"STAYING AFLOAT VIA GUANXI: STUDENT NETWORKS, SOCIAL CAPITAL AND INEQUALITY IN CHINESE ADULT HIGHER EDUCATION"

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ABSTRACT

This study illuminates students' purposive cultivation of guanxi, or social networks based on continuous exchange of resources, in the context of China's Adult Higher Education system. Interviews with 30 students reveal the motivations underpinning their creation of informal ties amongst peers, which they consider to procure beneficial resources for the present and long-term. They deem guanxi with peers to compensate for the isolation they experience. Such experiences, taken in the context of a competitive Higher Education and graduate employment landscape, are then related to social capital. The marriage of the concepts guanxi and social capital is also discussed in light of our analysis.

Key words: mature students, China, higher education, guanxi, social capital

1. INTRODUCTION

Social capital, although a difficult concept to pinpoint, has been argued to be intertwined with one's progression in the education system (De Vries and Renfrow, 2016; Field, 2015; Reay, *et al.* 2002). The enabling qualities of social capital in Higher Education (HE) are becoming more widely recognised and substantiated (Fearon *et al.*, 2018). It is not only academic success but the accrual of skills required for networking with others that is arguably significant in a HE landscape shaped by market forces. The idea that social capital is related to students' connections and ability to follow the unwritten or tacit rules of the system (Bathmaker, *et al.*, 2013; Crozier and Reay, 2011) provides grist for analysis regarding inequality within HE. Structural inequalities within China's system, arising from its somewhat piecemeal developmental trajectory, are

becoming more widely acknowledged (Chen and Wu, 2011; Qin, 2016; Zhao, 2016). Its transformation and transitioning from 'elite to mass' (Shan and Guo, 2014, p.12), has sparked concerns over inequality amidst rising numbers and uneven resourcing across types of HE provision (Jiang, 2017; Yang, 2005). However, empirical studies are scarce.

Frequently construed as 'non-mainstream', mature students as a group have been the subject of attention in the Anglophone research literature in terms of their marginalisation (Morris, 2009). This arises in connection to what has been argued to be a HE system perpetuating inequality (Bourdieu, 1977; Sissel *et al*., 2001). Those such as Reay *et al*. (2002) who have explored the group's characteristics attest to their unique needs, especially their feelings of dislocation from a secure idea of who they are in such contexts. They are therefore more likely to seek community with those with whom they feel affinity. However, comparatively, considerably less is known about mature students as a group in the Chinese context. The Chinese equivalent to mature students are those studying within the Adult Higher Education System (AHE). The interview data in our study pertain to such students.

The few studies focusing on students within AHE have not adopted the concept of social capital explicitly to pursue concerns over inequality. The notion of capital, which refers to resources accrued - whether economic or built up through familiarity with a system – only appears in Wang and Morgan's (2009) research. In an investigation into AHE students' marginalisation, Wang and Morgan deploy the concept of human capital, understood in terms of productivity within the workforce, to illuminate AHE students' positioning in the market. Human capital is arguably a more directly market-based,

measurable construct compared to social capital, though it does not foster understanding of how capital accrues through students' social connections. This is where the concept of social capital can provide further insight.

In China, guanxi, a form of connectivity deeply entrenched in culture involving the continuous 'exchange of favours' (Liu, 2008, p.64) between people is the closest concept to social capital as conceived in Anglophone literature. Qi (2013) theorises that by virtue of its continuous, directly reciprocal exchanges, guanxi fosters greater explication of connectivity and associated social norms than the westernised concept of social capital. Guanxi has also been noted to have risen to prominence as a social practice in relation to the acquisition of job contacts and inside-information within China's marketised, competitive employment landscape (Bian, 2018). However, while guanxi has been investigated extensively in connection with the field of business, it has not been studied in relation to the HE system in China. The inequality noted in the Anglophone literature regarding HE students' social capital (for example, Bathmaker, *et al*., 2013) has inspired our qualitative inquiry into Chinese AHE students' social connectivity and subjective experiences in the unequal situation posited by Chen and Wu (2011), Qin (2016), and Zhao (2016).

Social, human, economic, symbolic and cultural forms of capital are regularly paired with HE in the Anglophone literature, though social capital remains the most opaque concept. This, according to Adler and Kwon (2002), is due to the intangibility of its embedded notions such as trust that are not amenable to direct measurement, and the potential quality of social capital in the sense that it is stored in anticipation of reciprocated future exchange of resources. Those deploying social capital in empirical

studies (for example, Jensen and Jetten, 2015) attest to its mutability, contending it is not the 'static property of the individual' (Field, 2015, p.16). It remains unclear, however, how its processual elements might be captured empirically. Social capital is a purely analytic construct so unlikely to be referred to directly by research participants. Conversely, the social practice of guanxi would be a term adopted since it is firmly embedded in every day parlance.

Our study sheds light upon AHE student interviewees' purposeful cultivation of guanxi in direct relation to the struggles they articulate at university. The article begins by outlining the political and socio-economic context of Chinese HE and its dual nature. The concepts social capital and guanxi are expounded before research literature connecting them to HE contexts is reviewed. An analysis of interview data follows, elucidating interviewees' deliberate use of guanxi. The marriage of social capital and guanxi to enhance understanding of inequality in HE is then discussed in light of our qualitative findings.

Chinese Adult Higher Education System (AHE)

Currently, two parallel HE systems exist in China: 'regular' and 'adult'. 'Regular' HE (RHE) targets students transitioning from high school who take the highly competitive Higher Education Entrance Examination that serves as the gateway to bachelor degree study. The 'adult' AHE, which has a greater vocational orientation than RHE, is associated with the first-degree diploma awarded to working adults. Chinese HE law (Yu, 2010) espouses that adults, regardless of factors like age, marital status

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and occupation have the right to participate in the Higher Education Entrance Examination and access RHE. However, they are stymied by fierce competition over accessing RHE and its full-time study mode. Studying in RHE would mean giving up paid work, rendering the part-time study offered by AHE more appealing. Studying part-time, as 'mature students', as they are known in China, enables adults to obtain a first-degree certificate provided by AHE (Wang and Jiao, 2016).

Since the launch of HE expansion in 1999 by the Chinese government, annual enrolment of undergraduate students has grown considerably (MoE, 2016a). However, the way the AHE system operates fosters an inequitable situation for Chinese mature students due to unequal distribution of educational resources (Chen, 2015). HE massification has given rise to an imbalance of financial allocation from the government between the RHE and AHE systems. Indeed, Chinese central government and local government prioritise RHE, allocating more financial support to it (Wang, 2016; Yang, 2017).(1)

HE massification has impelled universities to seek more resources, including facilities and teaching space, to accommodate the rapidly enlarging 'regular' student cohort (Ji, 2013; Yang, 2016). Subsequently, regular universities merged with the former independent adult higher education institutions to form university campuses containing students from both the RHE and AHE systems. However, resources originally assigned to AHE are purported to have been re-directed for the benefit of students in RHE instead (Chen, 2015; Yang, 2016). The temporary patterns of teacher recruitment have also raised concerns over guaranteeing the professionalism of AHE's teachers (Guo, 2015; Wang, 2016). Moreover, lack of government policy to monitor the quality of AHE is

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argued to engender the diminished perceived value of its degrees (Zhao, 2016). Such concerns reverberate throughout the research of Wang (2011), which stands alone as a study yielding qualitative data within the small field of empirical research on AHE. Student participants within Wang's evaluative case study provided negative appraisal of taught content and delivery practices. Case study findings also led Wang to lament a behavioural orientation salient within AHE, namely, the vacuous pursuing of degrees for job-market competitiveness. (2)

2. 'SOCIAL CAPITAL' AND 'GUANXI'

The concept of social capital in the Anglophone literature is considered opaque, difficult to measure, and has come to be recognised as an umbrella term (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Smart, 1993). A point of convergence between its proponents is that it pertains to a person's access to social resources procured within relationships or interconnections constituting the social fabric of the person's environment. Resources, which not all social capital theorists agree necessarily bring about positive effects, are intangible partly as they represent merely potential benefit based on whether future reciprocal exchanges occur.

Central to conceptions proffered by Bourdieu (1977), famous for propagating the concept, social capital is considered borne out of mutual recognition and solidarity formed out of a long history of shared circumstances in a societal hierarchy. As Rankin (2002) discusses, Bourdieu's conceptualisation of social capital cannot be divorced from its ideological function. However, divergent views have formed in the USA.

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Relative to what was regarded pessimistic theorising on the part of Bourdieu, within the Anglophone literature James Coleman is a notable advocate for social capital's ability to provide the basis for other forms of capital (Field, 2005; Putnam, 2004). Coleman is also argued by Portes (1998) to have provided a distinctive contribution to social capital's conceptualisation, namely, that one's level of social capital is not necessarily determined by one's socio-economic position in a hierarchy. This appears to open up avenues for conceiving of social capital as actively constructed. It must be noted, as Qi (2013) explains, the nature of the social processes connected to social capital remain implicit and difficult to capture by its theorists.

Scholars suggest guanxi is the closest Chinese term for 'social capital' (Chen and Wu, 2011; Gu *et al.,* 2008; Huang and Aaltio, 2014). Guanxi, a combination of two Chinese characters 'guan' meaning 'to close' and 'xi' meaning 'link', represents personal connections among individuals in Chinese society that influence the nature of interpersonal dynamics (Chen and Chen, 2004; Park and Luo, 2001). Core to guanxi are relationships between individuals and 'continual obligation for the exchange of favours' (Dunfee and Warren, 2001, p.192).

In contrast to the westernised social capital concept that emphasises the basis of social interconnections in wider, sociological or demographic categories, guanxi focuses on the many and varied origins of such interconnections and how advantages are actualised through social exchange behaviour at the individual level (Luo *et al.,* 2012). Specifically, social capital developed in western contexts refers to a person's social tie to a group, such as a community (for example, Crowther *et al*., 2008); in comparison, guanxi becomes formed on initially dyadic ties, namely, those held

between two persons (Li, 2012). Guanxi ties can either be pragmatic, helping individuals to exchange social resources, such as business contacts, or relational in the form of bonds founded upon a trust that builds over protracted periods in which exchange activity occurs. Ties such as those between school peers can contain a blend of both (Chen and Chen, 2004). Guanxi can derive from a variety of characteristics common to the 'dyadic individuals, such as kinship, friendship, acquaintanceship, native origin, and same surname' (Cheng *et al.*, 2014, p.900). What links two people together may not always be obvious, but is generally accepted by people as something that must be sought out actively (Chen and Chen, 2004).

Not dissimilar to the class-based origins of the conceptualisation of social capital conceived by Bourdieu (1977), guanxi has been posited a form of social practice based upon microsocial trust that has evolved alongside, and in response to, changing structural conditions in China (Liu, 2008). Under the communist planned economy, Liu explains guanxi was pivotal in ameliorating anxieties through fostering social exchange in informal circles existing amongst ordinary people, away from the gaze of the state. Despite plentiful resources in the current marketised, globalised era, guanxi has endured to the present day, albeit in an altered form.

When deployed in the field of business, guanxi has been lamented for its instrumentalism as it is reputed to perpetuate asymmetries in access to resources, achieved largely by undercutting formal bureaucratic processes (Qi, 2013). This, Qi notes, has lent guanxi a rather unfortunate notoriety in terms of pushing the boundaries of everyday informal practices, bordering on the unethical. Both positive and negative qualities have been articulated widely across literature conceptualising guanxi (Chen

and Chen, 2004). Guanxi's endurance and salience in Chinese culture is due to its informality which Qi (2013) argues gives it fortitude over more explicit, formalised exchanges. Further, despite occurring within informal interchanges, guanxi has a purposeful quality. This has been encapsulated by Chen and Chen (2004) who proffer a step-wise blueprint that could be summarised as: select advantageous target from whom the agent needs to take advantage; initially build a relationship with the target; get the benefit; now there is an obligation to reciprocate.

The grounds of social capital and guanxi's comparability, despite obvious social and cultural differences, have been substantiated by Qi (2013) who contends they possess sufficient similarities to warrant their coupling. Social capital lacks the explicit procedural quality of guanxi, but the latter can potentially 'rejuvenate' (Qi, 2013, p. 309) social capital, throwing further light upon the implicit agreements that form the glue between people.

3. RESEARCH IN HE

Mature students' marginalisation has been posited widely as a concern and attributed to a fundamentality unequal HE system, both in USA (Sissel, *et al.* 2001) and UK (Morris, 2009). Attention has been directed to barriers implied by the theoretical notion of differential levels of capital and how these play out in what could be argued the micro-context of university life (for example: Bathmaker *et al.*, 2013; Crozier and Reay, 2011; Reay, 2003). However, social capital as a singular analytic category has not often been coupled with HE. It has arisen as an analytic focus for some over the last two

decades. As shown in this section, not all explicit users of the concept of social capital in HE research deem it inherently entwined with limited life or educational chances. As a concept, whether adopted to expose social injustice, or advance an understanding of its more positive role in aiding social mobility, Field (2015) argues social capital has received little attention with respect to mature compared to younger students.

In the instances of social capital's adoption in HE contexts, it is conceived of as mutable. Winch's (2000) study, for instance, attests to its role in social mobility. More recently, Fearon *et al*. (2018) proffer the idea that certain attributes, such as the ability to network with others, bear strongly upon one's chances of personal progression. Jensen and Jetten (2015) place greater emphasis on the connective, relational characteristics of social capital, positing it as enmeshed with belonging, a feeling diminished for those unfamiliar with the rules of the system. They advocate encouraging a bridging form of social capital between tutors and students, as opposed to a bonding form created between peers, to foster a more secure academic identity. Although the above studies take social capital in a rather more optimistic vein than advocates of Bourdieu's (1977) conception of social capital, (for example, Bathmaker *et al*., 2013), all promulgate the Bourdieusian notion that limited social connectedness and attendant resources is a factor in one's feeling of confidence or security in a context like HE.

Although mature students, partly due to their part-time status, have been characterised as lacking in terms of resources devoted to them (Laird and Pruce, 2009; Price and Baker, 2012), the social networks formed in and around formal campus spaces have stimulated interest as sites for fruitful interactions. As qualitative studies of such

phenomena have grown, peer support has been noted as especially important among mature students following non-traditional routes (Gilardi and Guglielmetti, 2011; Lundberg, 2003) and is considered capable of providing a unique form of support. Indeed, the informal modes of interaction upon which mature students' social networks are built are deemed by Tett *et al*. (2012) a facilitator of an important type of learning occurring beyond formal taught sessions, namely, the contextualisation of knowledge and extension of material encountered in lectures. Furthermore, the advantages of such social networks extend far beyond the confines of students' immediate study context, that is, to various life-wide situations including continued employment, maintenance of good health, social integration and social adaptation (Daza, 2016).

4. METHODOLOGY

Our qualitative study employs what Roberts (2002) refers to as a biographical interview approach to gain insights into past and present experiences of 30 AHE students, along with the contextual settings within which learning occurs. A large city on the eastern coast has been selected as a representative location for this study, since China's coastal urban belt is widely regarded the educational and economic powerhouse of the country. Within this city, two universities have been selected according to criterion-based purposeful sampling. All interviewee participants are female students of the AHE system, aged 25 to 40 years. At the time of interview (2016), most were working full-time, married and had child dependants. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts screened and analysed.

5. INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

In this section, excerpts of narratives from interviews are presented, with a particular analytic focus on connections made with fellow students. Analysis of interview data gave rise to emergent themes: a) feelings of isolation leading to reliance upon guanxi with peers; b) resources expected and actively sought out; c) intentional maintenance of guanxi with peers to store potential benefit for the long-term.

a) Feelings of Isolation Leading to Reliance on Guanxi with Peers

Interviewees articulate what they feel to be their position relative to those in RHE, deeming the AHE cohort to be subordinate. Despite having lectures on university campus, they speak of being barred from resources on campus, perceiving them to belong solely to RHE students,

> *…we can enter the library but we can only read books inside and we are not allowed to borrow books and take them out. Our student card is different from the full-time [RHE] students so we cannot use the Wi-Fi on campus; we cannot use the university website either, because we cannot get access to the internet by using our student number. (31yrs, Yr1)*

Interviewees speak of feeling denied the forms of support and access to resources available to those they deem 'authentic' students, namely, those within RHE. The segregation they refer to contributes to feeling isolated as a cohort of 'mature students';

> *Those [RHE] students are the dominant and authentic students in university and the university does not think highly of us mature students.*

> *The university does not care about us or want to spend much effort on us.*
> (25yrs, Yr3)

Feeling 'neglected' by the university is cited as the reason for turning to peers. Opportunities for bridging capital, with those in the wider campus community such as their RHE counterparts appear limited. The perception that the 'university does not care for us' is compounded by a sense of disconnection from teaching staff. Module teachers are described as unwilling to offer help or answer questions and 'leave the classroom as soon as they finish the lectures',

> *...our teachers show no willingness to care for us or help us. When we come to them with questions their attitude is unsupportive...so we are unwilling to ask them again. Then I have to have a good guanxi with my peers who are the only ones I can rely on. (29yrs, Yr1)*

Guanxi with peers is highly valued by interviewees for yielding desired resources in terms of studying and is considered reliable since it can be readily turned to as and when required. They contrast this to the paucity of support from teachers. Interviewees' proactivity in terms of seeking and maintaining guanxi with peers resonates with Bian's (2018) postulation that integral to guanxi is the purposeful bolstering of the most personally fruitful, instrumental ties in one's immediate social network. Interviewees strengthen such ties through the regular, repeated exchange activity they describe, which Bian would identify as fundamental to guanxi.

Interviewees consider peers' company to be critical to completing,

> *There are 80 students in my class and teachers do not know who I am...so if I didn't have people in my class for company I would feel quite isolated and lonely, and maybe not complete the study (26yrs, Yr3).*

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The unity they claim it generates resonates with Reay *et al.'s* (2002) contention that mature students, perhaps through feeling non-mainstream, connect on the basis of perceived similarity and subsequently obtain mutual self-validation. Our interviewees suggest peers are the only people they can turn to, though ties created appear as instrumental as they are emotional. They reflect the blend of emotional and instrumental qualities that Chen and Chen (2004) deem prevalent among guanxi between school peers. Rather than referring to emotional resources directly, they adopt the term 'company'. Such connectivity is not likened to that of close friendship:

> *...guanxi with peers not only provides me with practical benefit, but also gives me company...although they are not my close friends. (26yrs, Yr3)*

b) *Resources Expected and Actively Sought Out*

Apparent in interviewees' narratives are the expectations propelling their construction of guanxi with peers along with processes involved in favour exchange. Those they describe reflect social norms within guanxi that Qi (2013, p.314) would characterise as '*renqing*'. The tacit expectation - integral to the working of guanxi - is the offering of resources upfront to initiate tie formation. Its processual nature is illustrated below,

> *There are some students in our class who keep notes very well. Because I do not keep notes and want to have a good scores in exams, I keep a good guanxi with them by offering what help they need. Then when I need to ask them for help I can because of our guanxi. (26yrs, graduated)*

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Interviewees allude to the reciprocal exchange of favours in this setting as 'support', explaining it includes provision of material to aid comprehension. It appears to involve collaboration to find expedient routes to the ends envisaged. For example, they speak of circumventing the practices implemented by the university that they consider obstructive, such as the attendance monitoring system. The perceived resource, namely, signing in on behalf of an absent peer is generated this way.

Such strategies for providing 'support', facilitated by guanxi, also appear founded upon distrust of teachers to deliver relevant or consistent teaching content. Faith is placed in peers as providers of desired resources. Double-checking with a peer that revision material received from module teachers is correct is a resource procured via dyadic ties. They speak of strategies for mitigating for conflicting revision material given by the various teachers encountered on a module. The peer in another class with whom they form such a dyadic tie does not have to be someone they know well: the tie is based upon pragmatic, mutual favour exchange, in a situation in which they have identified a common, practical need,

> *...we tell each other what the teacher says...[the peer] is an important resource for me to have a higher score in exams...so we maintain our guanxi well although we are not close friends. (28yrs, Yr1)*

A salient resource interviewees state they expect to gain from guanxi with peers is assistance in understanding assignment requirements,

> *...senior students here have helped a lot. They give me assignments they have done before to let me know how to do it. They give me their notes*

which I can turn to when I do not understand the teaching context. (25yrs, Yr3)

They speak of having greater confidence in each other's knowledge than lecture content, which they consider 'really outdated'. This chimes with Chen's (2015) contention that textbooks developed for the disciplines within the AHE system have not been updated or modernised for over a decade. Interviewees consider it irrelevant to their working lives and consequently place little value upon it.

They deem a paucity of practice-focused, contemporary course content another reason for relying upon guanxi with peers. Peers' knowledge gained from work experience is regarded a richer source of professional learning than lecture content. Faith in and valuing of one another's professional experience, as well as knowledge of which module materials to trust, strengthens these ties,

> *Because the university does not provide us with teaching of practical skills, I need to rely on my guanxi with my peers to learn practical working experience. (25yrs, Yr3)*

c) *Intentional Maintenance of Guanxi with Peers to Store Potential Benefit for the Long-term*

Interviewees emphasise the importance of maintaining good guanxi with peers for long-term benefit. This must be taken in the context of China's highly competitive graduate job-market, propagated by HE massification (Jiang, 2017). As Bian (2018) explains, empirical studies investigating wider patterns of job search strategies indicate

that guanxi as a social practice has come to the fore. Bian notes that such proclivity to deploy guanxi to expedite job opportunities occurs despite the increasing influence of marketised approaches. The latter might be assumed to run contra to the underhand binding agreements integral to guanxi; indeed, agreements within market transactions are typically of a more explicit variety. For interviewees, guanxi with peers is considered critical to long-term storage of resources such as job references, or know how in terms of professional practice. The latter is not considered by them to be supported in course content. Implied in the excerpts below is the notion of needing to be sufficiently resourced as an individual, as though prepared for the competition in the job-market that Wang (2011) and Jiang (2017) postulate,

> *All my classmates now work in kindergartens….now I have to find a job in a good kindergarten so have to ask my classmate to be my referee to introduce me to her kindergarten. Now my classmates are just teachers in their kindergarten…after a few years they will have promotion and become leaders in their kindergarten…. so maintaining the guanxi with them is very important. (34yrs, yr1)*

> *My peers work in various kindergartens… different kindergartens have their special features such as teaching design or activity design. We can learn various things from each other. Their work experience is a priceless resource for me….so I want to maintain our guanxi even after graduation. (33yrs, yr3)*

Guanxi is also considered to procure personalised assistance tailored to professional practice and personal situation. Interviewees enthuse over guanxi's role in the acquisition of specific forms of help from peers, unique to their individual needs. This appears facilitated by going beyond exchanging practical forms of help to sharing in matters of 'personal life':

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We like to maintain a good guanxi with each other so create many opportunities to get close to each other. We have lunch together every Sunday on the big grass area - like a picnic - and keep this as a routine. We share our work and personal life in order to maintain and have a closer guanxi with each other, which enables us to feel comfortable to ask each other for help. (35yrs, Yr1)

While such sharing fosters feeling at ease with one another, it ultimately seems a strategy for oiling the wheels so they feel more able to favour-seek. Thus, in this context, relational qualities of guanxi are infused with pragmatism.

6. DISCUSSION

Interviewees' cognisance of the moves they need to make to inaugurate guanxi with peers is reflected in their accounts of their motivations and actions. Such active pursuit of 'good guanxi' to obtain resources could extend the conceptualisation of social capital in the West. In the aforementioned Anglophone literature, Bathmaker *et al.* (2013) postulate an arguably received form of social capital, in so far that it manifests in students' inherited access to networks, or pre-given capacity to activate them. Conversely, AHE student interviewees engage the norms of guanxi as a social practice to develop their networks. The active construction of guanxi, starting from dyadic ties, facilitates the opening up of social capital to the notion of its purposive cultivation. The step-wise processes pertaining to the initiation of ties, identification of a common need to consolidate the tie and expectation of reciprocity are captured in our study. They provide further substantiation to Qi's (2013, p.309) theoretical argument that guanxi can 'rejuvenate' social capital. Whether such intentional behaviour and readiness to

construct one's social networks transfers to national contexts that do not engage guanxi is a matter for future inquiry.

The proactivity on the part of interviewees in constructing their guanxi lends a degree of support to the more optimistic notions of social capital that eschew its structurally determined nature (see Portes, 1998). Even before graduating, interviewees augment guanxi with peers to procure anticipated benefits. However, assuming such proactivity is unaffected by societal structures and associated inequality would be to ignore the Bourdieusian influence upon social capital's conceptualisation. It would also overlook current conditions regarding China's intensely competitive graduate employment landscape (Jiang, 2017). As Qi (2013) clarifies, informal agreements arising from relations of trust agglutinate the networks that are able to confer certain privileges; pertinently, the limited nature of such networks and inequitable access to them and prized resources embedded therein thus raise comparable concerns over inequality.

An aspect of guanxi also highlighted in our study is its fostering of highly personalised resources, as Bian (2018) would attest. Interviewees could be argued to engage a social practice that they recognise collectively as way of catalysing the exchange of information that might slip through the net of formalised channels and patterns of interconnectivity. Such tendencies to use informal connections to procure particular resources in wider society stem, Bain explains, from a past characterised by resource impoverishment. Ties are made intentionally 'strong' (Bian, 2018, p.605) from being deemed most likely to yield resources. From the perspective of social capital, interviewees' concentration on connections with those deemed to have similar characteristics or needs may be construed as a proclivity for bonding over bridging.

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Rather than characterising their reliance on guanxi with peers to yield resources as habitual parochialism - as though bonding is selected freely over bridging capital - it could be argued to be a concerted effort to counter the effects of scarce conditions. Thus social connectivity, at the micro-level, is not just a shaped around the familiar practices and social norms of guanxi, but conditioned by wider structural forces and political intervention in HE. Under-resourcing is indeed perceived by interviewees, echoing the concerns of Wang (2016), Yang (2005) and Yang (2017) who lament the uneven allocation of resources across types of HE in China.

Taking structuralist arguments further, interviewees' reliance on guanxi with peers to compensate for what appears a paucity of provision could inadvertently reinforce the workings of what Jiang (2017) defines as a profoundly marketised HE landscape. In other words, it potentially mitigates for damages brought to equality arising from a political strategy ultimately championing competitiveness over social redistribution (Jiang, 2017; Yang, 2005). Such a concern is further inflected in Shan and Guo's (2014) contention that equity issues are not readily picked up by research into the effects of the transformation of China's HE since policy documents purvey predominantly marketised discourses, as though education is a mere servant of the economy. This way, issues of inequality become submerged.

7. CONCLUSION

This study elucidates the self-initiated, processual nature of guanxi in the context of China's AHE and helps articulate the shortest conceptual bridges between guanxi and

social capital. Interview data are limited to students' perceptions, in terms of their expressed motivations for augmenting guanxi with peers. Therefore, it is not possible to discern the longevity of such ties, or realisation of the benefit students anticipate. Nevertheless, pursuing the relational components, subsumed within social capital distinctively, illuminates how the processes of inaugurating social capital fuse with the norms of a culturally embedded social practice, namely, guanxi. Further investigation across national contexts, attuned to both structural and micro social elements, could confirm social capital's utility and flexibility as a concept integral to investigating HE inequality internationally.

8. NOTES

(1) For instance, in 2014, central government allocated 81.8 billion (Chinese *yuan*) to RHE (MoE, 2014) and 19.7 billion (Chinese *yuan*) to AHE (MoE, 2016b).

(2) Wang's (2011) study did not incorporate the concepts social capital or guanxi.

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