

The Strength of Strong Ties in Job Searching in China: An Overview

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Abstract: The roles and influences of social networks in job markets is a heated topic. China is a unique object of research that contributes to revealing how these dynamics can differ between contexts. Though the Strength of Weak Ties Theory has been widely accepted to be depicting the job markets in the Western world, many researchers hypothesized that job seekers in China receive more benefit from strong ties because of the collectivist characteristics of Chinese culture, the existence of institutional holes, and mechanism of influence peddling. Moreover, China, which transited from planned economy to a more marketized one, provides clues about how marketization influences the dynamics of using strong ties. This article reviews previous studies and evidence that support and explain the strength of strong ties in Chinese job market, as well as counterarguments which claim the former ones to be overestimating such strength. This article also discusses potential topics for further investigations.

1. Introduction

The old saying that “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know” marks the importance of having personal connections to job-finding. Social network is an informal way to acquire a job by receiving help from connected people. Two mechanisms account for this phenomenon: Information provision and influence (Trimble & Kmec, 2011[1]).

Information provision:

Via social network, contacts transmit information of jobs to the job seeker, increasing the number and diversity of job opportunities he or she knows and hence is possible to apply to (Granovetter, 1995[2]; Marsden and Gorman, 2001[3]). The channel also works in the reverse direction by providing the information of potential job candidates to employers. The knowledge, sometimes individualized, contextualized (Fernandez, 2000[4]) or realistically previewing (Premack & Wanous, 1985[5]), of each other promotes matching between employers and job seekers (Trimble & Kmec, 2011[1]). Insider information shared through network also promotes the likelihood of the candidate’s attainment of job (Fernandez & Weinberg, 1997[6]).

Influence:

If a job seeker has an influential or reputable contact, the contact may refer to the job seeker and provides positive signal. Referrers tend to recommend people who are qualified and who are similar

to themselves (Rees, 1966[7]), respectively because of their own reputation and homophily. The contact may also be involved in the decision-making of hiring. On the other hand, even the referrers are not influential, their recommendations may be credible as they want to keep their reputation (by avoiding referring unqualified candidates) and they know the flaws of their contacts better (Smith, 2012[8])

Granovetter (1973[9], 1995[2]) proposed that weak ties are likely to improve one's labour market outcomes because one's weak ties are more likely to be connected to contacts from different social circles and with less similarities to him or her and hence bridge groups of close people. One's weak ties are also more likely to be connected to people with higher influences (Lin, 1982[10], 1999[11]). These are results of homophily- people tend to form stronger ties with those similar to them (McPherson et al., 2001[12]). There are many empirical evidences supporting this argument (for review, see Lin, 1999[11]; Marsden & Gorman, 2001[3]). Weak ties act mainly through information provision.

The concepts of the strength of weak ties, however, is challenged under the Chinese context. Researchers claimed, with some evidences, that strong ties bring higher likelihood of employment and salary in China for three reasons: culture (Bian & Ang, 1997[13]), institutional holes (Bian, 2002[14]; Bian & Huang, 2009[15]) and influence peddling (Bian et al., 2015[16]; Tian & Lin, 2016[17]). These three factors facilitate the use of influence mechanism via which strong ties are more likely than weak ties to act.

Though supported by many empirical studies, this challenge is challenged by Obukhova and Zhang (2017[18]) who claim the faulty methodology overestimates the use of strong ties.

2. Political and economic context

The Reform and Opening-up started in 1978 brought marketization. Two decades later, the job-assignment system was totally abolished. Private sector and government accountability grew. The job-assignment system left no room for weak ties as helping in this system can be costly (Bian, 1997[19]). The market, replacing it, promote use of weak ties (Tian & Lin, 2016[17]). However, the path dependent reform (Nee & Cao, 1999[20]) partially retained the importance of political influence from the planned economy and job-assignment (Bian & Logan, 1996[21]; Zhou, 2000[22]). Besides, other aspects institutional inertia, such as discriminative migration policy, may still play a role (for example, Lu et al., 2013[23]).

3. Culture

Researchers in social network have noticed the collectivistic values of China. Morally, Confucian principles define a person in relation to significant others (Yang 1994[24]) and his or her communities (Hsiao, 1988[25]). In-group sometimes arise, where members are socially expected to act in the interest of the group (Triandis, 1989[26]). This is like a moral obligation. Moreover, the common exchange of favors, facilitate by the belief in reciprocity (Cheung & Gui, 2006[27]), is not institutionalized, requiring mutual trust of individuals (Bian & Ang, 1997[13]; Yang, 1989[28]). Compared to western societies, there are stronger trust in strong ties but weaker trust in weak ties in China (Ma et al., 2011[29]), and strong ties may be a "prerequisite for, rather than merely a facilitator of, the acquisition of important information" (Björkman & Kock, 1995[30]). Therefore, weak ties in Chinese society may be much less beneficial than in the western societies (Xiao and Tsui 2007[31]; Ma et al. 2011[29]). Since there are evidences of the strength of strong ties from Taiwan (Ma et al. 2011[29]) and Singapore (Bian & Ang 1997[13]) which shared the Chinese cultural root but have not undergo transition of economy, culture is certainly playing a role.

4. Institutional holes and marketization

Bian (2002[14]) found institutional holes, the unavailability or insufficiency of formal labour market mechanism in matching employers and job seekers, prominent in the 1990s. People were not accustomed to seek or post job vacancies by news and advertisements, while the public employment services were inefficient and usually register less paid jobs. Forged qualifications, experiences and references were hard to authenticate. Limited information made formal mechanism of hiring less effective and information distortion brought an issue in trust. Therefore, ties mattered in job seeking; strong ties mattered more because of the presence of stronger trust and more holistic information. Bian and Huang (2009) commented that people are more interested in “obtaining more substantive assistance” than just information.

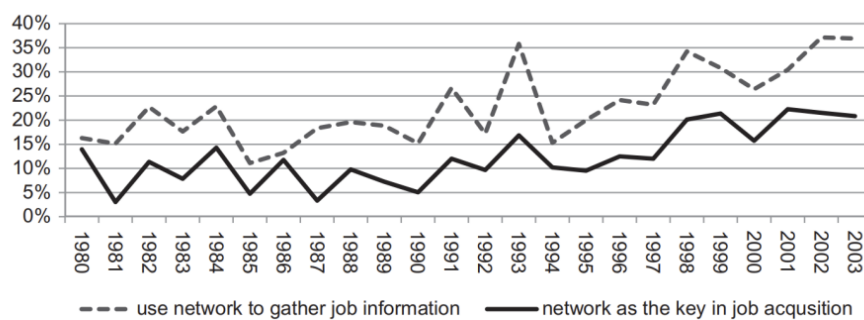


Figure 1: Use of Social Networks in Job Search and Acquisition. (Zhao 2013)

Marketization is filling this institutional hole. According to Figure 1, Zhao (2013[32]) claimed that the development of the labour market is related to a wider use of weak ties and a more important role of the information mechanism, and network became increasingly common in job information gathering and job acquisition over time. Similarly, Tian and Lin (2016[17]) found a steady increase in the use of weak ties and an increase and hereafter persistent use of strong ties from 1978 to 2008. All three researchers agreed that the use of weak ties are more important in the private sector than in the public sector in relation to the use of strong ties. Though, Tian and Lin (2016[17]) found that use of weak ties in the public sector increased in a similar rate to in the private sector; this data may hint an enhanced use formal hiring mechanism in the public sector (but not a decreased use of informal one). Use of weak ties demonstrate an inter-provincial differences: there are higher uses of weak ties in the more developed (and also more marketized) regions (Obhukova & Zhang, 2017[18]). Obhukova and Robineau (2020[33]) conducted a research on the job referrers, finding that referrers’ moral motive to help their contacts is replacing by the employers use of referrers’ social network to reduce recruitment cost, suggesting marketization’s effect on hiring decision.

However, the institutional holes may still exists in some cases. Low skilled workers rely more on strong ties that formed base on origin region and kinship (Zhao, 2013[32]). Lu et al. (2013[23]) found that migrate peasants in city are unlikely to build connections with urban residents, and even when connections are built they are not useful. This may arise from the institutional discrimination of the household registration system to migrant peasants, such as unequal social insurance and housing policy, as well as a clash in culture and education level. Lack of information may still exist for low skill labour and employees in the modern metropolitan of Shanghai. Moreover, the migrant peasants usually have bad working environment, and low wage which is frequently backed (length up to years). As independent union is illegal, the migrant peasants use strong ties with co-working other migrant peasants to protect themselves (Zhao, 2013[32]). Lu et al. did not find a positive relationship between strong ties and pay within migrate workers.

5. Influence peddling

Influence peddling is the use of influence on someone’s behave for bribery or favor. Researchers have been aware of that the intimacy in strong ties enables more costly and risky helping. Bian et al.

(2015[16]) found that in China, strong ties are more likely to produce favoritism, leading to higher status job, especially in the public sector. Ma et al. (2011[29]) proposed that ties are more important in promotions within government offices and affiliate institutions with low bureaucratic rank, that is, ones that are local and/or hierarchal distant to the central government. Tian and Lin (2016[17]) found an increase in use of strong ties in the government and state-owned corporations; they account the common practice of informal hiring in the public sector for this finding.

6. Criticism of the strength of strong ties

Obukhova (2012[34]) did not find a relationship between higher salary and strong ties. She claimed that strong ties can bring more job offers to graduating students, but not better ones and the students are not more likely accept these offers. Further, Obukhova and Zhang (2017[18]) criticized the methodology used by previous studies. The previous studies mainly use directly survey on the employees the type of tie they use in acquiring a job and few use rely on the social capital theory which focus on the resources one can mobilize through network. The former method overlook the ties that fail to bring a job while the latter is biased by homophily (Mouw, 2003[35]). Obukhova and Zhang researched on university students graduating in 2011, comparing the two method with theirs method of looking at the students who use both strong and weak ties. They concluded that the direct approach tend to overestimate the strength of strong ties while the social capital approach and their approach support the strength of weak ties.

7. Conclusion and discussion

In China, culture, institutional holes and influence peddling may lead to higher importance of strong ties in job seeking. However, the collective values of Chinese culture seem to be declining, especially in the cities (Steele & Lynch 2013[36]). Further investigation is called to evaluate the effect of declining collectivism on job seeking in China and how this effect possess regional and class difference. Institutional holes are being filled, and this is an opportunity of studying how strong and weak ties substitutes and complements formal mechanism in the labour market. The influence peddling may still continue to exist, but the relevant studies are conducted before China's recent reforms in strengthening anti-corruption system, which may or may not be effective in inhibiting influence peddling.

The criticism on the hypothetical strength of strong ties are mainly by researching graduating students. However, the Chinese society underwent an intergenerational mobility: young people, especially college students, are more likely to look for a job in a city or industry that their kins are totally unfamiliar with (Obukhova 2012[34]). Closely related students, moreover, may be competitors. Therefore, researching on graduating students only may be biased. More evaluations on tie strength and job attainment in other groups in the population can be conducted.

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