

From “Children of the Devil” to “Sons of God”: The Reconfiguration of *Guanxi* in a 20th Century Indigenous Chinese Protestant Group

“魔鬼之子”變成“神的兒子”：中國二十世紀的一個本土基督教團體如何改造了“關係”

Abstract

Guanxi is the Chinese system of ideas and practices constituting social relationships and can be considered the foundation of Chinese societies. Protestant Christianity spread over *guanxi* networks from its first introduction to China, changing both *guanxi* and Christianity in the process. This paper proposes a causal model of *guanxi* and then analyzes how it was reconstituted in the indigenous Chinese Protestant group, the Local Churches. It is based on published writings by Local Church founders and members and on the author’s thirty years of experience with the group. This case contributes to academic understanding of *guanxi* and Chinese Christianity, finding that extension of family, supply of resources, and social interaction are the most critical aspects of *guanxi*, but that specific practices change in the Christian context to preserve Biblical commandments. Because *guanxi* networks are bonding rather than bridging, Chinese Christian groups will tend to diverge more than converge.

Key Words

Guanxi, Chinese Protestantism, cultural contextualization, Local Church

Introduction

Guanxi 關係 is the Chinese system of ideas and practices constituting social relationships. It is based on Confucian ideology regarding the rights and responsibilities of people to each other and is formed and maintained by daily rituals and practices that produce *ganqing* 感情 (positive feelings) among the various parties. *Guanxi* can be considered the foundation of Chinese societies, even today. Kipnis (1997:23) argues that *guanxi* is a “total social phenomenon” like that described by Marcel Mauss in *The Gift* (2002:4). Kipnis follows Bourdieu (1977, 1990) and

divides *guanxi* into cultural ideals and everyday practices. Kipnis finds that these practices “simultaneously [act] in the present and [rely] on shared understandings from the past, as skillfully manipulating time rather than mechanically acting out atemporal rules” (7). *Guanxi* practices are everyday rituals, which allow practitioners to embody the symbols of the Chinese worldview because such symbols are systematic, perceptual, emotional, and performative (Hénaff 2015). Hénaff emphasizes that a “ritual actualizes what it stages.” For Kipnis (1997:8) what is actualized in *guanxi* rituals is the network of relationships that “in fact constitute one’s self” and the “families, villages, and perhaps any other social group one could name.” Thus, *guanxi* practices and relationships form the warp and weft of Chinese societies, and foreign institutions, such as capitalism or Christianity must negotiate their form with respect to *guanxi* rituals, when they enter a Chinese society. For example, scholars now discuss China’s *guanxi* capitalism (McNally 2012). Christianity, too, has adapted to *guanxi* in Chinese societies. This paper describes in detail how an indigenous Chinese Protestant group—the Local Churches—reconstituted *guanxi* during the twentieth century. It shows how in the process of redefining *guanxi* to make its members committed Christians, the Local Churches also Sinicized Christianity.

History of the Local Church Movement

The Local Church movement began in Fuzhou, China in the early 1920s; its primary founder was the indigenous Chinese preacher and Bible expositor, Watchman Nee (Ni Tosheng, 倪柝聲 1903-1972). Witness Lee (Li Changshou, 李常受 AKA 李長壽 1905-1997), a native of Shandong Province, joined Nee’s group in Shanghai in the early 1930s. He became Nee’s close associate and an editor in Nee’s publication ministry (Lian 2010:195). The Local Church movement grew in China under their leadership until the Communist Revolution in 1949. At that

time, Lee was sent to Taiwan to continue ministry work there. Nee remained in Shanghai, working among Local Church congregations in the PRC until his arrest and imprisonment in 1952. Nee died in a Chinese labor camp in 1972 (J.T.H. Lee 2005). After more than a decade of church work in Taiwan and Southeast Asia, Lee relocated his ministry to the United States in 1962, whence the Local Church movement spread around the globe (Zimmerman-Liu and Wright 2015b). Lee continued as the principal leader of the group until his death in 1997.

Nee, Lee, and other early members of the Local Churches expressed dissatisfaction with mission Christianity and sought to find a way to be Christian apart from Western cultural influences. The early Local Churches returned to a fundamentalist understanding of the religion’s sacred text, the Bible, but they attempted to interpret it apart from European culture. They sought to emphasize the elements of scriptural and historical Christianity that would most appeal to their audience of Republican-era (1911-1949) Chinese people (Zimmerman-Liu 2014).

In the process of contextualizing Christianity to Chinese society apart from Western cultural influences, the Local Churches had to grapple with questions of what it meant to be both Chinese and Christian. How should Chinese Christians relate to other church members? How should they relate to non-Christian family members? To non-Christian members of society in general? These questions might seem strange to readers raised in the Western tradition of the liberal self, but to members of Chinese society that constituted self and others by means of relationship rituals, the answers to those questions were critical to the Chinese Christians’ acceptance, understanding, and practice of the faith. In the process of answering these questions, the Local Churches reconstituted *guanxi* relationships among their members, and they also Sinicized their version of Christianity.

In describing how the Local Churches reconstituted *guanxi*, this study will add to the growing body of literature about *guanxi* (Jacobs 1979; Yang 1994; Yan 1996; Kipnis 1997; Bell 2000; Dos Santos 2006) by describing a case in which *guanxi* was adapted to fit changing social conditions. Because the case of the Local Churches involves the adaptation of *guanxi* to a non-Chinese religion, it can highlight the aspects of *guanxi* deemed most essential by the group, thus, deepening scholarly understanding of the phenomenon. This study will also contribute to the literature on indigenous Chinese Christianity (Bays 1996, 2003, 2012; Lian 2010; Ng 2012, 2013; Gewurz 2012; Zimmerman-Liu 2014, Zimmerman-Liu and Wright 2015a, 2015b) by highlighting a fundamental aspect of Chinese culture that was changed by Christianity as it simultaneously changed Christianity in the Chinese context. Several studies have shown how Christian groups historically recruited members and spread along *guanxi* and kinship networks in China (Wiest 1982; J.T.H. Lee 2001; Chow 2013), but no studies have explored how these groups handled the rituals and practices of *guanxi* in a Christian context. This study seeks to fill that gap in the literature.

Data and Methods

In addition to scholarly sources on indigenous Chinese Christianity and on *guanxi*, this study relies on the published writings of Local Church founders and preachers: Watchman Nee and Witness Lee. It also relies on published letters and testimonies of Local Church members in China and Taiwan and on interviews, which were conducted between 2009 and 2013, with Local Church leaders and with leaders of other Chinese Christian groups in southern California. It is further informed by the experiences of the author, who was a member of Local Church congregations in Taiwan and the United States from 1978-2008 and a translator for Witness Lee in his publishing companies in Taiwan and California from 1983-2001. The study is also

informed by the author’s experiences as the eldest daughter-in-law in a multigenerational Hakka Chinese household in Taiwan and the United States from 1986-2010. To prevent bias, the author relies primarily on third-party sources, confirming those data with her personal experiences.

In order to demonstrate how the Local Churches changed and were changed by *guanxi* relationships, this study first develops a model of *guanxi*. It then uses Local Church teachings and practices to show how *guanxi* was reconstituted to give church members a new identity as “sons of God” instead of “children of the devil.” This change of identity was important for creating in new members a feeling of solidarity with the church (Melucci 1996) and for overcoming the problem of “rice Christians,” who only came to church for food without being committed to the community. Social movement theory can explain how Christianity changed as the Local Church framed its teachings according to the logic of *guanxi* (Snow, et. al 1986) because the frames triggered cultural scripts, which in turn influenced the way indigenous Chinese Christians understood the religion (Schank & Abelson 1977). After discussing the ways that Chinese-speaking Local Church Christians reconstructed *guanxi* and reinterpreted Christianity, the paper concludes with a discussion of variations in how *guanxi* was understood by Local Church members from urban and rural areas in Taiwan and from mainland China in comparison with Taiwan. This study also examines how Christianity was understood by Chinese-speaking and English-speaking Local Church members in the United States. These comparisons highlight the most critical aspects of *guanxi* that remained the same across social classes, regional variations, and cultural contexts. Moreover, they will show whether *guanxi* makes Chinese Protestant groups more or less apt to converge with other sects.

A Composite Model of *Guanxi*

As previously noted, the Chinese system of *guanxi* contains both an ideology and a set of ritual practices. Duran Bell (2000) describes the underlying ideology of *guanxi* as being that of the Confucian kinship paradigm. He notes that Chinese history has been characterized by cycles of famine and starvation when family units have not been sufficient for survival. He states: “An extension of familial forms of support has been sought through membership in a village, work group, or kin group. The specifically Chinese method of articulating this extension of family support beyond the domestic family is *guanxi*” (2000:133).

Bell further describes how *guanxi* relationships are framed in the discourse of Confucian thought as belonging to any of the five *gang* 綱 (dyadic social ties comprising all human relations): father-son, husband-wife, emperor-official, elder brother-younger brother, and friend-friend. These relationships are governed by the *wu-lun* 五倫 (five ethical relationships), which are ethical strictures for intra-family relationships. Bell avers:

In most, if not all, cultures there is a counterpart of the *wu-lun* for the guidance of intrafamily behavior. The special characteristic of Confucian thought is that the *wu-lun* are extended beyond the domestic group into all other ethically supportable forms of relation, and once the *wu-lun* are expressed in other collectivities the boundaries of the family become enclosed by a broader quasi-familial structure—a broader structure of duty and responsibility. *Guanxi* is the term for the mechanisms in Chinese culture by which the *wu-lun* are exported beyond the family setting (133-134).

Thus, the logic of *guanxi*, in some form or another, has been an integral part of Chinese society for millennia.

J. Bruce Jacobs (1979) describes how *guanxi* (*kuan-hsi*) was practiced in a rural Taiwanese village in the 1970s. His observations are quite similar to what the author observed among her relatives and friends from Taiwan; moreover, they also closely resemble the practices observed by Kipnis in a northern Chinese village in the 1990s. Jacobs finds that *guanxi* relationships begin with a basis, which he calls the independent variable. He identifies seven typological bases of relationship for *guanxi*: 1) locality; 2) kinship; 3) co-worker; 4) classmate; 5) sworn brothers; 6) same surname; and 7) teacher-student (251). In order to have a *guanxi* relationship, people must first have one of these seven typological bases. Next, Jacobs identifies a mediating variable: *ganqing* (*kan-ch'ing*) or the affection produced by *guanxi* rituals. This aspect of the model is fully developed in Kipnis (1997). The resulting *guanxi* relationship is the dependent variable in Jacobs' model. It can be close or distant, depending both on the quality of the basis and on how much *ganqing* has been produced by social interaction and *guanxi* rituals.

Kipnis (1997) describes in great detail the everyday rituals that produce *ganqing*, which in turn determines the closeness of a particular *guanxi* relationship. These practices include: 1) the use of kinship names (such as Brother, Sister, Auntie or Uncle) between the people in the relationship; 2) visiting each other in their homes, especially at times of illness or on special occasions; 3) giving gifts on various prescribed occasions; 4) guest/host etiquette, including seating arrangements, sharing alcoholic drinks, and lighting cigarettes; 5) inviting one another to banquets or dinners; 6) kowtowing; 7) *bai* 拜 (venerate), which Kipnis translates as “showing respect” for elders, ancestors, and spirits, but which in China before 1949 and in areas outside China today generally means “to venerate,” when applied to living elders, and “to venerate by burning incense,” when applied to dead ancestors, deities, and spirits. This last aspect of *guanxi*

rituals was particularly problematic for Chinese Protestants and needed immediate, drastic reconfiguration.

Yunxiang Yan (1996) describes the resulting differentiated relationships in three layers. In her study of *guanxi* in a rural village in Heilongjiang, Yan (1996:4) calls the closest layer of familial relationships the personal core. She identifies the next layer as the “reliable zone” and the outermost layer as the “effective zone.” Although the names are slightly different, the layers are similar to what the author observed among her Hakka friends and family in Taiwan in the 1980s.

Because many *guanxi* rituals entail the giving of gifts, including the giving of red envelopes filled with money, some people understand *guanxi* as an instrumental relationship. *Guanxi* has been characterized as a patrimonial relationship, in which the gift is similar to a bribe (Walder 1986; Oi 1989). Kipnis (1997) and Jacobs (1979) repeatedly emphasize, however, that the various *guanxi* rituals produce a kind of emotion called *ganqing*. *Ganqing* improves the *guanxi* relationship, making it deeper, and with the deepening of the relationship, a person’s expectations and responsibilities vis-à-vis the other party increase. The ideology of *guanxi* includes the idea of expanding resources for households, but there is no one-to-one correspondence between gifts given and benefits immediately received, although the parties in each *guanxi* relationship are keenly aware of what they owe and are owed in each case.

The following diagram (Diagram 1) summarizes these descriptions of *guanxi* relationships more clearly. At the center is one’s own household, *zijiaren* 自家人, composed of a married couple, their children, and, possibly, their elderly parents. This household may also include the wives and children of older sons. All resources in the household are held in common without much sense of individual private property. Among the author’s Hakka relatives and other

acquaintances in Taiwan in the 1980s, some heads of household (*dangjiade* 當家的) required the working members of the household to hand over all the money they earned and then gave back spending allowances to each household member. More typically, heads of household require each working household member to contribute a certain amount of his or her salary to defray the household’s expenses.

[Diagram 1—Layered Categories of *Guanxi* Relationships]

The next layer out is composed of relatives and friends with whom the members of the household have close *guanxi*. The closeness of the relationship does not depend as much on blood as it does on a sense that this person can be relied upon in an emergency. In general, the bases for *guanxi* in this layer are close kin, classmates, sworn brothers, and close neighbors in urban areas or people from the same village in rural areas. The feelings of trust and affection, the *ganqing*, between the parties has been built up over a long period of time through countless social interactions that provided opportunities for many shared experiences and many iterations of *guanxi*-producing rituals among the parties.

People in this layer are referred to as “one’s own people” (*zijiren* 自己人). *Zijiren* can be relied on in a pinch to provide money or other assistance. When a *zijiren* has a difficulty, one is obligated by *guanxi* to contribute monetary or other aid to see them through their hardship. When *zijiren* give red envelopes of money at a wedding or other gift-giving occasion, the household accepts the gift, records it, keeps the red envelope as a sign that the giver’s intent has been accepted, and then returns the money the next morning. This is done because there is so much sharing back and forth of resources that they are said to be as close as members of the actual household themselves. When the head of household is returning the money, the giver insists that the household must keep the gift, and there is much pushing back and forth with loud

protestations. In the end, whether or not the head of household keeps the money depends on the household’s actual need. If there is no need, the giver accepts the return of the money. If the household needs the money to cover the cost of the celebration, the giver insists on giving the gift, and in the end, the head of household acquiesces and keeps the money.

The next layer is made up of people with whom one exchanges gifts. The *guanxi* is more distant than that which binds household members to *zijiren*, but the relationship is closer than one of mere acquaintances. This relationship is described as *lishangwanglai* 禮上往來, or one of exchanging gifts. The bases for *guanxi* at this level include more distant kin, co-workers, teacher-student, and neighbors with whom one has fewer interactions. This is also the level for the basis of having the same surname without being related. Speaking the same dialect is also a basis for this layer of *guanxi*. Interactions at this level are more instrumental. Relationships here are cultivated and maintained for the purpose of furthering business relationships or for currying political favors (Yan 1996:24; Yang 1994, 2002).

Many of the *guanxi* interactions described by Kipnis (1997) occurred at this level. Outwardly, the rituals are the same as for *zijiren*, but the way they are handled differs due to the different underlying bases and the lower level of *ganqing* in the relationships. At weddings, birthday parties, funerals, and other occasions when gifts are usually exchanged, the household keeps records of each envelope of money, the name of the giver, and the amount received. Unlike gifts from *zijiren* there is no attempt to immediately return the money from people in the *lishangwanglai* category. When a person who has given gifts in the past invites the household to their own gift-giving occasions, the record books are brought out to determine how much money the household must give to keep the accounts balanced. Visits and gifts of fruit are reciprocated within an appropriate period of time that is neither too fast nor too slow. The time is not drawn

out too long because written records are not usually kept of non-monetary gifts. The speed with which the visit or gift is returned frequently depends on the relative hierarchical status of the giver vis-à-vis the recipient and on the level of *ganqing* between them. In a relationship with more *ganqing*, one does not need to be quite so punctilious in reciprocating gifts. If a person is of lower status than the gift-giver, the speed with which he or she returns the gift depends on his or her feeling of indebtedness to the person of higher status.

In all *guanxi* relationships, there is an important hierarchy of social status. This can be easily seen in the typical Taiwanese visitation rituals at the Chinese New Year. On Chinese New Year’s Eve, all unmarried children and married sons with their wives and children return to their parents’ home for New Year’s Eve dinner. After dinner the household exchanges red envelopes with people of higher generations giving gifts of money to the younger generations. The next day, married daughters take their husbands and children to visit their parents. If a middle-aged, married daughter has married daughters of her own, she generally tells them to arrive at her house for lunch, and then she takes her married daughters with their families, her unmarried children, and her husband to visit her parents for dinner. Since her married sons are at their wives’ parents’ homes that day, they must make their own arrangements to visit maternal grandparents, usually on the morning of the third day of Chinese New Year. The third day of Chinese New Year is frequently the day upon which nephews and nieces visit uncles and younger brothers visit older brothers. The fourth day expands the visitation to neighbors, classmates, and other people with close *guanxi*. Most people of the author’s acquaintance in Taiwan, especially during the 1980s, went back to work on the sixth or seventh day after the Chinese New Year. On the day or two before businesses reopened at the end of the holiday, family elders would make return

visits to married children and younger siblings who had visited them on the second, third or fourth day of the holiday season.

Similar hierarchical patterns can be seen in gift-giving rituals. Peers exchange gifts, while an empty-handed visit from someone of a high rank is generally considered sufficient to return the favor of a gift from a subordinate. In some cases, the higher ranked person does not even need to reciprocate with a visit because their acceptance of the gift and their willingness to enter into a relationship with a lower-ranked person is seen as giving the lower-ranked gift-giver sufficient face and honor in the relationship.

The honor of having one’s gift accepted becomes clear when the last category of *guanxi* is considered: *bulingqing* 不領情 or one whose *qing* the household does not receive. These are people the head of household considers unworthy of a relationship. Their gifts are immediately returned in the red envelope. Their invitations are ignored. Members of the household are forbidden to speak with anyone connected to that person. Usually, people fall into this category because of a dispute with a member of the household. People in this category can have any of the bases for *guanxi*. In fact, close kin, even siblings, can land here when their *guanxi* is damaged. It generally takes intervention from people with close *guanxi* to both parties to restore the damaged *guanxi* (Jacobs 1979) and remove the *bulingqing* categorization.

In sum, *guanxi* relationships are an important and integral part of Chinese society. Chinese people use intra-familial logic to produce extended networks of close kin, distant kin, business associates, neighbors, and friends. These networks are in nested layers of strong-tie and weak-tie relationships depending on the level of the *guanxi* and on the *ganqing* or positive feelings of the parties in the relationships. *Guanxi* relationships include an ethical component of reciprocal duties and responsibilities. When one party of a *guanxi* relationship has a need, the

other party has a social obligation to help. There is a general understanding, however, that one does not require too much too often from any particular partner in a *guanxi* relationship. This is why it is important to build and maintain many *guanxi* relationships. When two people have accumulated sufficient *guanxi*, their ties and sentiments with respect to each other are quite strong. Most adult Chinese people have built up webs of these strong *guanxi* relationships; hence, tapping into *guanxi* networks was a useful strategy for spreading Christianity in the otherwise unwelcoming social environment of imperial and early Republican era China.

***Guanxi* Networks, Church Leadership, and Recruitment to Chinese Christian Groups**

Leaders and Guanxi Networks

As noted earlier, missionaries to China relied on *guanxi* and kinship networks to recruit new converts. For example, in the 1840s, when Christianity was still illegal in China, Baptist missionaries converted Chinese emigrants from Chaozhou, who were living in Bangkok, and then sent them back to China where “they spread the news about their conversion at considerable personal risk through kinship, village, and lineage networks” (J.T.H. Lee 2001:758). After the treaties ending the Opium Wars (1839-1842, 1856-1860) opened China to Western missionary proselytization, the missionaries used their earlier experiences, developing a strategy of targeting *guanxi* networks to spread the faith. The missionaries would first convert household leaders and then the rest of the family would follow their elders into the church (763-4).

Most indigenous Chinese Protestant leaders of the early 20th century were second or third generation Christians. The most prominent indigenous Chinese evangelists of the early twentieth century—Dora Yu, Wang Mingdao, and John Sung—were all the children of Chinese Christian families. Watchman Nee, founder of the Local Churches, was a third generation Christian, as were many of his close associates, including Witness Lee (Lian 2010, Anonymous 2002). Even

today many of the leaders in China’s Protestant churches are from Christian families (Patterson 2007, Lui 2011, Ro 2013). This may be, in part, because Christianity persisted throughout the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) by means of families worshipping secretly in their homes (Interview, Southern California, 2009). Thus, the children of Christian families may be more apt to have the background necessary for effective church leadership.

Guanxi and Recruitment

When discussing indigenous Chinese Protestant church strategies for growth and recruitment today, one interviewee stated: “Family is everything.” Another described how his church would usually recruit new members from the *guanxi* networks of existing and newly-converted church members (Interviews, Southern California, 2009). The leaders of the Local Churches teach their followers that “the unit of God’s salvation is not an individual person, but the whole family, the whole house” (W. Lee 1987). In the next chapter of the same book, Lee teaches that Christians must bear fruit because the Bible says that they are branches on the vine. In a discussion with his assistants, he further explained that a vine bears fruit in bunches and that recruiting people by households is the same as bearing a bunch of grapes.¹ At the time of conversion, new Local Church members are encouraged to follow Watchman Nee’s example and to make lists of their close and distant kin, their classmates, colleagues, and other friends, in other words, they are asked to list all the people with whom they have *guanxi*. They are then taught to pray for these people and to work diligently to convert every member of their *guanxi* networks to Christianity (Nee 1991).

Guanxi networks do not just provide a ready pool of new recruits to Chinese Protestant churches. *Guanxi* practices also shape the way in which new believers and potential recruits are

¹ Discussion with assistants in publication ministry, Taiwan, 1987

approached. As noted earlier, Kipnis identifies using kinship terms of address as one way in which *guanxi* networks are extended. Like many independent Christian churches in America, Chinese Protestants refer to fellow church members as “brother” and “sister.” In the Chinese context, however, these kinship terms take on overtones of *guanxi* ideology. For example, when Christians meet the non-believing parents of a fellow church member, they usually address the parents as “uncle” and “auntie,” as if they are indeed a relative of their friend from church. This creates a closer tie with the non-believers than if they just addressed them politely by their surnames. It also shows them a measure of respect and deference as members of the elder generation.

The following example from the author’s observation of Local Church leader Witness Lee using *guanxi* skills in California in 1996 further illustrates this point. Ah-tsang was the father of one of the Chinese maintenance workers in Witness Lee’s California publishing company. Ah-yi, the worker, was also a member of the Local Churches, and Witness Lee always addressed him as “brother,” even though Lee was already 90 years old. The fact that Lee was Ah-yi’s boss and a published author in contrast to Ah-yi’s position as a manual laborer made the gap between their social positions even broader in the usual hierarchy of Chinese social status. Ah-tsang was not a Christian, and he had some negative perceptions of Christianity. Ah-yi had done good work repairing Witness Lee’s home, and over the course of his time working there, Lee had learned that Ah-yi’s father was visiting from Taiwan to seek American medical expertise for a chronic ailment. Lee also learned that Ah-tsang had not yet been converted to Christianity. The following day, Lee instructed his wife to visit Ah-tsang with some fruit from their daughter’s tree and to extend the couple’s sincere hopes for Ah-tsang’s speedy recovery. Mrs. Lee was 80 and more than 10 years older than Ah-tsang, yet she addressed him as “uncle” when she gave him the fruit.

Ah-tsang was a barely literate peasant, and it was a great honor for him to be given a gift and called “uncle” by someone so much older than he, especially since the Lees were of a much higher social class. He immediately expressed interest in learning more about the church from Mrs. Lee.

The next day, Ah-tsang asked his daughter-in-law to phone the Lees to make an appointment for him to return the visit on a later date. As a much younger person and the father of a worker, according to *guanxi* norms, he should have been the one to initiate any visitation and gift-giving; instead the Lees had lowered themselves to the position of his son’s generation. Due to the extreme gap in their true relative social statuses from age and occupations, Ah-tsang felt compelled by *guanxi* etiquette to quickly return the Lees’ gift and face-giving honor. He and his wife and son went out to buy the best Asian pears that they could find in preparation for the return visit.

The following morning Ah-tsang went with his wife and daughter-in-law to the Lee’s home. Witness Lee was in his study working with his assistants on his latest publication. Mrs. Lee invited Ah-tsang and his wife to sit in the living room for a short while. She also served them glasses of warm water. Several minutes later, Mr. Lee’s assistants left. Ah-tsang and his wife and daughter-in-law went into Mr. Lee’s study. Mr. Lee did not address Ah-tsang as “uncle.” Instead, he warmly greeted Ah-tsang’s wife, who was a church member. After Mr. Lee had greeted his “dear sister,” he turned to the sister’s husband, Ah-tsang, and greeted him politely by his surname. Next, Witness Lee spoke highly of Ah-tsang’s son, praising his excellent workmanship and strong work ethic. He then asked Ah-tsang about his other children and his health. Ah-tsang felt that Mr. Lee was giving him much face by receiving him in his

study, as if he were a close friend or relative, and by showing so much affection and concern for Ah-tsang’s family.

After fifteen minutes of conversation, Mr. Lee rose to take some medication. He allowed Ah-tsang to support him as he negotiated his way around the corner of his desk, another sign that he considered Ah-tsang to be family. He walked with Ah-tsang to the edge of the entry hall and said casually, “You really should consider believing in Jesus. This faith has helped me much over the course of my life. Pray to Jesus and He will heal you. I will pray for you, too.” With that, Mr. Lee went into the kitchen to take his medicine, and Mrs. Lee performed the customary ritual of seeing her guests to the door of the home. One of the Lees’ nieces walked Ah-tsang through the yard to the sidewalk and politely bid them good-bye. When Ah-tsang got home, he began asking his wife and son about becoming a Christian.² Other church members had previously tried to convert Ah-tsang without success. Because Witness Lee gave Ah-tsang much face with his skillful use of *guanxi* rituals, Lee’s few sentences carried more weight than hours of talking by others.

Guanxi rituals are fluid, and the Lees were quite adept at using *guanxi* to create positive *ganqing* that strengthened their relationship with Ah-tsang. When Mrs. Lee brought the gift of fruit to Ah-tsang’s son’s home, she was met at the door by Ah-tsang’s daughter-in-law. Since she was a church “sister” with the daughter-in-law, who made the introductions, Mrs. Lee took a position in the same generation as Ah-tsang’s son and daughter-in-law in her choice of family terms for addressing Ah-tsang. If she had been introduced to Ah-tsang by his granddaughter, Mrs.

² Ah-tsang was the author’s father-in-law from 1986-2010. He was never baptized as a Christian, but after this incident, he stopped performing rites of ancestor worship, and he would pray to Jesus in times of distress. He also encouraged his nieces and nephews to become Christians.

Lee would most likely have followed the girl in calling Ah-tsang “grandfather.” When Ah-tsang was introduced to Mr. Lee, his wife was at his side. Mr. Lee ignored their daughter-in-law, and pulled the relationship even closer by addressing Ah-tsang’s wife as his “dear sister” and warmly greeting her first. A wife’s brother is closer than a nephew in Chinese family hierarchies; hence, Mr. Lee unerringly selected the position that gave him the closest and most influential relationship with Ah-tsang.

In the section defining *guanxi*, it was noted that *guanxi* is about developing relationships and its inherent gift-giving is not transactional. Mr. Lee understood these rules and used them effectively, too. He spent sufficient time with Ah-tsang asking about his children and his health, giving Ah-tsang the feeling that Mr. Lee cared about him as a person. The sentence recruiting Ah-tsang to Christianity was stated almost as an aside, at the very end of the visit. It was worded in such a way that Ah-tsang did not feel coerced or forced to do anything. Instead, Ah-tsang felt that this statement was being given to him as concerned advice and that Mr. Lee had his best interests at heart. Because the advice was given with sufficient concern and *ganqing* had been built up through the Lees’ gift of fruit, Mrs. Lee’s performance of guest/host etiquette in the living room, and Mr. Lee’s face-giving conversation and actions, Ah-Tsang was receptive to Mr. Lee’s suggestion about praying to Jesus.

New Converts and the Logic of Guanxi

As noted in the previous section describing *guanxi* networks, Bell (2000) sees *guanxi* as a cultural mechanism that enables kinship and lineage networks to obtain resources necessary to the survival of the family in times of shortage or social unrest. Such logic can be found in the narratives of new converts, many of which describe how Christianity met their family’s need for certain resources. An important attraction since Protestant Christianity’s earliest days in China

has been the perceived efficacy of Christian prayers and rituals for healing the sick (Zhong and Chan 1993:257; Lambert 2006:89). Furthermore, many conversion narratives describe miraculous rescues after the converts prayed to Jesus. One example of such a narrative is the story of how 1989 escapee from Tiananmen Square, Zhang Boli, was spared from freezing to death in a snowstorm on the Russian border after he had committed himself to Jesus (Zhang 1998:128-29). Another attractive aspect of Christianity is that Protestant groups can tap into worldwide church networks and provide their members with resources, which come “at a much cheaper cost than traditional rituals in local communities, because of less expense for ritual offerings, operas and feasts” (Bays 2003:502).

The calculation of cost-effectiveness by new converts can create a free-rider mentality (Olson 1965) that Protestant leaders strive to erase. Because Protestant Christian teachings are relatively unknown among average Chinese individuals, most indigenous Protestant groups have extensive training programs for new believers (Xin 2009; Zimmerman-Liu and Wright 2015a). These programs allow the new believers to quickly assimilate the Christian belief system. In 1950, Local Church founder Watchman Nee published a three-volume set called “Messages for Building up New Believers” to meet the need of turning converts into committed Christians. In the preface, he stated that the purpose of the series was to allow each new believer to “become like a little child and start his life all over again” (Nee [1950] 1997). New converts to the Local Churches are taught with the terms of *guanxi* kinship language. The description of conversion is framed in a way that causes new believers to feel that they are God’s children who must learn the rights and obligations accruing to them in their new identity as members of the family of God.

The Reconfiguration of *Guanxi* Through Local Church Teachings and Practices

Redefining the new believers’ identity by reconfiguring *guanxi* is an important step in solidifying their status as Christians. This is because *guanxi* is such an integral part of Chinese society and is the manner in which Chinese people constitute their own “selves” (Kipnis 1997). Hénaff (2015) describes the factors necessary to effect conversions in the case of the Bororo tribe in Amazonia. He notes that when they remained in their traditional villages, which were arranged according to their traditional worldview and kinship patterns, it was impossible for the missionaries to convert them. However, when the Bororo were removed from their circular villages into rows of homes along straight streets, they lost their traditional sense of self and were easily converted. In the case of Chinese Christians, recruiting them to Christianity in a time of household need is not difficult, due to the logic of *guanxi* and resources. The challenge comes when a Christian group tries to move the new recruits from “rice Christians,” who come to church only when they need food, to committed and active members of the church community. This requires a complete reconstitution of *guanxi* to give the recently converted believers a new Christian identity and a new sense of self.

Ideological Reconstitution: Pre-conversion Status Framed as “Children of the Devil,” Post-Conversion Status Framed as “Sons of God”

In the Local Churches, the reconstitution of *guanxi* ideology begins by teaching new believers that prior to their conversion they were “children of the devil,” but that now they are “children of God” (1 John 3:10). Witness Lee states: “Men, as fallen descendants of Adam, are born children of the devil, the evil one (John 8:44), and possess his life, partake of his nature, and live in sin automatically and habitually” (2003:864). These children of the devil inhabit the “world” and are bound for destruction until they are saved from Satan’s world through believing in Jesus and by being baptized into the kingdom and household of God (Nee 2001a). After their

conversion, new members are taught that they are now the children of God. Lee emphasizes that new believers begin as “children of God,” but if they want to be “heirs of God,” they must “grow in life to become sons, and then [they] must pass through suffering that they may be glorified to become legal heirs” (2003:455). Conversion to Christianity is framed in terms of becoming members of the household of God, and Christian life is framed as the process of maturing sufficiently to fulfill one’s rights and responsibilities towards God and his household, in order to become worthy of a great inheritance (W. Lee 2003:610, 620). In this way, the core frame of *guanxi* ideology, the extension of a household, is reconfigured to match passages in the Bible and to make Christianity intelligible to people with a *guanxi* worldview.

Reconfiguring Pre-Conversion Guanxi Practices

In addition to immediately giving new converts a reconstituted ideology of *guanxi*, the Local Churches instruct them on how they must change their *guanxi* practices to fit their new status as “sons of God.” The first items of *guanxi* practices that are reconstituted in Local Church practice are the matters of *bai* and ‘kow-tow’ because they are connected with idols. In volume 2 of the *New Believer’s Series* (2001b), Watchman Nee instructs new believers:

A new believer must give up his idols from the very first day of his salvation. He should not mention the names of idols, be involved with fortune-telling, or visit any temples. We cannot worship anything with an image. Even the thought of worshipping such things is forbidden. ... Anything that falls into these categories should be destroyed; they should not even be sold. We should destroy, exterminate, and remove them.

The author observed these teachings being put into practice among Chinese-speaking members of the Local Churches in Taiwan and in the United States. In each case, experienced

Local Church members would visit the new believers and accompany them on a search of their entire home. All statues of deities, ancestor tablets, pictures of dragons, and incense burners, spirit money, or other items used for rituals involving *bai* veneration were gathered up, smashed, and then burned. Afterwards, the new believers were instructed to never again hold a joss stick (incense used in *bai* rituals), bow down (kow-tow) before an idol or a living person, or partake of any foods that had previously been laid out on a spirit table and sacrificed in a *bai* ritual. Furthermore, the new believers were exhorted to stop smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol because Christians are holy. These prohibitions forced a drastic reconfiguration of the new believers’ old *guanxi* relationships, as they prohibited them from engaging in many of the *guanxi*-producing rituals that constituted the majority of social life in China before 1949 and in Taiwan, even today.

The immediate result for new Local Church believers was similar to the situation of the Bororo people living in a straight line. The new believers’ previous methods of constituting self and others were no longer available, and they could transition rapidly into their new community—the church. For example, because the new believers no longer ate anything that had been offered in *bai* rituals, it became awkward for them to visit their old friends, as many households offered fruit in a ritual before the ancestral tablet in the morning and then served the fruit to guests later in the day. When a new believer refused to eat the fruit served on a visit, it violated guest/host etiquette and made prior *guanxi* relationships hard to maintain. The problem was often exacerbated when the convert also refused alcohol and cigarettes. These refusals to engage in traditional *guanxi* rituals damaged the *ganqing* and *guanxi* with old friends, and the parties would spontaneously become distant. Usually the old close *guanxi* relationships would move out one layer, but in some cases the other parties would be so offended that the new

Christians would be considered *bulingqing* and would be shunned by their old friends. This pushed them further into the church community.

Relationships with close family members, such as parents and spouses, also had to be renegotiated. The Local Churches taught their members to honor parents and spouses in all things, but to always put God first. The author observed many cases where this created problems for the new believers because they no longer participated in family *bai* rituals. Funerals, in particular, could be a problem. Most Local Church believers in Taiwan would negotiate with non-Christian relatives concerning their role and the extent of their participation in funeral rituals. In general, Local Church members felt comfortable wearing burlap mourning clothes, praying respectfully before the coffin, and following the coffin to the grave site, but they would not burn incense or kow-tow to the coffin, the deceased’s picture, or the ancestral tablet. If pressured to do more than appear in mourning garb, they would bring a wreath of flowers and place it on the coffin, in lieu of burning incense and kow-towing.

Students who converted to Christianity while living at home with unbelieving parents were sometimes disciplined for going to church activities. The author heard one Local Church leader, named Titus, tell his story at a youth conference in Ohio in 1979. Titus had joined the Local Churches in Taiwan in the 1950s when he was still a high school student. His father was quite upset because sons are supposed to perform most of the *bai* rituals related to ancestor worship. Titus said the church leaders in Taiwan told him to obey his parents in everything except for the matter of going to church on Sundays. He would go to church, and his father would beat him when he came home. Titus would endure the beating without complaint. When the beatings did not work, Titus said his father tried locking him in his room on Sundays, but Titus would climb out the window and still go to church. He would come home to find the gate

locked and would kneel in the road waiting for his father to relent and allow him back into the house. This went on for a long period of time, and eventually, the father realized that the only matter in which Titus disobeyed was the matter of going to church. Since Titus was otherwise a top student and a paragon of good behavior, his father relented and allowed him to be an active church member. To summarize, family remained a critical focus of the reconfigured *guanxi* practices within the Local Churches, but instead of being paramount, as under the more traditional Chinese worldview, family was subordinated to God and the church.

Redefining Guanxi Practices within the Church Community

Jacobs (1979) explains that social interactions are critical for constituting *guanxi*. Since the new believers were not able to continue in close *guanxi* relationships with their non-Christian family and friends, due to the constraints of their Christian practice, they spontaneously turned to the church, which had been framed as their new family, the household of God. Watchman Nee (1997) expressed this most clearly in his *New Believers Series: Loving the Brothers #22*:

Suppose you have many friends and you like them very much, or you admire many people and respect them very much. There is still a difference between your feelings toward them and your feelings toward the brothers and sisters in your own family. Somehow, there is a difference. If a person is born of your mother, if he is your brother, there is spontaneously a special and inexplicable feeling toward him. It is a feeling of instinctive love. This feeling proves that you and he belong to the same family.

The same holds true for our spiritual family. Suppose there is a person whose appearance, family background, education, disposition, and interest are totally different from yours. Yet he has believed in the Lord Jesus. Spontaneously,

you will have an inexplicable feeling toward him. You will feel that he is your brother. He will be dearer to you than your brother in the flesh.

Thus, the Local Churches teach that the feelings among church members should be as close as, or even closer than, the feelings among blood relatives. Their new identity as children of God is framed in terms of *ganqing*, and this triggers the cultural scripts of *guanxi* networks to draw the new converts into deeper solidarity with the group.

In *Life-Study of Ephesians*, Witness Lee (1984) similarly teaches that the Christians are “folks of the same family” and that they should regard one another “in an intimate way as our folks.” In *Life Messages, Volume 1*, Lee (1978) emphasizes that being members of God’s family means that all the members of the church are brothers and on the same level. Unlike traditional *guanxi* relationships, the Local Churches have developed a more egalitarian form of *guanxi*, in which all members are on the same level. Moreover, as “folks,” church members are all in the circle of *zijiren*. This emphasis on fellow church members represents a major change in the typological basis for close *guanxi*, and it affects *guanxi* practices in the Local Churches.

Local Church members follow Chinese custom to foster *guanxi* through social interaction. New believers are generally contacted by phone and visited several times per week by the person recruiting them and by that person’s prayer/Bible-study partners. New believers are also encouraged to form their own partnerships for prayer, Bible-study, and visitation. Each congregation has small-group gatherings, home Bible studies, prayer meetings, youth meetings, and Sunday worship services. During visitations and in the home meetings, the believers are encouraged to share any problems in their lives so that the group can counsel and pray for them. Unlike traditional Chinese *guanxi* relationships, in which one must be careful to not impose too much, the Local Church members encourage each other to tell their needs to the group. No

promises of assistance are made, except that the group will pray. Later, however, the church members who have learned about a particular believer’s difficulties seek ways to remedy the situation. They might help by networking to find employment opportunities or by babysitting while a mother sees the doctor or even by making anonymous gifts of cash designated for the needy member in the church offering box. The gifts are passed unopened to the designee by church deacons and elders.

Assistance is rendered to other believers as part of one’s duty as a member of the household of God. There is no thought of receiving direct repayment from that particular person because each member knows that church members will help them in their times of difficulty. Since the people receiving aid do not know who gave the envelopes of cash, they can only repay the *guanxi* to the group by donating to a person in need when financially able.

Thus, the extension of household resources at the core of *guanxi* is maintained, but it is reconstituted to remove the dyadic structure. Assistance comes from the group and is repaid to the group. Moreover, a person receiving aid can repay the debt to the group by donating money or by giving service or labor, such as by helping to clean the church hall or by teaching youth or children’s classes. This expanded view of *guanxi* as a group process greatly increases the cohesion and solidarity of Local Church congregations. It also makes the Local Church *guanxi* network “inward looking and bonding” as opposed to “outward looking and bridging” (Putnam and Goss 2002).

Banqueting is similarly reconstituted with the Local Church practice of “love feasts.” These potluck meals are frequently held after church services. In the modern era, it is hard to see the *guanxi* ethos of extending family resources among the Local Churches, but in the 1950s in Taiwan when there was great wealth inequality among church members, this practice was more

than just social interaction to foster relationships. According to church members who experienced that time period, during the 1950s the Local Churches in Taiwan would hold regular love feasts after Sunday morning services. People would bring metal lunchboxes filled with the best meals they could afford and place them in the church’s steamer bin before going in to worship. Many people could only afford to fill their boxes with rice, pickled vegetables, and a hard-boiled egg. Others, however, could fill their boxes with rice, fresh vegetables, chicken legs, pork, and other delicacies. Generally, the boxes filled by affluent members were shiny and new, while those from poorer members were dull and dented. The deacons distributing the boxes were instructed to give poor church members the shiny boxes, as they probably could not afford to eat well at home. The wealthy, of course, were given the dingiest boxes. Complaining about one’s lunch was strictly forbidden, and all were instructed to eat what they had received with grateful and joyful hearts. Some of the wealthier church members confided to the author that they had been appalled at the poverty their church brothers and sisters lived in, and after eating a particularly meager lunch, they would attempt to secretly determine who had made it and then put an envelope of cash into the offering box to help that family. Other younger church members, who had been children at the time, remembered the joy of being able to eat multiple delicacies in one meal or the distress of finding that they had only gotten rice and egg for lunch. All the church members, who had experienced those love feasts, said that the shared meals had done much to increase the group’s solidarity.

Variations of Local Church *Guanxi*

Just as traditional *guanxi* rituals, ideologies, and practices vary in different times and different places, so too, do the Local Church reconstitutions of *guanxi*. For example, younger church members from urban areas with more education seem to be less concerned with the

function of providing resources to needy households than older church members, who have experienced war and famine, or than church members from rural areas where the standard of living is lower and traditional Chinese *guanxi* practices are stronger. Local Church members who had moved from the People’s Republic of China to southern California tended to perform more individual gift-giving rituals from traditional Chinese *guanxi* than their Taiwanese counterparts. This created friction among the two sub-groups because the Taiwanese felt that the mainland Chinese church members were not dealing with fellow church members as *zijiren*.

Changes in Christianity from its Incorporation of Reconstituted *Guanxi*

The adaptations made by Local Church Protestantism to conform to the cultural scripts of *guanxi* networks created a form of Protestantism that is very different from its Western counterparts. In fact, when Witness Lee brought Chinese Christianity to the United States in the 1960s, his church’s “distinctively Chinese approach to the universal truths of Christianity ... contributed greatly to their being misunderstood and mislabeled as a cult in the West” (Miller 2009:31). Christian apologist Gretchen Passantino Coburn notes that Lee’s scriptural exegesis was more homiletic and like a father teaching his children and “did not reflect the rational, didactic, Aristotelian exposition familiar to us [Western Christian apologists]” (2009:49). Passantino Coburn further described how Lee had attempted to clear up the misunderstanding of his ministry among Western Christians by inviting Christian Research Institute founder, Walter Martin, to discuss their differences over a meal, in accordance with Chinese etiquette and *guanxi* cultural scripts. This action made Lee even more suspect to the Western Christians because they saw the meal as a form of bribery, due to their lack of insight into Chinese culture (Passantino Coburn interview, Southern California, 2013). The misunderstandings of these apologists in the American anti-cult movement of the 1970s demonstrate how the cultural scripts of *guanxi*

significantly shaped Chinese Protestantism, to the extent that fellow Christians from the West did not recognize Chinese Christians as true believers.

Further differences between Chinese and American Protestantism can be seen by comparing Ammerman’s 1987 study of American Fundamentalists with Local Church Christians, who are also fundamentalists in their scriptural interpretations. Chinese Protestant groups emphasize the church as the real family of God, through their teaching and practice. In contrast, American fundamentalist Protestants tend to emphasize individual believers and their families as warriors against modernity (Ammerman [1987] 1999:17). Indeed Madsen (2009) finds that individualism is the hallmark of American religious faiths.

Despite the American Local Churches’ differences from mainstream American Protestantism, there are differences between English-speaking and Chinese-speaking members of Local Church congregations in America that can be traced to *guanxi* logic. Most English-speakers are less concerned with helping fellow church members by giving them resources. Non-Chinese elders even tried to discourage the practice of giving individual offerings to other members anonymously through the offering box. The American elders would give families a one-time donation from the church’s general offering at a time of crisis, but they viewed individual-to-individual donations as potential tax fraud. Similarly, English-speaking Local Church members do not understand the Chinese-speakers’ concept of paying favors forward in the church, according to each member’s abilities. The author observed problems in the children’s classes, when Chinese-speaking mothers said they served the church by playing the piano and did not take their turn at teaching the children because of their difficulties with English. Some Americans saw this as the Chinese mothers’ taking advantage of the other mothers or as evidence that Chinese people are lazy slackers.

Conclusion

The preceding description of the Local Church reconfiguration of *guanxi* highlights the critical facets of *guanxi*: extension of family, supply of resources, and social interaction. Even though these facets of *guanxi* are drastically changed in the Local Church context, they remain the critical aspects of the Local Church model. In traditional Chinese *guanxi*, people with the bases identified by Jacobs (1979) can all enter into *guanxi* relationships with a particular subject. In the Local Church, however, the primary basis for *guanxi* relationships, apart from close kinship, is membership in the Local Churches. In traditional Chinese *guanxi* relationships, *ganqing* is produced by social interactions of the eight categories described by Kipnis (1997). In the Local Church reconstitution of *guanxi*, *ganqing* is produced by social interactions at church activities. The only category that remains similar to those described by Kipnis is visitation, but even there, the rituals are changed, as the church members do not smoke or drink, and their visits usually include Bible study and prayer. In times of great poverty, Taiwanese Local Church members turned the *guanxi* banqueting ritual into a way of feeding the church’s poor households without causing the poor to lose face. This example further emphasizes the importance of *guanxi* as a way of providing resources to households in times of need. Jacobs (1979) asserts that the end result of traditional *guanxi* rituals is a relationship with either close or distant *guanxi*. In the Local Church model, this distinction is blurred among church members, as all are seen to be *zijiren*: “brothers and sisters” and as intimate as one’s own “folks.” The strain on one person of maintaining so many close *guanxi* relationships is alleviated in the Local Churches by defining the social debt as one to the congregation as a whole. Any “son of God” can receive from any other “son of God,” and all he or she must do is then serve another “son of God” at some point in the future. This produces a form of Protestantism with a stronger sense of community than is

found among American Protestants. Group solidarity is strong, and the focus faces inward on the "household of God." The only contact "sons of God" want to have with "sons of the devil" is that which is necessary for proselytization. The Local Churches' reconstitution of *guanxi* creates a strong boundary between church members and outsiders, while maintaining the critical core of traditional *guanxi*: the extension of family to provide households with resources by means of fostering relationships through ritualized social interactions. These boundaries frequently remain strong, even between Local Church Christians and Christians from other indigenous Chinese churches, such as the True Jesus Church, because there is not sufficient interaction among members of both groups to produce *ganqing* and create strong bonds of *guanxi* solidarity. Therefore, Local Church Protestants are unlikely to converge with other Chinese Protestant groups, but will instead maintain and expand their own networks of believers, who live in close solidarity.

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