

*Bribing for the Truth: A Reconsideration of Guanxi and Justice
through Geling Yan's The Uninvited*

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Abstract

Geling Yan, one of the world's most well-known writers in diaspora literature, has produced a substantial body of works in both Chinese and English. This paper attempts to provide a comparative analysis of the two conceptions of justice and guanxi through her English novel *The Uninvited* (2006). Drawing on theoretical bases from Jacques Derrida, John Rawls, Michael J. Sandel, Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, and Morgan W. Geddie, this paper highlights the ambiguity and implausibility of locating justice and guanxi as purely transcendental or contingent notions. As exemplified in this work on the bizarre journey of Dan Dong, a factory-worker-turned-pseudo-journalist in contemporary Beijing, this paper argues that the similarity between the two conceptions lies in their common pursuit of benefits from and desires of the other. Two key, common constructs, empathy and reciprocity, are identified. In the later part, this paper focuses on the negative connotations of guanxi as shown in Dan's ventures, highlights its tension with justice in terms of constructs of bonding and trust, and explores if guanxi is really intensifying China's unrestrained corruption and serves as an obstacle to China's progression as a society with the rule of law. Explicating the literary tropes in the work, from metaphors to imagery, this paper concludes how guanxi could complicate the conception of justice with its essentialist/instrumentalist complexity.

Keywords: Chinese society, justice, guanxi, modernization, Yan Geling, *The Uninvited*

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Introduction

Geling Yan, one of the world's most well-known writers in diaspora literature, has produced a substantial body of novels, essays, and scripts in both Chinese and English. Born in Shanghai in 1958, Yan joined the People's Liberation Army (PLA) as a dancer in the midst of the Cultural Revolution when she was as young as 12. When she was discharged over a decade later, Yan had obtained a rank equivalent to Lieutenant Colonel. In 1985 Yan published her first novel and ever since has enjoyed a prolific and well-acclaimed career. Towards the end of 1989 Yan went to the United States for graduate study and now she lives in Berlin, Germany. She also travels frequently back to China. Yan's work focuses primarily of the lives of the ordinary and the underprivileged in modern China, particularly those related with the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). As she once explained in an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, "We should remember what has occurred in China. . . . We want to make great literature out of this [history]. The Cultural Revolution lasted ten years and turned many lives upside down. We have to accept it as part of modern Chinese history" (as cited in Geng, 2014). In her more recent works Yan has diversified her outputs to explore different eras of modern China, but the ubiquitous, ongoing touch that remains in her novels is a rich realist tint that borders on the absurdist and magical at times. One such rendition is her first and only English novel up to this date, *The Uninvited* (2006). In this bizarrely surrealist novel exploring the whimsical aspects of a rapidly developing China, the reader is given a tasty treat of the complex nexus of the Chinese *guanxi* 關係. What are the philosophical or ethical queries behind these networks of mutual dependence and even deceit? How does *guanxi* complicate the conception of justice? Through a comparative discussion, this paper shall explore their shared features, highlight their conceptual differences, and argue that in *The Uninvited*, what makes *guanxi* a complicated conditioning of justice lies in its essentialist/instrumentalist complexity.

The Chinese *Guanxi*

In *The Uninvited*, the establishment, maintenance, and manipulation of relationships are integral to the progression of the plot. One memorable quip from Happy Gao, a young yet relentlessly ambitious journalist in Beijing at the turn of the second millennia who takes advantages of Dan Dong, her newly acquainted business partner, taps right into the essence of *guanxi*: "You can really get people to trust you with your golden retriever face. And I benefit from their trust in you" (Yan, 2006, p. 145). With the help of Dan's "golden retriever face," together the two run into the heinous lives of a master artist, the president of a giant real estate company, and other dignitaries. What Happy does not know, though, is that Dan is simply a reserve cannery worker: he goes to different conferences and banquets, disguising as a freelance journalist, only to enjoy the exotic food and collect the back-alley "money for your troubles"—bribes from big corporations to entice journalists to write "good articles" for them—to make ends meet (Yan, 2006, p. 3). As more and more exclusive breaking news are credited to their writing desks, gradually they are dragged into a bigger scandal that threatens to destroy them all.

The Chinese *guanxi* is not as instrumentalist or orientalist as some might think. It shares many similarities with the western notion of hospitality which is defined as "the act or practice of being hospitable; the reception and entertainment of guests,

visitors, or strangers, with liberality and goodwill” (“Hospitality, n.”). The social dynamics between guests and hosts did not use to be as binary as a modern reader would like to imagine: as J. Hillis Miller (1977) explains, the guest is both a “friendly presence and alien invader”, and the words “host” and “guest” share the same etymological root in *ghos-ti*, meaning “stranger, guest, host, . . . someone with whom one has reciprocal duties of hospitality” (p. 442). Reciprocity is never one-sided. It involves both parties in a relationship. In its crudest sense, the word *guanxi* means simply a “relationship between objects, forces, or persons” (Yang, 1994, p. 1). Both hospitality and *guanxi* feature the inherent need of humans to cultivate personal relationships and reciprocity plays a key role. In *The Uninvited*, Dan the protagonist lives in the crumbling attic for the cannery workers with his wife Little Plum, who also comes from the more rural part of the Chinese Northwest as Dan does. On one Sunday afternoon when Dan is off from his precarious venture as a banquet bug, he finally could sit down and enjoy the homemade meal prepared by his wife. As Dan contemplates, he has not tasted Little Plum’s “hot, soupy noodles” for over a year, and he “feels the warmth and softness spread in his stomach, penetrating his flesh and blood, caressing him inwardly” (Yan, 2009, p. 111). There is perhaps no better scene than this that captures the liberality and pureness of the affectionate bond between husband and wife. The give-and-take of food involves not so much calculation and exchanges for favours as a natural yearning for care, signifying the most primitive form of relationship. The mantra “that male and female should dwell together, is the greatest of human relations” (男女居室，人之大倫也) is rooted in the Chinese psyche, a teaching that could be traced back to as early as Mencius 孟子¹. This seemingly absolute or pure *guanxi*, of course, is fragile and at most times transient, as Dan is suddenly “seized by fear” in the middle of the meal and dreads that “if he doesn’t stop going to banquets, he will lose this loft room with a homemade sofa and stolen hot showers, and Little Plum, who makes hot, soupy noodles” (Yan, 2009, p. 111). Once *guanxi* are expanded to cover a wider social network, there is always the latent possibility of a power struggle in which the self cannot harmonize with her others. For *guanxi* mandates that there should be a well-trodden route to be the right person: one should start from her cultivation of self and expand that to be of her family, nation, and finally the universe. Dan’s fear of losing his wife and home is also his momentum to do the quasi-job posing as a freelance journalist. He has to gain more “money for your troubles” not only to make ends meet, but also to buy a condo, a haven of the couple and them alone, to get rid of the exposed, crowded life with other factory workers in the attic (154). If he could not soothe his marital life, he risks crippling his whole existence. This thought is not uniquely Chinese. Jacques Derrida the French philosopher also argues that a host, in having the power to be such, desires to locate property ownership and thus establishes some form of self-identity through interacting with her guests (as cited in Reynolds, 2010). What makes *guanxi*—and in a more neutral sense, society—possible, rather paradoxically, is the coexisting desires for mutual benefits and intimate relationships.

¹ Another ancient Chinese classic, *I Ching* 易經, preaches similar thoughts: “From the existence of male and female there came afterwards husband and wife. From husband and wife there came father and son. From father and son there came ruler and minister. From ruler and minister there came high and low. When (the distinction of) high and low had existence, afterwards came the arrangements of propriety and righteousness (有天地然後有萬物，有萬物然後有男女，有男女然後有夫婦，有夫婦然後有父子，有父子然後有君臣，有君臣然後有上下，有上下然後禮義有所措).

Guanxi and Reciprocity

The subtler connotation of guanxi is that, as Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (1994) notes, “once guanxi is established between two people, each can ask for a favour of the other with the expectation that the debt incurred will be repaid sometime in the future (p. 1-2). Throughout *The Uninvited*, Dan is in the centre of this mechanism of the exchange of favors. On numerous occasions Happy asks Dan for help to do interviews with Ocean Chen, a famous painter, by offering Dan promises and personal gifts beforehand. She arranges a teenage girl called Old Ten to do foot massage for Dan (Yang, 2006, p. 42-43), and promises to help him publish his own articles if he could help her call Master Chen (Yang, 2006, p. 96). Happy is forever keen to offer him these benefits and introduce him to her acquaintances so as to trap Dan in a never-ending, ever-looping cycle of gifts, compromises, and networks. The contrived career as a journalist allows him to receive complimentary gratuities from housing developers, construction workers, farmers coming to the city from remote areas, restaurant managers, and many others. They do not approach Dan with no purposes: the poor farmers and construction workers in particular are suffering from low and unpaid wages and they are heavily exploited by the corrupted cadres of the government and the nouveau riche (Yan, 2006, p. 79; p. 168). They implore Dan to bring justice to them by writing and publishing their stories. Justice accidentally comes to Dan’s feet, however amateur and uneducated he is as a fake reporter. Besides guanxi, reciprocity also features in the conceptualization of justice. As Brian Barry and Matt Matravers (2011) explain, “justice has always been closely connected to the ideas of desert and equality. Rewards and punishments are justly distributed if they go to those who deserve them. But in the absence of different desert claims, justice demands equal treatment.” Identifying himself with the oppressed and underprivileged, Dan is passionate to bring to the spotlight a demand of compensation for damage and the punishment for the commission of crimes for his fellow peasants and blue-collar friends.

A Sense of Justice

Mere exchanges of favors do not facilitate the sense of justice in Dan’s heart. Reciprocity is not limited to physical means. It should evoke in persons the sense of empathy and morality. As John Rawls writes in his magnum opus *A Theory of Justice* (1999), “it is a necessary feature of moral feelings, and part of what distinguishes them from the natural attitudes, that the person’s explanation of his experience invokes a moral concept and its associated principles” (p. 421). Rawls’s call for each person to realize their “original position” under the veil of ignorance is aptly demonstrated in Dan’s lamentation at his first banquet. Dan charges on the wealthy guests when they are lavishly devouring peacock meat: “Do you know what my neighbors on the building-top slum eat? They eat canned food long past its expiration date. Do you know what their monthly wages are? Less than your daily fee. . . . Do all of you think it’s fair?” The next question, however, appears to be what kind of justice should be pursued to right this wrong. Theories of egalitarian justice face challenges with their “grounding the commitment to the fundamental equality of persons” and “giving an account of each agent’s motivation to behave justly” (Barry & Matravers, 2011). Problems arise for other theories of justice as well. Virtue ethics, utilitarianism, and many others have their own advantages and drawbacks. To think beyond the relativist outlook, a useful tool in the conceptualization of justice at hand is guanxi.

Justice and Empathy

For better or worse, in *The Uninvited*, guanxi forces Dan to confront society amidst pressures from communities and prompts him to engage more actively with his moral calling. The numerous banquets that Dan has attended throughout his saga, with gratuity and gourmet food from peacock meat to shark fins, are the very epitomes that before these journalists write anything about the events or companies, they are indebted to the generosity of the host. The deals are struck not with the direct exchange of goods (in this case a complimentary article in a newspaper) but by the pre-established bond of human interaction. Guanxi, in a sense, “concentrates on building the bond or relationship before the transaction in such a way that once the transaction is completed, the company and customer become one cooperative unit” (Geddie, DeFranco, and Geddie, 2005, p. 627). Dan is thus caught between the dual obligations to both his nefarious benefactors and his emotionally-attached, brutally-treated compatriots. Although banquets, favours, and gifts are utilized, guanxi is not equivalent to impersonal bribery and corruption. These means, emphasized as they are in exchanges of favours, help to activate guanxi only when the emotional responses of the parties concerned are also accounted. Guanxi inclines to adhere with the principle of homophily which is about the more frequent contact between similar people than that among dissimilar people, implying that “cultural, behavioral, genetic, or material information that flows through networks will tend to be localized” (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook, 2001, p. 416). In Chinese society, for instance, the native-place ties are a source of affinity: people coming from the same village, county, or province, or speak the same accent could be counted as reliable and to “do a favor or open a back door” (Yang, 2006, p. 115). This explains, at least partly, the more than passionate attitude Master Chen displays to Dan when they first meet in the peacock banquet. Master Chen recognizes Dan’s accent to be the same as his, immediately “gives a friendly slap to Dan’s shoulder”, and declares that “only a landsman of mine would be so tall and strong and straightforward” (Yang, 2006, p. 11). The relationship between the two develops as they continue to cross each other’s paths. Later when Dan gives Master Chen the green onions his native parents have given him, although the onions “don’t look very fresh,” Master Chen is more than escalated, exclaiming “How did you know I miss these so much! When I was too sick to eat anything, I begged to have onions like this” (Yang, 2006, p. 66). The relationship borders on one between father and son as Dan gradually could gain the total trust of the old master and unveil his corrupted secrets. As Yang (1994) puts it, emotional bonds like “friendship, kinship, classmates, and so forth are not coextensive with guanxi, but serve as bases or potential sites for guanxi. . . . They act as spheres of potential guanxi operations, as reservoirs of binding ties and ethical obligations on which guanxixue [the study of guanxi] draws to fulfil its own end” (p. 111). Though never intended to take any advantage of their close relationship, even with Happy’s incessant urge to expose Master Chen’s scandalous life, Dan attains an attachment with Master Chen which goes beyond nepotism, one that Master Chen’s mistress and secretary could only envy. Tiny gifts and innocuous ingratiation might be helpful to building guanxi, but the finer emotional sentiments that humans value and portray for each other—that is what we called empathy—could be the deeper root in the understanding of guanxi.

Justice and Guanxi: Three Images

Inevitably Dan's empathy and his sense of justice are overwhelmed by incessant yearnings for reciprocity. Sociologists are conscious of guanxi through its negative connotations and they are quick to point out that it is "fuelling [China's] rampant corruption" and "an obstacle to China's becoming a modern society based on the rule of law" (Gold, Guthrie, & Wank, 2002, p. 3). The peasants and construction workers who ask Dan to give them a voice in mass media are only flashes of many more cases where "Party cadres" and the nouveau riche embezzle their hard-earned wages. The sad truth is that when guanxi is rendered in the extreme, humans, mutually dependent on empathy and reciprocity as they are, become instruments for each other to fulfil their materialistic desires. Dan confesses when a construction worker presses him to expose their suffering: "He is scared to be amid so many helpless beings. He hates being a container into which these miserable guys spit and vomit their bitterness and sadness" (Yang, 2006, p. 170). Even his accidental love interest, the massage girl Old Ten, sleeps with him not without any purpose: she wants Dan to write a story of her sister who was deserted by a rich young official and died tragically (Yang, 2006, 117). The fluid relationship between guanxi and justice destabilizes and troubles Dan's self-identity. Towards the end, when Dan accidentally bumps into an old man who works as a film extra on the street, he expresses his admiration for the old man and it captures precisely his defiance against the essentialist/instrumentalist complexity of guanxi. Out of the woven network of guanxi as an "extra", he no longer has to "be bossed around by Happy", "understand Ocean Chen's profoundly confusing paintings, or his infinitely intriguing circle of people", or "feel guilty and full of heartache for people like Old Ten and her sister" (Yang, 2006, p. 231). But instead of being the extra, free man he has so fancied, the ironic ending puts him onto the spotlight of a talk show, as his misadventure is finally brought to public and he is arrested for counterfeiting his identity (Yang, 2006, p. 268). Dan's struggles are thus ultimately fruitless, under the forcefulness of guanxi to conform people to the wider, social tides.

Conclusion

The Uninvited captures the delicate roles guanxi plays in relation to justice and presents the farcical situations when this beast goes completely untamed. Functioning as both an engine and a break, guanxi enslaves people's lives in its most suffocating rendition, but at the same time it signifies the precise values of what makes one human which is the emotional-rational bonding among friends, families, and nations. In a poignantly symbolic scene of a pigeon trapped in a subway towards the end of the novel:

Dan looks, feeling for the bird. It is a most frightening nightmare for a pigeon, repeating her route as if under some unbreakable spell, circling in a mysterious, dark orbit. The more she tries to break free, the more deeply she is trapped. There she goes once more, dashing into the tunnel, her body askew. She will fly until her energy is exhausted and she drops dead. (Yang, 2006, 248-249)

With the fact that no man is an island, Dan's attempt to be completely free is fatally flawed. Rather than waking up from the "most frightening nightmare" of guanxi once and for all, a more plausible way out requires a justified conception of justice by "the

conditions of our life as we know it or not at all” (Rawls, 1999, p. 398). A theory of justice, with a proper interpellation of guanxism, might serve a better role in society, or at least in modern, Chinese society, with the proposal that the rules of justice can be compromised through the rational agreement of each individualistic yet connected agent to dwell on with others.

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