Reciprocity, Collectivism, and the Chinese Church

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A gift has meaning within a specific context. Focusing on the context of gift-exchange can shed more light on patronage and reciprocity than merely speaking of the word "gift." Therefore, we will reflect on the significance of reciprocity within 2 particular settings: (a) cultures and (b) relationships. This talk will present reciprocity within a Chinese context. Using Chinese culture as a case study enables us to see the significance of social exchange within different types of relationships.

Consider the following ways people interpreted the favors done for them. In 2006, an older woman in Nanjing fell when getting off a bus. A man, Peng Yu, helped the woman, contacted her family and paid her initial hospital fee (about $33). However, she accused him of causing her fall. Although no corroborating evidence existed proving Peng Yu was at fault, the judge in the case ruled against him saying, "no one would, in good conscience, help someone unless they felt guilty."[1]

A similar situation occurred in 2013, when Wang Lan saw an older woman had fallen. Like Peng Yu, Wang Lan assisted the elderly woman, contacted her family, and paid the initial medical fees. Once again, the injured woman accessed Wang Lan of pushing her claiming, "If it wasn't you who bumped into me, why would you have helped take me to the hospital?" Later, cameras proved conclusively that Wang Lan did not harm the older woman.

These two anecdotes illustrate the importance of context when giving or receiving gifts and favors. Few people could imagine just how differently these two elderly women interpreted the actions of Peng Yu and Wang Lan. However, in each case, the helper was a relational outsider to the injured people. Consequently, their assistance was viewed with suspicion.

On the one hand, we know our relationship with other people will influence how we interpret their gifts. In the context of shallow, one-dimensional relationships, they are considered bribes. In the context of long-term, multi-faceted relationships, they are expressions of love and loyalty. In a way, these norms of social exchange are common sense. On the other hand, the ideas and practices most common to human life often are the most complex. To see why a concept is complex, simply begin talking about context.

So, we now turn to look at relationships in Chinese culture.

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[1] Countless articles retell this story and the next one. Both are summarized online: https://medium.com/shanghai-living/4-31-why-people-would-usually-not-help-you-in-an-accident-in-china-c50972e28a82. cf. https://www.chinasmack.com/good-samaritan-again-blamed-after-helping-fallen-elderly.

Reciprocity in Chinese Relationships

A significant form of reciprocity in Chinese culture is called *renqing.* A wooden translation of *renqing* (人情) is "human feelings." *Renqing* describes a voluntary reciprocal exchange between individuals *based on emotional attachment*.[2] Sentiment perpetuates social exchange as people continue to foster mutual affection.

Renqing is one way that people establish *guanxi* (or relationships). Guanxi could be defined as "those social connections that facilitate repeated favor exchange."[3] *Guanxi* subdivides into three types: "obligatory (family and kinship relations), reciprocal (friends and acquaintances), and utilitarian (seller-buyers or strangers)." [4] *Renqing* only exists within non-familial relationships. Chinese do not regard the give-and-take of family relationships as *renqing*. Rather, helping one's relatives is an obligation, what a person "should do" (yinggai de). In this way, obligation is distinct from *renqing*.

Familial relationships entail a fundamental obligation or duty *without respect to one's feelings*. People are responsible to protect and secure the needs of family members, both "immediate" and "extended" family (to use a common Western distinction). One scholar summarizes the relationship between gift-giving practices and family. She says,

> "[T]he motive of reciprocity does not characterize the gift-giving relations in Chinese culture since *the relationships within a family in China are too sacred be bound by the obligation to reciprocate.*"[5]

Exchanging resources among family is a *moral imperative*.

By contrast, *renqing* carries only slight moral connotations. It primarily concerns wisdom, etiquette or propriety. The person who properly exchanges *renqing* understands how to manage interpersonal relationships. Thus, Yang explains *renqing* as "the proper way of conducting oneself in social relationships, treating each according to the behavior that their specific status and relationship to oneself dictate." [6]

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[2] Cf. K. K. Hwang, "Face and favor: The Chinese power game." *The American Journal of Sociology*, 92(4) (1987): 944–74; Yunxiang Yan. *The Flow of Gifts: Reciprocity and Social Networks in a Chinese Village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

[3] Yanjie Bian. "The Increasing Significance of *Guanxi* in China's Transitional Economy." Presentation as the 41st Annual Sorokin Lecture. University of Saskatchewan. 29 Jan 2010. p. 4. Technically, *guanxi* can refer to any relationship, though verbal appeals to *guanxi* routinely connote Bian's definition.

[4] Chao C. Chen, Xiao-Ping Chen, and Shengsheng Huang. "Chinese Guanxi: An Integrated Review and New Directions for Future Research" *Management and Organization Review* 9:1, March 2013, 167–207. Citing Zhang, Y., & Zhang, Z. *Guanxi* and organizational dynamics in China: A link between individual and organizational levels. *Journal of Business Ethics,* 67(4) 2006: 375–392.

[5] Vinita P. Amberwani, "Examining Gift Giving Motives in a Cross Cultural Context." (PhD Dissertation; Carleton University, Ottawa, 2014), p. 70. What about filial piety? While filial piety is reciprocal in nature, Chinese do not categorize it as *renqing*.

[6] Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China* (Ithaca, NY; Cornell, 2016), 68.

Hwang describes permanent familial relationships as "expressive ties." He also identifies two types of non-familial relationships: (1) "instrumental ties" and (2) "mixed ties."[7] Instrumental ties lack an "expressive component" of family relationships. One establishes temporary "instrumental ties" for "attaining his material goals." These *transactional* relationships include those between a business and its customers.

"Mixed ties" must "keep a certain expressive component" (i.e., *renqing*). Typical "mixed-tie" relationships (i.e. friendships) include "neighbors, classmates, colleagues, teachers and students, people sharing a birth place, and so forth." They are voluntary and particular to common interests or background. In the West, examples include school alumni, fans of the same sports team, and, at times, those with similar political views. Ji Ruan summarizes, "Mixed ties are relationships in which an individual seeks to influence other people by means of *renqing* and *mianzi* ['face']."[8]

How does social exchange work within these three "ties" or relationships? The rules of exchange that govern familial and transactional relationships resemble those of other cultures and so are not difficult to grasp. By contrast, friendships (or "mixed tie" relationships) are more complex. In what follows, I will explain the rules and function of reciprocity in Chinese relationships.

Exchanging gifts or favors primarily serves two interconnected functions. First, social exchange establishes relationship with others. I include the initiation, maintenance, and deepening of relationships. Second, gift-giving sows the seed of obligation, which will *someday* bear fruit in the form of returned favors.

Exchange rituals are so basic that *not* giving or receiving gifts and favors will eventually end friendships.[9] Friendship [mix-tie relationships] are consciously pragmatic, often initiated when practical concerns arise. They are less likely to stem from mere common interest.

One could summarize Chinese *renqing* or reciprocity with a phrase: "Give in order to receive." Before criticizing this perspective as "selfish" or unbiblical, a few observations can help us nuance the Chinese notion of reciprocity.

For instance, the Bible contains several instances where one is motivated to give by the promise to receive. In Matthew 6:3–4, Jesus admonishes,

> "But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

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[7] Hwang, "Face and favor," pp. 949–53

[8] Ji Ruan, "The Use of Guanxi in Everyday Life." (PhD Dissertation, University of Kent, 2015), p. 100.

[9] Many have made this observation. Cf. Amanda Elizabeth Brunson, "The Conceptualization of Friendship by Chinese International Students at a University in the Southeastern United States." (PhD Dissertation; Tuscaloosa, AL; University of Alabama, 2017), 64, 89, 102.

Likewise, in Matthew 10:42,

> "And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward."

These passages highlight the point that the Chinese expectation of return is not entirely without some biblical correlate.[10]

What about Jesus' admonition "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35)? First of all, notice that Jesus gives motivation for giving –– blessing). Second, Chinese effectively combine the two actions such that the former (*giving*) is a means to the latter (*receiving*). While one is blessed to give, he is doubly blessed if he *also* receives. Chinese reciprocity creates a "win-win" scenario. Sharing resources limits competition by fostering cooperation. In effect, this approach is one strategy for dealing with the so-called "limited good" phenomenon.[11]

Basic human experience reminds us that Chinese reciprocity is not inherently "selfish." The function of Chinese reciprocity is not unique to East Asia. My description of *renqing* could well describe similar relationships across human cultures. On the one hand, doing favors and giving gifts are natural ways to initiate a friendship even in the West. For example, people welcome new neighbors by bringing them food or other small gifts when they move to the area.

Chinese use various social rituals (called *li*) to foster *renqing* (i.e., reciprocity among friends). These include banquets, hosting meals, and giving gifts (e.g., birthday, wedding, random small token items). Over times, perpetual social exchange forms relationships that can eventually approximate kinship bonds.

On the other hand, friendships thrive when people exchange favors and gifts. Few genuine friendships survive one-way relationships, as when a "friend" perpetually refuses to invest in the other person, whether in the form of favors, advice, encouragement, or gifts.[12] Accordingly, one might conclude that Chinese, in general, are less naïve and more sober-minded about the nature of friendship.

Philosophically, Chinese reciprocity is rooted in the fundamental belief that the world and society have a natural order. Thus, a person should maintain one's social position through *renqing*, which guarantees balance in relationships. One scholar

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[10] From a different angle, cf. 1 Tim 5:4, "But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God."

[11] This notion refers to the idea that resources are limited such that one person having a resource means someone else does not have it. Cf. Jayson Georges. "Limited Good" has limited good. 2 Nov 2015. Online: http://honorshame.com/limited-good/

[12] I exclude Facebook "friends" since many such people are little more than distance associations.

summarizes, "If a Chinese is accused of 'knowing no *renqing*', this means that he is lacking li and is incapable of managing interpersonal relationships."[13]

Another aspect of Chinese reciprocity is noteworthy, because it is not often present in other contexts. In China, the gift-giver typically is the social inferior *rather than* the person with higher social status. In other contexts, the social superior gains honor by giving gifts or favors. What is the purpose of lower status persons initiating the exchange of gifts?

He or she seeks to establish a relationship in order to secure favors, if not soon then when the need eventually arises. Gift-givers do not always have a specific favor in mind. Rather, they initiate a relationship "just in case." Simply having a large relationship network is a beneficial asset itself. After all, being able to connect people together is a form of giving to others.

For example, imagine Person B (Ben). He establishes a relationship with Person A (Alan). However, he does not necessarily want something from Alan. Rather, Ben also has a relationship with Charles. So, Ben can use his relationship with Alan as a resource by connecting Alan to Charles. In this way, Ben grants a favor to Charles. Ben is a giver more than a "taker."

Social exchange can have a *preemptory* nature. Yet, preemptory exchanges are not necessarily "bribes" since each person does not agree on a specific *quid pro quo* arrangement. Gift-givers are always aware that recipients might deny future requests.

For example, we once lived in apartment with a fantastic landlord. Periodically, he took our family to eat at a nice restaurant and would help us out with this or that need. But, in 3 years' time, he never asked for anything from us in return except the rent. He was wealthy and needed little materially from us. One day, in our fourth year in the relationship, the landlord asked our family to help his friend, a singer and specifically wanted us to be in her music video. We gladly obliged out of a healthy sense of obligation that comes from a sense of friendship. In short, during the first three years of gifts and favors, thee landlord had not ulterior agenda except to foster *renqing*.

What about the circumstance where the social superior initiates an exchange of favors? Ji Ruan highlights potential differences:

> If the mayor of the city were to ask a headteacher [for a student's acceptance into a school], there would be no banqueting or gift giving. However, although they would not involve the practice of instrumental li, they would still involve the concept of instrumental li, such as *renqing* (sense of indebtedness) and face. The mayor would usually keep the *renqing* debt in mind and would be more likely to give the headteacher a promotion in the future; that is why the headteacher would accept the mayor's request for a favour.[14]

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[13] Ji Ruan, "The Use of Guanxi in Everyday Life," p. 91. Likewise, cf. Gouldner, "The Norm of Reciprocity," *American Sociological Review*, 1960: 174–76.

[14] Ji Ruan, "The Use of Guanxi in Everyday Life," p. 241.

Although gift-giving does not precede the request for a favor, the rule of *renqing* requires eventual reciprocation.

A few overarching principles govern *renqing* exchanges and are reflected in numerous idioms.

1. Pay back more than you receive

This point ensures an ongoing sense of indebtedness between parties.

2. Limit how much you receive from others

This protects recipients against becoming indebted beyond their ability to repay.

3. Never directly ask someone to return favors

The final point treats the relationship as a mere transaction (instrumental tie). Accordingly, *renqing* (human feeling) should govern the relationship, not the desire to achieve a transaction.

If people do not want friendship, what can they do? They could use some of the following four strategies. Each assumes that Person An initiates a friendship by giving a gift to the unwilling Person Zhang.

1. Person Zhang never pays back *renqing*.
2. Person Zhang does not accept the gift.
3. Person Zhang immediately repays An with a gift.
4. Person Zhang repays with a gift of less (or exactly equal) value.

The first approach is indirect but requires time before Person An understands Person Zhang does not want to be friends. The second option is the clearest response, followed by the third method. In the fourth option, the closer the gifts are in value, the less likely Person An will discern Person Zhang's intent.

By contrast, how does one encourage friendship? Person Zhang could respond in three ways.

1. Give a gift of greater value.
2. Give a timely gift.
3. Give a gift especially suited to the recipient (Person An).

I already mentioned the first choice. The second and third options demonstrate Person Zhang's thoughtfulness and sincere concern for Person An. Person Zhang exemplifies "human feeling" (*renqing*) by offering a gift or favor that is well-timed to

Person An's needs or by showing awareness of An's unique interests. Such intentionality is a signal that An and Zhang's relationship transcends a specific transaction.

Why does reciprocity differ across cultures?

Next, we ask a key question: Why does reciprocity differ across cultures? (i.e., the rules of reciprocity). I will focus on one answer in particular.

Peng Mei studied the differences between gift-giving differs in China and Germany.[15] She [Peng Mei] says, "When invited to their boss's birthday party, 26.67% Chinese would give expensive presents while only 3.33% Germans would do so."[16] Both cultures have long-term, pragmatic orientations. Accordingly, one might expect both cultures to perceive the long-term importance of gift-giving for fostering a good relationship with one's boss.[17]

What explains this statistical gap?

> She (Peng Mei) concludes,
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> [For Chinese] Under this "Guanxi" influence, it seems to be a very good opportunity to give expensive gifts to one's boss to further the relationship…. But the Germans are influenced by individualism and equality, therefore they have clear-cut lines between public and private interests. (Though there is high power distance between the leaders and their employees in Germany, the employees would rarely think of getting any concrete benefits in work by establishing a close relationship with their leaders).[18]

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[15] Peng Mei, "A Contrastive Study of Gift-Giving Between Chinese and Germans," *US-China Foreign Language* Vol. 14, no. 8 (August 2016): 597–604.

[16] Peng Mei, "A Contrastive Study of Gift-Giving Between Chinese and Germans," p. 601. In addition, Peng notes, "[M]ore than half of the Chinese participants (63.33%) admit expensive gifts are often used to demonstrate the significance attached to one's relationship with the recipient. It is the researcher's assumption that for most of the Chinese people, the more expensive a gift is, the more meaning it entails…. On the contrary, only 20% Germans would feel the same" (p. 600).

[17] Inexplicably, Peng Mei (p 602) asserts Germany is a high-power distance culture, despite evidence to the contrary (Cf. https://www.hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/). In fact, Germany has a low-power distance culture. China is a high power distance culture. Yet, this does not sufficiently explain the statistical discrepancy. Although a low-power distance might alleviate pressure to give to one's boss, nothing about low-power distance *discourages* giving gifts to one's boss. By comparison, we could expect Germany's long-term orientation to spur greater gift giving to bosses.

[18] Peng Mei, "A Contrastive Study of Gift-Giving Between Chinese and Germans," p. 601. Peng cites Boye Lafayette De Mente. *Chinese Etiquette & Ethics in Business*. Chicago: NTC Business Books, 1989; Hu, W. Z., & Cornelius, G. *Encountering the Chinese: A Guide for Americans.* Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, 1991; Seligman, S. D. *Chinese Business Etiquette*. New York: Warner Books, 1999. Peng adds, "However, it should be noted here that now in China, the young generation might have been very much affected by the Western cultures and values, so this practice is likely to become less and less. That may be why only 26.67% of the Chinese would do so." Peng's conclusion likely stems in part from the contrast between the 26.67% figure and the 63.33% of Chinese who "admit expensive gifts are often used to demonstrate the significance attached to one's relationship with the recipient."

The individualistic versus collectivistic distinction helps explain people's different responses to their bosses.[19] But we need to develop this suggestion further.

People loosely describe collectivist cultures as those prioritizing the group above the individual. By contrast, individualistic cultures emphasize the rights and prerogatives of the individual over the group. These descriptions are simplistic generalizations. They merely stress characteristics that tend to be prominent within cultures. Broadly speaking, Chinese emphasize the "collective self" (*dawo*) above the "individual self" (*xiaowo*). The former depends on one's similarities shared with others. The latter highlights individual features *distinct from* the surrounding community.

Given a collectivist perspective, Chinese do not sharply dichotomize "public" and "private" spheres. The public/private distinction is more prominent in individualistic cultures, where people assume multiple, separate identities. Thus, one's public role (e.g., employee) should not affect private relationships. Fostering a close personal relationship with one's boss could even be deemed inappropriate in a Western context.

Western friendships often center on common interests, e.g., sports, books, hobbies. Belonging to interest-based social groups rarely entails a sense of responsibility or debt. Group members relate within a narrow sphere of life. They might not have meaningful relationships beyond their shared interest. A Westerner who divides his relationships in this way can theoretically belong to an infinite number of social groups. Social identity, at any given moment, is temporary. One's personal sense of identity, across countless groups, is most likely defined by the individual's particularities.

How do these factors influence reciprocity?

Western individualism tends to limit the quantity and quality of reciprocity exchanges. This is due to the restricted scope and longevity of social relationships. In addition, by partitioning one's relationship network, a person has limited ability to develop the sort of reputation and trust across a community that encourages social exchange.

By contrast, Chinese people tend to prioritize relationships based on common background (e.g., hometown, language). Commonality transcends the individual. "Who *we* are," not merely "what *I* do" determines identity. This view of identity will more likely sustain reciprocal relationships over time.[20] So then, what is the relationship between collectivism and reciprocity? To answer this question, we should observe the link between trust, collectivism, and reciprocity.

As trust increases between people, so does reciprocity.[21] Multiple factors influence whether one trusts another person. Belonging to the same group generally contributes to higher levels of trust between people. If you and I belong to the same group, we are more

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[19] Egalitarian ≠ individualistic; Hierarchical ≠ communal.

[20] For reasons for the collectivist/individualist divide and Chinese/Westerners, see Richard Nesbitt, *Geography of Thought How Asians and Westerners Think Differently...and Why* NY: Simon & Schuster, 2003.

[21] For example, cf. "Trust, Reciprocity and Social Distance in China."

likely to trust one another than outsiders. These observations seem obvious, but they mask several distinctions with practical implications.

For instance, because humans are social beings, even so-called "individualistic" (sub)cultures have "collectivist" tendencies. All people simultaneously belong to multiple groups. Families, classmates, sports teams, unions, and nations are a few examples. To understand the link between collectivism and reciprocity, one should further clarify the meaning of "group." What does it mean to belong to the same in-group? What separates insiders from outsiders?

Are these people insiders or outsiders?

In recent scholarship, researchers distinguish 2 types of collectivism: "categorical collectivism" and "relational collectivism."[22] To illustrate the difference, imagine each image above represents different types of people. At one level, "individualists" only marginally define themselves as members of collectives.

People from so-called "individualistic" cultures usually are "categorical collectivists." Herrmann-Pillath writes,

> "Categorical collectivism refers to shared ascriptions of a group of people, such as shared ethnicity or shared membership to an organization." Examples include nationality, ethnicity, gender, common interest, alumni of the same school, among others. Group membership is "defined in terms of prototypical properties that are shared among members of a common ingroup."[23]

By contrast, East Asian cultures typically perceive groups as primarily relationship based. Brewer and Chen add,

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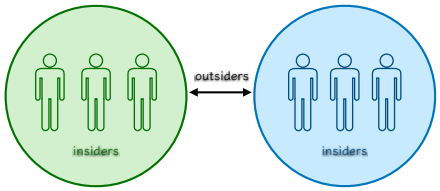
[22] A landmark paper delineating this distinction is Brewer and Chen, "Where (Who) Are Collectives in Collectivism? Towards Conceptual Clarification of Individualism and Collectivism." *Psychological Review* 111 (1): 133–151. Where they use the term "group collectivism," I use "categorical collectivism" for clarity. "Group" increases ambiguity since "collectivism" already implies the idea of "group." This term is also used by Carsten Herrmann-Pillath in "Social Capital, Chinese Style: Individualism, Relational Collectivism and the Cultural Embeddedness of Institutions-Performance Link," 2009. p. 19.

[23] Brewer and Chen, 137.

"Whereas people in Western individualist cultures tend to place emphasis on the categorical distinction between ingroups and outgroups, people in East Asian cultures tend to perceive groups as primarily relationship based."[24]

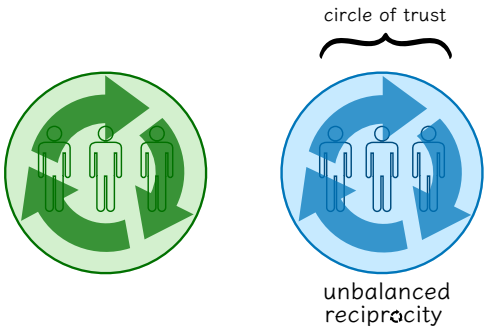


Such "relational collectivists" primarily identify with those whom they are interdependent and have ongoing interaction. Such close relationships transcend abstract categories. They stress cooperation, personal loyalty, and maintaining group harmony.

Because these two forms of "collectivism" prioritize different "groups," their definitions of "insider" differ. Accordingly, we should consider the relationship between collectivism and trust. Categorical collectivists have larger in-groups, thus "broader radius of trust." On the other hand, relational collectivists, having smaller in-groups, tend to have a *narrower* radius of trust.[25]

Types of Reciprocity and Collectivism

I already said that trust and reciprocity have a positive correlation. On this point, we should distinguish two kinds of reciprocity: *balanced* and *unbalanced reciprocity*.

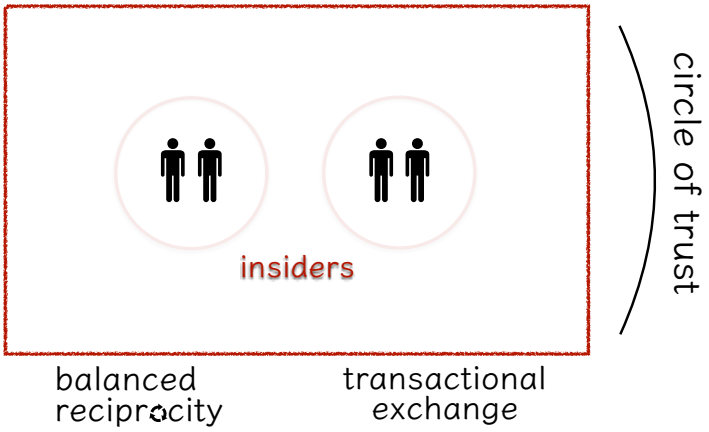


[24] Brewer and Chen, 137.

[25] André van Hoorn, "Individualist-Collectivist Culture and Trust Radius," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 2015, Vol. 46(2) 269–276.

Relational collectivists are more accustomed to unbalanced reciprocity (or "altruistic reciprocity").[26] Chinese *renqing* is an example of unbalanced reciprocity. Partners perpetuate their debt to one another through an unbalanced exchange of gifts and favors.

Categorical collectivists usually favor balanced reciprocity.[27] Studies repeatedly show them uncomfortable with unequal exchanges, whether in their favor or against them.



Categorical Collective

The two types of collectives (categorical and relational) affect how group members extend trust. For categorical collectivists (i.e., individualists), trust is based on common affinity or shared attributes; hence a broad trust radius. Reciprocity and trust interact in a different manner.

Three observations are noteworthy. First, because categorical collectivists emphasize balanced exchange, reciprocity is akin to a transaction, which is characterized by immediate and equal repayment of debt. Therefore, reciprocity plays less of a role in forming and sustaining close relationships.

Second, people are primed to think of their group identity only when their categorical collective is explicitly contrasted with other groups. Thus, one is less likely to think of her national identity except *in conscious comparison* to other nationalities. A fan of a sports team, like the New York Yankees, expresses that social identity when triggered by the fan of another team bragging about a rival or perhaps criticizing the Yankees.

Apart from these inter-group contexts, one lays greater stress on personal identity than social identity. In that case, individuals are less concerned with cooperation and

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[26] Yiming Jing, "How Interpersonal trust is developed from social exchange", pp. ???

[27] "Balanced reciprocity", cf. Yiming Jing, How Interpersonal trust is developed from social exchange."

harmonious relationships.[28] Furthermore, a person simultaneously belongs to multiple categorical collectives. At any given time, one's sense of collective identity depends on the situation. In this context, reciprocity is more instrumental than affection-based.[29] Social exchange is based on the principle of equity, i.e., as a transaction depending on a cost-benefit analysis.

Third, reciprocity is an unfitting and impractical means of forming one's categorical collective identity. Exchanging favors and gifts does not affect a social identity based on shared attributes. Also, a person has limited resources such as time and money. It is unreasonable to expect individuals to maintain ongoing social exchange with a broad circle of potential "insiders."

Relational collectivists are more discriminate. Unbalanced reciprocity (or *renqing*) is well suited to foster trust. These people engender positive affections for one another by exchanging favors and extending mutual social debts.

Such reciprocity determines the closeness of one's relationships. Relational collectivists form in-groups that are particular rather than categorical. Using "unbalanced" reciprocity builds trust and so helps Chinese discriminate between those with whom they share resources and those they do not.[30] In short, Chinese (relational) reciprocity is a form of *paying it forward*. Favors serve as deposits, which accrue with time and return to the giver with increased value.

The two types of collectivism explain research findings that appear counterintuitive. Scholars characterize the relational collectivists in generalized terms, claiming such collectivists prioritize the group over the individual.

By contrast, we *expect* individualists (i.e., categorical collectivists) to show less consideration to insiders because they stress their own needs above the group. In fact, categorical collectivists (i.e. individualists) consistently show stronger bias towards their in-group ("insiders") compared to relational collectivists.[31] *How do we make sense of this?*

The explanation lies in the fact that we define "in-group" differently. Relational collectivists are less trusting of people who belong to their categorical in-group (nationality, ethnicity, gender, etc.). Without an established personal relationship, such

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[28] Last sentence a paraphrase of Brewer and Chen, p. 146. Cf. Yiming Jing. "How Interpersonal trust is developed from social exchange." PhD dissertation.

[29] As Yiming Jing states, "American trust is more instrumentally based whereas Chinese trust is more affectively based, only emerge from social exchanges that last over extended time-periods, and involve real-world, face-to-face interactions" (p. 52).

[30] By contrast, categorical collectivists have less need to consider how to allocate their resource among others since they give according to personal need.

[31] Brewer and Chen, "Where (Who) Are Collectives in Collectivism? Towards Conceptual Clarification of Individualism and Collectivism, Psychological Review 111 (1): 133–151. (pp. ??) "Social Capital, Chinese Style: Individualism, Relational Collectivism and the Cultural Embeddedness of Institutions-Performance Link" p. 20??

people are "strangers." In other words, a Chinese person is not going to trust others simply because they also are Chinese.

This conclusion is consistent with numerous sociological studies. For example, "The comparative lack of abstract group loyalty has always been commonplace in descriptions of Chinese social behavior."[32] Also, "Americans tended to trust strangers on the basis of a common group category membership, whereas stranger trust for Japanese was contingent on whether the target person shared a direct or indirect relationship link with a close other."[33]

Implications for the Church

How might the above observations influence the church? The implications are many, so I will highlight just a few applications across a spectrum of areas.[34]

First, how do we apply the distinction between categorical collectives and relational collectives? Theologically speaking, the church is a categorical collective. The church consists of followers of Christ who share common values, convictions, beliefs, practices, and experiences.

From our observations, we anticipate that churches will face certain challenges. Sharing attributes or common affinity does not guarantee enduring social ties that transcend social contexts. An individual belongs to multiple social groups. Someone might only have an enhanced sense of belonging to the church (i.e. a particular categorical collective) when other people criticize or compete with it.

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[32] Carsten Hermann-Pillath, "Social Capital, Chinese Style: Individualism, Relational Collectivism and the Cultural Embeddedness of Institutions-Performance Link." October 2009. p. 20.

[33] Brewer and Chen, see quote citation below in notes

[34] Brewer and Chen make a noteworthy observation. A person's self-conception at times either coheres or diverges from one's social identity. Inasmuch as a categorical collectivist sees a discrepancy between his self-conception and his social identity, he will likely feel guilt. However, for a relational collectivist, inconsistency in one's personal and social identity produces shame.

To understand why this occurs, we must remember the distinction between guilt and shame. At a fundamental level, guilt primarily concerns actions, i.e., *doing* wrong, whereas shame involves identity, i.e., *being* bad. In an individualistic (categorical collectivist) culture, some attribute or abstract principle characterizes the group. It determines who belongs and who does not. This external criterion creates perceived standards that people can transgress. These standards are objective, rather than subjective, in the sense that they are not relative to a particular person's whims or opinions. A person's transgressions constitute wrongdoing and thus produce guilt.

Relational collectivists do not have externally determined boundaries that define their in-groups. One is acutely conscious of the inter-relationship between one's behavior, his relationship to other people, and his status within a group. Certain actions might offend others or even threaten significant relationships. A person might find himself rejected and cast out of the group. Accordingly, someone in this cultural context is sensitive to others' personal assessment of him.

In effect, one easily begins to regard the church as a type of volunteer society. The problem is exacerbated in China where Chinese are not prone to trust persons in the same broad social category. How might Christians respond?

Christians should move from seeing the church as a "categorical collective" to forming the church into a "relational collective." When believers initially meet, they are not linked by personal interaction. Developing close relationships occurs through the exchange of grace (i.e., gifts, favors). This give-and-take creates enduring relationships that transcend theological or ideological unity. Ultimately, the church must forge a unity based on practice, not mere principle alone.

The choice of where one lives can also hinder churches from becoming relational collectives. If people attend a church far from their home, they have limited opportunities to engage in ongoing social exchange, which deepens close connections with others. In practice, their work and neighborhood relationships will have a more significant effect on their social identity.

This discussion helps us understand and analyze the church in China and elsewhere. For the most part, the Chinese church is not organized in "denominations." Rather, they are networks, some large, others small. Are they categorical or relational collectives?

When considering the church in our respective contexts, we want to ask, "Does the church act more as a categorical collective or a relational collective?" And what kind of categorical and/or relational collectives are they? For example, are they rooted in geography? Creedal confession? Interpersonal relationships? Reverence for leader? Ministry philosophy? Answers to these questions will influence power structures, formal or informal patronage relationships, ministry strategies, and the church's relationship with "outsiders."[35]

A healthy church will draw from the best of both types of collectives. Categorical collectives enable us to be more embracing, overcoming social boundaries, etc. However, people in these cultures "value self over others, pride over modesty, self-enhancement over self-effacement, have more but less close and enduring friendships, prefer a direct communication style" which can be seen as insensitive to others and prone to strain relationships.[36]

Relational collectives are the context of personalized, enduring relationships. They "value being with and caring for family, friends and members of their groups, modesty over pride, self-effacement over self-enhancement."[37]

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[35] For more development of this point, see "Polity and Patronage in the Chinese Church." 6 June 2018. Online: http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jacksonwu/2018/06/06/polity-patronage-chinese-churches/.

[36] "Cultural differences in social networking site use: A comparative study of China and the United States" Linda A. Jackson, Jin-Liang Wang in Computers in Human Behavior 29 (2013) 919.

[37] "Cultural differences in social networking site use: A comparative study of China and the United States" Linda A. Jackson, Jin-Liang Wang in Computers in Human Behavior 29 (2013) 919.

Missionary relationships

Missionaries working among Chinese (and in other collectivist cultures) are often confused by the norms of social exchange. This lack of understanding limits their ability to develop enduring relationships with Chinese nationals. Even worse, missionaries might cause irreparable damage by their inappropriate behaviors.

These problems are rooted in one's almost imperceptible assumptions about social identity. Specifically, when most Westerners crossing cultures, these categorical collectivists are biased against (Chinese-style) unbalanced reciprocity. Therefore, they likely will struggle to form close, long-term relationships with Chinese.

Westerners tend to misunderstand why Chinese exchange gifts or favors. Many foreigners are surprised to receive gifts from a stranger. They are suspicious of a Chinese person's motive, thinking the giver intends to bribe them. Unfamiliar with local customs, foreigners might reject the gifts and limit their friendships with Chinese people.

When Westerners do accept gifts, they potentially commit another mistake. They are uncomfortable having a relational debt, feeling as if they are obligated to comply with others' demands of them. In order to avoid "debt," they too quickly repay the favor or gift. Consequently, they convey to Chinese neighbors the subtle message they are not interested in deepening their friendship.

Missionaries should be both intentional and informed with respect to social exchange. If they are ignorant of the significance of their gifts, they can hinder relationship building. In her interviews with Chinese, Brunson observed, they "talked about being offended by gifts that Americans gave because the gifts were generic or inexpensive."[38] One interviewee said, "was shocked that Americans will give gift cards, wine, or flowers, things she considered to be impersonal." Another Chinese student "told a story of one of his Chinese friends feeling insulted when her American friend gave her a bumper sticker for her birthday. He said, 'But you know what he gives to her? A car sticker that said, "I love Chingdao." Her city [sic]. Yes. So she feels so mad about it.'"

Westerners can too easily overlook the symbolic value of gifts and actions. Missionaries are advised to learn the unwritten rules of social exchange. As mentioned above, several factors contribute to the significance of a gift. Besides cost, the timeliness and suitability of a gift or favor add to its meaning. Conversely, certain elements in every culture potentially detract from the perceived value of a gift or favor. For example, Chinese consider the number 4 unlucky but the number 8 lucky. Also, the number 250 signifies an idiot or a stupid person. Thus, giving someone a gift of 250 RMB might be interpreted as an insult.[39]

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[38] Amanda Elizabeth Brunson, "The Conceptualization of Friendship by Chinese International Students at a University in the Southeastern United States." PhD Dissertation (Tuscaloosa, AL; University of Alabama, 2017), 89. The following quotations come from p. 65.

[39] What number infers something like slut or gigolo?

Some foreigners will need to reframe the way they see gifts in the context of relationships. Receiving a favor does not necessarily "enslave" a person by making her a "debtor." *Instead*, social exchange is the natural result of healthy relationships.

Furthermore, one can exercise greater control over the quality and quality of his relationships, simply by being intentional in practicing social exchange. These dynamics remind us that any single person can only maintain a limited number of relationships, each having a different quality and function within one's life.

Therefore, one is wise to consider the best use of resources to manage his various relationships.[40] Missionaries can utilize their resources for the sake of building long-term close-tie relationships rather than mere transactional relationships, (which makes people feel they are "projects" or employees, not friends and disciples).

Evangelism as Gift-Sharing

Chinese Christians use social exchange as a means of evangelism. At a basic level, giving gifts places a subtle social obligation on potential converts to attend church activities. Yet, one scholar (Andrew Abel) points out an adaption to cultural conventional. The "sense of debt seems to go to the congregation as a whole, rather than to facilitate dyadic exchanges between individuals."[41]

Moreover, Abel identifies four ways "church members strategically negate certain traditional Chinese norms of reciprocity….[F]avors are often provided

1) anonymously,

2) to perfect strangers,

3) with no expectation of return, and

4) to persons of lower status."[42]

These distinctive features of Christian gift-giving a significant due to the way they contrast conventional Chinese society.

The Christian who assists non-believers does so <u>not</u> from a feeling of social obligation nor a calculated effort to compel others to repay the favor. When an individual believer forsakes expectations of return for himself *personally*, recipients recognize such gifts as expressions of love.

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[40] Adam Grant, *Givers.*

[41] Andrew Abel, "Favor Fishing and Punch-Bowl Christians: Ritual and Conversion in a Chinese Protestant Church" Sociology of Religion, 67:2 (2006): 172. Cf. "…the favor comes on behalf of the congregation and is not tied to the Chinese traditional means of building relationships between individuals through the exchange of gifts and favors; the gift or favor is instead given with no strings attached." (Abel, "It's the people here" – The Study of Ritual, Conversion, and Congregational Life among Chinese Christians", p. 94).

[42] Andrew Abel, "Favor Fishing and Punch-Bowl Christians", p. 172.

Chinese Christians effectively place all social relationships into two (not three) types. Within the church, believers call one another "sister" and "brother." All non-Christians are regarded equally as outsiders. As a result,

> The '*renqing rule*' drops out. It is as if the Chinese Christians are treating everyone in their social world (i.e., other Chinese Christians or potential converts) as members of the same clan, and, in the process, undermining balanced reciprocation of favors as the basis for most network ties.[43]

Christians extend help to fellow believers from a positive sense of obligation, as one feels toward family and closest friends. By giving gifts without an expectation of *individual* return, the Christian essentially invites non-believers to join the church family.

Social exchange among Christians also subverts Chinese hierarchal norms. This is evident in several ways. Studying conversion among Chinese believers, Abel observes,

> it was often a person of equal or higher status who would initiate a friendship. A very common pattern was for college professors, advanced graduate students, and/or successful local professionals to meet arriving students at the airport and offer to drive them to town and invite them to upcoming church social events…. For some of these individuals, it was these qualities, seen in the behavior of church members, that attracted them to the church and to conversion.[44]

Similarly, Abel shares a story of an old man who "frequently told his children 'I took care of you when you were young; now you have to take care of me!'" but then helped with the household dishes after becoming a Christian.[45] Moreover, authority in Chinese churches tends to be vested in those who are "older", not in age, but in years since their conversion to Christianity.[46]

Reciprocity can be used as a means of loving enemies. Specifically, wisely *requesting* gifts can help us make friends with our enemies. I refer to what has been called "The Benjamin Franklin Effect."[47] McRaney explains,

> When Franklin ran for his second term as a clerk, a peer whose name he never mentions in his autobiography delivered a long election speech censuring Franklin and tarnishing his reputation. Although Franklin won, he was furious with his opponent and, observing that this was "a gentleman of fortune and education" who

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[43] Andrew Abel, "Favor Fishing and Punch-Bowl Christians," p. 171.

[44] Abel, "It's the people here", p. 18.

[45] Abel, "It's the people here", p.

[46] Andrew Abel, "Favor Fishing and Punch-Bowl Christians," p. 173.

[47] See. McRaney, *You Are Not So Smart*. A summary is found online: https://youarenotsosmart.com/2011/10/05/the-benjamin-franklin-effect/. Cf. https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/02/20/the-benjamin-franklin-effect-mcraney/

> might one day come to hold great power in government, rather concerned about future frictions with him.
>
> Franklin set out to turn his hater into a fan, but he wanted to do it without "paying any servile respect to him." Franklin's reputation as a book collector and library founder gave him a standing as a man of discerning literary tastes, so Franklin sent a letter to the hater asking if he could borrow a specific selection from his library, one that was a "very scarce and curious book." The rival, flattered, sent it right away. Franklin sent it back a week later with a thank-you note. Mission accomplished. The next time the legislature met, the man approached Franklin and spoke to him in person for the first time. Franklin said the man "ever after manifested a readiness to serve me on all occasions, so that we became great friends, and our friendship continued to his death."

Contrary to what many people think, the way one can befriend an enemy might not be to give a gift, but to humbly *receive* a gift.

Theology of Grace

The Chinese practice of social exchange creates certain theological challenges. The most serious challenge, perhaps, concerns the nature of grace. Accordingly, Chinese face two temptations. The first is "easy-believism." A potential convert might think that certain actions, e.g., baptism or praying "the sinner's prayer", are saving rituals akin to those found in traditional religion. One perceives such practices themselves have mechanistic efficacy.

The second temptation contrasts the first. One might confuse the relationship between grace and works, such that the latter become meritorious in the sense of gaining favor with God.

This perspective subtly treats the Christian as the initiative taker, not God. Rather than God taking the initiative in gift-giving, whereby people become recipients, this distortion of grace emphasizes a person's need to maintain the relationship through gift-giving.

On the other hand, the above challenge is an opportunity to recover certain aspects of biblical grace. In particular, Chinese Christians can help the Western church recover an understanding of the "circularity" of grace. I refer to John Barclay's work on grace whereby a gift is "non-circular" when one gives without expecting repayment or reciprocation from the recipient.

Barclay states,

> This was not a common conception of perfect gifts in antiquity. Gifts were distinguishable from loans or market transactions by the fact that no return could be demanded or enforced, but they were not detached from every notion of

> exchange or return; indeed, they could fulfill their function as gifts only if they were not unilateral.[48]

Similarly, Chinese use gift-giving to sustain and strengthen relationships. The bond (or *renqing*) between people creates the obligation or "ought to" that Westerners mistake as contra-grace. However, from a Chinese Christian perspective, the following is true: if my "ought to" is also my "want to", then it is grace.[49]

Growing the Church

Under the nebulous label "church growth," I will focus on two aspects––church multiplication and church maturity. The above observations should influence our church planting strategies. Several contemporary church planting philosophies emphasize rapidity.[50] However, Chinese relationship building is a time-intensive process. This fact is evident by the reciprocal nature of Chinese gift-giving.

By laying stress on speed, church planters increase the likelihood they will overlook relationship building. Instead, church planting catalysts risk treating co-workers as employees and settling for transactional relationships. Church planters have limited time and resources to invest in relationships.

An emphasis on rapidity can quickly result in church planters relating with co-workers only as trainers, not as spiritual siblings and mentors who care for people as people, not ministry projects. In light of the above observations, missionaries and pastors in China are advised not to overemphasize rapidity; nor should they treat the number of conversions and new churches as the primary metric for spiritual health.

John Massey adds,

> Paul clearly states in Eph 4:12 that gifted leaders are given to the church "for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ." When this critical component is missing, and each member is not encouraged to minister his respective gift to the body of Christ, then the church becomes susceptible to spiritual immaturity and is blown about by every wind of doctrine.[51]

To train healthy pastors and church leaders, one must slow down not only to discern others' needs but also to demonstrate the sincere concern that can only be shown with time.

Exchanging gifts or favors is a natural aspect of family life. Chinese Christians routinely underscore the church's familial nature. In fact, the typical translation for "house

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[48] John Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 74.

[49] 如果我 "应该的" 也是我 "想要的", 它就是恩典

[50] For example, see Steve Smith's *T4T* and David Garrison's *Church Planting Movements*.

[51] John Massey, "Wrinkling Time in the Missionary Task: A Theological Review of Church Planting Movements Methodology" *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 55:1 (Fall 2012): 129.

church" is 家庭教会 ("family church"). To develop healthy fictive kinships, they must foster a deep sense of mutual identification and trust.

This process requires time and intentionality. If pastors do not model a familial style of relating to other believers, we cannot expect congregations to adopt a familial perspective of the church.

Understanding social exchange within Chinese relationships help us counteract a troubling phenomenon within the Chinese church. Abel notes,

> Because the members worry that the church will become known merely as a source of handouts, converts and recruits are often better (materially) supported through their typically larger networks of non-Christian Chinese friends.[52]

This observation raises questions. Do believers go far enough in their view of the church as a family? Have Christians neglected to develop a theological perspective of reciprocity and, as a result, pushed Chinese believers to identify fundamentally with natural, blood families? Has the Chinese church sufficiently considered the practical implications of membership? For example, what expectations should be placed on professed converts qualifying them to receive material support (while minimizing the potential of non-believers draining church resources through deception)? (such as widows and the poor)

Conclusion

I'll conclude by reemphasizing a few general ideas. I'll conclude by reemphasizing a few general ideas.

1. First, we focused on understanding how reciprocity works in Chinese relationships, especially among friends and acquaintances. Exchanging gifts and favors both develops and deepens these friendships (i.e. "mixed tie" relationships) by fostering "human feelings" (or *renqing*). In short, Chinese "Give in order to receive."

2. We then considered why the norms of reciprocity differ across cultures. We asked the question, "What is the relationship between collectivism, trust, and reciprocity?" We drew several key factors that help us answer that question.

(a) The type of group in which we belong will influence our reciprocity behaviors. Reciprocity depends on trust. And trust is higher among "insiders" (people in the same group). However, East Asians and Westerners typically forms "in groups" based on different standards.

East Asians are "relational collectivists," who form groups based on personal relationships or interactions. *Westerners* are "categorical collectivists." That is, they are individualists who generally form groups based on shared attributes or common affinity.

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[52] Andrew Abel, "Favor Fishing and Punch-Bowl Christians," p. 174

(b) Effect on gift-exchange

As a result, Easterners (who live in stereotypical "collectivist" cultures) use gift-exchange to start and strengthen relationships.

On the other hand, "categorical collectives," by definition, are not formed based on gift-giving. Therefore, Westerners normally do not emphasize reciprocity in the same way as Easterners. In fact, Westerners are less likely to engage in gift-exchange, suspecting that such behavior is manipulative or bribery.

(c) Finally, these dynamics have implications for the church.

At a basic level, the church is a "categorical collective"; yet, it must learn to become a "relational collective." By understanding the relationships between reciprocity and group identity, Christians can form healthy churches and more effectively accomplish its mission across cultures.