To Bribe Or Not To Bribe: Comparing Perceptions About Justice, Morality, And Inequality Among Rural And Urban Chinese

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ABSTRACT: In the early 1990s Chinese leaders formally recognized the need to establish the rule of law to safeguard reforms, promote economic growth, and curb political corruption. These efforts are part of the ongoing construction of a new legal system. Previously, ordinary Chinese citizens solved their conflicts through informal, local mediation based on the principles of reciprocity and the rule of relationships. Now they can also take their disputes to a formal mediator or a judge at court. This article presents findings from an ethnographic study that collected narratives about perceptions of justice and fairness from a purposive sample of 46 urban and 46 rural residents in Hebei province and subsequently tested the distribution and cultural consensus regarding such beliefs by
systematically interviewing a random sample of 144 urban and
158 rural informants in the same locations. While young urban
citizens are enthusiastic about the idea of independent judgments
according to the rule of law, the majority of informants still believe
in the inevitability of gift giving to win a case at court or accomplish
any personal goal. Reliance on *guanxi*, the rule of relationships,
continues to offer predictability for social actors but has left many
Chinese people with a moral dilemma. Traditional ideas about
reciprocity require them to give something in return for assistance.
Yet socialist ethics of egalitarianism taught them to refrain from gift
giving beyond their immediate circle of friends and family. This
article explores how contradicting messages about moral conduct
and proper conflict resolution are negotiated differently by age,
gender, and provenance.

**Introduction**

In the early 1990s Chinese leaders formally recognized the
need to establish the rule of law to safeguard reforms, promote
economic growth, and curb political corruption. These efforts
are part of the ongoing construction of a new legal system that
has already influenced many changes in legal institutions and
procedures (Wang 2000). In the course of this endeavor Chinese
people have begun to realize that a consistent and predictable
legal system has the potential to become the most important
institution to facilitate modernization (Potter 2001). The
concept of the rule of law indicates that the law stands above
individual officeholders as neutral arbiters to which disputes
are referred. All people within a state operating under the
rule of law are equal before the law, and everyone, regardless
of position or status, is subject to it. However, traditionally
China’s political system was rooted in the concept of the rule
of man (Peerenboom 2004: 114). The individual officeholder
stood above the law and served as arbiter to whom disputes
were referred (Starr 2001: 204). The implementation of a new
legal system has provided Chinese citizens with the option of
settling civil disputes through formal adjudication by a judge at court in addition to local mediation based on the principles of reciprocity.

However, few people actually take a case to court. Analysis of ethnographic interviews revealed that those who experienced court proceedings or know someone involved in adjudication at court find the actual implementation of the law either ineffective or unjust (Avenarius et al. 2005; Avenarius 2009). Instead, reliance on guanxi, i.e., particularistic relationships, offers more predictability for legal actors. In fact, many Chinese citizens claim that to win a case at court they have to channel gifts to the presiding judge. The belief in the inevitability of gift giving to accomplish goals poses a challenge to China’s quest to adopt new ethical guidelines as part of its modernization process (Jankowiak 2004; Hsu 2007). Traditional ideas about reciprocity require Chinese people to give something in return for assistance. Yet socialist ethics of egalitarianism taught them to refrain from gift giving beyond their immediate circle of friends and family. In addition, many Chinese citizens are aware of the international neoliberal discourse condemning corruption and bribery (Jankowiak 2004). Nevertheless, discussions about the implementation of the rule of law and the newly created opportunities to take a conflict beyond local mediation has ignited the imagination of many Chinese citizens and introduced them to an additional set of values.

Chinese society continues to linger in a phase of transition from a society influenced by the demands of collectivism to a society defined by the opportunities and challenges of individualism (Jankowiak 2004; Oxfeld 2010; Yan 2010; Jankowiak n.d.; Yan 2011; Kleinman et al. 2011). Social and economic changes instigated shifts in the ethical discourse to the extent that both scholars and citizens have asked if contemporary Chinese society is at the brink of moral collapse (Thornton 2007; Kleinman et al. 2011). This study makes a contribution to the understanding of a particular aspect of
China’s changing moral landscape and explores the following questions. How has the discourse about the rule of law among Chinese citizens influenced beliefs about right and wrong behavior, especially regarding the role of relationships and the expectations of reciprocity? How has access to economic opportunities and a more diversified network of social relationships shaped moral expectations for the conduct of fellow citizens? Specifically, how do Chinese people negotiate the difference between traditional convictions about gift giving as a mandatory act to fulfill the cultural prescription of reciprocity and the claim that gift giving with the intent to elicit a favor is equivalent to bribery and essentially considered an unlawful activity? Since we expected the development of attitudes and perceptions in reference to the rule of law to unfold at different rates in rural and urban communities, we studied both social environments to learn how answers to our questions differ by residential location, age, gender, and socioeconomic characteristics.

Findings from the analysis of ethnographic interviews and cultural consensus analysis show that China’s economic and legal reforms have indeed unhinged a range of practices from their traditional foundation of moral reasoning. In this article we review shifting evaluations of morality among Chinese citizens in respect to three themes of inquiry: preferred moral characteristics, the role of relationships in conflict resolutions, and the practice of gift giving. We found that the pace of adjustment from traditional expectations of moral behavior to the reality of negotiating the demands of making a living in a global economy is different for rural and urban residents. These developments are predominately influenced by the composition of social circles that differs by location of upbringing and age. As a result of differential access to information in general and economic opportunities in particular, rural and urban Chinese communicate discrete ideas about the distinction between gift giving and bribery and the repercussions of bribery. There is no
single unified moral standard for all Chinese citizens. Rather, contradicting moral expectations are reconciled in multiple ways and continue to evolve in their adjustment to the demands of life in a postsocialist society.

The Role of Guanxi in Shaping China’s Moral Landscape

Our study of changing notions of morality in light of institutional changes introduced by the Chinese state aims to make a contribution to the existing anthropological literature of morality (Howell 1997; Zigon 2008; Heintz 2009). This exploration of specific aspects of Chinese morality can also add to our understanding of cultural definitions of self and personhood and the relationship between the individual and society (Young 1981). In terms of options for conflict resolutions, Chinese people find themselves between traditional expectations and modern opportunities. Dispute resolution by mediation is oriented fundamentally on the principles of reciprocity with the goal to reestablish harmony and peace in the social order (Fei 1992; Zhao 2003). The western legal systems, from which Chinese reformers borrowed to construct a new legal system, are based on diametrically opposed ideas about the significance of the individual (Starr 2001). The traditional Chinese foundation of moral reasoning was grounded in the rule of relationships rather than either oriented to focus on the individual or the group. This relational ethic is rooted in the teachings of Confucius. The individual is defined as a social and interactive being, not an isolated, separate entity. The social philosophy of relationships is founded on the Confucian principles of lun, which means a “differentiated order,” and li, the “rules of proper conduct.” The concept of lun stresses differentiation between people, specifically fathers and sons, husbands and wives, seniors and juniors, superiors and subordinates and so forth (King 1994). It is a system of complimentary social roles
with distinct status differences. Accordingly, a Chinese person sees the world as a reflection of his or her relations to others and the particular circumstances that unite them. The indigenous Chinese category for such a particularistic tie is guanxi, a “significant relationship.” The notion of “having a guanxi” expresses the fact that two individuals are engaged in social exchange with each other. Relationships are multidimensional and ranked in order of importance. Everyone stands at the center of his or her network of guanxi produced by his or her own social influence (Fei 1992).

This relationship orientation of Chinese culture presented citizens with the moral mandate to nurture and maintain existing relationships and engage in acts of reciprocity (Yang 1957; Young 1981; Lu 1998; Yao et al. 1999; Zhuo 2001). Reciprocity was expressed in the form of gifts and favors making guanxi a combination of instrumentality and expression of feelings (Lo and Otis 2003). It was neither morally acceptable to approach strangers without an introduction by a related person nor to sever ties due to personal animosities or conflict. The basic function of guanxi was to insure alliance in times of need and bind people beyond choice or sympathy.

Economic reforms and participation in global markets have introduced an increasing use of guanxi to facilitate market transactions. This has unleashed a debate about the fairness of adhering to particularistic principles in an economic system fueled by beliefs in universal rules and values (Dunfee and Warren 2001; Hanafin 2002). Even the Chinese government became concerned with the particularistic nature of guanxi and its proclivity towards corruption as part of its legalist reform measures and the promotion of a capitalist environment (Kwong 1997). In addition, Western connotations of analogous definitions of phrasings such as “crony capitalism” and “nepotism,” have placed guanxi in a dishonest light, and made it subject to hotly debated controversies (Dunfee and Warren 2001; Hanafin 2002; Lynton and De Bettignies 2009). Hence
we need to explore how *guanxi* operates in situations outside a kinship network since Chinese people seem to base moral uprightness on a high standard of trust between individuals who are closely related and belonging to a close circle of contacts. *Guanxi* intrinsically relies on notions of equal or greater reciprocity to uphold its ties. This creates problems when trying to uphold market economies’ call for efficiencies and opportunities based on measurable differences in offers.

It is important to reflect that adherence to market economic principles has not been the first time the ethics of universalism were introduced to Chinese people. Yang (1988) describes that during imperial times relational ethics based on Confucian kinship principles existed alongside universalistic state ethics that were represented by a nonhereditary bureaucracy that recruited personnel on the basis of meritocracy. However, for the majority of the population living in the countryside, the authorities of the state were far away and rarely interfered with everyday matters except during the collection of taxes (Shue 1988). For the case of conflict resolutions in rural areas people only dealt with state authority, such as government administrators and magistrates, when they had failed to settle disputes within their own social worlds (Huang 1996). In all other situations, for immediate relationships to kin and village members, only relational ethics applied and loyalties and gratitude were expressed with reciprocity of favors and gifts. The Chinese term for gifts, *liwu*, captures the notion that “gifts are the proper thing to do” since it is composed of the word for proper conduct, *li*, and *wu*, object.

During the collectivist period relational ethics were pushed aside completely by a different brand of universalistic ethics that stressed equality among comrades (Vogel 1965). Only the state’s definition of ethical behavior was declared desirable and observance of private standards of morality was prosecuted. Helping all fellow Chinese was promoted as an important value at the expense of acting on personal preferences for the
establishment of friendships. In the early years of collectivism, the practice of gift giving to maintain guanxi was rarely encountered but over time became part of underground activities to deal with the scarcity of goods and services inherent in the socialist economy (Lo and Otis 2003). Management of guanxi became more strategic and focused on specific goals. It introduced more flexibility and more fragmentation of relationships outside of kin groups. The instrumental function of these relationships became more pronounced than the expressive function of friendship.

At the beginning of the economic reform period the cultivation of guanxi blossomed into a widespread practice throughout most social circles and developed into an elaborate system of social interactions based on a combination of affect and need (Yang 1994). In urban areas it also served as a means of social positioning for those who strategically crafted connections with influential others (Smart 1993; White et al. 1996; Yang 2002). Guanxi has also been used to reduce transaction costs in business and industrial relationships due to its durability, connectivity and the inherent obligation to reciprocate (Wank 1996). As a result, scholars understand guanxi as social capital that can be accumulated and converted into economic, political, or symbolic capital (Smart 1993; Lin 2001; Bian 2002). However, the flexible adaptation of guanxi to business procedures and economic interactions has not eliminated the assumption that the very act of delivering on guanxi obligations is considered a moral act (Hsu 2007). This observation inspired Lo and Otis (2003) to label the current use and role of guanxi a “free-floating cultural motif” that has become the common standard for appropriate social interaction and ultimately the foundation of a new type of civility in China (Lo and Otis 2003: 143).

In terms of actual cultural practices, it is important to note that despite the increasing flexibility in establishing guanxi for a variety of purposes and with a range of people outside of the
kin group, work place and school environments, the process of cultivating *guanxi* continues to be tied to the prescription of time-delayed procedures. Gift items should be carefully selected and not be monetary in nature but rather an item that the recipient might find interesting or useful. Hence the understanding that establishing and maintaining efforts is a strategic endeavor and involves longterm reciprocity rather than one-time transaction. In contrast, bribery is defined as a violation of efforts to maintain face by allowing ample time between gift presentation and request of a favor (Lo and Otis 2003: 144).

However, over time and due to the ongoing changes within Chinese society (Yang 2002), the use of *guanxi* has entailed increasingly pluralistic activities beyond the variety of its applications and the extent of social positions it is able to reach and link (Lo And Otis 2003). Although relational ethics continue to influence Chinese people’s interaction patterns, the increasing contact with strangers in urban areas has introduced the element of choice (Zhang 2010). Urban residents can navigate obligations to their personal network members in a selective manner by making *guanxi* work for them rather than being consumed by the demands of *guanxi* reciprocity. In addition, Jankowiak (2004) introduces us to the fact that an increasing number of Chinese citizens is willing to embrace the larger society rather than only their own personal network members in their concerns. It translates into developing a sense of obligation to help less fortunate citizens with monetary donations or active charity service. The ongoing individualization of Chinese society has offered Chinese citizens the opportunity to engage with others on a voluntary rather than a mandatory basis as common during collectivist or imperial times (Yan 2010). For most people this altered mode of involvement with the state mainly converts into displays of nationalistic pride (Jankowiak 2004). In addition, Yan (2011) suggests the development of social trust based on universal
principles rather than the reliance on particularistic *guanxi* for the provision of social security to adjust to the demands of an urban lifestyle and participation in a modern society.

Yet, we should not overlook that changes to opportunities for interaction with strangers, the potential for social mobility, and the engagement with the state, have been experienced at different speeds in rural and urban areas (Ruan 1993; Lin 2001; Bian 2002). In rural communities, careful attention to the actual members of one’s social circle and the obligation to reciprocate prevail (Yan 1996; Kipnis 1997; Ku 2003; Yan 2003). There, *guanxi* serves as a tool of integration in situations of social fragmentation caused by engagement in new economic opportunities that put a premium on effectiveness and competition (Vermeer et al. 1998). Oxfeld (2010) describes that in closeknit communities conscious remembrance of past behavior, including favors granted or withheld, continues to serve as an instruction for proper moral behavior. Appearing to pay back a moral debt is particularly important for members of rural communities. Fulfillment of obligations establishes trust in each other and delivers a sense of security. Similar mechanisms of social control have become gradually unavailable in urban neighborhoods due to increasingly dispersed settlement of friends and family members.

What do these gradual changes away from relational ethics mean for our investigation of the role of *guanxi* in shaping current moral expectations? Scholars disagree in their viewpoints regarding the future role of *guanxi* and its influence on expectations for moral behavior in general and conflict resolution strategies in particular. Some predict that the role of a *guanxi* relationship will decline as a result of economic transformations and be replaced by the rule of law (Guthrie 1999; Gold et al. 2002). Others argue that the importance of *guanxi* will increase and create a situation quite different from western rational-legal systems (Jones 1994; Potter 2002; Yang 2002). Potter (2002) describes an increased willingness of
urban Chinese disputants to be involved in more formal forms of conflict resolution and accept rulings based on universal principles. However, he also claims that the fact that involved parties have lawyers who represent them in their stead allows the disputants to continue and nourish their guanxi independent of the outcome at court (Potter 2002: 188).

Learning more about the role of guanxi in conflict resolutions in addition to beliefs and attitudes about justice and fairness is expected to serve as a step towards understanding current moral expectations in Chinese society. However, it is also imperative to investigate the actual nature of social relationships Chinese people currently engage in, specifically the role of these relationships in establishing wider reaching ties to people outside their primary groups. After all, the particularistic outlook of traditional Chinese culture prescribed different expectations for moral conduct for family members and friends than for acquaintances and strangers.

**Ethnographic Background**

The exploration of how moral expectations regarding the role of relationships and the practice of gift giving have changed in reference to the introduction of the rule of law was guided by the assumption that Chinese citizens experience and respond to these changes differently. Although change could not be studied directly as part of a longitudinal design, we expected that a comparison of an urban and a rural community would capture some of the differences in beliefs, perceptions and attitudes about the justice and fairness inherent in the two available conflict resolution strategies, mediation and adjudication (Avenarius and Johnson n.d.).\(^1\) To allow for comparability, we selected an urban site and the rural field site located in the same geographic region of Hebei province.\(^2\)
The rural field site, which we call by the pseudonym Li village because the majority of villagers share that last name, was chosen because it is located within the same administrative unit as the city of Shijiazhuang, the prefecture of Shijiazhuang. However, as part of Zhao County within Shijiazhuang prefecture the village is not a suburb or satellite town of the provincial capital. The distance from the center of Shijiazhuang is 80 miles or approximately one hour by private car and two hours by public bus. At the time of data collection in 2006 and 2007, the village had about 4,830 inhabitants living in 900 separate households. Li village is widely known for its pear production, which dates back to the 17th century and brought the village a modest level of wealth during the era of collectivization between the 1950s and 1970s (Zhao 2003). After decollectivization in 1983 farmers converted all agricultural space to pear cultivation. Trees were allocated by using a lottery system that assigned trees located in specific areas to individual villagers.

Li village residents are not known to leave their village for urban jobs since the village economy provides ample opportunity to ensure economic prosperity for its population due to pear production and related agricultural sideline industries. In fact, only 21% of village households are not involved in any sideline activity. Almost 30% of households have some stakeholder interest or ownership in a freezer facility. A little more than 10% of all households engage in long-distance trade of pears, organizing the transportation of fruits and their direct marketing in cities throughout mainland China. Additional sideline businesses in the service sector include ownership of convenience stores or market stands, repair services and restaurants. Several households also own or are co-owners of factories that produce goods needed for pear production and distribution, such as paper mills, paper carton factories, fruit net factories, and soft drink factories. A few additional households have members who work in these
**TABLE 1.** Informants’ Evaluation of Socioeconomic Difference In Rural and Urban China  
(Self-Reported Socioeconomic Differences Based on Income/Occupation)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class*</th>
<th>Rural Informants**</th>
<th>Urban Informants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LC</td>
<td>farmers without any sideline business</td>
<td>unemployed students, factory workers, sales people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LMC</td>
<td>factory workers, seasonal workers</td>
<td>office workers, school teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UMC</td>
<td>small business owners, teachers</td>
<td>professionals (white collar workers), low level government officials, small business owners (2 to 3 people)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UC</td>
<td>factory owners, county level government officials</td>
<td>business owner (more than 3 employee, high level government officials)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTES:**  
* Class Designations: LC=lower class; LMC=lower middle class; UMC=upper middle class; UC=upper class.  
** All rural households lease agricultural land.  
+ These emic descriptions were elicited in both phases of data collection.
factories as wage labors or earn a salary by teaching in the local schools or working on construction sites. Table 1 shows a distribution of socioeconomic classes as described by rural informants.

Administratively, the village used to be organized into eight separate production teams during the time of collectivization. The whole village constituted a brigade that belonged to a commune which later was converted into a township (Guldin 2001). Although the village is now considered a single administrative unit, the division into eight production teams continues to be recognized by villagers. For example, informants specify the addresses of friends and family members as located in a particular production unit within the village. In fact social network analysis of village households revealed that 53% of the personal network members of heads of households are linking them to fellow production team members and that 78% of all ties are located within the village itself (Avenarius 2009). Also noteworthy is the fact that Li village has a considerably high rate of village endogamy. Two thirds of all women between the ages of 25 and 40 have remained in the village after marriage rather than marry into a neighboring village community. Villagers claimed that this trend is a phenomenon that has strengthened over the last 20 years. They explain it with the consistently good results from pear harvests resulting in stable incomes compared to neighboring villages who have to rely on grain production. However, this might be gradually changing due to the increasing interest expressed by young villagers, in particular young women, to obtain a higher education and seek jobs in the county seat, provincial capital or other cities throughout China.

Ethnographic research in the urban field site of the city of Shijiazhuang posed a different set of challenges than research in Li village. Although Shijiazhuang was considered simply a very large village until the early 1990s when it became a major railroad junction, today it is located at the intersection
of north-south and east-west highways and railroads. The provincial capital of Hebei province is home to textile, fertilizer, pharmaceutical, automotive, building materials and paper industries. The population of the urban area is 2.1 million and the jurisdiction of the prefecture of Shijiazhuang includes six districts, twelve counties and five county level cities, a total of 9 million people. Though we were unable to use a stratified random sampling strategy as in the village, and the data gathered during individual interviews were not supported by participant observation, we are able to compare some aspects of urban informants socioeconomic background based on informants’ evaluation of their social status. Table 1 compiles the aggregate views of informants with respect to their own socioeconomic standing and their evaluation of others.5

Most informants based their comments on a combination of income levels and status evaluation. Jankowiak (2004) has detected similar practices. While these categories are not completely corresponding with actual levels of income or future expectations of income and status, we have included the emic view of informants in our analysis (LeCompte and Schensul 1999). Students were grouped with the lowest income group and small business owners with the upper middle class income group. Urban informants consider manual laborers and sales people and students to belong to the lowest income group. In both of our samples, about 40% of informants fit that profile. Lower middle class citizens are expected to include school teachers and office workers, occupations held by roughly 25% of informants. The upper middle class was associated with government workers, white collar professionals, including doctors, lawyers, and engineers, and small business owners employing up to three people. About 35% of informants in the two samples fulfilled those criteria.

To capture differences by age and gender we purposively sampled in each field site to include an equal number of men and women in three different age groups (Johnson 1990). We
defined these three age groups in response to political events that have shaped the life experiences of Chinese citizens since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. We assumed that older informants who came of age before the Chinese Cultural Revolution would display different opinions than informants who grew up during the Cultural Revolution and younger informants who experienced decollectivization during their school years. Accordingly, we consider informants who were born before 1951 as older informants, those born between 1952 and 1970 as middle aged, and informants born after 1970 as young.

**Emic Views of Moral Characteristics**

A dominant theme in the literature on historic and contemporary perspectives of Chinese morality are moral expectations for leaders (Madsen 1984; Wilson 1981; Peerenboom 1993, 2004; Jing 1996). However, our interest was to learn what rural and urban residents rather than leaders define as moral characteristics they respect in their family members, neighbors, and friends. In her account of the moral sensibilities of a rural community in southern China, Oxfeld (2010) discusses that peasants often have very clear moral expectations for each other. In similar fashion, our goal was to elicit moral expectations and juxtapose them with notions of fairness and justice in conflict resolutions. We asked informants to list all the characteristics of a moral person that came to mind. As part of this free-listing task they could name as many descriptors as they wanted (Johnson and Weller 2002).

Table 2 shows a comparison of the first ten terms listed by rural and urban informants including both genders and all age groups. The characteristics mentioned earliest and most frequently as descriptors of a desirable moral trait by both rural and urban residents was “helps people.” This confirms
the traditional relationship orientation in Chinese culture and its expectation to fulfill obligations towards others in a person’s immediate social circle. It can also be interpreted as an echo of the time of collectivization when Chinese citizens were expected to universally extend their efforts of assistance towards others beyond their immediate family members (Vogel 1965; Marsden 1984; Yan 2010). However, as introduced above and further discussed below, the most current research on changing values among urban Chinese finds that the process of modernization and urbanization has not necessarily reduced the sense of obligation towards others as often predicted. Rather, the development of nationalistic sentiments and more diversified social networks has compelled some Chinese citizens to extend their willingness to assist others to strangers and donate time or money to charities (Jankowiak 2004; Yan 2009).

The next few terms on the respective lists are not entirely overlapping, but “is kind” and “does good deeds” appear

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Urban Sample (n=158)</th>
<th>Rural Sample (n=144)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>helps people</td>
<td>helps people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>is kind</td>
<td>has suzhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>does good deeds</td>
<td>is fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>takes care of parents</td>
<td>does good deeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>is honest</td>
<td>is kind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>is literate</td>
<td>behaves decent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>is fair</td>
<td>is credible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>has suzhi</td>
<td>obeys the law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>obeys the law</td>
<td>is honest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>is polite</td>
<td>is literate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 2. Comparison of Rural and Urban Rankings of Moral Characteristics
on both in prominent places. The expectation to “take care of parents” is a trait that only rural informants mention as part of their first ten characteristics. When sorting lists by gender, we noticed that on average, female informants in Li village put the characteristic of helping parents in second place. However, this notion is absent among both genders for the urban sample. It shows us that the prescribed responsibilities for urban residents have shifted in recent years, a tendency also identified by Yan (2010) and Kleinman et al. (2011).

The prominence of the term *suzhi*, while not surprising, is also noteworthy. In recent years the concept of *suzhi* and its role as an indicator of cultural change in China has become increasingly visible in English language scholarship on Chinese culture (Yan 2003; Anagnost 2004; Kipnis 2006; Hsu 2007). The common translation of *suzhi* as “quality” doesn’t do the concept enough justice. Introduced by the Chinese government in the 1980s alongside birth control campaigns, it promotes the improvement of Chinese citizens in respect to mental, physical and behavioral abilities (Kipnis 2006). While *suzhi* has higher salience scores in the list of urbanites than rural residents, rural residents also mention “is literate,” “has knowledge” and “is polite” as descriptors on their lists. Although not exactly similar, these concepts are related. In the case of rural residents it exemplifies that compared to urban residents they are less attuned to specific terms promoted by media and government.

A few more insights can be gained from the placement of certain terms when comparing lists generated separately for age and gender in addition to location of upbringing. “Is honest” was placed higher on respective lists of rural people, and especially members of the younger set, while young urbanites listed “is credible” more frequently than other age groups or rural residents. While these terms are related this might nevertheless represent the respective experiences of young urban informants in the workplace where they engage
in interactions with people that are not part of their primary group of family members and relatives. The only exception to this practice was made by older urban informants born before 1951. The majority of them mentioned “is fair” as the first item on their lists. This can be interpreted as reminiscing of the period of collectivism when all people were considered equal, which many informants associated with the ultimate standard for fairness. Finally, the fact that “obeys the law” made it into the top ten of the lists for both groups shows us that the notion of fa, law, is now part of the daily consciousness of Chinese people. Though we lack the data to prove it, we assume that prior to increased engagement in the discourse about the rule of law, and most likely prior to 1949, the term li, meaning “rules proper conduct,” would have been mentioned more frequently.

Taken together we learn from the evaluation of these descriptors that Chinese people use two different aspects for their evaluations of moral behavior. One set of adjectives captures expectations about interaction patterns with others, such as “helps people,” “does good deeds,” “takes care of parents,” “is polite.” The other aspect of moral evaluation is represented by terms that identify an individual’s characteristics, such as “is kind,” “is credible,” “is honest,” “is literate,” “has suzhi.” The latter set of qualities focuses on a person’s individual character rather than his or her interactions with others. Certainly, the two sets of descriptors are intertwined. A kind person improves the overall experience of interaction, and honest conduct and decency cannot be uncoupled from the relational context. Nevertheless we do see a tendency to emphasize universally applicable individual traits over comments about a person’s style of relating and interacting with others. This is another confirmation that Chinese people are becoming more interested in self-cultivation and self-realization than serving the collective (see also Jankowiak 2004; Yan 2010; Kleinman et al.2011).
Making Use of Relationships: What Is Considered Proper Moral Conduct?

To capture the range of current beliefs and attitudes about relationships and reciprocity in light of the introduction of the rule of law, we conducted cultural consensus analysis on the perceptions and attitudes of rural and urban informants about the fairness and justice of different conflict resolution strategies (Weller 2007). In the second year of data collection we presented informants with a series of related yet slightly differently worded statements we had collected during ethnographic interviews about the role of relationships and gift giving in both adjudication and mediation. A closer look at individual cultural beliefs reveals patterned differences between rural and urban opinions. In fact, our data do not fit a singular cultural consensus model, suggesting separate cultural understandings among rural and urban residents. However, we can identify an urban Chinese cultural model and a separate rural Chinese cultural model of moral behavior with respect to the role of gift giving and the role of relationships in achieving personal goals. In addition, we detect a tendency for an emerging cultural model of young Chinese people independent of their location of upbringing.

The following paragraphs introduce opinions about the role of relationships in court adjudication and then discuss ideas about gift giving and bribery in light of changing evaluations of the meaning of the rule of law among ordinary citizens. We match perceptions and opinions with data on personal network structures that we elicited along with the evaluation of opinions. The types of disputes that are brought before judges at Chinese civil courts are only slightly different in rural and urban settings. Rural informants described cases of border disputes for agricultural and residential land use spaces, compensation claims for accidents, failure to repay borrowed money and a few cases of divorce and inheritance
settlements. Urban residents listed compensation claims for accidents and medical malpractice, compensation for defective goods, failure to repay borrowed money, compensation for lost wages or other violations of labor contracts, and divorce and inheritance settlements. The increasing number of claims for compensation is particularly noteworthy. Yan (2011) describes this tendency as a move toward “rightful resistance” and “rights assertion,” in particular in terms of consumer rights (Yan 2011: 44). We interpret the insistence on compensation payment as an extension of the Chinese values of reciprocity. Both rural and urban residents share the belief that accidents, malpractice, and the sale of flawed goods need to be rectified and the emotional harm caused by these occurrences needs to be acknowledged.

As mentioned earlier, mediation had been the only form of conflict resolution available for non-crime-related incidents. Within local communities mediation is both the product of social relationships and an instrument to manage these relationships. In the majority of disagreements between two or more citizens an intervention by a mediator, a person related to both parties, is considered sufficient to solve problems and restore the existing relationships (Avenarius 2009). A representative description of mediation by villagers exemplifies the focus on relatedness:

What you have to do is “mix the mu” (huo xini) to settle things. It will be suitable for all kinds of situations. There are only two persons, so they both have to give a little. That is how disputes are solved (42-year-old-male rural informant).

However, informants in both rural and urban areas expressed frustration with this approach to conflict resolution. Having to make a compromise, admitting partial misconduct or involvement and accepting a solution that asks for a contribution from both sides, is seen as unsatisfying and unfair.
to the individual who considers his or her actions as rightful conduct. This leads people who have not had any experience with adjudication at court themselves and don’t know anyone knowledgeable about legal procedures to assume that the rule of law is able to deliver absolute justice. They expect a court ruling to free them of obligations. Yet they are also aware that the consequences of such a procedure would signify the end of the relationship that might have existed with another person prior to the dispute.

Having a relationship with a staff member at court is believed to increase chances of a favorable outcome for plaintiffs in a court case. The following story is representative of a range of cases that villagers had either heard about or experienced themselves.

Four men invested in river front land that contained 87 young trees. Then, one of the four men decided to build a house on the land and used most of the trees for that purpose. He had previously agreed to pay 50 Yuan for each tree, but paid only part of the total sum to his partners once the trees were cut. He continually promised to pay at a later time. However, each time his three partners reminded him of the outstanding payment, he failed to do reimburse them. So the three aggrieved men filed suit in court. The defendant claimed that he had sold the trees to the building contractor and had not been paid by him for the trees. The contractor in turn claimed that the defendant still owed him money for the construction of the house. The contractor also demanded money from the defendant.

Since the contractor had used the trees belonging to the plaintiffs, the judge demanded that the contractor should pay for them. However, the contractor appealed to the district court and found another judge who was a distant relative of his. That judge received testimony from a group of neighbors who claimed that the defendant had used the trees for his own activities of construction and heating purposes. On this basis the judge ruled that the defendant should pay the contractor for the unpaid
balance of construction costs. The three other plaintiffs
trying to get reimbursed for the loss of their trees received
no payment. The outcome was considered to be an injustice
by most villagers. The neighbors who had testified for the
contractor became the targets of anger and feud.

Both rural and urban informants agree that activating an
existing guanxi with a court official is instrumental to winning
a case at court. Many went even further and suggested that
relationships with high level politicians are more beneficial
than relationships with court officials for the positive outcome
of court proceedings. Opinions diverge slightly regarding the
role of evidence in contrast to the role of relationships. Rural
people are twice as likely as urban people to believe that the
party or person with stronger relationships to a court official
will win the case independent of evidence production. This
attitude is most pronounced among informants from both
areas of residence who report that a member of their personal
social network works as a legal professional. They express the
sentiment that having a guanxi with a judge or high ranking
clerk rather than the written rules of the law affect the outcome
of a lawsuit. In addition, they believe that having a guanxi is
more important than monetary gifts to win a positive outcome
in a lawsuit. An exemplary statement of perception about
procedures at court based on information received from an
acquaintance supports this insight:

If you are just a common person who has no
relationship, they will take more money from you, because
common people have no relationships, no inroads and no
outroads. Even if you sue someone in court, it’s not easy.
Such kind of common people have no chance but to be
bullied (51-year-old female urban informant who knows
a lawyer).

However, the specific view that court judges rarely abide
by the rule of law is rare among urban residents born after
1970. Younger urbanites reject the role of relationships as an influential factor in court procedures. Instead they voice their trust in the impartiality of the legal system. The majority of these young people have not encountered court procedures or experienced instances of injustice. They are eager to embrace a new brand of morality, the promises of the rule of the law and the idea of being able to assert their personal right. Potter (2002) finds a similar willingness to follow the rule of law in a study of Shanghai residents and their support for the role of formal judicial mechanisms to guarantee the repayment of loans.

This urban attitude is somewhat perplexing when comparing it to the statements that the same young informants make about the role of relationships in ensuring employment. Market reforms have introduced Chinese people to opportunities to establish relationships with people beyond their kinship group or workplace (Vermeer et al. 1998; Oi 1999). When asking rural and urban residents to evaluate the role of relationships in either finding a job or getting wealthy, we recorded explicit differences of opinion among age groups. Older informants in both rural and urban locations argue that decent people rely on their abilities and not on relationships to find a job. It is likely that their attitudes are informed by the instructions received during the time of collectivism (Bian 2002; Lo and Otis 2003). Young urbanites were surprisingly outspoken in their refusal to agree with that statement. Contrary to the prediction that merit and achievement might override the need for relationships in light of urban residents’ claim that a person’s suzhi is an important moral characteristic, young urban residents seem to approach the need for a job from a rather pragmatic perspective. Many see the establishment of guanxi for the sole purpose of gaining employment as a necessary act to get ahead and to bring honor to their immediate family. We also found similar sentiments among other informants, independent of age and location, who listed either lawyers, high government officials or affluent business people as members of their personal networks.
Changing Moral Ideas About Gift Giving: To Bribe Or Not To Bribe?

Recent literature introduced us to the changing nature of guanxi relationships as a flexible practice that is consciously managed to facilitate particular desirable outcomes (Yang 1994; Wank 1996; Yang 2002; Lo and Otis 2003; Hsu 2007). Hence it is important to take a closer look at the changing viewpoints among Chinese citizens regarding the function of the kind of gift giving that is associated with establishing and maintaining guanxi. Traditionally, reliance on guanxi involves the presentation of a good deed, a favor, or a gift at some point in time (Yang 1957; Yan 1996; Yao et al. 1999; Liu 2000). It also entails the recognition of a hierarchical relationship in the subtle sense of one person “seeking” assistance and the other person “granting” assistance. Following these principles, the strength of guanxi arises from the obligation of subordinates to fulfill ritual obligations to those who provide assistance and therefore have slightly more power and influence than themselves. Inherent in this transaction is also a sense of generosity (Yang 2002). It is important to note that the presentation of gifts doesn't mark the onset of a guanxi, but occurs as an expression or activation of an existing guanxi. A perquisite for such a ritual acknowledgment of a relation is the identification of shared attributes two people have in common, for example, as neighbors, classmates, work colleagues, etc. In the absence of such a joint membership, a third person with overlapping associations to both parties can function as a go-between and create the necessary link. The gift that manifests the link takes on the form of a ritual tribute to a superior, the person who has generously granted assistance or favor (Zhu et al. 2000; Ku 2003).

Residents of Li village and Shijiazhuang city followed these basic cultural expectations in their descriptions of proper behavior in regard to cultivating and maintaining guanxi and gaining favorable outcomes. When interested in persuading
a known person to grant help, many expressed that the presentation of a gift is morally prescribed. However, almost all unstructured, open-ended interviews conducted during the first phase of data collection included a declaration that specified gift giving is not considered appropriate when two parties are not already familiar with one another:

(...) according to normal reasoning, no matter if you give a little bit or a lot to anyone who is not family or friend already, that is a form of bribery (39-year-old male rural informant).

Similar sentiments can be found in the recent literature on *guanxi* (Yan 1996; Kipnis 1997; Gold et al. 2002; Ku 2003). There is a clear sense of difference between already established relationships and relationships that are forged ad hoc with the assistance of gift presentation. To gauge the distribution of such sentiments among a larger sample of people, we asked a closed question about the morality of giving gifts to unrelated others as part of the structured interview instrument. Only 17% of rural residents affirmed that they consider giving gifts to people who are not already part of their social network morally acceptable, compared to 38% of urban residents. As we will see below the divergence between rural and urban Chinese is further reinforced when comparing the monetary values informants attach to their definitions of gift giving and bribery.

A closer look at the distribution of evaluations according to age and gender reveals that among urban residents both men and women born after 1970 are supportive of the practice of gift giving independent of existing relationships to facilitate a desired outcome. It corresponds with the affirmation of young urban residents introduced above that reliance on relationships is a necessity to obtain employment or any other goal they find important to pursue. This stands in stark contrast to the majority of rural people and older urbanites, who consider this
gift giving practice a violation of the rules of proper behavior. However, the majority of urban residents disagree with the claim “if both sides give presents to the judge, whoever gives the highest amount will win the case,” yet the majority of rural informants agree. In fact, rural people are twice as likely as urbanites to believe in the power of money in seeking conflict resolution at court. The following account of a court case that Li villagers frequently cited exemplifies these attitudes:

A group of ten households protested the building of a house that blocked their customary right of way. They took the case to the village dispute resolution committee but the parties involved were unable to reach an agreement based on mediation. Then the ten household heads took the matter to court. The initial cost of this court procedure was 3000 Yuan. Later all ten villagers jointly decided to finance dinner parties for the judge. However, the case didn’t get solved in their favor. The judge didn’t grant them their wish despite their gifts. They were drained of money, which is typical for poor plaintiffs (58-years old male rural informant).

Similar to our exploration of the role of relationships in court proceedings, we deduce that urban residents share a willingness to accept the possibility of impartial rulings at court. In contrast, some rural residents are misinformed and others mistrust the rule of law. The examination of gift giving practices and their evaluation also reflects the sense of inequality that many rural residents experience. Additional analysis of related statements further endorses the finding that although rural people are not approving of gift giving to people outside their established social networks as morally correct behavior, most of them doubt that they can accomplish their goals when interacting with people living outside their village without presenting a gift. In recent years differential access to resources, including opportunities to create diversified social networks and to generate income in addition to farming, has
created differences between villagers and between villagers and urban residents. The availability of money that Oxfeld (2010) describes as a major contributor to changed practices and expectations regarding repayment of obligations among rural residents has allowed some villagers to choose direct payment of gifts to attempt to narrow the gap between themselves and people in power.

Rural people are still abiding by the distinction between superiority and inferiority inherent in traditional *guanxi* practices and remain committed to their responsibility to reciprocate (Ku 2003). They continue to be limited by the lack of diversity in the composition of their personal networks and the demands of their kin group members and close neighbors. The social networks of urban residents, on the other hand, have become larger and more diverse (Jankowiak 2004). They increasingly exercise choice when interacting with others and use flexible associations with fellow urbanites to either minimize or maximize their participation in certain *guanxi* at certain times of need (Lo and Otis 2003).

A noteworthy aspect of the exploration of attitudes towards gift giving as a means to an end, is that both urban and rural citizens agree that in the absence of an already established *guanxi* they see no difference between gifts presented in monetary form and gifts given as already purchased goods (e.g., a box of cigarettes, an expensive bottle of brandy, a TV set). In contrast, the traditional practice called for time-delayed expectation of favors, and appropriate gifts had to be carefully researched to ensure it would be meaningful to the recipient (Lo and Otis 2003). The current dismissal of such requirements shows that the line between proper and less proper gift giving has been blurred.

At present, the cultural ideal is not to engage in acts of bribery as part of the process of cultivating relationships to accomplish particular goals. However, for most Chinese citizens the reality of the demands of interacting with a growing
number of strangers as part of their adjustment to the market economy and the experience of increasing inequality in gaining access to resources calls for acts of bribery if a person has the means to engage in it. The practice of giving gifts without first establishing a relationship based on commonalities with a potential *guanxi* partner, is made morally acceptable in the minds of Chinese people because it serves the goal of personal advancement, self-realization and by extension may benefit a person’s entire family. Some would say desperate situations call for desperate measures. However, Yan (2011) reports that an increasing number of urban residents claims that “self-development is the moral way to make a contribution to society” (Yan 2011: 40). The reaction to and acceptance of inequality is further confirmed when looking at tolerable levels of value associated with gift giving as opposed to declarations of ostentatious levels of giving that some people associate with the notion of bribery. The differences in value we present in the next paragraph showcase that the evaluation of proper moral conduct as opposed to immoral conduct is based on matters of degree rather than the essential nature of the practice (Hsu 1996).

Although informants rarely use the modern Chinese word for bribery, *xinghui*, to talk about the subtle differences in relationship management that might call for the presentation of gifts, we asked informants to list the value of gifts that they consider worth the label *xinghui* as part of structured interviews conducted in the second phase of data collection. To further capture the variance in viewpoints we encouraged informants to name the value level in RMB that they associate with the word *xinghui*. The official policy of the Chinese government states that gifts up to RMB 5000, worth approximately US $674 at the time of research, are legally acceptable. However, few informants referred to these guidelines. A few urban residents mentioned up to RMB 50,000 as an adequate value to call a gift “bribery,” dependent on the level of affluence of a particular
giver. The majority of urban residents consider gifts between RMB 1,000 and 3,000 acceptable. Only 14% reject any sum as an acceptable practice, claiming “yi fen qian ye suan - even one penny given unsolicited counts as bribery.” These numbers shift for rural residents. Using the same phrase yi fen qian ye suan, 40% declare any amount of gift giving to members outside one’s own social circle as an act of bribery. The remaining informants in Li village differ in their description of acceptable bribery levels between RMB 100 and RMB 1,000. Hardly anyone lists any amount beyond that level.12

In sum, most Chinese citizens consider the giving of money or goods as equally improper when presented to unrelated others. However, our findings also show that the practice of gift giving to people outside their guanxi network is an often encountered practice. Although the increased frequency of this conduct doesn’t make the practice acceptable moral behavior, Chinese citizens respond to behavior that digresses from traditional moral expectations with different levels of condemnation. Younger urbanites do not consider it a violation, whereas most other urban residents and a few well-connected villagers think of it as a minor offense; yet others find a departure from traditional practices distressing but sometimes necessary for personal advancement. We see this as further confirmation of a transition towards a new ethic of pragmatism in Chinese society. While the ideals of meritocracy and universalism expect citizens not to rely on relationships to advance their personal goals, in reality people have to resort to the active creation of relationships to realize their ambitions. The evaluation of the means to such ends as bribery, and by extension to government officials as a form of corruption, is carefully circumvented by considering the circumstances of each situation and negotiating matters of degree rather than declaring the practice to be a violation of a universal rule of conduct.
Discussion

The legal reforms introduced by the Chinese state have provided Chinese citizens with access to adjudication as an additional conflict resolution strategy. These institutional changes have impacted local Chinese communities differently and introduced a variety of responses among urban and rural people. Changes in legal procedures are not the only alterations that Chinese citizens have experienced over the course of the last three decades. Economic reforms initiated in the late 1970s have triggered a multitude of new challenges and reactions. However, our explorations of changing ideas about morality focused specifically on Chinese responses to the discourse about the rule of law. It allowed us to study how the related concepts of universalism and impartiality have been negotiated by Chinese citizens in reference to the rule of relationships that has dominated Chinese culture in the past.

The analysis of unstructured interviews in the exploratory phase of data collection and the assessment of the cultural consensus model based on structured interviews in the explanatory phase of the project revealed a few seemingly paradoxical attitudes about proper moral conduct and the fairness of adjudication among informants. Two observations stand out. Rural residents are more likely than urbanites to condemn the presentation of gifts of any value to people outside a person’s established circle of friends and relatives as bribery. Yet they are more eager than urban residents to prescribe gift giving to judges as a strategy for winning a case in court. In fact, they are unlikely to try to forgo the practice altogether and rather recommend using monetary gifts to compensate for their lack of access to resource-generating relationships, indicating that they view themselves as unequal contestants in interactions with legal professionals whom they perceive to be more educated and in possession of higher levels of *suzhi*.13
While they advise against acts of bribery, they occasionally find themselves engaging in the practice.

Young urban residents embody another set of contradicting responses to the new opportunities afforded by the opening of labor markets and the introduction of the rule of law. Although they avoid using the label “bribery,” they are highly likely to support gift giving to people with whom they are not closely related. Yet they also express their trust in the rule of law, individual rights and universalistic ethics more vividly than other Chinese citizens. They are simultaneously more pragmatic and more idealistic than both their rural age mates and older urban residents with whom they share similar lifestyles. Comparable observations have been made by Jankowiak (2004, 2008) and Yan (2009, 2011) who consider young Chinese citizens both more selfish in their pursuit of individual desire and more selfless as evident in their willingness to contribute either money or their labor to charities.

Clearly, Chinese society is in the middle of an ongoing transition from one set of moral imperatives to another. What explains these contradictions in moral evaluations? From a demographic angle, gender rarely registers as an explanation for differences in perceptions. Generational differences account for some of the variation in attitudes and point to further changes in the near future. However, to date, the variations in legal consciousness and perceptions about correct moral conduct are mainly driven by structural differences between urban and rural populations. Despite the comparatively small geographic distance between the city of Shijiazhuang and Li village, the characteristics of personal networks in each location have a significant impact on the formation of opinions.

Although no longer limited to agricultural production, rural residents continue to be firmly bound to their social circles of family and kin group members (Yan 1996; Kipnis 1997; Liu 2000). Due to the relatively low outmigration for Li village, the network composition of villagers is not diverse in
terms of members who live in the county seat or the provincial capital. Many rural residents socialize exclusively with their relatives and neighbors (Avenarius 2009). Access to information about education, business opportunities and legal procedures, including the meaning of the rule of law, is still limited to those who know somebody outside their village or know where to search for such resources. Nevertheless, the increasing rate of industrialization in rural areas is expected to introduce more diversity to rural social networks and eventually influence residents’ perceptions accordingly, in particular the younger generation of rural residents.

In contrast, urban residents have more opportunities than rural people to establish relationships to people outside their primary groups. They meet non-kin group members in their neighborhoods and their work place (Ruan 1993; Bian 2002; Saich 2011). In addition, residents of urban areas have more exposure to the changed conditions of the new legal system since the majority of lawyers, however small in absolute numbers throughout China, practice in cities (Starr 2001; Potter 2002). This has shaped attitudes and perceptions regarding the rule of law and the role of lawyers among urban residents (Gallagher 2006; Jankowiak 2004, 2008; Woo and Gallagher 2011). Urban informants are more likely than rural informants to be acquainted with a lawyer as a member of their personal network or to know somebody who knows a lawyer or judge. Our findings have shown that such characteristics have an influence on the formation of opinions about the rule of law and legal procedures independent of actual experience with adjudication at court. Interaction with legal professionals introduces citizens to a more realistic view of the usefulness of adjudication to obtain a favorable outcome and shapes their awareness of the pervasiveness of the rule of relationships in Chinese culture to date.

The diversification of social networks and the increasing volume of interactions with strangers as a result of economic
restructuring has allowed Chinese citizens more freedom and more choices in the navigation of social relationships. In urban areas and among younger people in particular, this has translated to a more flexible interpretation of the obligations associated with *guanxi* (Lo and Otis 2003). Urban residents benefit from the less binding and less stifling composition of social networks between individuals who are not in constant contact with one another due to dispersed settlement throughout urban spaces. That is not to say that they don’t feel a sense of obligation to assist others. In fact, Jankowiak (2004) introduces us to the expanded moral consciousness of some urban citizens who are increasingly considering a sense of obligation or moral empathy towards less fortunate others in the society at large, i.e., fellow citizens who are not members of their personal networks. In contrast, rural residents continue to understand their moral obligations as tied to the maintenance of face, i.e., the appearance of proper conduct in the evaluation and eyes of others (Oxfeld 2010). This observation is further supported by the descriptions of moral characteristics we elicited from both rural and urban residents. Both groups listed “helping others” as the most important trait of a moral person. However, urban residents make a conscious choice to help others, whereas rural residents consider it a non-negotiable mandate. These differences in attitudes also explain why young urban residents see no harm in using relationships to their advantage. Their personal networks are large enough to allow them to pick and choose between helping and avoiding others at different times. They don’t fear longterm repercussions when strategically using a person or claiming the need to fulfill preceding responsibilities when declining a request for help.

Despite these changed circumstances for social interactions, hardly any urban or rural resident is capable of evading the pervasive traditional moral requirement of gift giving to balance favors or debts, either those already received or those anticipated. Most people continue to be interested in keeping
up appearances in this regard. However, our data showcased an increasing interest and willingness among young people to develop a sense of social trust based on adherence to universal values and the rule of law. In the meantime, most Chinese citizens continue to rely on their belief in personal trust afforded by the establishment and maintenance of *guanxi* (Yan 2011).

Apart from our reflections on generational and structural differences, contradicting opinions about proper moral conduct should not be considered a new phenomenon in Chinese culture. Fei Xiaotong developed comparable insights in his evaluation of pre-1949 Chinese society, stating that "(...) *the traditional moral system was incapable of producing a comprehensive moral concept*" (Fei 1992: 78). Instead, he claimed that Chinese ethics and laws are applied and rejected in reference to the particular needs of an individual within specific contexts. These flexible ideas regarding morality were tied to equally fluid associations with various groups of other citizens. Different interaction partners and social contexts called for different rules of conduct. These observations confirm the particularistic nature of traditional Chinese social (Fei 1992; Peerenboom 1993, 2004; Potter 2002).

Kleinman et al. (2011) describe similar struggles with the adjustment of moral expectations to the requirements of modern life among urban Chinese. Many people present divided selves in response to the availability of choices and the current range of moral teachings. They are still immersed in their relationships to others, but not as engaged in self-sacrifice as was culturally expected during the period of collectivism. Instead modern Chinese citizens are often driven by an interest in self-improvement and in search of an individualistic morality. Based on our findings we argue that the claim of an increasing number of people that China is in the midst of a moral crisis, should mainly be understood as a reaction to the multitude of ethical teachings currently available (Jankowiak 2004; Oxfeld 2010; Yan 2009, 2011). Remnants of
the traditional relational ethics are still at play, even in urban areas. And although collectivist ethics are unlikely to make a comeback, they find entrance to the ongoing discourse about proper moral behavior. Finally, citizens’ experiences with universalistic ethics are not solid enough to displace all the other voices. Since the change of moral values is not as fast paced as economic changes, we suggest the temporary label of “ethics of pragmatism” to capture the current process of moral adjustment to new realities.

Nevertheless, we should look ahead and ask if Chinese people might witness the beginning of an end to particularistic practices and relational ethics? Although not evident in daily practice that still centers around the use of guanxi for personal advancement, the universalistic nature of the rule of law is appealing to many young Chinese and often considered more just and fair than reliance on relationships. Adherence to universalism also pairs well with the trend towards individualization of Chinese society as suggested by Jankowiak (2009) and Yan (2010). Perhaps the suzhi dialogue and its emphasis on individual accomplishments will contribute to the eventual development of a less flexible but more universally applicable notion of morality among the younger generation of Chinese citizens. We expect further studies of attitudes and behaviors among young Chinese people to inform us if it is possible to simultaneously embrace individualization and a particularistic social order.

For the present it is important to note that pondering and discussing the universal principles of the rule of law is no longer limited to the circles of the highly educated elite. Instead the debate pervades a whole generation of Chinese citizens independent of gender and socioeconomic background. There is reason to assume that younger members of the rural population have also taken note of these concepts and beliefs. The rapid rate of urbanization and easy accessibility of information technology in most parts of China’s eastern regions increase
the likelihood that the next generation of rural residents will follow suit in adopting faith in the impartiality of the rule of law. It remains to be seen how the readily accepted practice of gift giving will fare in this evolving process. Adherence to or elimination of bribery will indicate where to locate Chinese morality on the apparent continuum between particularism or universalism unique to Chinese culture.

We conclude that while the discourse about the rule of law has not replaced traditional expectations about moral conduct, its introduction has opened avenues for the development of what might be considered a new moral standard in the future. It is likely that in close-knit circles of family members and friends the accumulation of obligations and moral debt based on conscious remembrance of favors and other acts of kindness will continue to call for reciprocity (Oxfeld 2010). However, new interaction patterns between strangers in urban environments and between individuals and the state will further develop the ethics of pragmatism, the flexible and revised use of guanxi, and ultimately a different kind of civility among Chinese citizens (Lo and Otis 2003; Jankowiak 2004). As Zigon (2008: 77) suggests in his exploration of anthropological perspectives on morality, the introduction of laws to the cultural canon of ideas in a society has the capacity to help constitute what is considered moral in a culture. Perhaps the ongoing discourse with the rule of law in China will eventually give the current process of transition lasting direction.

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NOTES

1 Detailed descriptions of the data collection and data analysis methods of the research design for this study are available in a chapter on mixed method design for social network research (Avenarius and Johnson n.d.). Prior to the first phase of data collection for this research the main author had conducted exploratory research on the Chinese legal system in the summer months of 2004. Additional ethnographic insights on Chinese culture were gained over the course of fieldwork done in 1993, 1995, 1996, and 2002. The main author, Christine Avenarius, is fluent in Mandarin Chinese. Zhao Xudong is a native speaker. In 2006, the main author conducted unstructured in-depth interviews in the urban areas alone and in the rural areas together with an assistant to help out when the fangyan, the local dialect, caused difficulties in mutual understanding. In 2007 structured interview questionnaires were conducted with the help of six research assistants. Many thanks to Wu Benjian, Ma Jiewen, Qi Zhao, Ji Pixi, Jia Jiabiao and Lai Rong.

2 We decided against Beijing as the urban field site since its status as the nation’s capital identified it as a much less representative urban space than a provincial capital.

3 At the time, all men between the ages of 15 and 55 received the same amount of trees. Women received subsidiary land that allowed conversion to tree cultivation. An adjustment of tree distribution took place in 2003. However, equal allocation of pear trees per household is elusive since the number of trees in the responsibility of a single household depends on its number of eligible members at the time of distribution.

4 Due to the challenges of recruiting informants in an urban space, we contacted informants in public spaces, enrolling them based on a predetermined quota for age and gender. Hence we didn’t learn as much about the lives of urban informants as we did for rural informants. In the rural field site we lived in a rural household for the duration of the field work and spent time observing daily routines.
Unfortunately, we were unable to recruit informants from the highest socioeconomic strata, identified as large business owners and higher government officials. Retirees among informants are distributed across all three other groups. The determination distribution of income classes among rural informants also benefited from an MA research project on wealth evaluations in Li village (Avenarius et al. 2005; Liu and Avenarius 2008).

We analyzed these words with the software package Anthropac 4.0 ranking the items based on frequencies and the order in which they were mentioned (Borgatti 1992). We then compared salience scores for the 10 highest ranked items by location, gender, and age (Bernard and Ryan 2010).

The study of cultural beliefs to capture changing attitudes and perceptions about justice and fairness in response to the newly introduced rule of law called for the application of cultural consensus theory, “a collection of analytical techniques and models that can be used to estimate cultural beliefs and the degree to which individuals know or report those beliefs” (Weller 2007: 339, see also D’Andrade 1995 on cognitive anthropology in general). To build a cultural consensus model, data were collected in two phases. We started with the collection of qualitative data as part of unstructured ethnographic interviews eliciting narratives about fairness and beliefs about guanxi. After the analysis of these data we followed up with the collection of quantitative data a year later using structured interview instruments to capture the distribution of findings among a larger number of informants (Glaser and Strauss 1967, LeCompte and Schensul 1999; Bernard 2006).

For both datasets, unstructured interviews and structured interviews, we collected data on social relationships. The unstructured interviews at both rural and urban field sites asked informants to describe their personal networks with the help of a name generator (McCallister and Fischer 1983). The structured interviews included a checklist that asked informants to respond to a set of position generators that elicited relationships with people in specific occupations and status categories (Lin 2001).

This observation is statistically significant: Pearson’s Chi-square=11.063, p=0.004

This observation is statistically significant: Fischer’s Exact = 7.283, p=0.007, odds ratio = 1.878. Further statistical notes available upon request.
The range of opinions about monetary levels for xinghui showed no statistically significant levels of explanations for either age, gender, or socioeconomic standing.

According to Yan (2009) some poor Chinese citizens who experience inequality believe that they have a “right” to engage in deviant behavior to level the playing field, as he eloquently describes in his account of extortion cases against “good Samaritans.”

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