



# A phenomenological explication of *guanxi* in rural tourism management: A case study of a village in China



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- *Being-in-the-world* conceptualizes the tourism destination as an inhabited place, instead of a merely physical and functional space.
- *Dwelling* contextualizes the roles of *guanxi* in the development of Chinese rural tourism, through an *emic* understanding and interpretation.
- *Guanxi* is the most influential 'locality' indigenous villagers employ to participate in and manage the tourism industry in their home village.
- The *hermeneutic phenomenology* explores these backstage conditions as the *being-in-the-world* of tourism.

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on hermeneutic phenomenology in tourism studies as well as Heidegger's concept of *being-in-the-world*, this paper reveals how tourism can and should be *done* in a Chinese rural village. This research contributes a contextual interpretation of *guanxi* in Chinese rural tourism development through an empirical study of a traditional agricultural village in China that has been transformed through tourism development. The paper argues that for the Chinese indigenous residents who are the primary actors engaged in tourism, *guanxi* is, neither a Confucian political ideal nor an instrumental tool, but the specific manner in which they *dwell* in their place. It demonstrates how the tourist destination, landscape and managerial regulation have been modified and adapted in a *guanxi* way. The paper suggests that an *emic* understanding of *guanxi* and the roles it plays in tourism participants' daily life is warranted and can provide a more holistic picture of tourism development in rural China.

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## 1. Introduction

Many scholars have called for a foregrounding of "Non-Western" knowledge and theory to equip tourism studies to better understand and interpret the new era we are entering, one characterized by the rapidly growing Asian, and particularly Chinese, tourist market (Chambers & Buzinde, 2015). Their aim is to confront the continuing dominance of "Anglo-Western centrism" because it has "provided the basis for misguided claims of universality" in tourism studies (Tucker, 2016, p. 250). One example of this "de-linking from Western epistemologies" (Tucker, 2016) in tourism studies is that researchers have sought to contextualize their discussions of

tourism in China by using the terms and conceptual frameworks from Chinese culture. *Guanxi*, in particular, a unique Chinese concept, has been employed to understand Chinese society and gained its status as a legitimate socio-cultural construct in Western mainstream literatures of cultural anthropology, sociology, social psychology, political science, and business and management research (e.g., Vogel, 1965; Weber, 1968; Yang, 1994). Yet it has been underexplored as a framework for comprehending the lived experience of tourism in China. Even those studies that address the concept of *guanxi* exhibit a notable blind spot. Generally, in these few studies, *guanxi* has been interpreted reductively as an instance of more familiar phenomena and universal forms of social relations. In particular, this Chinese-specific phenomenon has been described as a political ideal or a pragmatic tool exerting influence on tourism developing processes. However, the indigenous participants' localized "way of seeing" (Yeoh & Kong, 1997, p. 56) the roles of *guanxi* in their own tourism-related experiences is absent or at least

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muted in the extant literature.

This paper attempts to redress the imbalances in previous studies through a hermeneutic phenomenological study of one rural village in China that has experienced recent tourism infrastructure development. Martin Heidegger's (1889–1976) analysis of *being-in-the-world* can provide a helpful philosophical framework from within which to understand the situated roles of *guanxi* in indigenous participants' tourism-involving experiences, one that differs substantially from those depicted in previous scholarly accounts. Since Heidegger's idea of *being-in-the-world* provides the theoretical grounds for this paper, it informs the interpretive methodology used here for understanding how local participants see and interpret their tourism experiences as meaningful. More importantly, these meaningful experiences constitute the very setting referred to as the "destination" where tourism actually occurs, and thus they determine how tourism can, should, and will be developed and managed in China's rural areas, like Huangling—the village studied in this paper.

This paper presents an original and reflexive study in how Western *being-in-the-world* and Eastern *guanxi* can productively combine to provide "an improved understanding of tourism research in China" (Bao, Chen, & Ma, 2014, p. 166). This reflection also initiates a hermeneutic exploration that conceptually frames tourism-and-locale (i.e., tourism-and-rural-China) as a holistic "field" in which the indigenous residents (re)shape and are (re)shaped by their cognitions, engagements and interactions with their lifeworld—of which tourism is a part. Moreover, the dynamic, ongoing and mutually constitutive engagement between *being-in-the-world* (that in rural China is *guanxi*) and tourism calls for further critical investigation as such a perspective has been under-researched or neglected in previous tourism research.

## 2. Literature review

The associations between *guanxi* and tourism have been insufficiently charted in academic research, despite the recent addition of new cases from China and touristic enterprises which are involved in the Chinese market. The use of the concept of *guanxi* in the English-language tourism literature began in the 2000s (e.g., Gilbert & Tsao, 2000; Pan, Laws, & Buhalis, 2001). This preexisting literature can be divided into two types: the first regards *guanxi* as picking out the way in which Confucian heritage functions as a political ideal in the tourism industry, and the second treats *guanxi* as an instrumental means for advancing specific interests during tourism development. Depending on which of these two perspectives they take, researchers differ not only in the roles, natures and purposes of *guanxi* in tourism but also in their value judgments about this Chinese-specific phenomenon.

### 2.1. Ideal *guanxi* in tourism

The first group of tourism scholars, those who take up the idea that *guanxi* is an ideal, have been influenced by the theoretical studies of Max Weber (1968) and Parsons (1939). Based on their arguments, *guanxi* is understood as "a particularistic structure of relationship" (Parsons, 1939, p. 466) that is deeply rooted in Confucianism. Confucius presented explicit moral principles that serve to guide the interactions of people and parties involved in these particularistic relationships. The maintenance of this particularistic relationship has been regarded as an important device for keeping political and social order (Shih, 1919). Many scholars (e.g., Chen, Chen, & Xin, 2004; Dunhua, 2009) believe that today's Chinese people, have, to a great extent, inherited these 'particularistic' values and preserved this normative tradition to build and maintain a special form of this relationship, i.e., *guanxi*. This paper refers

to this as "ideal *guanxi*."

The inherited cultural norms and programming among Chinese people (Chen et al., 2004) may help explain how *guanxi* influences tourism through governmental functions. In particular, having cultural and historical roots in Confucianism, *guanxi* has been appraised as the set of philosophical beliefs and ethical principles that inform the regulative ideal governing Chinese society. According to this ideal, tourism participants are expected to adopt non-market strategies to create a harmonious environment (Chen & Peng, 2016; Gu, Ryan, Bin, & Wei, 2013). For example, Gu et al. (2013) explore how the State utilizes the ethics of *guanxi* to advance desired reforms in the Chinese hotel industry. It is argued that the normative and regulative powers of *guanxi* serve as a social ideal which encourages tourism operators to take on certain social responsibilities. Additionally, given the state-led and top-down tourism development in China, *guanxi* has been a salient factor that forges many aspects of tourism. In particular, *guanxi* is an informal network of mutual trust that can promote the implementation of tourism policy (Wang & Ap, 2013), or a state-led tourism project (Zhao & Timothy, 2015), better than formal, hierarchical channels.

This literature is grounded collectively on the following assumption: China is currently in a transitional stage in which legislative and administrative gaps exist as the economy moves from a system of centralized control to a mixed public-private sector model (see, e.g., Ryan & Huang, 2013). In this context, the Chinese ideal of *guanxi* is viewed as the desired supplementary means to facilitate cooperation and provide informal guidance for the tourism participants, especially at the organizational level, because relationships and responsibilities remain, at least for this transitional moment, unclear. Notably, all of these studies have been located within the political system to investigate how *guanxi* as a political ideal can contribute to shaping government-involved tourism development.

The blind spots in the extant research are obvious. Firstly, the theoretical starting point of this group of literature is that *guanxi*, as an ideal political power, can exert influences on tourism development in the transitional economy of China today, with its inherited organizational deficiencies. However, it would be a mistake to view Confucianism as a sort of unmoved mover in an ideal logic of political causality. This kind of research treats *guanxi* as the manifestation of a static ancient textual tradition rather than a dynamic construction and practice in daily life. Therefore, what we have seen in this research is that *guanxi* has been presented as a Confucian worldview, or a sort of abstract "political structure" that works outside of or upon human subjects. However, *guanxi* as a unique social phenomenon permeates every aspect of Chinese people's life (Tucker, 2010). Its existence is dependent upon the continuing work of Chinese people and constitutes their everyday behavior and interactions (Kipnis, 1997). If one separates Chinese people and the context of their daily life, the resulting picture hardly captures the real way in which *guanxi* interacts with tourism.

Secondly, as a lived experience, the meanings of tourism for its participants, managers and operators should not be merely confined within the political domain. Admittedly, the influences from the government upon the tourism industry in China may be more obvious than its counterparts in other places. But from the standpoint of participants, the influences of *guanxi* on their tourism experiences are located more in their daily lives than in the political system. In other words, the ideal political aspect of *guanxi* is not these tourism participants' practice of daily life but relatively far away from their everyday experiences. Practices of *guanxi* are not merely remnants of tradition but, rather, are activated or vitalized in present tourism participants' lived experiences.

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