

# Industrial and Social Networks in Asian Collectivist Societies

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## Abstract

*The success of collectivist Asian economies in recent years has sparked much interest in the operation of Asian firms. Multinational marketers are increasingly realising the importance of personal relationships when dealing with Asian and other collectivist societies. Research has highlighted the importance of the different modis operandi and the role of networks in Asian society. We examine Asian networks - in particular the Chinese notion of 'guanxi' and highlight some of their unique characteristics. We then construct a matrix that integrates the individualist-collectivist society continuum with an individual vertical-horizontal dimension and use this to link it to the welfare-business types of objectives of organizations. This is used to propose the type of individuals that would be more prevalent in different types of organizations including Asian networks. Implications are drawn and a research agenda proposed for empirical work in the domain.*

## Introduction

Culture not only influences the way in which people behave and their values, norms and attitudes as individuals, but also the way in which relationships and networks are nurtured within a society. The relationship between individuals plays an important role in business dealings (Xin and Pearce, 1996). In Chinese societies, an individual's *guanxi*, which can be described as using personal connections in order to secure favors in personal relations (Luo, 1997a), appears to be the lifeblood of the business community and also extends into politics and society (Kao, 1993). Similarly, this web of connections exists in other collective societies: in Japan it is known as *kankei* or *wa* and Korea as *kwankye* or *inhwa* (Yeung and Tung, 1996; Alston, 1989). The terms *blat* in Russia and *pratik* in Haiti refer to the same type of instrumental personal ties (Xin and Pearce, 1996). Likewise, in the Philippines, *kapwa* is the core value of society and relates to a shared awareness of identity with others (Watkins and Gerong, 1997). These networks are held together by elaborate patterns of interdependence and reciprocity and a dense interconnection of culture and identity (Achrol, 1997).

Western writers have typically used the network marketing paradigm (Dwyer, Schurr and Or, 1987;

Thorelli, 1986, 1990; Anderson and Narus, 1990) as a framework within which to examine *guanxi* and other such networks. In this perspective *guanxi* has generally been viewed as a form of favoritism and nepotism by Westerners (Yeung and Tung, 1996). This is not surprising given that it is difficult to separate personal views and perceptions from the culture in which we are accustomed. This ethnocentric perspective of Western writers has perhaps resulted in a limited understanding of the intricacies and idiosyncrasies of culturally bound networks and the importance of personal connections in business relationships.

Societies differ along many different dimensions and it is becoming increasingly important for multinational organizations to understand these differences in order to be competitive in foreign markets. Hofstede's (1980) individualism-collectivism continuum provides an understanding of the social connectedness among individuals within a society. Individualism has been defined as emotional independence from "groups, organizations and other collectives" (Hofstede, 1980) with little concern for family and relatives or the views of others (Triandis, 1990). Western cultures have typically been defined as individualistic societies where relationships

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between organizations are usually formed for the mutual benefit of both organizations and can be either long or short-term arrangements, depending on the needs of and value gained by each partner. On the other hand, a collectivist society, is one where individuals are defined with reference to a societal or cultural context (Earley and Gibson, 1998) and are bound together by the relationships formed with others in that society. By contrast, relationships in collective societies tend to develop over a longer period of time and often involve a personal connection between individuals as well as organizations.

This study examines Asian networks, particularly *guanxi* among Chinese businesses, and highlights some of their key characteristics. We build a matrix that integrates Hofstede's (1980) individualism-collectivism continuum with an individual vertical-horizontal dimension and use this to link it to the welfare-business types of objectives of organizations. This is used to propose the type of individuals that would be more prevalent in different types of organizations including Asian networks.

## Asian Networks

The dynamic business environment of the past decade has seen the emergence of new network organizations. Whilst the evolution of such networks has progressed slowly in western economies, they have flourished in collectivist cultures such as China and Japan (Achrol, 1997). Only recently have we seen a shift in western thinking from a transaction-based business approach to a relational approach, which recognises the importance of cooperation and mutual benefit from an exchange (Ambler, 1995).

Research into Asian networks has often been viewed from a "western" perspective, which does not fully capture the true nuances or idiosyncrasies of these cultures. In addressing this issue, Achrol (1997) identifies four types of organizational networks: the internal market, vertical market, inter-market and opportunity networks. Of these, the inter-market network is used to describe the organizational structures prevalent in Asian societies. They are characterised by dense interconnections in resource sharing, strategic decision making, culture and

identity, periodic patterns of collective action and are usually held together by elaborate patterns of interdependence and reciprocity. Furthermore, network cultures emphasise loyalty, trust and social norms of behavior that define the patterns of accepted actions shared by members of an exchange system (Achrol, 1997).

Chinese *guanxi* networks have received considerable attention in the literature. *Guanxi* is literally translated as personal connections/relationships on which an individual can draw to secure resources or advantages when doing business as well as in the course of social life (Davies, 1995). Arias (1998) and Luo (1997a) both offer useful descriptions of the main characteristics of *guanxi*: (1) it includes the notion of a continuing reciprocal relationship over an indefinite time period; (2) favors are banked; (3) it extends beyond the relationship between two parties to include other parties within the social network (ie. it can be transferred); (4) the relationship network is built among individuals not organizations; (5) status matters – relationship is prior to and a prerequisite to the business relationship. As a result, the Chinese market is conditioned by the reliance on trust relationships, informal agreements and favor exchanging rather than on the enforcement of legal contracts (Luo, 1997a). An individual's *guanxi* plays an important role in the business success and market performance of an organization operating within Chinese culture (Luo, 1997b; Yeung and Tung, 1996; Leung, Wong and Wong, 1996; Davies, Leung, Luk and Wong, 1995), particularly for those that are privately owned (Xin and Pearce, 1996). *Guanxi* is particularly dominant and ingrained in Chinese society due to culture and to a lesser degree, institutional weakness and corruption (Arias, 1998; Yeung and Tung, 1996).

The interconnected networks of personal, social and business relationships are not unique or restricted to Chinese cultures. They are equally prevalent in other collective societies (Ambler, 1995). The basis of *keiretsu* relationships in Japan, for instance, involves the development of a complex web of self-enforcing safe-guards that elicit cooperation and create inter-firm trust (Dyer, 1998). Personal relationships are

often used in the conduct of political, economic and community affairs, relying on trust and a mutual sense of obligation to ensure the credibility of commitments (Gerlach and Lincoln, 1998). The use of legal contractual agreements in such situations is limited (Dyer, 1998). Korea, too, has its own distinct network structures known as *Chaebol*, which represent extensive sets of vertically integrated firms that center around several large core firms. The Korean *Chaebol* have high rates of internalization in that they supply and distribute their products through their own trading companies. As a result they are strongly diversified across numerous industrial sectors and can exert significant economic power (Hamilton, 1998). As in Chinese cultures, these network structures are essential for the long-term development and well-being of business and social relationships.

### Individualistic vs Collectivist Societies

Identifying and classifying societies based on cultural differences has been the focus of many studies. Tonnies (1887) and Durkheim (1893) view the fundamental nature of society and the person as grounded in social relationships (in Gray and Marshall, 1998). For instance, Durkheim's definition of a mechanistic society is one in which social order is based on similarities among people and where pressures to conform are high. Furthermore, an individual's sense of identity is grounded in acceptance by family and the immediate community. Tonnies describes this as a "Gemeinschaft" society where the family and extended kin groups are the central institutions of relationships within a society (Gray and Marshall, 1998). In an organic society, social cohesion is a result of interdependence among members of a group and an individual's social value, sense of self-

worth and belonging is driven by self interest (Gray and Marshall, 1998). Like these philosophies, Hofstede's (1980) individualism-collectivism dimension differentiates between cultures in which individual identity and goals are preferred from those that are orientated toward the welfare of the group. In particular, individualists believe that personal goals and self-interest have priority over group goals and their personal beliefs, values and attitudes drive their social behaviors. By contrast, collectivists define the self in terms of the connectedness to others in a group, give priority to the collective interests of the group rather than personal goals and are driven by social norms, duties and obligations (Triandis, 1995). Along this continuum, countries such as America, Australia and Western Europe have typically been considered more individualistic societies, whilst Eastern cultures such as China and other parts of Asia, Latin America and Southern European countries exhibit the characteristics of collective societies (Hofstede, 1980; Shkodriani and Gibbons, 1995).

From these initial studies, the individualism-collectivism construct has been further refined to include a vertical and horizontal dimension (Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk and Gelfand, 1995; Triandis, 1995; Triandis, Chen and Chan, 1998). Within these societies vertical individualists (VI) tend to focus on power and achievement whereas horizontal individualists (HI) emphasise the values of self-direction. Likewise, vertical collectivist (VC) stress the values of tradition and conformity whilst horizontal collectivist (HC) emphasise the values of benevolence (Oishi, Schimmack, Diener and Suh, 1998). This relationship is portrayed in matrix form in Figure 1. The matrix allows us to differentiate within collective and individualist cultures. Therefore, Australia and the

Figure 1: Individual – collectivism matrix

		— Society —	
		Individualistic	Collectivist
Individual	Vertical	Vertical Individualists VI	Vertical Collectivist VC
	Horizontal	Horizontal Individualists HI	Horizontal Collectivist HC

United States are both considered individualist societies, yet Australia is somewhat more “horizontal” than the United States (i.e. are more egalitarian). Similarly, Japan is more “vertical” than Greece or Korea (Triandis, Chen and Chan, 1998).

It is also possible to have variation in individualism-collectivism within a single culture (Wagner, 1995; Schwartz, 1990). Varying degrees of collectivism have been identified within Arabic (Buda and Elsayed-Elhouly, 1998), Israeli (Sagy, Orr and Bar-On, 1999) and Turkish cultures (Goregenli, 1997) and also in collectivist attitudes toward relationships with parents, spouses, coworkers, friends, neighbors and strangers (Goregenli, 1997; Shkodriani and Gibbons, 1995). These findings challenge the assumption that cultures high in collectivism are low in individualism, and vice versa. It is essentially a question of degree on an individualistic-collectivist continuum. Indeed, the coexistence model of individualism-collectivism argues that whilst some cultures may be more collectivistic than others, it does not necessarily preclude the existence of individualism within that society (Kagitcibasi, 1994; Kim, 1994; Moemeka, 1998; Wink, 1997). Often, two or more cultural dimensions operate together in the same society or community. For instance, whilst the United States is considered the ideal example of an individualistic culture, certain aspects of that society, such as social welfare, unemployment benefits and free education, reflect a degree of collectivism (Moemeka, 1998). On the other hand, Hong Kong is considered a relatively collectivistic society (Leung, 1987), yet attitudes of members within that culture tend to reflect a degree of individualism (Triandis, Chen and Chan, 1998). The emerging affluence and modernity of Hong Kong has perhaps contributed to this phenomenon, with individuals living in this society feeling more pressure to present themselves as less collectivist than they really are (Triandis, Chen and Chan, 1998).

There is some evidence to suggest that the shift from collectivism to individualism is related to the wealth and economic development of societies (Earley and Gibson, 1998; Sinha and Kao, 1988). Gray and Marshall (1998) explore this issue further in their

examination of Kenyan and Korean management orientations. Their findings suggest that the level of economic and industrial development of a society influences cultural values and social norms. As a less industrialised nation, Kenya was found to be more relationship oriented than Korea, which reflects a *Gemeinschaft*-mechanical or collectivist society. Likewise, modern day Korea was more task-oriented, resembling a *Gesellschaft*-organic or individualistic society (Gray and Marshall, 1998). These results suggest that industrialised countries exhibit the characteristics of individualistic cultures while less industrialised countries are more collective societies.

A few studies have examined the influence of social variables on the individualist-collectivism continuum. For example, religious groups attribute more importance to in-group ethnocentric values, such as family, country and nationality, secular groups place more emphasis on collectivist universal values, such as freedom of opinion (Sagy, Orr and Bar-On (1999). Religious orientation and ethnicity have been found to be the main predictors of collectivism but not individualism in a society (Wink, 1997). A greater understanding is required of the cultural, social, and personal contexts that facilitate and inhibit the development and expression of communal and self-oriented behavior (Wink, 1997).

## Propositions

Network structures prevalent in Asian collective societies are substantially different from traditional arms length relationships that have typically characterised inter-organizational relationships in the United States and other individualistic cultures (Dyer, 1998). Unlike the western perspective to relationship building, transactions in eastern cultures typically involve the presence of a long-formed relationship prior to any formal business undertakings (Ambler, 1995). One factor that appears to be common with such networks relates to an individual's relationship with and orientation towards others within a group. In collective societies, much emphasis is placed on the bond between family members, friends, and other such groups and the basis of one's identity is often established through such connections. This philosophy

carries forward to the personal, social and business relationships developed over time. Hence, when analyzing and describing networks within Asian societies, one must take into consideration the underlying relationships developed between individuals and the factors that influence such alliances. As highlighted by Achrol (1997) these include factors such as trust, commitment and social norms such as solidarity, mutuality, flexibility and role integrity.

Although the individualism-collectivism continuum has been used extensively in the examination of cultural differences at an individual or societal level, it is also relevant at the organizational level. Earley and Gibson (1998) provide a comprehensive review of the literature pertaining to the use of this construct in an organizational setting. Of particular interest is the congruence between organizational phenomena and the cultural context in which organizations operate. Cooperative behavior amongst coworkers has typically been associated with collectivistic organizational cultures (Triandis, 1990; Chatman and Barsade, 1995; Earley and Gibson, 1998). This is not to suggest that it does not exist in individualistic organizations, but rather there are different factors that stimulate and drive cooperation. Individualistic cooperation seems to be driven more by members' preoccupation and desire to avoid behaving irrationally or being exploited by others in a group. By contrast, collectivists are motivated by not wanting to appear selfish, so they place more emphasis on the common goal shared by all parties in the group (Chen, Chen and Meindl, 1998). They also have a preference for job security and equality in reward allocations, but dislike human resource management systems that emphasise individual achievements or performance-based promotion systems (Ramamoorthy and Carroll, 1998). The relationship between an employee and a firm in a collective society is influenced by, amongst other factors, job security, the reward allocation system and the match between an individual's and organization's culture (Ramamoorthy and Carroll, 1998; Chen, Chen and Meindl, 1998; Earley and Gibson, 1998). We argue that the matrix cells indicated in Figure 1, will impact

the preference individuals will exhibit as to the objectives that companies they work for will pursue. Objectives can also be said to extend on a continuum from welfare to business type. At the welfare extreme the emphasis of the objectives is not on profit but could be various including nationalistic goals. Examples would be the kibutz, universities and cooperatives where some collective goal of members is key. At the other pole we have the business firms driven by ever greater growth and profit. We propose that:

- P<sub>1</sub>: Vertical individualists will prefer to work in organizations driven by business objectives.*
- P<sub>2</sub>: Horizontal individualists will prefer to work in organizations driven by welfare objectives (eg universities).*
- P<sub>3</sub>: Vertical collectivists will prefer to work in organizations driven by business objectives (indulging in networks).*
- P<sub>4</sub>: Horizontal collectivists will prefer to work in organizations driven by welfare objectives (e.g. kibutz).*

## Conclusions, Implications and Future Research

In this article, we have described an individual-collectivist continuum for classifying individuals within societies and use it to propose the type of organization each is more likely to work for. We recognise that not all network structures in Asian societies are the same or operate to the same principles or philosophies. Culture is an important consideration in relationship building within Asian collective societies, in particular their horizontal or vertical orientation. This study also recognise that there are some similarities between cultures, namely the importance of building relationships that are mutually beneficial, many of which are formed on the basis of trust and reciprocity. Understanding such complexities and idiosyncrasies is important to marketers in both East and West.

This review has implications for future research into network organizations and culture. The implications center on two major areas: (1) relevance

to international marketers; (2) the structure of network organizations in individualistic societies. This review provides us with a better understanding of the complexity of networks structures within Asian collective societies. We can see that many alliances formed between organizations in collective societies are not based solely, if at all, on contractual agreements. Rather, such alliances are a function of relationships formed at the individual level. Hence, "western" organizations operating in "eastern" cultures need to recognise this and perhaps work towards building good relationships with individuals, initially, prior to forming any such alliances at an organizational level. Secondly, whilst there are some similarities amongst Asian societies, international marketers need to recognise that fundamental differences do exist, particularly with respect to the value systems or ways of operating. By identifying where the differences lie, international marketers can more readily develop appropriate strategies for formulating long lasting relationships within different Asian cultures. For instance, an organization operating within a Chinese based culture, will find that status and authority are far more important to the success of a relationship than in a Korean society. Hence, international marketers should develop an understanding of the way in which relationships are formed within Asian collective societies and the factors that influence success. Thirdly, given that there is a slow progression towards network structures and organizations in the west (Achrol, 1997), we need to develop an understanding of how such structures have evolved in the east and perhaps implement part of these philosophies within our own cultures. This article makes a contribution to the literature on network organizations by analyzing network structures in Asian collective societies within the context of cultural, personal and organizational influences. Organizations that develop good relationships with employees will enjoy higher productivity and experience a higher degree of loyalty amongst its employees. Similarly, one may argue that within individualistic cultures, trust in relationships is perhaps irrelevant, given that many organizations protect their own interests through the use of contracts and other legally binding documents.

However, these elements alone will not guarantee the long-term success of a relationship. Trust is vital for such arrangements to expand into long lasting, mutually beneficial connections between individuals and organizations. As such, firms operating in today's global environment should be aware of the basic, personal factors that contribute to the success of inter- and intra-organizational relationships.

There are many avenues open for future research. It would be useful to empirically examine the propositions put forward via a cross-cultural study. Future studies could also focus on other collectiveistic societies, such as those in Latin America or Southern European, and examine the similarities and differences to Asian collectiveistic societies in terms of the network structures formed and the factors influencing alliances. A similar examination of relationship building in individualistic cultures along the horizontal/vertical dimension could also yield some interesting results.

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