

## Abstract

This dissertation develops the Chinese term *lishang-wanglai* as a general concept in the analysis of personalised relationships in China, through the detailed study of rural Chinese people's social support arrangements since the 1980s. Based on an ESRC social support project in ten Chinese villages (1991 – 1994) and my restudy on two of these villages between 1995 and 1996 the dissertation concentrates on one of them: Kaixiangong village. It was introduced to the anthropological field by Fei Xiaotong in the 1930s. The combination of previous researchers' studies and original fieldwork and post-fieldwork over the last few years make it possible to present a longitudinal study of the village which covers nearly 70 years (1936 to 2004). This allows an up-to-date and broad-ranging ethnography with a highly detailed empirical study on villagers personalised relationships and reciprocity (see Chapters 1 to 5).

Previous researchers, e.g. Sahlins's typology of reciprocity, 1972; M. Yang's *guanxi* and *guanxixue*, 1994; Y. Yan's *guanxi* network and *renqing* ethics, 1996b; A. Kipnis's *guanxi* and *ganqing*, 1997 and C. Stafford's cycles of *yang* and *laiwang*, 1995, 2000a and c, etc. have made some progress in analysing personalised relationships in China. The dissertation extends and broadens this previous work, using *lishang-wanglai* as a general analytical tool.

The notion *li shang wanglai* was used, during the fieldwork, by a Chinese villager and is deeply rooted in Chinese culture. From this starting point, the dissertation develops the novel concept of *lishang-wanglai* by interpreting certain implicit cultural models and patterns of social relationships in Kaixiangong. *Lishang-wanglai* models the creative process of personalised relationships in which different types of reciprocities (*wanglai*) are judged by different criteria (*lishang*).

This dissertation has contributed to general knowledge in the following ways: it is a very thorough and detailed ethnography of a Chinese village with longitudinal comparisons; it has methodological implications for fieldwork, although *lishang-wanglai* is not itself a research method; it has brought together previous researchers' studies on personalised relationships, i.e. *mianzi*, *bao*, *chaxugeju*, *ganqing*, *guanxi*, *renqing*, *yuan*, *fu*, *yang* and *laiwang*, etc. within a single unified model; it has developed a new analysis of reciprocity in which principles and typology are combined; it has demonstrated a dynamic network model of reciprocity (*lishang-wanglai* networks); it has also demonstrated through detailed ethnography that the motivation of *lishang-wanglai* is social creativity, and finally it highlights the importance and significance of state and gender in practices of *lishang-wanglai*.