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THE FUNCTION OF INFORMAL GUANXI CIRCLE IN ANCIENT CHINA POLITICAL STRUCTURE

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Abstract

Guanxi circle play a critical role in ancient China politics. Based on guanxi, two kinds of guanxi groups formed: formal guanxi circle and informal guanxi circle. The former refers to the group centered the emperor; the latter refers to the groups with the powerful and charismatic figures as the core, except for the emperor. In order to consolidate the political power, the emperors in different periods would try to prevent the informal guanxi circle in political structure. Besides, various scriptures also denounce the informal guanxi circle, deeming such circle as harmful. The judgement of informal guanxi circle appeals to research, as there is no previous researcher has address such problems. This study set out to examine whether the informal guanxi circle is harmful to the whole political structure. Results show that the informal guanxi circle, in the antecedent of satisfactory communication, can be extremely meaningful to the whole political structure. This study implies that the fact of informal guanxi circle is on the contrary of the common sense derived from the scriptures and the superficial ancient political activities, such as the emperor's order to prevent the informal guanxi circle. The findings can contribute a better understanding of the ancient informal guanxi circle in ancient political structure in China.

Keywords: Guanxi; Informal Guanxi Circle; Formal Guanxi Circle; Ancient Political Structure; China.

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1. Introduction

As a common interpersonal relationship pattern, guanxi plays a critical role in the development of individual and organizations. For about five thousand years, guanxi influenced the history process in China. Many researchers noticed or focused on the modern and contemporary guanxi in China or the Chinese community. The beginning of guanxi study is from 1989; in the first stage(1989-1998), researchers tried to clarify guanxi concept; in the second stage(1999-2005), studies focused on the consequence of guanxi and the ethic judgement on guanxi; the third stage,

guanxi studies included more normative research(L. Liu & Mei, 2015). In those research papers, the guanxi in ancient China politics has got little addressed. The guanxi in ancient China politics is still in The mist.

Understanding guanxi in ancient China politics is important, as guanxi was prevalent in ancient China politics. Even the ancient government required the officials should be appointed to the places far from their home towns, which is described as “qianli zhiwai zuoguan”(being officials thousands miles away from the home town) in Chinese language. The requirement for the official appointment is to prevent the home town guanxi, which related to his relatives or friends, to interfere with his administration.

This paper gives an account of the guanxi in ancient politics. The overall structure of the study takes the form of three sections. The first section addresses the guanxi concept, and the relationship between guanxi and ancient China politics; the second section clarifies and discusses on the different guanxi in ancient China politics; the third section focuses on the cause of guanxi’s popularity in ancient China politics.

2. Guanxi Concept and the Relationship between Guanxi and Ancient China Politics

Guanxi means the delicate fibers into the personal or every aspects of society(Park & Luo, 2001). Different from the social network in western countries, guanxi operates with the family as the central, the distant relatives, friends, and the acquaintances arranged on the periphery according to the degree of trust and different distances(Pye, 1996). Guanxi permeated in ancient China permeated in ancient China society, as many novels indicated. Among the novels, *Journey to the West* is the typical one exemplifies guanxi. In the novel, the hero Sun Wukong conquers the monsters with the help from the guanxi, and the defeated monsters also avoid the severe punishment with guanxi sometimes. This novel is the symbol of ancient China politics in the aspect of guanxi.

Guanxi roots deeply in Confucian tradition of China. Compared to the other thought schools in ancient China, Confucian schools pay great attention to the interpersonal relationship. The coral values of Confucian thought, ren(humane), yi(justice), li(etiquette), zhi(wisdom) and xin(faith), all focus on the interpersonal relationship(Jing Haifeng, 2012). The focus of Confucian thought is to create the harmony in the hierarchy society(Park & Luo, 2001).

Two concepts is related with guanxi intimately: renqing and mianzi. Renqing is a form of social capital for the interpersonal exchange of favor(Pye, 1996). In China, if one gets the help from others based on humanitarian, s/he will have the obligation to repay the help on other events(Hwang, 1987). Such obligation is a kind of renqing. Just like the Social network in the western, China society also requires that the obligation should be repaid roughly equivalently(Zhang & Zhang, 2006). Renqing. Renqing rooted in the social network in China. With the obligations among the participants, the renqing will get more involved and brings the favors for the participants. However, the renqing can also bring the burden for the participants, as the participants should make the effort to repaid the continuous renqing based on obligations(Zhang & Zhang, 2006). For the different ranks in society, renqing has the different results in the aspect of obligation and repayment. The higher social ranks often give the favor to

or help others without the anticipation to get the repayment from the receivers; in this condition, s/he only wants display the higher social reputation and self-satisfaction(Zhang & Zhang, 2006).

Mianzi can be translated into the English word face. It means a kind of reputation in China society. Mianzi is necessary to cultivate and expand the social network(Park & Luo, 2001). It is a kind of intangible social currency and the personal status(Park & Luo, 2001). "Losing face" will hurt his or her social status and reputation, so s/he will have less possibility to gain success. Mianzi is important for the social individual to gain social status even trust from others(Buckley, Clegg, & Tan, 2006). If one has enough mianzi, s/he will achieve more success in social network.

Guanxi involved in ancient politics. Guo(2001) argued that etiquette, ethics and sentiment principles are more significant in the self-interested aspect of guanxi in China elite politics(Guo, 2001). Some special sorts of guanxi, which are affected ancient China politics deeply. Those special guanxi can be divided as followings: 1) kin guanxi, which is based on the kin; 2) land guanxi, which is based on the land the participants live on; 3) business guanxi, which is based on the same business the participants involve in(Zheng, 2012). The elite political groups made use of the different sorts for guanxi to achieve the political balance. In the beginning of Tang dynasty, the royal family maintained its administration with the help of the kin guanxi, because of the unstable condition in that time. With the political condition's stability, the royal family began to suppress the kin guanxi in alliance with the other remote kin guanxi, in that the old kin guanxi threatened the royal reign. However, when the new kin guanxi posed the threat to the royal family, the royal family began to enroll the intellectuals in from the folk through national examination for official selection(Zheng, 2012). Therefore, the land and business guanxi became more phenomenal in political elite groups.

In the national examination for official selection, the criteria of the examination for different regions were different. Because of the land guanxi, the officials selected from the same region would reciprocate to each other. Therefore, the groups according to the officials from the same region would form. In the same group, the officials gave each favoritism, resulting in the damage of the whole regime. On the other hand, the capacity for national examination is different in the different regions. For example, Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces had more examinees who having high examination points, however, the examinees came from Gansu province had low points in the examinations. So the officials in Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces would have more officials according to the examination points. When the officials resources concentrated in Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces. Therefore, when the officials came from such two provinces became united because of the land guanxi, they would threaten the royal regime. In order to prevent such events, the royal family decided to appoint to the different criteria to the different regions(Shi, 1999).

Another measure to prevent the land guanxi in ancient Institution is to appoint the officials to remote areas(qianli zhiwai zuoguan). If the officials were appointed in the regions of their home town, the officials would gave favoritism to their relatives, friends or their classmates, resulting in the corruption.

Guanxi is necessary for the examinees in their future official careers. After the examinees passed the examinations, they would visit the high officials in order to get appointment of official positions and promoted. There were many examples of such situation, some famous poems and officials adopted such measure for their official career, such as Su Shi, who paid a visit to a high official after the examination with his brother and father, who passed the same examination. They all got the official appointment after the visit. In order to get the business guanxi, the examinees would called themselves as the pupils of the officials they asked for help from. Classmate guanxi and tutor-pupil guanxi were two sorts of significant guanxi in ancient times. When the examinees called themselves as the pupils of the officials, they got the guanxi with the officials. In the novel *The Scholars*, the low rank officials called themselves as the pupils of high rank officials, but in fact, they were not the real pupils of the high rank officials(Wu, 2013).

The groups formed in the process is of great importance for the rule of the empire. Superficially, the groups seem a threat to the royal family, however, it benefits the rule of the empire in some circumstance. The governing of the empire can be described as the leader member exchange system. In the system, the relationship between the emperor and his subordinates is formal, so is the relationship between the high rank officials and the low rank officials. The groups formed among the officials can be described as the informal relationship, or informal guanxi circle. If the different guanxi circles have the connection, which can be described as guanxi bridges, the whole structure formed by the informal and formal relationships can exert effective function(J.-D. Luo, Cheng, & Zhang, 2016). The governing formed by the informal and formal groups can enable the smooth monarchy. However, if the official cannot form the informal guanxi circles, with the only one circle centered the emperor, the governing cannot functioned as smoothly as the structure composed of informal and formal groups with circle bridges. According to Luo et al.(2016), the structure composed by the single guanxi circle with the leader as the center cannot inspire the initiative of the subordinates.

What the emperors feared is that the overnight of the informal groups with the threat to their rule. The informal circle has one leader as the center. When the informal circle became mighty, the informal leader will has significant power with the threat to the emperor.

In the politics of medieval China, the emperors made use of the different informal groups to facilitate their rule. But the emperor would not like to see the overnight of the informal groups, so the emperors would suppress the overmighty groups with other groups when it was necessary. In other words, the emperors made use of the different guanxi circles to reinforce their governing. Although the informal guanxi circle was forbidden in some situations, for example, in Shangshu, the earliest historical literature in China, it is recorded that “all the citizens in the country should not form the guanxi circle....and only the emperor should be the center of the empire”(Anonymity, 2016), the informal circle would benefit the whole governing structure of the emperor.

3. The Different Guanxi Circle in Ancient China Politics

According to the different structures, the guanxi circles in ancient China politics can be divided into three sorts. The first sort is the guanxi circle with the emperor as the only center, just as the aforementioned; the second sort of the guanxi circle is the structure composed of the different

circles without the effective connection, guanxi bridge; the third structure is consisted by the different guanxi circles and with guanxi bridge.

The three sorts of guanxi circle structure have different functions. It is obvious that the third guanxi circle structure is of most effectiveness. However, the second guanxi circle structure is most dangerous to the emperor's reign. In the construction of the organization, the duality and paradox are inevitable built into the process(Johnston, 2005). As the guanxi circles were built up for resource allocation and psychological support, so the different guanxi circles would have the violent competitions. Such violent competitions were numerous in China medieval politics(C. Liu, 2006). Without the efficient communication, the unnecessary competitions would become dangerous to the reign of the emperor and weaken the governing of the whole empire. In the fierce competition, the individual would fight for the short term benefit with rare consideration for the whole public interests, because the individual only struggles for the long term interest when s/he feels safe(Bergeron, 2007). To avoid the competition, the guanxi circle bridges were necessary to maintain the harmony among the different guanxi circles.

One famous example of the fierce competition between the different guanxi circles in ancient China politics is the conflict between Suoetu group and Ming Zhu groups in Kangxi Emperor Period in Qing dynasty. The two groups contested with each other around which prince could come to the throne. The competition was so violent that the national affairs administration and official management were damaged to a large extent(C. Liu, 2006).

If there is no informal guanxi circle as the supplement for the emperor reign, the whole governing structure will be weak. As aforementioned, the goal of guanxi circle is to get the benefit, including the resource allocation and psychological support. So without the informal circle, the individual will have less initiative. A guanxi circle has two rings: one is the circle of core members and another is the protective belt of circle of peripheral members(J.-D. Luo et al., 2016). Those of high degree of centrality in the informal guanxi circle is the informal leader(Wasserman & Faust, 1994). In the guanxi among the circles, the most important matter is trust. In order to get the trust on of the formal leader or informal leader, the members of the circle will display extra-role behavior for the benefit of the whole circle to get the trust of the leader. Every informal circle in the whole governing structure will display the extra-role behavior in order to get the trust of the leader. In the case, the whole structure will have the foremost efficiency.

4. The Cause of Guanxi's Popularity in Ancient China Politics

The popularity of guanxi in China ancient politics roots in China traditional culture. As aforementioned, Confucian thought permeates in every aspect of China society, so the politics in ancient China paid extreme attention to guanxi.

According to China custom, the relationship among people can be divided into three kinds: family tie, familiar tie and acquaintance tie(J.-D. Luo et al., 2016). Family tie is the core connection in all the interpersonal relationship of China people. Different from family tie, familiar tie is flexible and reciprocal(Zhang & Zhang, 2006). The third kind of connection is the acquaintance tie(J. Luo, 2005). The acquaintance tie following on the principle of

equality(Hwang, 1987). The three kinds of interpersonal relationship compose the guanxi around an individual. The family tie is the core guanxi, with the familiar tie as the next ring and the acquaintance tie as the third ring around the individual.

The individual should display more extra-role behavior to facilitate the familiar tie, as the familiar tie is of extreme importance to the actor. As aforementioned, the familiar tie is based on reciprocal rule, however, the reciprocity does not mean that individual wants to get the favoritism immediately according to his or her extra-behavior. The guanxi of the familiar tie is long term and relative stable(Hwang, 1987), so the extra-behavior, which includes the material emotional investment, is important to maintain the familiar tie.

The acquaintance tie is the most peripheral connection in guanxi circle. It is necessary to point out that such kind of connection does not include the strangers(Zhang & Zhang, 2006), for example, the seller and buyer's relationship is not belonged to the acquaintance tie. It can also be called as the utilitarian tie, based on the term of obligation(J.-D. Luo et al., 2016), and have a strong possibility of becoming mixed tie(Fu, Tsui, & Dess, 2006;Chen & Chen, 2004). When the informal circle, pursuing for the benefit, is formed, the acquaintance tie will try to get to the core, in order to get the benefit. In the process, the extra-behavior for the goal is done.

Therefore, it can be concluded the structure of guanxi circle is beneficial for the working efficiency, as all the actors want to get the benefit or more benefit. That justifies the necessary existence of informal guanxi circle in the governing structure in ancient politics. Although many government orders and scriptures tried to prevent the informal guanxi circle, informal guanxi circle still existed continuously in ancient politics. To a large extent, such informal guanxi circle benefited, but not did harm to, the whole political structure in ancient times. But we should notice that such benefit is based on the antecedent of smooth connection. Without smooth connection, the different inform circle is isolated, resulting in the conflicts among the political structure. Within the informal circle, without the smooth connection, the conflicts will also happen. So the connection among the individuals, and the connection between the different circles, guanxi bridge, are extremely critical to the function of the governing structure in ancient politics.

5. Conclusion

Guanxi circle is phenomenal in ancient China politics. Guanxi circle included formal guanxi circle and informal guanxi circle. The formal guanxi circle is around the royal family, or to be accurate, the emperor. On the other hand, informal guanxi circle referred to the circle without the emperor, with some charismatic and powerful figures as the core. In ancient politics and renowned scriptures, the informal guanxi circle was to be prevented, because the informal guanxi circle is deemed as the benefit seeking groups, which violates the benefit of the whole political structure. But in fact, the informal guanxi circle play an important role in the political structure in ancient politics. The actors pay the extra-behavior in their working, so the efficiency of the whole structure will be improved in the process. If a political structure in ancient times was without the informal guanxi circle, the efficiency of the whole political structure would be low. In either inform guanxi circle or formal guanxi circle, guanxi bridge is necessary. Without guanxi bridge, conflicts will happen. The present study testifies the meaningfulness of informal

guanxi circle in ancient China politics. It is proved that informal guanxi circle is far from harm for the political structure. On the contrary, it is meaningful and necessary to the political structure.

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