



Sociological Briefing

Bribery as a cultural phenomenon in China

The word “bribery” is rarely used in sociological research but related concepts such as corruption and graft are more commonly used. Looking at scientific databases, we can identify a growing concern in sociological studies about how to prevent actions linked to bribery or corruption. Moreover, it is also relevant to mention the increase of sociological analysis about citizens’ awareness of topics such as transparency, particularly in the public sphere. The concepts that refer to the use of personal connections to obtain economic or non-economic benefits may differ across territories. For example, in China, it is used the term “guanxi”, which is linked to the bribery subculture. In this sociological briefing, the author approaches the use of “guanxi” to obtain school places in two cities in this country through an ethnographic case.

The author of “[Motivations for ritual performance in bribery: Ethnographic case studies of the use of guanxi to gain school places in China](#)” published in *Current Sociology*, unveils the ritual performances to explore the ways individuals’ performances are related to “guanxi”.

Knowledge about bribery, “guanxi” and ritual performance

The author incorporates the different concepts underlying the nature of corruption and bribery in the case of China, paying special attention to “renqing” (the ethic of indebtedness) and “ganqing” (affection) and the ways they interrelate with “guanxi”, which refers to “personal relationships, connections or networks in Chinese culture, which can be utilized or potentially utilized, in informal and interpersonal forms, in order to acquire resources”. Goffman is included throughout this contribution, in particular with his work about the use of symbols and their impact to represent (or not) people themselves. In this case, the author refers mainly to Goffman’s works “Symbols and class status”, “On face-work”, and “Interaction Ritual: essays on Face-to-Face behavior”. The synergies between the research topic of the article and the sociological knowledge derived from Goffman’s work frames the reading of this contribution.

Schools in China and corruption

Parents in China are profoundly concerned about the schools where their children will be enrolled. The underlying causes explaining this situation are mainly five: the relevant role of education linked to the Con-

fucian ideal, the one-child policy increasing the expectations of the parents towards their children, the role of education for employment opportunities, the pride of the parents depending on the school, and the social capital that schools can facilitate. Influenced by all these aspects, Chinese parents can use “guanxi” to have access to some schools. To approach this phenomenon, the author has developed two case studies between 2012 and 2015 on the bases of participant observation, interviews, and documentation. Furthermore, the author supports the selection because of the close relations in both cities, including friends, relatives, and acquaintances, most of them using “guanxi”. In this vein, it is also mentioned how the research process has avoided biased results considering the role that reflexivity has on this topic.

Construction of morality by ritual, motivations for moralized performance, and ritual performance

The author uses the concept of “moralizing” to illustrate some cases linked to bribery, incorporating the performance of giving gifts, among others. The motivations for the bribery “guanxi” are diverse and may include the common practice of giving envelopes with money to headteachers or officials. The ritual practice is described by two of the parents participating in the case study, exemplifying that giving an envelope implies becoming an “excellent Communist party member”. Moreover, it occurs that giving money is not commonly perceived as illegal, but a practice of “renqing” which is normally assumed by the participants of the research. This practice implies obtaining school places by paying amounts of money without consid-

ering it to be ethically wrong or illegal. However, sometimes dilemmas are raised as some officials and headteachers know the legality but there is a coercive context to follow and accept the “renqing”.

The ritual performances identified in this contribution are two: “ketao” and “tacit ritual”. The author exemplifies the “ketao” as people giving or returning gifts to demonstrate their politeness, and “tacit ritual” can include packing money and placing it directly in the pocket of officials or headteachers. The author suggests that different levels of both ritual performances exist, exemplifying this reality through diverse cases showing the complex reality and types of “guanxi”.

This work contributes to analysing corruption from a sociological perspective using Goffman’s work, demonstrating the possibility to explore the Chinese case, and concluding that morality is related to interaction rituals. The use of “renqing” and “ganqing” throughout the ethnographic case illustrates the need to pay attention to the particularities influencing “brivery” beyond what is legally conceptualized.