

FLOWER DRINKING IN KTV NIGHTCLUBS A STRATEGY FOR BUSINESS NEGOTIATION AND SUCCESS IN MODERN ASIA

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ABSTRACT

Flower drinking in KTV nightclubs and hostess bars is a culturally embedded ritual prevalent across East Asia, serving as a strategic mechanism for business negotiation and relationship-building. This practice involves alcohol consumption in the company of hostesses within gendered social spaces, where affective bonds foster guanxi (relational trust), reinforce hegemonic masculinity, and enable informal political-economic exchanges. Drawing from sociological, cultural, and organizational perspectives, this paper analyzes the psychosocial functions of flower drinking, its role in facilitating business negotiations, and its ongoing adaptation amid Chinese economic expansion into Southeast Asia. Ethical considerations surrounding gender dynamics and corruption risks are also examined. This study highlights flower drinking's complexity as a social and economic practice and calls for nuanced engagement by scholars and policymakers to understand its contemporary significance in Asian business cultures.

Keywords: Asia, Business, Flower drinking (hua jiu), Relational ties (guanxi), KTV, Nightclubs, Hostess bars and socialization (ying chou)

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of “flower drinking” or alcohol consumption with hostesses in karaoke-style entertainment venues has become both a controversial and vital component of East Asian business negotiation cultures. Once widely examined in Taiwanese and Chinese urban contexts (Bedford & Hwang, 2011; Yang, 1994) interest subsided until recently, as flower drinking migrated with East Asian investment into Southeast Asia. These rituals now serve not only as cultural vestiges, but also as strategic venues for guanxi cultivation, emotional bonding, and informal deal-making.

The practice of “flower drinking” or visiting KTV nightclubs and hostess bars where clients consume alcohol in the company of female hostesses, sometimes including prostitution has long been integral in business cultures across East Asia, particularly in China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Japan, and Korea. Though much of the academic study focused on Chinese, Hong Kong and Taiwanese practices from 10-20 years ago,

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renewed attention is emerging as Chinese businesses expand into Southeast Asia. As Chinese, Japanese, and Korean firms expand into Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand, they bring with them norms of encrypted sociability and intimacy-based negotiation. This paper explores the psychological, cultural, and ethical dimensions of flower drinking, emphasizing its enduring strategic relevance and the emerging research on erotic capital, gendered *guanxi*, and workplace inequality.

This paper examines flower drinking's socio-psychological dynamics, its role in successful business development, negotiation strategies and relational cultivation (*guanxi*), and its modern relevance in both corporate and political domains, including instances of corruption and sex-for-influence. How flower drinking fosters trust, social bonding, and strategic exchanges, while also carrying ethical risks related to gender equity and corruption. New research on erotic capital, backdoor *guanxi*, and psychological dynamics further nuances our understanding of flower drinking's modern relevance. Despite criticism especially regarding sex bribery scandals and corruption, flower drinking remains a culturally salient practice (Zhang, 2016; Louie, 2008).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Prevalence and Masculinity

Bedford & Hwang's, (2011) study in Taiwan revealed flower drinking as integral to constructing and sustaining masculinity among mid- to upper-class men. Skill in flower-drinking etiquette and club interaction served as markers of professional and social competence. The practice reinforced traditional Confucian masculinity ideals or *wen-wu*, a combination of intellectual and martial virtues, while enabling male bonding and exclusion. They observed:

“Demonstration of skill at flower drinking and facility with the related social etiquette are important channels for male bonding central to professional development” (Bedford & Hwang, 2011).

In Taiwan and Japan, flower drinking functioned similarly: professionals and politicians conducted business and cemented trust through nocturnal entertainment, often leading to prostitution when negotiations peaked (Yang, 2003; Simon, 2003).

Guanxi, Trust, and Negotiation

In China, *guanxi* refers to a network of mutual favors, emotional bonds (*ganqing*), and moral obligations (*renqing*) pervades business culture (Luo, 2008). A cornerstone of Chinese business culture, *guanxi* refers to interpersonal relationships based on moral obligations, affective ties, and cyclical reciprocity (Chen & Chen, 2004; Luo, 2008). Rather than rely on formal contracts, many East Asian firms prefer emotional trust built over time as trust maintained and assessed in private social rituals like flower drinking (Fan, 2002; Cheng, 2011). Recent scholarship also differentiates between “working *guanxi*” (transactional networks) and “backdoor *guanxi*” (informal, trust-based bonds involving sensitive influence) (Schmidt & Zhou, 2019). Such networks rely heavily on social rituals to build trust and face-saving. Practices involving

banquets, alcohol, and intimate entertainment allow guanxi members to bypass formal legal processes and assess character via vulnerability. Alcohol-mediated interaction softens negotiation stances, encouraging emotional expressiveness, especially face-red intoxication serving as visible sincerity (Lin, 2011). Negotiation research showed Chinese negotiators adapt strategy based on relational relevance, prioritizing integrative tactics in high-trust relationships cultivated in contexts like flower drinking (Barthelmeß, 2024).

Renewed Interest in Southeast Asia

While academic attention has waned since the early 2000s, interest subsided until recently as flower drinking migrated with East Asian investment into Southeast Asia. These rituals now serve not only as cultural vestiges, but also as strategic venues for guanxi cultivation, emotional bonding, and informal deal-making. Asia's expanding regional integration revives interest. As Chinese investors enter Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar, they bring not just capital but guanxi-cultivation rituals. Flower drinking emerges as an expatriate cultural export for establishing trust and easing negotiations in host countries with nascent legal frameworks.

Guanxi is a central concept in Chinese and broader Confucian cultures, referring to the cultivation of personal networks through reciprocal obligation, emotional connection (*ganqing*), and long-term relationship building (Chen & Chen, 2004; Gold, Guthrie, & Wank, 2002). In the business context, guanxi serves as a critical mechanism for facilitating trust, reducing uncertainty, and securing informal resources (Luo, 2008). Flower drinking plays an integral role in the ritualistic performance of guanxi, where businessmen engage in shared vulnerability such as drinking alcohol, singing, and engaging in emotionally charged conversations in order to foster intimacy and demonstrate loyalty (Bedford & Hwang, 2011).

This ritualized form of guanxi development is often gendered and classed. As Lin, (2011) explains, the private and often secretive environments of KTV clubs offer a liminal space where conventional boundaries of professionalism are temporarily suspended. These environments serve as sites of performative masculinity, where relationships are solidified through stylized drinking rituals and symbolic consumption, a process sometimes referred to as *yingchou* (应酬) (Hwang, 2009).

Flower Drinking, Masculinity, and Erotic Capital

Flower drinking functions as a performative enactment of elite masculinity in Taiwan, where skill in club etiquette including knowing how to drink, tip, joke, and gesture appropriately demonstrated both social fluency and professional competence (Bedford & Hwang, 2011). This ritual is deeply embedded in Confucian ideals of *wen-wu* masculinity, blending intellectual charisma with warrior-like decisiveness.

This is also deemed as ritualized Intimacy and masculine bonding. These encounters often involve shared intoxication, reciprocal

toasting (敬酒), and flirtation with hostesses, which collectively dramatize camaraderie, loyalty, and generosity. In the absence of formal contracts or transparent institutional frameworks, flower drinking facilitates informal trust-building, where emotional expressiveness and affective vulnerability serve as proxies for sincerity (Lin, 2011; Louie, 2008).

Flower drinking in hostess club reinforces a hegemonic masculinity that blends economic power with emotional control (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Bedford & Hwang, (2011) observed that host-focused entertainment is a form of symbolic power including a performance of wealth, stamina, and social dominance. Louie, (2008) and Kang, (2011) noted that dominance is expressed via competition in drinking, etiquette with hostesses, and the expenditure of elite resources. More recent work on erotic capital refers to the attractive and seductive assets individuals wield revealed how female hostesses engage in emotional and sexual labor to facilitate guanxi building (Jackson, 2020; McClennan, 2022).

Their presence strengthens symbolic trust while reinforcing patriarchal and transactional relations. Likewise, other research agreed that these settings allow elite men to perform dominance, status, and sexual entitlement through the symbolic consumption of feminine beauty and attentiveness (Louie, 2008; Zurndorfer, 2016). Women hostesses provide not only companionship but also strategic "erotic capital" (Hakim, 2010) using flirtation, emotional labor, and aesthetic presentation to facilitate business negotiations and flatter male egos. This erotic labor is commodified and transactional, yet it blurs the boundaries between intimacy and professionalism.

Recent studies have drawn attention to how female labor in these venues is often devalued or rendered invisible despite its centrality to the business process. Jackson, (2020) used the concept of "gendered guanxi" to describe how women navigate and manipulate erotic capital within patriarchal organizational cultures, often experiencing both empowerment and exploitation.

These interactions create a complex interplay of power, dependency, and social maneuvering that aligns with (Bourdieu's, 1986) theory of symbolic capital. These male-dominated rituals often exclude women professionals who cannot or will not participate in KTV outings. Western expatriate women, in particular, report being sidelined from strategic discussions or informal decision-making, forced to rely on formal channels with less influence (Hoffman, 2018). Thus, flower drinking creates two tiers of negotiation: the intimate and informal, and the official but peripheral. Through such channels, parties can cultivate stronger relational ties which enables social resources exchange via favor within the inner circle. To some extent, it confers an edge for individuals or business as they could access to proprietary information and exclusive social network.

Corruption, Secrecy, and Political Power

Granovetter's notion of social embeddedness posits that economic exchanges are fundamentally shaped by social relation structures (Granovetter, 1985). Flower drinking exemplifies this intertwining of social and emotional connections where relational closeness, trust, and bond maintenance create favorable negotiation outcomes even in the absence of enforceable contracts (Barthelmeß, 2024).

Alcohol mediates emotional openness, personal disclosure, and symbolic gift exchange, facilitating mutual understanding and relational commitments. Indeed, private KTV rooms offer refuge from public scrutiny, enabling discreet negotiations that may involve bribery or sex-for-favor transactions. KTV clubs and similar private nightlife settings have also functioned as venues for illicit activities such as bribery, sexual corruption, and political conspiracies (Manion, 2004; Yang, 1994). In many high-profile cases in China and Taiwan, government officials and corporate leaders have been implicated in scandals involving sexual bribery, embezzlement, or abuse of power where many of which occurred in KTV settings (Zhang, 2016). Gao, (2019) described how flower drinking facilitates "backdoor guanxi" as unofficial channels of access, influence, and favor-seeking that operate beyond institutional scrutiny.

This system thrives in opaque environments where regulation is weak, and where shared experiences, not signed documents, establish credibility. In Digital Commons research, Schmidt & Zhou, (2019) frame backdoor guanxi as a relational category that merges discretion with affect, bypassing formal oversight. In such spaces, hostesses act as affective brokers and sometimes as literal couriers of bribes, gifts, or sex-for-influence arrangements, especially in dealings between private firms and government officials (Yang, 1994; Zhang, 2016). The secrecy and exclusivity of flower drinking rituals create ideal conditions for non-transparent transactions that circumvent formal accountability structures (Pace University, 2018). It is documented the use of flower drinking in corruption networks where business elites reward officials with luxurious entertainment, female companionship, or outright sex. These venues offer plausible deniability: no invoices or no paper trails. The use of female hostesses as intermediaries in these corrupt exchanges further entrenches the commodification of gender and the normalization of coercive relationships in elite male networks.

These dynamics reflect what Hwang & Bedford, (2020) refer to as "hierarchical intimacy," wherein emotional closeness is cultivated for instrumental gain, underpinned by power asymmetries and sexual politics. Studies showed that landlords and corrupt officials have leveraged these spaces to curry influence via expensive hostess services (Yang, 2000; Manion, 2004). Although Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign in China has driven such practices underground, they continue in more private or overseas settings, where plausible deniability is easier to maintain (Zhang, 2016). As ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) standards

tighten globally, companies relying on flower drinking face increasing reputational and regulatory risks (Tan, 2023).

Psychosocial Dynamics and the Business of Intimacy

In Chinese organizational psychology, *guanxi* refers to embedded interpersonal networks sustained by emotional labor, long-term reciprocity, and symbolic obligations (Chen & Chen, 2004; Luo, 2008). *Guanxi* is particularly salient in high-stakes negotiations where formal contracts are viewed as secondary to affective trust. In such contexts, hostesses act as emotional facilitators, using flirtation, humor, and empathy to lubricate social interaction and deepen interpersonal resonance (McClennan, 2022). Hostess clubs, therefore, become “affective economies” where emotional and erotic labor is exchanged for relational capital. These transactions, although superficially informal, produce durable bonds that influence hiring, partnerships, and financial decisions. Through shared intoxication and symbolic gestures of generosity, businessmen cultivate a form of intimacy that would be difficult to achieve in formal business settings.

These interactions often reduce psychological resistance, accelerate trust-building, and generate moral obligations that transcend contractual agreements (Schmidt & Zhou, 2019). Moreover, as indicated by Lin, (2011) and Jackson, (2020) the hostess club becomes a performative stage where identity, desire, and ambition intersect. The labor of hostesses is not merely entertainment but part of a broader system of affective brokerage that sustains high-level business ecosystems in East Asia. These dynamics pose complex ethical questions, particularly in relation to workplace harassment, gender inequality, and the normalization of sexualized transactions in corporate cultures. Barthelme, (2024) argued that emotional expression and vulnerability, especially during shared intoxication, facilitate integrative negotiation. Alcohol lowers inhibitions and fosters emotional resonance, while shared storytelling and confessions create affective ties. This dynamic, orchestrated by hostesses, accelerates rapport and promotes sincerity. Symbolic generosity such as ordering premium liquor or requesting favored hostesses serves as a demonstration of relational commitment, signaling long-term interest beyond transactional gain (Jin, 2018).

Jackson, (2020) introduced the concept of “gendered and sexualized *guanxi*,” and highlighted how erotic capital which involves strategic deployment of beauty, charm, and emotional labor. This form of social resource becomes a form of currency within patriarchal business networks. Female hostesses, although formally outsiders to the male-dominated business sphere, serve as intermediaries who facilitate intimacy and trust among male patrons, blurring the line between professional and personal interactions. This gendered structure mirrors broader inequalities in the workplace. Women professionals who do not or cannot participate in these rituals are often excluded from key networking opportunities (Hoffman, 2018). As a result, flower drinking contributes to the informal yet powerful reproduction of gendered exclusions in corporate hierarchies.

Southeast Asia: Transnational Adaptation of Ritual

Tan, (2023) documented the spread of KTV clubs offering Mandarin-speaking hostesses in Phnom Penh, Sihanoukville, and Ho Chi Minh City. These clubs replicate the aesthetics and rituals of Chinese-style flower drinking include private rooms, bottle service, loyalty cards but operate in legally gray zones with minimal labor protection. While some hostesses are local Southeast Asian women trained in Chinese etiquette, others are flown in from China or Vietnam. The erotic labor they perform is adapted to local cultural norms, but the underlying structure such as emotional bonding for business advantage remains unchanged (Hoffman, 2018).

In response to media scrutiny and anti-trafficking efforts, many KTV venues are rebranding as upscale karaoke lounges, replacing explicit flirtation with light entertainment. Some multinationals have shifted toward inclusive hospitality like mixed-gender team retreats, community service, or wellness-based bonding as alternatives to flower drinking, especially when engaging Western investors or NGOs (Lin, 2023).

Flower drinking reifies patriarchal business culture. Hostesses are often trapped in symbolic servitude, rewarded for emotional availability and aesthetic labor. As corporate diversity and inclusion (D&I) policies proliferate, flower drinking clashes with emerging norms of equity and consent, making it incompatible with global HR strategies (Louie, 2008). By enabling unofficial channels of power, flower drinking undermines formal governance and accountability. It reproduces elite networks that operate outside institutional oversight, often in ways that harm transparency and meritocracy. Future research must explore how such informal practices reshape the political economy of developing regions.

Flower drinking and related social rituals in East Asian business contexts significantly contribute to business success and competitive advantage by fostering trust, reciprocity, and relational embeddedness essential for guanxi-based transactions. According to Luo, (2008) these informal social interactions strengthen affective ties and reduce transactional uncertainty, providing firms with privileged access to information, resources, and opportunities. Lin, (2011) emphasized that such practices create symbolic intimacy and mutual obligation, which accelerate negotiation processes and enhance partner loyalty. In increasingly competitive markets, these socially embedded strategies enable firms to navigate opaque regulatory environments and outmaneuver less-networked competitors, reinforcing both strategic positioning and long-term business resilience.

CONCLUSION

Flower drinking remains a powerful yet contested negotiation ritual. It stems from centuries-old cultural norms of trust, reciprocity, and gendered power, but faces increasing challenge in modern, globally integrated business environments valuing transparency and equity. Its relevance in Southeast Asia demonstrates its adaptability across cultural

boundaries as well as amplifies concerns about corruption and gender exclusion. Future research should explore how firms and policy frameworks adapt KTV rituals to align with international standards while preserving relational efficacy.

Flower drinking exemplifies the enduring significance of ritualized intimacy in East Asian business cultures. Simultaneously a performance of masculinity, a strategy of guanxi cultivation, and a vehicle for affective negotiation, it blurs the boundaries between professionalism and pleasure. Yet its gendered, opaque, and potentially exploitative nature increasingly conflicts with modern governance expectations. As Chinese economic influence globalizes, flower drinking has entered new geographies, adapting to local norms while exporting Confucian-tinged business practices. Its future may lie in hybrid forms rituals stripped of eroticism, made inclusive and ethical if they are to align with ESG criteria and global cultural expectations. Further ethnographic and comparative research is needed to understand how these rituals evolve across regions and sectors.

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