

Cultivating corrupt ties in post-Mao China

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In "Making Business Personal: Corruption, Anti-corruption, and Elite Networks in Post-Mao China," published in *Current Anthropology*, John Osburg argues that the implementation of reforms to promote market competition and accountability in post-Mao China fostered the creation of corrupt business networks during this period. Osburg examines how economic reforms and anti-corruption campaigns led entrepreneurs to actively use practices of entertainment and bribery to cultivate beneficial relationships with state officials.

During the post-Mao period (1978-present), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has instituted measures to combat corruption. Drawing upon the work of other scholars, Osburg argues that these efforts are selective in revealing corruption, especially given that the committees responsible for enforcing these campaigns often belong to the same organization as the entities being investigated. In particular, Osburg points to the inspection tours (kaocha) associated with audit culture as an example of a procedure that prompts corrupt behavior.

In order to guard against competition and garner the protection of a powerful official, businesspeople sought to establish guanxi ties—a system of symbiotic connections where individuals trade favors.

Utilizing ethnographic research that he began in the early 2000s, Osburg analyzes the evolution of these elite networks. In his fieldwork, Osburg examined the practices a group of entrepreneurs in Chengdu used as they attempted to forge personal connections and gain favor with powerful government officials. The development of these predominately male

networks relied upon ritualized leisure activities known as yingchou to encourage a sense of shared enjoyment and solidarity. Osburg's research illustrates that these gendered outings with clients and [government officials](#) often included drinking, frequenting nightclubs and karaoke clubs, and visiting brothels and saunas.

Drawing upon the accounts of his informants, Osburg argues that these relationships serve a purpose that goes beyond entertainment or a mere business transaction.

"Entertaining is understood by its participants as (not always successful) attempts to engender subjective transformations, to inject forms of value resistant to commodification and commensurability into business relationships, and to transform relationships of cold calculation into particularistic relationships bound by, in the words of my informants, "sentiment" (ganqing). This is achieved through the incommensurable, shared experiences of intimacy, vulnerability, pleasure, and complicity that elite business entertaining enables but does not always achieve," Osburg writes.

In his analysis, Osburg describes how his informants—regardless of their background—viewed these techniques as a means of establishing guanxi ties that were usually reserved for the elite. However, Osburg's findings suggest that this has changed over time. The recent anti-corruption campaign in 2013 has led to the decline of older guanxi cultivation techniques and venues. This, in turn, has benefitted members of the elite who can still rely on their family background and their established networks to advance their interests, while ordinary businesspeople, who can no longer use corrupt practices to win state patronage and protection, are left on the sidelines.

More information: John Osburg, Making Business Personal: Corruption, Anti-corruption, and Elite Networks in Post-Mao China,

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