

Social Networks in East and Southeast Asia I: National Characteristics, Institutions, Network Capital, and *Guanxi*

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Vincent Chua¹ and Barry Wellman²

Abstract

These articles examine social networks in the context of Asia. Their pages contain numerous examples showcasing the primacy of social context in the patterning, accumulation, role, and value of social networks and social capital. Network characteristics follow from national and institutional characteristics: In China, kinship networks are prominent all throughout the life course. Meanwhile, *guanxi* continues to be an important factor in the labor market and academic success of Chinese individuals, despite the shift from socialism to capitalism. In Japan, mutual monitoring among kin and coworkers make for a society based on strong ties. In Korea, voluntary associations are important communal spaces for meeting diverse contacts. In China's neighborhoods, cooperation between neighbors coexists with social control from above to reinforce social hierarchy. The issue ends with a note about the importance of cultivating *guanxi* in organizations and in everyday life.

Keywords

international comparisons, kinship, labor markets, education, voluntary associations, neighborhoods, *guanxi*, networks, East Asian societies, China, Taiwan, Japan, Chinese diaspora, Korea

This is one of two special issues about social networks and social capital in East and Southeast Asia. The total of 18 articles, 9 per issue, is evidence that social network analysis, although having emerged in the West (Freeman, 2004; Wellman, 1988), is surging in importance in East Asia, including Southeast Asia.

¹National University of Singapore, Singapore

²University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Corresponding Author:

Vincent Chua, Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, 11 Arts Link, ASI #04-27, Singapore 117570.

Email: socckhv@nus.edu.sg

This is not a showcase of Asian exceptionalism. Indeed, claims about Asia's distinctiveness have always been around. Many of these portray Asia as "exotic, romantic and subservient" (Acharya, 2013, p. 64). Instead, we bring together a collection of essays based on systematically collected data on several countries in East and Southeast Asia (see also the second *American Behavioral Scientist* issue, Volume 59, Issue 9). Moreover, we are proud that almost all of our authors are native to the countries being studied.

We study Asian contexts theoretically—by using established concepts and frameworks for analyzing social networks—and empirically—by comparing Asian and non-Asian cases. Rather than one or the other, we underscore Asia's "continuities and novelties" (Duara, 2013, p. 28) with—and set against—current understandings of social networks and social capital.

Networks in the Context of Asia

Several statements about network structure and social capital have become central to the field: for example, the strength of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973, 1983), the propositions that social networks facilitate status attainment (Lin, 2001), or that social media are communication affordances, accelerating the spread of community relations (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). How do these general statements and observations fit with the specific conditions and characteristics of Asian societies?

Social, cultural, economic, political, and geographical contexts specific to Asia constitute rich sites of analysis. Taking them into account, these articles focus on the embedded character of social networks and social capital. Granovetter wrote about weak ties in the United States, but can his findings be extended elsewhere? Having originated in the Western context, how do network theories and observations travel globally?

We advance the argument that differences in national and institutional contexts are closely associated with differences in the patterning, accumulation, role, and value of social networks and social capital. We do not assume the value of social capital to be the same wherever individuals go. Instead, we concentrate on the social context in which social networks actually exist.

The articles in this issue focus on two broad types of social contexts: national and institutional. The first type emphasizes that variations in national systems affect the forms and outcomes of social capital. The second type is concerned with the institutions that make up those national contexts—these include the family, the education systems, the state-led economies intermingled with free-market economies, the planned neighborhoods, and the civic organizations, which have had a shorter history of democratic participation than in the West (Curtis, Baer, & Grabb, 2001).

In turn, we expect both national and institutional contexts to affect their embedded social networks in several ways.

The first pertains to access: It is important to have "social capital," which is the quantity and quality of resources embedded in personal networks that help people to get by and get ahead in life (Lin, 2001). Questions of access are important precisely

because of their link to resources: Who has more, who has less; where and how do these networks occur (Lin, 2000; Small, 2009)?

Each nation's contexts profoundly affect the nature of access to social capital. For example, in China, people are less likely to mobilize their personal contacts for getting a job because the socialist system has hindered the use of job contacts for a long time (Bian, 1997; Son, 2013). When they use ties, the Chinese are more likely to use strong ties than weak ties because trust is such a vital resource for circumventing the authoritarian system (Bian, 1997). In Japan and Singapore, the use of job contacts is much lower (about 35%) than in the United States (about 65%) because school grades are more important for securing a good job, which suppresses the usefulness of contacts in both labor markets (Chua, 2011; Granovetter, 1995).

Overall, we need more research into how specific national-level characteristics shape the access and use of networks. A useful framework invokes the broad general notions of culture (e.g., Confucian vs. Western) and political economy (e.g., capitalism vs. socialism), comparing across a variety of national contexts (Hall & Soskice, 2001; Son, 2013). To address these matters, this issue presents research from China, Japan, Taiwan, and the United States: countries different enough to warrant a comparative analysis.

Each nation's institutions matter in shaping access to and use of social capital: The family is a critical source of intergenerational transfers in both East and West. Schools are places to acquire social capital as well as human capital (Buekel & Guseva, 2002). The labor market is full of relationships (Granovetter, 1985). Voluntary associations are places to get to know others with similar interests (Small, 2009). Therefore, Small (2009, v) puts it well when he says, "networks do not arise out of thin air" but "emerge over the course of their routine activities, in the everyday organizations where those activities take place."

The family institution in China shapes patterns of network accumulation and social support in distinctive ways (Freeman & Ruan, 1997). Rigorous competition in the schools may make school social capital a major part of Chinese personal networks (Lai, Wong, & Feng, 2015). In Japan, social control and mutual monitoring among family members and coworkers require enormous amounts of time that limit a more extensive reach to weaker ties (Yamagishi, 1986). The Japanese ideal is that companies expect their workers to stay with the same firm all their work lives (Dore, 1986). This way, cultural practices and institutions reinforce each other and strongly influence the organization of social ties.

A second way by which national and institutional contexts affect social networks is in payoffs—what networks do. Although networks are useful for status attainment (Erickson, 2001; Lin, 2001), contextual details may modify the extent of that usefulness, either reducing or amplifying it. In Singapore, meritocratic labor markets reduce the usefulness of job contacts in favor of academic credentials (Chua, 2011). In China, the payoffs to contact use are lower than in the United States because of central allocation by the authorities and a growing meritocracy in the state and private sectors (Son, 2013). In sum, different kinds of contexts may produce different kinds of payoffs to social capital.

The newest research on the contextual effects of social capital have delved into how such factors as job sector, job rank, and time periods affect the use and payoffs to social capital (Benton, McDonald, Manzoni, & Warner, 2014; Chua, 2014; McDonald, 2015). Asia provides an excellent opportunity for similar studies that focus on contingent effects. The rise of free markets, widening income inequalities, and advances in the rule of law and meritocracy (Mahbubani, 2008), make Asia a novel and interesting space for the study of whether contacts matter (Mouw, 2003).

Although much research has investigated the role of networks in economic outcomes—jobs, earnings, and promotions and the like (Bian, Huang, & Zhang, 2015; Erickson, 2001)—noneconomic outcomes, such as a sense of belonging to the neighborhood or social trust, are at least equally important to consider (Putnam, 2000). Therefore, this issue includes articles that delve into the expressive outcomes of social capital. Several articles showcase instances where social ties in neighborhoods and voluntary associations are important for feelings of social cohesion and social trust among inhabitants and members.

Contexts are important for the area-specific meanings they carry. Russia has *blat* while China has *guanxi*. Both refer to informal connections, but they are set against historical and cultural factors that are quite different (Ledeneva, 2008). Asian networks should be studied against the backdrop of how the region has evolved, what it is, and how it is going to be (Duara, 2013). This also means that while network analysis affords a general toolkit for the study of networks, there exists historical and cultural specificities that must be taken into account (Chen & Reese, 2015; Wellman, Chen, & Dong, 2002).

With these ideas in mind, we:

- (1) Begin with a comparative framework of how national characteristics shape access to social capital. These analyses compare China, Japan, Taiwan, and the United States.
- (2) Continue with questions of social capital access: looking into how institutions such as family and school influence access to social capital. We then examine labor market institutions by asking questions about how contextual factors such as job type, job sector, and time period characteristics affect the payoffs to social capital.
- (3) Next, we extend our investigation into noneconomic domains, looking at how networks in neighborhoods and participation in voluntary associations affect the building of place attachments and generalized social trust (e.g., Do you trust strangers?)
- (4) Finally, we examine the contested nature and meanings associated with *guanxi* itself. One article delves into a firm's *guanxi* network structure and illustrates partitioning between core and peripheral members, whereas the other offers several provocative statements on the nature of *guanxi*.

International Comparisons

The first two articles in this issue are based on international comparisons. In “Cross-National Patterns of Social Capital Accumulation: Network Resources and Aging in

China, Taiwan, and the United States,” Steve McDonald, Feinian Chen, and Christine Mair examine the relationship between age and four types of social capital: daily contacts, occupational contacts, close kin contacts, and organizational memberships. They ask if the relationships vary by national characteristics such as culture (Confucian vs. Western) and political economy (socialist vs. capitalist). Three findings stand out: the first is the increasing importance of close kin as people get older in China. This is associated with Confucian culture, which emphasizes family piety and observance of hierarchy (e.g., respect for elders). The second finding is the growing number of occupational contacts as people get older in the United States. The authors attribute this to the liberal market institutions, where “interpersonal communication networks in advanced capitalist societies are increasingly dominated by work-related issues” (p. 921). The third finding is the growing importance of organizational membership (again as people get older in the United States).

The second international comparison—“Reconnecting Here and There: The Reactivation of Dormant Ties in the United States and Japan”—finds that Japanese people are less likely than Americans to reconnect with dormant ties. The authors—Jeffrey Boase, Tetsuro Kobayashi, Andrew Schrock, Tsutomu Suzuki, and Takahisa Suzuki—conducted a novel field experiment, where all respondents had smartphones installed with software, reminding them to reconnect with address book ties they had not contacted over the past 60 days. Their results show that people living in Japan are less likely to reconnect with their dormant ties. Further analyses confirm that high levels of contact and mutual monitoring among kin and work ties in Japan are factors that reduce opportunities for nurturing dormant ties, an observation consistent with Yamagishi’s (1986) study.

Networks in Family, School, and Labor Market

The next three articles are based on the specific contexts of Mainland and overseas Chinese, focusing on access to social capital in family, school, and the labor market.

In “Family, School, and Access to Social Capital Among High School Students in Urban Nanjing,” Gina Lai, Odalia Wong, and Xiaotian Feng show that the family is a critical source of social capital: students with college-educated fathers are more likely to enter high-prestige schools than students with less educated fathers. In addition, they show that high-prestige schools are places for students to know the high-positioned parents of their peers. Among students in high-prestige schools, this kind of peer-parental social capital forms a significant proportion of their total social capital. The study underscores the family and school as critical sites of the reproduction of network inequality. Network advantages begin in the home and translate to network advantages in the influential schools they attend.

Yanjie Bian and Xianbi Huang’s article, “Beyond the Strength of Social Ties: Job Search Networks and Entry-Level Wage in Urban China,” is an ambitious large-scale study of wage earners in eight cities: Guangzhou, Xiamen, Shanghai, Tianjin, Jinan, Xi’an, Lanzhou, and Changchun. Two questions define the study: First, what are the effects of weak ties and information-rich ties on entry-level wages? Second, how do

these effects vary between (a) state and nonstate sectors, (b) jobs of varying skill specificity, and (c) different periods since 1980? The findings demonstrate the contingent nature of social capital's effects. Both weak ties and information-rich ties are associated with high entry-level wages. The effects are greater in less institutionalized sectors such as the nonstate sector, greater for professionals than for administrators, and greater for nonskilled laborers than for skilled workers. The effects do not significantly vary across the time periods, leading the authors to conclude that Chinese *guanxi* culture continues to be a rather stable force despite the rapid economic transformation that has taken place for over 30 years.

The last article in this section examines the Chinese diaspora in Toronto. In "Minding the Gender Gap: Social Network and Internet Correlates of Business Performance Among Chinese Immigrant Entrepreneurs," Wenhong Chen, Justin Tan, and Fangjing Tu examine gender differences in Chinese entrepreneurial networks. Their study evaluates 10 hypotheses in a comprehensive study of gender, kinship, participation in voluntary associations, Internet use, transnational entrepreneurship, and business performance. As do Bian and Huang, their study reveals the contingent nature of social capital's effects. For example, women entrepreneurs do not do as well as men when they have kin contacts in their networks, and women benefit more than men from participating in transnational entrepreneurship. The gender penalty reflects women's traditional role as homemakers, although the few women who break out of the kinship network find success as transnational entrepreneurs.

Networks, Trust, and Place Attachment

The next article analyzes the first large-scale survey of neighborhood governance in Guangzhou. In "Toward a Relational Account of Neighborhood Governance: Territory-Based Networks and Residential Outcomes in Urban China," Qiang Fu, Shenjing He, Yushu Zhu, Si-ming Li, Yanling He, Huoming Zhou, and Nan Lin find a significant link between neighborly interactions and neighborhood attachment. Ties to people of different occupations within the neighborhood, the number of neighbors known by name, interactions among the neighbors, and participation in neighborhood interest groups are all positively associated with neighborhood attachment (defined as the extent to which residents regard the neighborhood as a place to call home) and social cohesion (defined as community solidarity and mutual trust among neighbors). The authors also find that state agencies' power over residents is negatively associated with neighborhood attachment. Thus, their study incorporates power (e.g., vertical relations) into the study of neighborhood.

The last article in this section concerns the relationship between organizational, social, capital, and generalized trust. Examining the 2004 Korean General Social Survey, Joonmo Son finds that members of organizations with diverse resources are more likely to say others can be trusted. Social capital is more important than the number of organizations: People who belong to organizations—where members have high levels of income and are more diverse in age and education level—are more likely to say that others can be trusted. Son proposes a social learning explanation: High-resource

and high-diversity organizations are training grounds for members who learn to cooperate with others with different values and attitudes. In Korea, several factors such as dissatisfaction in politics and antipathy toward corruption in government, work against social trust.

Nature of the *Guanxi* Network

The final two articles in this issue examine the structures and meanings of *guanxi*. In “*Guanxi* Circles’ Effect on Organizational Trust: Bringing Power and Vertical Social Exchanges Into Intraorganizational Network Analysis.” Jar-Der Luo and Meng-Yu Cheng study the structure of 354 *guanxi* networks in a factory of a Taiwanese high-tech company based in Mainland China. They investigate how network structure relates to employees’ perceptions of organizational trust. The study contributes in two ways. First, it expands the conventional meanings of *guanxi* beyond bonding social capital to include the notions of power and segregation: *guanxi* networks are partitioned into insiders versus outsiders and core members versus peripheral members. Second, it demonstrates that core members are more likely than peripheral members to have high levels of organizational trust.

In the final article, “*Guanxi*, Tie Strength, and Network Attributes”, Jack Barbalet uses the *guanxi* concept to examine the limits of standard social network analysis. He draws on several contrasts: First, scholars routinely make the distinction between expressive and instrumental ties, but *guanxi* is both expressive and instrumental at the same time. Second, it does not always make sense to categorize network ties as either weak or strong. Instead, *guanxi* is more like a continuum defined by ebbs and flows of tie strength. The author claims that *guanxi* needs to be constantly cultivated and affirmed—like a “Chinese son . . . who must demonstrate his worthiness as a son through fulfillment of the obligations of filial piety.” Third, it is not always appropriate to describe *guanxi* in terms of close-knit triads. This is because people often mobilize *guanxi* via indirect ways. For instance, Chen does a favor for Li by giving Zhao a job, but Zhao has no obligation to repay Chen. Therefore, the bonding qualities of *guanxi* sometimes are overstated in the literature. Fourth, scholars often refer to *guanxi* as a means for overcoming information opacity (e.g., getting information on a job opening), but the Chinese network is itself often the source of information opacity. Secrecy becomes a general property of the *guanxi* network when specific information is not shared among group members to save face.

Summarizing Note

We emphasize that contexts are not just background props against which actors act, but are interwoven with networks of ties connecting individuals. The articles are filled with examples showing how social contexts and other social attributes (such as age, class, and gender) matter for accessing social capital and gaining from its use.

We learn several things from these articles. For example, kinship is more salient in China than in the United States. In Japan, mutual monitoring between kin and

coworkers are associated with strong ties. In China, ties of influence and favoritism are critical for labor market success despite the gradual shift from socialism to capitalism. In Korea, participation in voluntary associations is associated with diverse access to occupational contacts. In China, schools and neighborhoods increase access to prestigious contacts and strengthen feelings of social cohesion, respectively. Also in China, *guanxi* in organizational life increases feelings of trust, particularly for insiders. In addition, *guanxi* entails both instrumental and expressive attributes and requires constant cultivation.

Overall, contexts are key: While network structures tell the story of how people are connected, broader contextual features—such as kin-centeredness, hierarchy, work orientation, and patterns of social segregation—tell the story of how personal connections are embedded in several Asian societies.

Potential Futures

We discern several promising strands of future research. One is the need for more international comparisons, not just with the United States as the reference point, but other Western societies such as in Europe. Asian–European comparisons are interesting because the latter comprise more regulated economies, larger safety nets, but have cultural characteristics different from those of many societies in Asia (Hall & Soskice, 2001).

The future could also do more to compare Asian societies. Because of numerous variations within a very heterogeneous Asia, there are pressing and meaningful needs for “inter-referencing Asia” (Duara, 2013, p. 25), that is, to take other Asian societies as the new baselines of comparison rather than to routinely adopt the Western societies as models.

Thus, a potential avenue for future research is the collection of network data from other Asian societies: an obvious one being India and other South Asian societies. Longstanding notions of caste and class segregation, violence against women, the high emphasis on education—particularly for public sector managerial jobs—and the growing private sector economies, all make India an important context for the network analysis of human relations. Status differences and other social divisions are such palpable features in the Indian context (Giridharadas, 2011).

A China–India comparison would be fascinating given the great differences in their respective systems: one being the largest socialist society, the other the largest democracy; one increasingly class-based, the other, caste-based. Yet they both also retain the Asian qualities of emphases on the family, gender inequality, face-saving, and respect for elders (Giridharadas, 2011; Shirahase, 2014). Politically, they have had different histories, but both markets are liberalizing (Huang, 2008; Kohli, 1989). If *guanxi* survives as a specific form of Chinese networking, are there parallel forms in the Indian context? Future research calls for a deeper understanding of social networks and social capital in other Asian contexts.

The second issue of these two issues (Volume 59, Issue 9) will delve into other topics in the Asian context such as social networks and migration, the impact of opportunity

structures on social networks, the integration of information and communications technology use and social participation including civic engagement, and the relationship between social capital and psychological well-being.

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Authors' Note

The inspiration for this special issue originates in the inaugural INSNA conference (International Network of Social Network Analysis) held in Asia (Xi'an, China) in 2013. The conference organized by Yanjie Bian brought together experts from a variety of disciplines to share ideas on their current projects. We have not confined our authors to the conference participants, but have included others who are part of this growing international network.

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Author Biographies

Vincent Chua is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore. His research areas are in social networks and social capital, education, and ethnic stratification. His work has appeared in publications such as *Social Networks*, *Social Science Research*, *Sociological Perspectives*, *Current Sociology*, *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, *Comparative Sociology*, *Asian Ethnicity*, and *The SAGE Handbook of Social Network Analysis*.

Barry Wellman, a sociologist, codirects the NetLab Network at the iSchool, University of Toronto. A fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, he founded the International Network for Social Network Analysis in 1976. He is the winner of career achievement awards from the International Communication Association, two sections of the American Sociological Association, and the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association. He recently coauthored *Networked: The New Social Operating System*.