**relation/关系(Guān Xì)**

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Chinese characters for “relation” is *guanxi*关系. This term is often used in daily life. Since ancient Chinese usually had more strict criteria for words included in lexicons or dictionaries, major traditional lexicons seldom took this term in. In modern Chinese, however, this term goes to another extreme, and its meanings seem to be all-embracing and more literary, such as “the interaction, connection or relation of things,” or “relationship of people or things" or "bearing and impact."[[1]](#footnote-1) Thus, Chinese phrases related to “correlation,” “relatedness,” and “relevance” are categorized as synonyms and co-constitute the general meaning of “relation” in Chinese.

On the other hand, some more "mundane" usages of “relation” implied subtle meanings that are hard to convey in words. For example, the phrase “have a relation with” originally contained a broader meaning, but for a long time, it is almost exclusively referred to as "have sex with or have an affair with somebody.” It makes the term “*guan xi*关系” (relation) after the verb “*fa sheng*发生” (have) stereotypically paired with "illicit sexual relation," and few people would question why we do not use the phrase "legitimate sexual relation".

Another example is the so-called “public relation,” a buzzword in the tide of the market economy in the 1980s with a root in common parlance and slang. This created many "verb-object structure" idioms based on some vulgar words, such as "seek the relationship for one's own benefit," “exploit connections to get a profit,” and "engage in a relationship as snobbery." There are complimentary phrases describing the degree of "relation," for instance if the relation is "solid enough," "hard enough," “strong enough,” "wild enough (much enough), "arbitrary enough," etc. As a result, the Chinese word for "relation" is not easy to be translated into Western languages and sometimes has to use the phonetic translation *guanxi*. A highly acclaimed TV drama series, *Chinese Style Relationship*, may best explain the complexity of the meaning of the Chinese "relation" *guanxi*关系.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Nevertheless, if we trace the etymological root of the Chinese characters for "relation," the term is not necessarily so derogatory. The first character, "*guan*关," originally was written as關, which took the shape of a bolt used to lock the door and later meant "strategic pass" (隘口) and "critical juncture" (枢纽).[[3]](#footnote-3)After the Tang Dynasty, the character was expanded to mean "get involved." The other character*,* “*xi* 系," is composed of the upper part 爪 (claw or hand) and the lower part 丝 (silk), which graphically displays how "to link the silk with a hand," attaching the word meaning of "be related to."[[4]](#footnote-4) The earliest case to use the two characters as a phrase could be found in *He lin yu lu*鹤林玉露, a collection of literary anecdotes by LUO Dajing (1196-1242). For example, in the story about ZHANG Liang's assassination of Emperor Qin: "This assassination encouraged many heroes to rebel, which was greatly related to ZHANG Liang’s action." We can easily find sentences such as "The death of ZHUGE Kongming has a great impact on many things." "This must be carried out because it is related to morality." The use of "relation" as a noun is derived accordingly[[5]](#footnote-5).

Three sources have greatly influenced the transmutation of Chinese phrases and words: the translation of Buddhist scriptures during the Han and Tang dynasties (202 BC – 907 AD); the "Europeanization" of the Chinese language as a result of the spread of Western learning in late Ming dynasty (1582 - 1644); and "Chinese terms reproduced in Japan" in the 19th century. Nevertheless, we cannot find similar sources for "relation." I would rather say that the "relation" itself is mutually located in the relation between the East and the West. Only a two-way interpretation can identify the trajectory of ideas from the traces of the linguistic and cultural encounter and activate the possible connections contained therein.

In this light, if we reflect on the West philosophy from a Chinese perspective, we may vaguely find a long chain of thought containing critical terms related to "relation": the ontological “*Beziehung*” for Martin Buber,[[6]](#footnote-6) “the method of correlation” for Paul Tillich[[7]](#footnote-7) and “a fertilizing effect” for T. S. Eliot,[[8]](#footnote-8) “the very relation itself” for Martin Heidegger,[[9]](#footnote-9) “la correlation” for Emmanuel Levinas,[[10]](#footnote-10) “the merely relational mediation” for Alain Badiou,[[11]](#footnote-11) and “Ying-Yang dialogue in place of God” for Julia Kristeva.[[12]](#footnote-12) What is particularly noteworthy is that this "chain" has been deeply inter-textualized with Chinese thought.

Take Martin Buber as an example. Buber has a frequently quoted saying - “I become through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become *I*, I say *Thou.*”[[13]](#footnote-13)James Brown interprets this saying as “a correlative action towards its own being.” He believes “the famous saying is even more pregnant in the original German.”[[14]](#footnote-14)Brown points out that thirteen years before *I and Thou* was published, based on three English translations (Giles, James Legge, and F. H. Balfour), Buber translated some discourses and fables from Zhuangzi into German.[[15]](#footnote-15)Since Buber does not know Chinese, “virtually every line of Buber's translation can be traced to one of these sources,” and “he occasionally (and very significantly) paraphrases loosely, combines sources, and splices editorial comments from the various translators directly into the text.”[[16]](#footnote-16) However, when translating a very critical sentence in Chapter “Autumn River,”[[17]](#footnote-17)Buber does not follow anyone of them but chooses a German word according to his own understanding. This Chinese phrase “*gong fen*功分” is rendered “function” by Giles, “efficacy” by Frederic H. Balfour, and “services they render” by James Legge. Only Buber, who does not know Chinese, thought that the key to "convertible and yet necessary terms" is "in relation to each other" or to "east and west," so he chooses without hesitation the German word *Beziehung*. In this light, it is understandable why Heidegger’s *Identity and Difference* "does not inquire into the components of the relation, but into the relation as a relation," why he “asks about the very relation itself,” [[18]](#footnote-18) and why he thinks that it is from "difference" to "relation" that the traditional metaphysics of "the structure of both ontology and theology"[[19]](#footnote-19)can be overcome.

Julia Kristeva has a similar discussion in her work *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*,[[20]](#footnote-20) in which she categorizes traditional Chinese philosophy and Michael Bakhtin’s “polyphonic novels” into two kinds of “poetic discourses,” respectively representing the East and the West. Kristeva argues that the fundamental features of both are “the effort … to break out the framework of casually determined identical substances,” so “analogy and relation” will replace “identity and substance.”[[21]](#footnote-21)In her view, this is “dialogism and ambivalence” and “the only linguistic practice to escape the prohibition.”[[22]](#footnote-22)In her discussion, Kristeva briefly mentioned a "Chinese philosopher ZHANG Dongsun," and it is evident that she had thoroughly read ZHANG's article "Thought, Language and Culture."

ZHANG’s article was originally published in *Sociologia*,[[23]](#footnote-23) and in June of the same year, the newly founded English journal *The Yenching Journal of Social Studies* published the English version, translated by the editor-in-chief of the journal LI An-che. The name of the article was changed to "A Chinese Philosopher's Theory of Knowledge."[[24]](#footnote-24) About 18 years later, in 1956, Haridas T. Muzumdar, an Indian-American scholar at Cornell College, published an article with the same title, offering a new translation as well as an interpretation of ZHANG Dongsun’s article.[[25]](#footnote-25)

ZHANG's main argument is to differentiate the Western "identity logic" from Chinese "correlation logic." He argues that the former comes along with a “subject-predicate proposition,” and the latter is in fact, the “antithetical grammar and syntax,” a term re-proposed by Chinese scholars in recent years.[[26]](#footnote-26) Muzumdar thus outlines three characteristics of Chinese thought: correlation logic, non-exclusive classification, and analogical definition,[[27]](#footnote-27) which is precisely what Kristeva calls "poetic discourse." Kristeva leaves a special note for this paragraph: "Modern physics and ancient Chinese thought ... are equally anti-Aristotelian, anti-monological and dialogical."[[28]](#footnote-28) This is what she called “Yin-Yang dialogue… in place of God”.[[29]](#footnote-29)

The British sinologist Angus Charles Graham has a book entitled *Yin-Yang and the Nature of Correlative Thinking*, in which he also discusses the "logic of correlation" in terms of *Yin-Yang*.[[30]](#footnote-30) It is interesting that the "correlation" is not exclusively a Chinese logic derived from *Yin-Yang* but can be traced as a paralleled clue in Western philosophy, which is probably the traditional thesis of “two natures in one person” or “hypostatic union.”

“Two natures in one person” or “hypostatic union” still attracts many efforts even today within the Christian faith circles. However, I think it has become more and more of a philosophical understanding since Martin Buber. For example, Kathryn Tanner, a theologian at the Yale University, states that “humans come to be in the image of God” actually implies “coming to be oneself in relation to what one is not," i.e., "all creatures are formed in relation to what they are not.”[[31]](#footnote-31) If Buber's saying is really "even more pregnant in the original German," I am afraid the "potentiality" contained in “*Beziehung*,” “ambivalence," and “correlative thinking” will be much more decadent with the Chinese reference to "east and west are convertible but necessary terms in relation to each other."

Moving on in the framework of theological hermeneutics, Tanner derives “apophatic accounts” that make the sacred "a mere non-semantic place-holder" in order to keep a "purely regulative, rather than constitutive or immanent” boundary of the understanding. Compared with "the merely relational mediation" or "the only linguistic practice to escape from the prohibition" mentioned above, we may recognize that the theologians can be as subversive as the philosophers.

In sum, it should be a meaningful practice, if not the only one, to reposition the term “relation” or *guanxi*关系 in Chinese or European languages, to re-activate the potential dialogue between Chinese thought and the continental philosophy, to rediscover the antithetical structure in comparison with “la correlation,” and to extend our dialogue in the risk of possible "misunderstanding".

1. “guan 关,” c.v., in *Xinhua Dictionary* (Chinese-English) (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2021), 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://tv.cctv.com/2017/03/28/VIDEVt0TQvlQN5nsbbQlgtnU170328.shtml?spm>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See LI Xueqin, et al. ed., *Zi Yuan* (Chinese Etymology), Vol. II (Tianjin: Tianjin Ancient Books Publishing House, 2012), 1058. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 1143. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. LUO Dajing, *He liny u lu*. See <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&res=548729&remap=gb>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jonathan R. Herman, *I and Tao: Martin Buber’s Encounter with Chuang Tzu* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 227, footnote12. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. John P. Newport, *Paul Tillich* (Waco: Word Books, 1984), 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. T. S. Eliot, [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, translated and with an introduction by Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Walter Brogan and James Risser, "Introduction," in *American Continental Philosophy: A Reader*, eds. Walter Brogan & James Risser (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 2nd edition, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. James Brown, *Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Buber and Barth: Subject and Object in Modern theology* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 104, 107*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Martin Buber, trans., *Reden und Gleichnisse des Tschuang-Tse* (Leipzig : Insel-verlag, 1910). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. 《庄子·秋水》：知东西相反而不可以相无，则功分定矣. (If we know that east and west are convertible and yet necessary terms in relation to each other, then such functions may be determined.) See Jonathan R. Herman, *I and Tao: Martin Buber’s Encounter with Chuang Tzu*, 227, footnote12. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 64-91. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., 85-86. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., 85-86. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. ZHANG Dongsun, “Si xiang, yu yang yu wen hua (Thought, Language and Culture),” in *Sociaologia*, Volume 10 (1938). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Chang Tung-sun, “A Chinese Philosopher’s Theory of Knowledge,” *The Yenching Journal of Social Studies*, Vol. I, No.2 (1939). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Haridas T. Muzumdar, “A Chinese Philosopher’s Theory of Knowledge,” *The Midwest Sociologist*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Dec., 1956): 12-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. SHEN Jiaxuan, *Chao yue zhu wei jie gou: dui yan yu fa he dui yang e shi* (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Haridas T. Muzumdar, “A Chinese Philosopher’s Theory of Knowledge,” 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, 91, footnote 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. A. C. Graham, *Yin-Yang and the Nature of Correlative Thinking* (Singapore: Institute of East Asian Philosophies, 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)