical Chinese theorist Xunzi.

In addition to clarification of what are the ritual elements of *guanxi*, the paper contributes a sociological basis for distinguishing ritual from social practice, ceremony, and rite. A further contribution is conceptualisation of ritual as a preformative enactment through which imaginative projection resolves situational ambiguity. While refinement of the notion of ritual occurs in examination of *guanxi*, the findings reported here have general relevance and application.

## 2 | CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF *GUANXI*

*Guanxi* is subject to different conceptualisations, each highlighting a particular aspect of *guanxi*. *Guanxi* is widely regarded not only as a type of social network but also a form of social exchange, and, in addition, a ritual practice. Each of these is briefly outlined. The purpose of treating the ritual aspects of *guanxi* is not only to further indicate the nature of *guanxi* but also to contribute clarity to the concept of ritual, and to distinguish ritual from related phenomena, including social practice, ceremony, and rite.

The term *guanxi* is loosely translated as 'social connection', personalised connections involving emotional feelings of participants regarding their relationship. As *guanxi* partners support each other, *guanxi* has instrumental properties. Its instrumentality, though, is not directly utilitarian because *guanxi* initially provides access to social goods, including social esteem or face, in Chinese, *mianzi*, earned by demonstrating resourcefulness and reliability in achieving successful *guanxi*. *Guanxi* also delivers access to the associates of a *guanxi* partner. A successful *guanxi* participant will thus be attractive to others as a prospective *guanxi* partner because the social goods provided by *guanxi* can be mobilised to secure material benefits including a job, say, a business agreement, or a loan; in general, providing opportunities to acquire benefits through privileged access to facilitating others. A *guanxi* connection between two people therefore lends itself to a fanning out of connections, a network of inter-connections. Indeed, sociological research on *guanxi* has predominantly focussed on its social network attributes (Bian, 2019; see also Barbalet, 2015).

The means through which *guanxi* is initiated and maintained include social exchanges which support the development of positively personalised relationships undergirding *guanxi*. As indicated in social exchange theory (Blau, 2017, pp. 28–9, 89–106), acceptance of a gift obliges the recipient to reciprocate. While an offer of a gift may be ignored or rejected (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 98–106; Komter, 2007, pp. 99–100) such a prospect is largely avoided in *guanxi*, with obligatory exchanges consolidated through participants' engagement in related practices, including disclosure of personal confidences in building affective ties, *ganqing*, between *guanxi* partners (Osburg, 2013, pp. 45–65) as well as mutual personal monitoring and surveillance of *guanxi* partners, providing each with privileged information of the other's preferences, needs, and capacities, including the appropriateness of particular favours or

gifts as well as how and when to provide them (Luo & Yeh, 2012, p. 56; Wank, 2009, pp. 83–4). Additionally, *guanxi* obligations are secured through participants' engagement in public acknowledgement, including banquets, about which more will be said below. Conceptualisation of *guanxi* as social exchange has also generated a significant research literature (Barbalet, 2018; Hwang, 1987).

An important element of the social exchange attribute of *guanxi* is not only personalised obligatory bonding through emotional *ganqing* but also the normative regulation of exchange relations through *renqing*, often translated as 'human feeling'. To be 'human' in Chinese society, to have or give *renqing*, is to know how to behave appropriately, to practice the rules of decorum, to be empathetic in relating to others, giving them their due and showing respect (Barbalet, 2018, pp. 940–1; Hwang, 1987, pp. 953–954; Yang, 1994, pp. 67–72). The concept of *renqing* not only invokes the notion of customary and norm-governed behaviour but also ritual (Fei, 1992, pp. 126–7, 138–40; Yang, 1957, pp. 291-2). Indeed, while not all researchers would agree that '*guanxi* [is] universally characterised as a core social ritual' (Herrmann-Pillath et al., 2021, p. 109), there is some acknowledgement among them that *guanxi* is 'supported by certain types of ritualised interactions' (Herrmann-Pillath et al., 2021, pp. 3–4).

Not only is *guanxi* practice itself held by some authors to be ritualised but it is also claimed that *guanxi* is supported by associated ritual practices through which the relations between *guanxi* partners are unified. For instance, it is noted that *guanxi* maintenance is possibly achieved through the presentation of gifts at weddings or funerals and during festivals, events described as rituals by the reporting authors (Kipnis, 1997, pp. 25, 86; Li & Tian, 2020, p. 185; Lo & Otis, 2003, pp. 136, 145), to be discussed later. Similarly, the use of kinship-names by non-kin *guanxi* partners is held to strengthen relations between them; such naming practices lead to what has been called 'ritualized kin' supportive of *guanxi* formation and serving *guanxi* maintenance (Bian, 2019, pp. 8–9). Certainly, the use in China of kin terms between non-kin persons is designed to generate a sense of personal closeness. Such 'fictive kinship', however, does not provide access to the resources available to family members (Fei, 1939, p. 91; Lin, 2001, p. 155). Critical reflection on the notion of 'ritualized kin' points in the direction of discussion below, as indicated in the following observations.

The bonds of kinship are compelling whereas friendship is voluntary and therefore vulnerable to the demands of kin. In China persons who place particular significance on their friendship may protect and reinforce it by embarking on ritual enactments of sworn brotherhood, *jiebai xiongdi* (Santos, 2008, p. 543; see also Jordan, 1985, pp. 233, 236–37). Indeed, sworn brotherhood is a means of protecting close friendship from challenges by kin, so that sworn brothers may devote resources between themselves against the prior claims of kin:

> … the kinship idiom in which [financial] assistance is phrased overcomes the argument that a person is helping his friend at the expense of his natural family, since his sworn brother may arguably constitute part of his family (Jordan, 1985: 238).

Sworn brotherhood, then, draws on kinship idiom as a defence against obligatory familial demands. It indicates strengthened friendship, even though its ritualised form suggests adoption of kinship protocols, which it effectively subverts. Here, then, ritual does not simply promote social order, often regarded as a consequence of ritual, but rather resolves an inherently ambiguous situation in favour of an alternate possible reality supportive of the ritual participants. In this case family order is effectively disrupted by friendship. It is of interest that Jacobs (1979: 249) regards sworn brotherhood as entirely secondary in consideration of *guanxi* as it merely represents an existing *guanxi* 'which the parties wish to make closer'.

Underlying the claims of *guanxi* ritual, both directly in *guanxi* practice itself and indirectly through the supporting engagements mentioned above, is the idea that *guanxi* and related actions operate through an ethical or moral mechanism, and there is an accompanying understanding that *guanxi* ethics derive from Confucian *li*, a foundational element of historical Chinese culture (Yang, 1994, p. 70), an idea frequently stated but seldom supported. The supposed Confucian basis of *guanxi* is critically assessed elsewhere (see Barbalet, 2021 chaps 2 and 3). What must be treated here, though, is the fact that in the relevant literature *li* is widely translated as 'ritual', often

used to justify the idea that *guanxi* is meaningfully Confucian. Before considering the ritual nature of *guanxi* more closely it is necessary to distinguish the concept of ritual from Confucian *li*, one referring to a type of social enactment or performance whereas the other relates to a form of societal governance.

## 3 | SEPARATING RITUAL FROM CONFUCIAN *LI*

In recent commentary there is acknowledgement of the distinction indicated here between '*li*' and 'ritual'. Ruan (2017: 54), for instance, says that *li* is the outer expression of spiritual development or *ren*, and therefore the rule of proper moral conduct, and that while *li* requires certain ritual performances 'ritual practices without *ren* are just rituals, not Confucian *li*'. But confusingly Ruan (2017: 55) continues to use the term *li* when referring to *guanxi* ritual with the qualifying 'instrumental *li*', even though terms other than *li* also indicate 'ritual', including *fashi* and *yishi*. Even more confusingly Herrmann-Pillath et al. (2021: 10) employ the term 'ritual' in a 'deliberately ambiguous way', both as a 'general theoretical term in the social sciences' and also a term indicating the 'Chinese concept of ritual "*li*"'. Their purpose is to 'introduce a "view from China" on the generic theoretical concept' (Herrmann-Pillath et al., 2021, p. 10). The difficulty, though, is that *li* does not refer only to ritual and that rather than introducing a 'view from China' in explicating ritual these authors attempt to theorise *guanxi* and ritual practices in present-day China through the frame of Collins (2004) interaction ritual chains while ignoring an arguably more appropriate Chinese account of ritual, as shown below.

In dynastic China from the time of Confucius *li* was a complex means of governance rather than a particular discrete social enactment, such as ritual. This is alluded to in the distinction drawn by Fei (1992: 94–100) between 'rule of ritual' and 'rule of law'. Commentators, though, fail to appreciate the significance of 'rule' in this context and assume a linguistic generality for 'ritual'. Fei (1992: 100) holds that a 'rule of ritual' is confined to traditional China and its rural social structure. Herrmann-Pillath et al. (2021: 4), on the other hand, take issue with Fei's formulation on the grounds that there is a 'renaissance of ritual in modern Chinese society'. The exclusivity of a 'rule of ritual' and a 'rule of law' is original to the Confucian notion of *li* because these terms refer to forms of governance, so that the revival of family rituals in modern China cannot be evidence of a revival or continuation of Confucian *li*, as 'rule of ritual'.

In his original text Fei (2020, p. 95) refers not to 'A Rule of Ritual', as his translators have it, but to *Li zhi zhixu*, '*Li* Governance System'. While Fei's (1992) translators render *li* as 'ritual' throughout the text, a practice parallelled by those commentators on *guanxi* concerned with its ritual aspects, it is important to appreciate that the notion of *li* encompasses a much broader canvas than ritual, however the latter term is understood. The *li* governance system maintained social order through hierarchical patterns of status roles sustained by deference and customary ethical principles of respect and obligatory regard. Indeed, the distinction Fei proposes is borrowed from Confucius (*Analects* 2.3):

> If the people be led by laws, and uniformity sought to be given them by punishments, they will try to avoid the punishment, but have no sense of shame. If they are led by virtue, and uniformity sought to be given them by the rules of propriety, they will have the sense of shame and moreover will become good. (Legge, 1971: 146).

In the original text Legge's 'rules of propriety' is *qizhiyili*, which translates as 'by means of *li*'. While *li* is here rendered by Legge as 'propriety' it is also often translated as 'rites' and, as indicated above, as 'ritual'. It cannot, however, be reduced to any one of these because rule of *li* entails all of them and more.

The *li* governance system was not conducted by a ruler exercising external legal power over a subject population, but by each person in a population avoiding loss of face or shame by self-directed endeavours to develop and maintain propriety or conformity with established conventions of decorum and morality. This was a rigorous system

of control regulated by self- or familial-management, which operated without costs of administration to central authorities and without the direct supervision of officials. Indeed, the distinction Confucius, and Fei, draw between *li* and law (*fa*) is signal. Law punishes transgression after it has occurred whereas *li* prevents transgression prior to its possible incidence. *Li*, then, is 'an achieved propriety in one's roles and relations' and 'a resolutely personal performance revealing one's worth to both oneself and one's community' (Ames, 2011, pp. 109, 174). As an instrument of state *li* was a unified whole consisting of many parts, including configurations of social roles, musical performances, ceremonies, cultural forms, ethical precepts, moral conduct, and rituals,—but without being reducible to any one of them (see Hall & Ames, 1998, pp. 269–75). Rituals were performed in support of *li* but so were many other types of social engagement.

It is of interest that while *li* is routinely translated as 'ritual', including in sociological accounts of *guanxi*, in the specialist discussion of the meaning and nature of Confucian *li* reference to ritual may be avoided without loss of meaning; indeed, with increased clarity. In these texts Confucian *li* has been described as 'encompass[ing] all established ethical, social, and political norms of human behaviour, including both formal rules and less serious patterns of everyday behaviour' (Li, 2007, p. 318). Similarly, 'the core feature of [Confucian] "*li*" is its prescription of normative codes of behaviour across a range of social contexts, including ceremonial, political, moral, and other aspects of daily life' (Zhang, 2023, p. 1004). In more summary fashion, Confucian *li* comprises the 'norms of appropriate behaviour' (Lai, 2006, p. 80). In Chinese historical semantics *li* originally, during the pre-Confucian Zhou dynasty, indicated religious ceremonies. Confucius' conceptualisation of *li*, though, changed the term's meaning from 'worship rituals' to 'governance norms' (Han, 2020). Han (2020: 76) appropriately notes that while Confucius' concern with propriety and humaneness is frequently understood to refer to 'individual moral character' its political function, related to societal rule, is the more exact reference.

In modern Chinese the character *li* is in the term for ritual, *liyi*, and in related terms including ceremony, *dianli*, and gift, *liwu*, usages taken by various writers to justify a continuity with Confucian *li*, as noted above. It can be added, though, that each of these things can be rendered with characters other than *li*, as in *fashi* for ritual, *yishi* for ceremony, and *kuizeng* for gift. As a system of governance *li* does not require the type of differentiation between ritual, ceremony, rite, and social custom or practice that a sociological account can provide, as outlined below. Having clarified some historical and linguistic aspects of *li* and ritual, discussion of ritual aspects of *guanxi* can be continued.

## 4 | *GUANXI* AND RITUAL

Considering the ritual aspects of *guanxi* requires a clear appreciation of what the term 'ritual' refers to, including what a ritual performance achieves for its practitioners. Not only is much of the discussion of ritual aspects of *guanxi* based on a misunderstanding of the relevance of *li* to ritual, as shown above, the nature of ritual is underspecified in practically all accounts of *guanxi* which claim that it has ritual elements. Also, the specialist literature on ritual is diverse with disagreement concerning the nature of ritual as a social phenomenon, so that the technical meaning of the term is unresolved, ambiguous, or contested. The approach adopted here evaluates claims regarding ritual aspects of *guanxi* as a means to generate a preliminary sociological understanding of ritual and how it can be distinguished from similar or related phenomena, to be justified below. First, though, we return to discussion of *guanxi* to identify elements of it relevant for consideration of ritual.

*Guanxi* requires recognition of common identity between prospective *guanxi* participants on which the connection between them is affectively based. Such *guanxi* bases are diverse (Chen et al., 2013, pp. 171–2; Jacobs, 1979, pp. 243–56), including a common 'native place' or locality of origin shared by prospective *guanxi* partners, being a 'class-mate' either by contemporaneous enrolment in a school or college or by being alumni of the same institution, or by each being known to a common third-party, either directly or indirectly (Bian, 1994, pp. 974–5). Such *guanxi* formational situations have been described as 'ritual contexts' on the grounds that the

emotional loading of such connections is 'ritualized in the shape of public recognition as the moral obligation to mutual exchange of reciprocal benefits' (Herrmann-Pillath et al., 2021, pp. 23–4). The idea that public recognition underlies the efficacy of a *guanxi* base, and therefore an expectation on the part of interactants and observers alike of a felt common identity and associated potential for affective connection, is accepted here. Such engagements, though, are best regarded as social practices rather than rituals. More will be said soon about this distinction.

Once a common *guanxi* base is accepted and a connection is established between two persons who share a native place or the friendship of an influential other, then *guanxi* practices such as gift or favour exchange can occur. Thus, the affective connection precipitated by a common *guanxi* base may be mobilised to achieve instrumental purposes. In these circumstances public visibility and recognition of the shared *guanxi* may be provided by holding banquets, where toasting with alcoholic drinks occurs together with various forms of entertainment, with much giving of face. Each of these separate activities has been characterised as a ritual or as having a ritual dimension.

Gift and favour exchange, a characteristic feature of *guanxi*, is widely seen as a ritual practice. Komter (2005, pp. 121–2) notes that 'the ritual and symbolic aspects of gift giving' derive from the fact that gifts 'are instruments to convey symbolic messages of the most varied kind' and, in addition, 'the interaction processes involved in gift exchange' generate social solidarity through the 'emotional energy' which results from particularistic giving and receiving, and through 'respecting' the symbolic representations involved. The symbolic significance of a *guanxi* gift has been widely noted (Yang, 1994, pp. 191–6, 236–7). Both the selection of a gift and its presentation or packaging are regarded as ritualised practices, with some gifts having higher symbolic value than others (Herrmann-Pillath et al., 2021, pp. 24–5) and the requirement that especially monetary gifts be concealed in a red envelope, *hongbao* (Ruan, 2017, pp. 125–6). Banquets and dinners are also regarded as ritual events (Herrmann-Pillath et al., 2021, p. 110; Ruan, 2017, pp. 76, 83, 123, 125; Yang, 1994, pp. 137–9, 236–7), and so is toasting and social drinking, which 'carries the function of both conspicuous consumption and hierarchy signifier and is therefore the perfect ritual for cementing *guanxi*' (Tang, 2020, p. 197).

Komter's statement above reveals two archetypical characterisations of ritual, as drawing on or creating symbolic meaning and as generating social solidarity in the formation or maintenance of social order. Both notions of ritual inhere in the characterisation of *guanxi* gift exchange, banqueting, and toasting as rituals, mentioned above. The idea of ritual as socially generating or reproducing symbolic meaning, called here $\text{Ritual}^{\text{concept}-\text{A}}$, or social solidarity and social order, $\text{Ritual}^{\text{concept}-\text{B}}$, while standard in much discussion of ritual have problematic features. First, 'ritual' in both of these senses is inherently ambiguous as they are routinely interchanged with 'ceremony' or 'rite' when the distinction between what these concepts refer to can—and should—be clarified. Second, the term 'social practice' almost always covers the ground indicated by each of these characterisations of ritual. These claims will be elaborated soon. Finally, a characterisation of ritual in terms of an outcome of symbolic representation risks finding ritual in 'all activities' (Lukes, 1975, p. 291). Similarly, the contribution of ritual to social order is always contingent; indeed, there are cases in which ritual 'exacerbates social conflict and works against … social integration' (Lukes, 1975, p. 300). In pointing to what ritual provides Lukes (1975, p. 291) prudently says that it 'draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought and feeling which they hold to be of special significance'. The argument here is that what is of ritual 'significance', as in the case of sworn brotherhood mentioned earlier, includes resolution of situational ambiguity marked by unaligned and contested interests. This suggests a need to identify a third sense of ritual, $\text{Ritual}^{\text{concept}-\text{C}}$, by considering an aspect of ritual in *guanxi* not yet mentioned.

An elemental *guanxi* ritual to be examined here is the ritual refusal of a gift within the core *guanxi* practice of gift exchange. The ritual refusal to acknowledge a *guanxi* gift demonstrates the importance of the relationship between *guanxi* partners rather than the material benefit a gift-object provides to one participant in the relationship. A feature of gift-giving between *guanxi* participants, then, is paradoxically a ritual practice of disregarding the gift, of leaving it in an obscure location and ignoring it after ensuring that it is observed, and tussling between the gift provider and recipient in gestures of refusal on the part of the recipient with the provider urging the gift on the intended recipient (Fei, 1992, pp. 124–5; Ruan, 2017, pp. 83, 122–4; Yang, 1994, p. 137). This ritual disregard of the gift is simultaneously a ritual display of high regard for the relationship. Only after the ritual refusal of the gift

has taken place, which asserts the importance of the relationship over the significance of the gift, can the gift be accepted.

This aspect of *guanxi* behaviour, the ritual refusal of a *guanxi* gift, which is here taken to be an irreducible ritual element of *guanxi*, is neither primarily symbolic ($\text{Ritual}^{\text{concept}-A}$)—an actual gift is refused and an actual relationship prioritised over the gift—nor directed to maintaining social order ($\text{Ritual}^{\text{concept}-B}$). The particularistic nature of *guanxi* means that it serves the interest of participants, indifferent to wider consequences. The ritual mentioned here consolidates *guanxi* between, say, property developers and local officials in appropriating farmland, leading to village protests and conflict with authorities. While widely acknowledged in the literature the ritual refusal of a gift is not characterised there in the terms indicated above but rather as 'etiquette' (Yang, 1994, p. 137), 'politeness' (Ruan, 2017, p. 83) or 'kindness' (Ruan, 2021, p. 51). Certainly, these may contribute to social order, but not necessarily, as when inappropriate politeness disrupts social order, as revealed by Garfinkel's (1984) breaching experiments. But more to the point, these terms do not capture the ambivalence of the situation in question.

This ritual aspect of *guanxi* is noticed in general terms by Goffman (1972: 83) as 'an interchange that can be found in many cultures' in which an 'individual defers to guests to show how welcome … and how highly he regards them; they in turn decline the offering at least once, showing through their demeanour that they are not presumptuous, immodest, or over eager to receive favour'. For Goffman, this interaction points to individual displays of deference or demeanour, displays explicable as social practices. The ritual quality of denying the gift in *guanxi*, on the other hand, is not principally to display deference or demeanour nor etiquette, politeness, or kindness. Rather it is to deny the significance of the gift for the sake of asserting the importance of the (*guanxi*) relationship, asserting paradoxically that a *guanxi* gift is to enrich the relationship rather than the recipient.

Through this ritual performance the obligation of reciprocity that comes with acceptance of a gift becomes an obligation to exchange respect or face, achieved through a ritual refusal of a gift. This ritual does not principally define or enforce social norms, as generally claimed of ritual. Rather, it re-interprets the situation participants find themselves in, providing a scenario of alternate possible realities that the ritual participants might enter, through a strategy of 'as if' projection, proposed by the classical Chinese philosopher Xunzi, to be discussed later. In the ritual refusal of a *guanxi* gift it is *as if* the gift is being avoided so that the relationship can be prioritised. As noted, this ritual enforces the primacy of the relationship over the gift. A *guanxi* gift in fact confirms the relationship, but the ritual refusal of the gift is an 'as if' construction in which the precedence of the relationship is asserted. $\text{Ritual}^{\text{concept}-C}$, then, entails an imaginatively projected construction, what Seligman et al. (2008, pp. 21–8) and Turner (1988, pp. 25–7) respectively refer to as a 'subjunctive' space or mood. After the performance of the ritual refusal of the gift, the gift is invariably accepted.

## 5 | RITUAL AND ITS OTHERS

It is suggested above that some of the supposed ritual aspects of *guanxi* are better described as social practices. The notion of 'practice' has attracted sociological interest through its theorisation in terms of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 52–65; 1990: 72–95). Indeed, a pertinent aspect of practice for situating *guanxi* and its supposed ritual attributes, and in general for understanding the content of $\text{Ritual}^{\text{concept}-A}$ and $\text{Ritual}^{\text{concept}-B}$, is that persons engaged in social practice must learn what to expect of others who occupy a shared social context or space. Central to social practice, then, is the social practitioner's expectation regarding others' behaviour. These expectations, noted by Bourdieu, are supported by socially current symbols and cognitive orders. A general idea of social practice is captured in the moral rather than the ritual aspect of *guanxi*, summarised as *renqing*, noted above. Indeed, a primary aspect of moral conduct relates to appropriate expectations regarding one's own behaviour as well as that of others.

Social expectations arise not simply from direct experience of interacting with others, but also from exposure to social norms and mores contemporaneous in the groups to which a person belongs. These latter include

educational experience in the broadest sense, summarised as social custom including normative notions of appropriate behaviour, undertaken with a sense that others would accept such behaviour as appropriate. Social practice, then, is premised on behaviour expected by and of others, 'patterns of learnt behaviour that enables us … to coordinate as members of a group … due to mutual responsiveness to each other's behaviour … as interpreted through shared meanings/cultural schemas' (Haslanger, 2018, p. 245). The terms *fengsu*, social custom, and *fencun*, appropriate behaviour or behaviour within the norms, covers this ground. Such terms arguably characterise *guanxi* practices as well as if not better than *li* or ritual, as indicated above. Clearly, 'social practice' is a generic term covering countless types. Ritual may in some contexts be regarded as a type of social practice. Ritual, though, more consistently, has a preformative element that goes beyond mere practice, as shown by Turner (1988, pp. 21–32, 72–98). Social practice, on the other hand, is characterised through actors' dispositions and meanings rather than their enactments.

'Social practice' refers to more general and less formal engagements than two other terms often invoked in discussion of ritual, including *guanxi* ritual, namely 'ceremony' and 'rite'. Ceremonies and rites include much more than the conventions or habits that persons draw on when engaging in social practices. It is also important to distinguish ceremony and rite from ritual even though, or rather because, the terms are frequently used interchangeably (see, for example, Chwe, 2001, pp. 19–30, 91–2; Goffman, 1972, pp. 61–2, 64–5, 77, 86–9, 91; Ruan, 2017, p. 50; Ruan, 2021, p. 43). While ritual may be conceptualised in terms of symbol, solidarity, or imaginatively projected construction, ceremonies are events confirming patterns of power in institutional forms while rites are public acknowledgements of status change through celebration of life-cycle events. Although definitionally distinct from ceremony, rite, and practice, as summarised here, it is important to acknowledge that ritual may support the purpose of a ceremony or rite. The point, though, is that these phenomena are conceptually distinct and animated by different purposes and processes.

Ceremonies have in common acknowledgement and consolidation of power and power differentials between participants. This is obvious in the case of presidential inaugurations and coronations, in which achievement of a ruling capacity by electoral victory or accession to a throne is publicly celebrated, and the roles of authoritative power holders and subjects of that power are made publicly visible. Religious ceremonies include congregational acknowledgement of the power of a divine force, a public demonstration or celebration of such godly power, and, incidentally, of the power of a clergy over a congregation, as representative or interpreter of that superior power. In considering ceremonies it is appropriate to distinguish between *sheng dian*, a grand ceremony, and *yishi*, a simpler ceremony, thus conceptually separating a presidential inauguration from a *guanxi* banquet, even though both relate to power relations.

A *guanxi* banquet, conventionally identified as *yanxi* or *yingchou*, is a small-scale ceremony in which power is displayed, honoured, and possibly contested. Such banquets are a public acknowledgement of the formation of a successful *guanxi*. Practically every aspect of a *guanxi* banquet relates to considerations of power. The guest list reflects the power of alliance and obligation that determines inclusion and exclusion. The seating arrangement is a highly visible reflection of the power-configuration of host and guests. The more powerful the guest the closer they sit to the host, who occupies the seat furthest from the door through which the food is brought. Dishes are offered first to the most powerful diners as indicated by the seating order. Gender power is also displayed at such banquets, with women typically seated at the lower end or side of the table or, when there is more than one table, at a separate table closer to the door. When eating commences or stops is determined by the host or special guest picking up his chopsticks or putting them down. Toasting similarly follows the pattern of power determining who is toasted (the powerful), who initiates a toast (those acknowledging or placating power) and the options of 'emptying the glass', *ganbei*, with the less powerful obliged to drink more than the more powerful (see Evasdottir, 2004, pp. 121–7).

The power dimension of ceremonies is confirmed by other instances of small ceremonies. Degradation ceremonies deploy power in degrading a subject's status; the relevant power may be institutional, as in the case of criminal conviction or courts martial, or it may take the form of informal collective power, as in the case of the

public shaving of the heads of French 'horizontal collaborators' after World War II (see Virgili, 2000). Garfinkel's (1956) classic treatment of degradation ceremonies focusses on the 'program of communicative tactics' through which 'public denunciation' degrades the status of a person (Garfinkel, 1956, p. 421), thus backgrounding the 'power allocations' involved (Garfinkel, 1956, p. 424). Graduation ceremonies involve a public celebration of the elevation of a cohort of erstwhile students to incorporation in a professional or disciplinary qualification and therefore entry into the authoritative power of a knowledge class, leading members of which preside over the graduation. Some ceremonies, including graduation ceremonies, consolidate not only power shifts but also life cycle change and in that sense have attributes of rites of passage.

Ceremonies, characterised by power and its consolidation, can be distinguished from rites of passage which celebrate sequential life cycle status change. In everyday language rites are lexically understood as formalised practices in general, and the term is used interchangeably with 'ceremony' and 'ritual'. Sociologically, though, van Gennep's *Les rites de passage*, first published in 1909, fixed the concept of rite to 'ceremonies of human passage' including 'birth, childhood, social puberty, betrothal, marriage, pregnancy, fatherhood, initiation into religious societies, and funerals' (Gennep, 2004, p. 3). To these can be added celebrations of graduation from educational institutions, mentioned above, retirement from an employing organisation, and so on. Gennep (2004: 11, 3) differentiates between 'rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation', each of which is characterised by a public acknowledgement and celebration of a person's transition from one social status to another, passing 'from one defined position to another'. The inclination to refer to *guanxi* 'rites' in the relevant literature derives to a large extent from European missionary translations of the Confucian classics, rendering *li* and associated terms as 'rite', in conformity with 19th century usage in discussing religion (see Eber, 1999), predating Gennep's sociological refinement.

## 6 | *GUANXI* AND EMOTION

While much of the discussion of *guanxi* ritual leaves the notion of ritual untheorised, assuming cultural continuity with Confucian *li*, as shown above, some recent publications (Herrmann-Pillath et al., 2021, pp. 18–30, 189–91; Ruan, 2017, pp. 50–1, 162–3) have drawn on an updated theory of interaction ritual (Collins, 2004). Herrmann-Pillath et al. (2021: 189) acknowledge early Chinese 'indigenous theories of ritual' but neither identify nor engage with these theories. The purpose here is to show that Collins' account of interaction ritual chains cannot explain *guanxi*-related ritual practices and especially $\text{Ritual}^{\text{concept-C}}$, and that a proto-sociological indigenous Chinese theory of ritual alluded to above is an effective resource for understanding *guanxi* ritual, and arguably ritual in general. Before considering ritual in Xunzi, Collins' (2004) account of interaction ritual chains is outlined.

Collins' theory of interaction ritual chains borrows Durkheim's idea that ritual is animated by emotional arousal, that rituals 'bring individuals together … and thus induces a state of [emotional] effervescence' (Durkheim, 1995, p. 386). But whereas Durkheim (1995: 387) regards ritual space as radically distinct from the everyday space of ordinary interaction, their 'ordinary occupations and preoccupations', and focusses instead on 'how man must conduct himself with sacred things' (Durkheim, 1995, p. 38), Collins follows Goffman (1972) in finding the locus of ritual in informal and secular social interaction. Collins thus combines Durkheim and Goffman in his own statement of interaction ritual chains. These are formed in spaces of everyday interaction through which situations of social copresence arise and in doing so generate what Collins calls emotional entrainment, generative of group solidarity.

Collins distinguishes between what he variously calls 'short-term', 'transient', 'transitory', 'dramatic', and 'disruptive emotions' (Collins, 2004, pp. 118, 125, 139), on the one hand, and 'long-term' emotions (Collins, 2004, pp. 118, 121) on the other. Short-term emotions include anger, fear, happiness, and so on, while long-term emotions are generalised feelings or 'emotional energy' (Collins, 2004, pp. 129–31). In situations of interaction participants come to share the same short-term emotional feeling through co-present contagion, a situation that *is* the

interaction ritual. It is not relevant in this account whether the shared feeling is anger, friendliness, fear, or sorrow, or any other emotion, what is important is that participants together experience a common transient emotion (Collins, 2004, pp. 107–8). This is because the necessary commonality of the emotion entrained in the experience of co-present interaction produces a shared emotional energy constitutive of a group feeling: the 'outcome of a successful build-up of emotional coordination within an interaction ritual is to produce feelings of solidarity', feelings of emotional energy, 'confidence and enthusiasm for social interaction' (Collins, 2004, p. 108).

In testing the validity of Collins' account of interaction rituals, as well as illustrating Xunzi's theory of ritual, it is appropriate to return to the ritual denial of a gift characteristic of *guanxi* practice, mentioned earlier. The ritual refusal to acknowledge a *guanxi* gift, it can be recalled, is to demonstrate the importance of the relationship between *guanxi* partners in down-playing the gift provided by one participant to the other. A feature of gift-giving between *guanxi* participants, then, is paradoxically a ritual practice of disregarding the gift, with recipient and provider entangled in gestures respectively of refusal and urging. The *guanxi* gift is a mechanism in the consolidation of a *guanxi* relationship with the accompanying generation of obligatory reciprocal responsibilities of support between relational participants. The ritual denial of the gift which occurs before the gift's acceptance is an affirmation of the relationship over the material value of an object, the gift. The provision of a gift is to enrich the relationship rather than the recipient, an understanding achieved by the ritual refusal of the gift.

The important thing to notice in this *guanxi* ritual is that transient emotions such as generosity and gratitude are not incidental to the ritual and its outcome, as Collins claims they should be, but rather they contribute to defining the ritual. Additionally, these emotions do not necessarily merge into a single common emotion, as 'emotional energy', but serve to distinguish the different roles of the ritual participants, giver and receiver. The ritual performance is not to produce solidarity—that solidarity already exists between the *guanxi* participants and is presupposed for the ritual to occur at all; indeed, this pre-existing solidarity between the *guanxi* participants, either in the realisation of *guanxi* bases of common identity in the initiation of a *guanxi* relation or in the practice of an ongoing *guanxi*, is the context in which the ritual occurs. The ritual performance enhances the face of the respective participants in their valuing the relationship they share above other considerations.

While Collins' theory of interaction ritual chains cannot adequately characterise or explain the ritual refusal of a *guanxi* gift Xunzi's account of funeral ritual, which also points to the importance of emotions, captures the purpose of this ritual and explains it sociologically. Xunzi (ca. 310–230 BC) was an educator, administrator, and public intellectual in the Confucian tradition. His philosophically astute writings are broad ranging, marked by a rationalising and reforming orientation. He argues against a contemporary convention, holding instead that ritual cannot intervene in the natural order: 'If you pray for rain and there is rain, what of that? I say there is no special relationship—as when you do not pray for rain and there is rain' (Knoblock & Zhang, 1999, p. 547; Hutton, 2016, p. 179). Consonant with Confucian precepts, Xunzi regards *li* in general (confusingly translated as 'ritual' in these sources) as having a social psychological and institutional rationale permitting appreciation and acknowledgement of principles of social processes and political order (Knoblock & Zhang, 1999, p. 551; Hutton, 2016, p. 181).

The last point above returns us to the distinction between Confucian *li* and ritual, treated earlier. While finding *li* in educational practices and social distinction, for instance (which are without direct relevance for a sociological understanding of ritual), Xunzi incidentally provides a novel account of ritual, as the term is understood here, in his 'Discourse on Ritual Principles' (Knoblock & Zhang, 1999, pp. 601–47; Hutton, 2016, pp. 201–17) in which he explains how funeral rituals guide, shape, and elicit emotions appropriate to participants' circumstances. In his discussion of the sequential management of the body of the deceased by the living, through which the mourner's emotions are acknowledged, constrained, and transformed, Xunzi presents an account of emotions in ritual which contrasts with Collins' interaction ritual model of emotional entrainment. There is sorrow at the loss of a loved one, expressed by caring for the deceased's body. Next, ornamentation of the corpse diverts feelings of disgust and supports feeling of sadness in the bereaved. Finally, sadness is displaced by respect when the buried body is ritually transformed from a corpse into an ancestor. Xunzi thus addresses ways in which the funeral ritual manages some emotions and encourages others. Ritual, in this account, does not produce a generalised emotional energy, as with

Collins, but rather stimulates and constrains particular short-term emotions, and ritually generates contrasting emotions.

Xunzi shows how funeral rituals encourage inner harmony, supportive of social order. They do this through reinterpretation of the participant's orientation and circumstance in so far as ritual performance provides scenarios of possible situations that the ritual participants might enter, through a strategy of *rutong*, translated as 'as if' (Knoblock & Zhang, 1999, pp. 630, 646; Hutton, 2016, pp. 216–17). In discussing funeral rituals Xunzi says 'One serves the dead as if one were serving the living … One gives a shape to that which is without physical substance and magnificently accomplishes proper form' (Hutton, 2016, p. 217; Knoblock & Zhang, 1999, p. 647). In this way an epistemic flexibility supports real-life situations, achieved through ritual practice. This is an important contribution to the theory of ritual, in which—going beyond Xunzi—an 'as if' orientation may generate situations that are distinct from and not necessarily reducible to either symbolic or social order outcomes, as shown earlier. In the ritual refusal of a *guanxi* gift, Xunzi's *rutong* strategy is obvious. It is *as if* the gift is being avoided so that the relationship can be given priority. This ritual enforces the importance of the relationship over the importance of the gift. A *guanxi* gift in fact confirms the relationship, but the ritual refusal of the gift is an 'as if' enforcement of the value of the relationship over the value of the gift.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

The term 'ritual' is deployed widely and ambiguously not only in everyday discourse but also in social science. Clarification can be brought to this notion by identifying what any given ritual might achieve and by distinguishing ritual from related forms, especially ceremony (acknowledgement or enactment of configurations of power) and rite (celebrations of life-cycle status transition). Ritual is routinely aligned with symbolic representation and social solidarity. It has been shown that ritual also entails projection of imaginative resolution of ambiguity. The first two understandings of ritual but not the third arguably overlap with the notion of social practice, understood in terms of social practitioners' or agents' culturally-formed expectations. The third performs an 'as if' resolution of ambivalence.

These conceptual refinements, developed through consideration of the case of *guanxi*, have general application and contribute not only to an understanding of *guanxi* and its associated literature but also to the continuing apprehension of those formal and informal practices in which social enactments or performances are embedded and which, as Goffman (1972: 91) put it, are 'sometimes called empty [but which] are perhaps in fact the fullest things of all'. Another form of generalisation undertaken here is to suggest the sociological relevance of Xunzi's account of funeral ritual, and especially his treatment of emotion in ritual and ritual's *rutong* form, which warrant further attention, as distinct from his broader account of Confucian *li*. It is anomalous that Xunzi is absent from discussions of *guanxi*, a situation redressed in the present contribution.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the Journal's anonymous referees for their helpful comments. An early version of this paper was presented at the ISA World Congress 2023 panel, 'Social Theory in China, Social Theory of China'. I thank the panel organiser, Xiaoying Qi, and participants for their questions and discussion.

Open access publishing facilitated by Australian Catholic University, as part of the Wiley - Australian Catholic University agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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**How to cite this article:** Barbalet, J. (2025). A conceptual refinement of ritual: The case of *guanxi*. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *76*(1), 83–95. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.13151