

Friendship: its meaning and practice in time and place

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Semantics

Limitations of language are felt more prominently within certain discourses than others. While in the field of semantics the study of a specific term obviously profits from paying attention to its relation to the world outside, studying a concept that might be felt to have worldwide relevance will also have to deal with differences in vocabulary. Since local moralities in which 'friendship' is embedded are contextual and tend to shift accordingly, the topic as such is complex enough. A cross-cultural debate on the theme of 'friendship' is bound to lay bare in addition sensitivities attached to the connotations of the English term, with its attributes of good company and warm feelings. Words in other languages likely to be translated by 'friendship', however, can well refer to relationships in which affection does not play a prominent role, as in the case of kinship bonds. Moreover – however unwelcome to some (Western) scholars taking part in the discussion – sexuality may well be part of friendship. Here, we use the English term 'friendship' as a stand-in for a supposedly worldwide cognitive notion covering relationships of solidarity.

Within a single cultural setting, owing to its persuasive potential, language can also serve as an auxiliary. An appeal to help among equals can be more successful by addressing someone as a friend. Where the designation 'friend' is used in contrast to romantic or erotic relationships, it can be used to elevate such relations to a higher plane.³ In a time of social change, it can be wise to testify to being someone's 'friend', while at every step one takes remaining aware that this person cannot be trusted.⁴

The inclusion of friendship within a broader conceptual system may contribute to its emancipation. In traditional Chinese ethics with its hierarchical system of the five recognized cardinal human relationships (*wulun*),⁵ friendship – the only relationship not determined by one's rank in the empire or by kinship bonds – occupies the lowest position. In spite of this marginal position, its being part of *wulun* creates the potential of friendship bonds to open up the hierarchy of the system, even if these are to be cast in kinship terms (e.g., sworn brotherhood).⁶

Kanako Akaeda argues that female writers in pre-war Japan described intimate relationships between young women in terms of *douseiai* (same-sex love) or *dousei no ai* (love between the same sex), since terms including *ai* sounded more positive and feminine.⁷ Persuasive strategies in a literary context may be recognized for instance in the *Jātaka* tales of the Buddha's previous births, going back to the Buddhist canon of the third century BCE. In three stories taken from a 14th-century Sinhala version analysed by Ranjini Obeyesekere, equality of birth, intelligence, and status are not considered necessary components of friendship – in contrast to the general conception in the society of that time. She suggests that the Buddhist monks who made the collection may have specifically selected stories of friendships that cut across such barriers.⁸

The landscape of friendship

Relationships of solidarity are naturally connected with concepts of personhood and the self-other distinction. In the context of reincarnation, the scale of connectedness extends beyond the human species, human and non-human animals being inhabitants of the same world, having shared lives in previous births. Owing to the *karma* in which

The volume *Conceptualizing Friendship in Time and Place* is the result of the interaction between colleagues from different disciplines and geographic backgrounds, gathered with the aim of understanding the various meanings and practices that 'friendship' can have in different social and historical contexts.¹ It was a privilege to be able to invite contributions from Asian and Euro-American cultural traditions in the fields of philosophy, anthropology, sociology, history, philology, and (popular) literature, and the conference on the topic proved to be an inspiring challenge.² A worldwide conference on the theme of 'friendship' (including participants, for instance, from Africa and Southern America) remains a heartfelt desideratum.



Detail from the scroll by Gao Qiwei, 1672-1734, 'Three Laughing Friends'. Courtesy of Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

the individual person partakes, animals can well be seen as past or potential selves – with vegetarianism as a natural consequence. Within traditional Chinese ethics, as Ping Wang describes, an individual was never defined by him/herself alone, but by one's various roles in relation to others, depending on the specific conditions in the cosmos, community and family.⁹ A focus on all members of the human species is found in the "undifferentiated benevolence" as promoted by Immanuel Kant, who argued we should experience friendship as if all were brothers submissive to a universal father who wishes the happiness of all.¹⁰

Interpersonal relationships within an ad hoc circle of individuals play a central role in the concept of "event friendship" as was proposed by Andrew Lambert. Using an informal musical jamming session as a metaphor, he points out that transforming routine interpersonal actions into events – and extending the circle of people with whom such events are created by including, in principle, anyone who enters the subject's local social world – may realize a moral ideal based on an openness which is a form of impartiality.¹¹

On the other end of the scale, where aristocratic honour codes prevail, a stable concept of personhood in terms of honour

code is essential, which "requires promises and solemn undertakings of personal loyalty, sustained by concrete acts of protection, service, favors and aid".¹² In Greek antiquity the view of the self as a partner in reciprocal relations underwent a change, as Tazuko van Berkel shows, when pre-monetary culture based on long-term bonds of mutual solidarity transformed into a culture with a "disembedded type of exchange", characterized by a commercial transaction: "the simultaneous exchange of equivalent goods that does not necessarily yield a lasting relationship between the participants".¹³ Such developments tend to induce a shrinking of the range of persons valued as 'friends in the strict sense of the word', as happened in Western 18th century 'civil society'. Allan Silver notes how Adam Smith "understands commercial society to 'purify' friendship (...)". Value measured by price systems in markets now has no bearing on values in friendship, which is entirely founded on circumstances distinctive to each bond, falling under the 'sovereignty' of friendship itself".¹⁴

A more common-sense reflection on friendship takes into account its culturally required performance. Cultural variations in companionship are linked with differing values attached to gender, age, caste and class. Local proximity codes of touching and eye contact, forms of address, and ways of carrying your body and dressing, are fashions to express proximity and distance. For distinguishing local taken-for-granted socialities, migration is often an eye-opening experience. In a cross-cultural marriage one has to learn how to perform new ways of shaping everyday life with family members, and new ways of keeping company. Thai wives "initially are amazed to see that their Dutch spouses make an appointment with parents and friends a few weeks or even a month in advance". On the other hand, Dutch husbands may feel uneasy when Thai close female friends go into the kitchen to help with cooking, and even bring their own cooked dishes.¹⁵

Outlook

The 'self' is unmistakably prominent in the modern Euro-American world, where privacy prevails – such in contrast to cultures in which being the only person in a room is exceptional, and intergenerational units are common practice. Within the current relatively small nuclear family units of Northern European welfare states and parts of white Northern America, after the grown-up children leave the parental home, parents wish to live independently, and don't wish to interfere with the career and the happiness of their children – who are forming nuclear families of their own. Supporting parents tends to become as complicated as asking for help is to the

parents themselves.¹⁶ Studying the social implications of the Dutch system together with Indian colleagues makes one sensitive to what – without undervaluing the advantages of public social services – gets eroded with welfare state arrangements.¹⁷

The fragile logic of reciprocity on the part of grown-up children towards their parents requires a more complex scenario of taking responsibility and accepting support. The priority attached to kin over those who are 'just friends' seems to be a topic worthy of discussion where social networks in several (especially Euro-American) cultures are concerned. The potential of – both life-long and more recently made – close friends is tapped not infrequently in practice. The idea of legally recognized bonds of support in a Civil Friendship Pact as proposed by Natasha Gruver, supplementing current state provisions for family members with formal agreements to support selected friends, seems to offer a promising perspective.¹⁸

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Notes

- 1 *Conceptualizing Friendship in Time and Place*, Carla Risseeuw and Marlein van Raalte (eds.), Leiden: Brill-Rodopi, 2017 (henceforth CFT&P).
- 2 Conference 'Conceptualising "Friendship": Its meaning and practice in Time and place', Leiden, IIAS, 30 September–2 October 2010.
- 3 Kumar, N. 'The Performance of Friendship in Contemporary India', CFT&P, p.232.
- 4 *Theognidea* (7th–6th century BCE) 37–38. See Joosse, A. 'The Road to Wisdom: A New Conceptualization of Friendship in Fourth-Century BCE Athens', CFT&P, p.105.
- 5 Righteousness between rulers and subjects, love between fathers and sons, seniority between older and younger brothers, difference between husbands and wives, trust between friends.
- 6 Wei-cheng Chu, 'The Utility of "Translated" Friendship for the Sinophone World: Past and Present', CFT&P, pp.172–73; Chu (p.179) refers to Alan Bray, *The Friend* (2003), and hopes that, this time, the Western conceptualization of 'friendship' will create new possibilities or activate capacities that would be neglected otherwise, p.182.
- 7 Akaeda, K. 'Intimate Relationships between Women as Romantic Love in Modern Japan', CFT&P, p.195–96. Akaeda points out how the Japanese views on homosexuality were substantially influenced by Western sexuality, e.g., *Sexual Inversion in Women* by Havelock Ellis (Japanese translation 1914).
- 8 Obeyesekere, R. 'The Concept of Friendship in the *Jātaka* Tales', CFT&P, p.70.
- 9 Ping Wang, 'The Chinese Concept of Friendship: Confucian Ethics and the Literati Narratives of Pre-Modern China', CFT&P, p.26.
- 10 *Metaphysik der Sitten*, 1797; see Sutcliffe, A. 'Friendship in the European Enlightenment: The Rationalization of Intimacy?', CFT&P, p.146.
- 11 Lambert, A. 'Impartiality, Close Friendships and the Confucian Tradition', CFT&P, pp.222–25 (at 224).
- 12 Silver, A. 'Historical Moments of Friendship Ideals: David & Jonathan, Montaigne, Adam Smith', CFT&P, p.128 (referring to the situation in the heroic warrior society of the Hebrew Bible).
- 13 van Berkel, T. 'Friendship after Money: The Case of Classical Greece', CFT&P, p.80.
- 14 *ibid.* Silver, pp.136–37.
- 15 Sukomboon Brown, P. 'Shades of Friendship among Thai Women in the Netherlands', CFT&P, p.257.
- 16 Risseeuw, C. 'On Family, Friendship and the Need for "Cultural Fuss": Changing Trajectories of Family and Friendship in the Netherlands', CFT&P, pp.268–84.
- 17 Risseeuw, C., Palriwala, R. & Ganesh, K. 2005. *Care, Culture, and Citizenship. Revisiting the Politics of the Dutch Welfare State*. Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis.
- 18 Gruver, N. 'Civil Friendship: A Proposal for Legal Bonds on Friendship and Care', CFT&P, pp.285–303.