edited by **KUAH-PEARCE KHUN ENG**

CHINESE WOMEN AND THEIR CULTURAL AND NETWORK CAPITALS

ASIAN WOMEN AND SOCIETY SERIES

mc **Marshall Cavendish**
Academic

edited by

KUAH-PEARCE KHUN ENG

CHINESE WOMEN AND THEIR CULTURAL AND NETWORK CAPITALS

ASIAN WOMEN AND SOCIETY SERIES

Acknowledgements

ASIAN WOMEN AND SOCIETY SERIES*
Series Editor: Kuah-Pearce Khun Eng

This series looks at the changing roles, influence, and identity of Asian women as a result of rapid changes in the twenty-first century. It explores various themes such as religious identity, social and capital network structure, sexuality, success and failure in politics and economic development.

Other planned titles in the series

* Log On: Chinese Women and the Creation of Cyber Networks
* Chinese Women and the Creation of Spiritual/Religious Capital and Networks
* Chinese Women in Politics: Utilising Their Social Capital and Networks
* Marginal Chinese Women and the Women Grassroot Organisations and Networks

---

KUAH-PEARCE KHUN ENG is Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Hong Kong.

*Series theme and actual titles are subject to modification.

Contents

Introduction

KUAH-PEARCE Khun Eng

The primary aim of this book is to explore how Chinese women today use existing cultural capital and social networks and create new ones to help them accomplish different tasks. Women tap into their pool of cultural capital and social networks for a variety of reasons: for the benefit of their children, their family and themselves on the one hand, and on the other hand, to assist them in their process of migration, adaptation and settling into a new social environment. It also concerns how Chinese women use cultural capital and social networks to negotiate and position themselves within their own community and the wider society to strengthen their social and economic position, particularly in a rapidly changing environment. While the possession of cultural capital and social networks have helped women to overcome difficulties, the inability to translate cultural capital and the lack of social networks have ghettoised and marginalised these women. This is particularly so for Chinese women in the Diaspora.

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL CAPITAL

The discourse on social capital has been written and argued by various scholars. Some have examined social capital theoretically, while others have attempted to locate social capital through empirical studies. One of the earliest scholars to conceptualise the impact of social capital is Bourdieu (1986). Bourdieu divides capital into three types: economic capital, cultural capital and social capital. Economic capital is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalised as a form of property rights, but cultural and social capital are often not immediately convertible to monetary forms (Bourdieu, 1986: 243).

Cultural capital exists in three forms. First, it exists in the form of cultural goods, which Bourdieu refers to as cultural capital in an objectified state. Second, it exists in the form of a state of embodied intelligence. Finally, cultural capital may be in the form a training qualification, such as education, and this he refers to as cultural capital in an institutionalised state (Bourdieu, 1986: 243). The accumulation of cultural

1

capital requires time and effort and often entails sacrifice on the part of the persons who acquire it. Furthermore, in the embodied state, cultural capital, such as a rare skill possessed by (or embodied in) a person, "cannot be transmitted instantaneously by gift or bequest, purchase or exchange". Bourdieu argues that cultural capital tends to function more as symbolic capital, as the social conditions that surround its transmission and acquisition are not clearly recognised for their economic value (Bourdieu, 1986: 245).

The concept of social capital is variously used to help understand the working of social relationships among individuals and social groups. Social capital is also seen as a set of social obligations ("connections"), and is closely linked to the possession of a network of relations between members of a group (Bourdieu, 1986: 243, 248), which is instrumental in facilitating social, economic and political interaction and relationship. Lin, (2001a), Lin, Cook and Burt (2001) explore social capital in terms of networks and embedded resources, and argue that it can be used in various contexts, including the labour market, and in organisational, community, and institutional settings. Likewise, Coleman (1988, 1990), Dasgupta and Serageldin, (2000) have explored social capital from a multidimensional perspective, where social capital is not only used in the economy and as an integral part of human resources, but also in inter-personal relationships and at a political level. To him, kinship plays an important role in the formation of social networks. To Lin, people who invest in social relationships do it for instrumental reason, in the hope that the social relationships will be transformed into significant social capital that they would be able to tap into to further their own social, economic or political ends (Lin, 2001a: 29). Portes categorises social capital into three types namely social network and social relations; common fate, bounded solidarity and identity; and enforceable trust (Portes, 1998). He argues that individuals, groups and community use social capital to further the interests and needs of these groups. At the same time, it is used as a barrier to exclude outsiders from participating in the activities or gaining assistance of the groups concerned (Portes, 1998:7). In understanding the use of social capital, Burt (1992) argues that people who possess social networks and are able to serve as intermediaries between different groups of people are brokers and they possess great advantage. Network members are deemed to possess a specific type of capital, which they can draw on when the need arises.

Thus, sharing a surname will entitle members of the surname group to draw upon connections to further their own ends.

Lin sees social capital as "resources embedded in social networks accessed and used by actors for actions" (Lin, 2001: 25). Thus, within the Chinese society, individuals used social networks, commonly termed *guanxi-wang* to further their individual or communal interests. *Guanxi* is commonly regarded as a set of relationship that is mutually beneficial to the people who engage in it. The size of the social capital is dependent on the size of the network and how effectively an individual can mobilise the ties or connections to suit his or her own needs in the shortest possible time. The bases for cultivating *guanxi* networks include kinship and non-kinship based types of social relationship. The primary *guanxi* networks often include family, lineage, native home ties, etc while secondary *guanxi* networks include working colleagues, acquaintances. *Guanxi* is only useful if an individual or community knows how to use it to its advantage. Thus, to use it as a leverage requires an individual or community to seek, pull or connect to those who possess *guanxi* relations. Hence, often the term *la guanxi* (拉關系) is used to denote a person's attempt to pull or connect to another person (King, 1994: 116). In this *guanxi* network, there is the giver and the receiver. The giver often finds it hard to reject the request and hence provides assistance out of human obligation, *renqing* (人情). On the other hand, the receiver becomes indebted to the giver and is therefore under emotional obligation to return favours in the future when required by the giver (King 1994, Yang 1994 and Lin 2001b: 153).

Guanxi and *guanxi* networks are relied upon heavily by various groups of people including businesspeople to further and enlarge their business operations today (Wong, S.L. and Salaff (1998), Hamilton, G. (1996). Apart from being used in the business environment, old and new Chinese migrants rely heavily on primary *guanxi* networks to help them adjust, adapt and negotiate their social relationships with others as well as in other formal environments such as the work place or in the public forum. The key primary *guanxi* network revolves around the family and lineage where kinship networks are of paramount importance to many, especially among Chinese women. Other forms of *guanxi* network include the clan and native home associations which were of prime importance during the early waves of migration during the 19th and early half of the 20th centuries (Sinn 1997, Kuah, 2000 and Liu 1998). Chinese social institutions—primarily territorial-based associations, *tongxianghui* and

clan associations—provide a ready network structure for members to facilitate social and economic interaction and today, they are reviving and revising their roles to suit modern needs.

The use of cultural and network capital therefore represents an important form of resources which individuals can tap into to further their own needs both within their community and especially in the Diaspora. Within Chinese society, network capital is often regarded as synonymous with the *guanxi* network. Chinese tapped into the various types of networks according to their needs. Often, they tend to rely heavily on the primary network and ask their family or kin members to assist as the first port of call. If family or kin members are not available or unable to assist, they would tap into the secondary network structure which consist of neighbours and fellow members, *laoxiang* or native place ties. As a last resort, they would rely on tertiary networks that consist of people which they have little connections, such as those in professional organisations, government organisations and non-governmental organisations. Irrespective of the types of networks an individual possesses, Wong and Salaff argue that personal networks could be seen as a form of capital capable of generating economic returns, especially for the Chinese in the Diaspora (Wong and Salaff, 1998: 358–374).

According to Yang, the art of establishing and maintaining *guanxi* involves three components. First, there is the issue of ethics; i.e., of how individuals behave and act to produce the desirable network capital. Individuals have to function within expected and accepted boundaries in order to create and enhance their network capital. The second component consists of the tactics used to procure the desirable *guanxi*. Finally, there is etiquette, consisting of desirable values that will determine the types of network capital produced. Network capital can thus be altruistic or instrumental, depending on the starting values of the procurer (Yang, 1994: 109–146).

Guanxi exchange is carried out only between two parties under the following conditions: first, when two persons have already established a basis of familiarity; secondly, when two persons have already established mutual trust and obligation; and thirdly, when two persons have a shared identity. Considering these three conditions, it is possible to argue that the establishment of *guanxi* networks is heavily influenced by individual affective sentiments based on the values of righteousness (*yiqi*); emotional feelings (*ganqing*); and human feelings (*renqin*). It is thus possible for an individual to accumulate social capital by enlarging his *guanxi* network.

This can be done through using intermediary, particularly a person with whom one has a kinship relationship. At each link in the *guanxi* network, the person asking for assistance will become indebted to the intermediary for the assistance. Thus, within the *guanxi* network structure, individuals are able to rely on others both to create and to expand their network. This kind of network comes with a set of obligations, including the obligation for continuous exchange to maintain the network and ensuring lasting connections (Yang, 1994).

Cultural capital and social networks can be seen as expressive or instrumental in nature. In our study here, it becomes very clear that these Chinese women use cultural capital and *guanxi* networks in an instrumental and utilitarianistic way to further their own needs. Among Chinese migrants, expressive *guanxi* network takes the form of empathy and emotional support among them and allowed these women migrants to build strong bonds among themselves. Likewise, kinship-based social networks are often of an expressive nature where kinsmen and kinswomen assist out of a set of moral obligations as well as empathy for their relatives.

At the broad societal level, the possession of social capital and social networks by individuals and social groups and how they use and negotiate them in various aspects of their daily life—e.g., in the work place, among co-ethnics, among migrants and people of other ethnic groups, in the political front, etc—help us to understand the inter-ethnic relationship and their social position within the wider society.

In this volume, there are slight variations in the interpretation and use of these various concepts—cultural capital, social capital and social network—as each author attempts to understand the operation of the various capitals in an empirical setting. But for all of them, cultural capital, social capital and social networks are useful only when they are translated into uses that would further the economic and social well-being of the individual and the family, irrespective of whether they are in the home country or in the Diaspora.

A NETWORK OF TALENT: CHINESE WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE SOCIETY

In traditional Chinese society, a woman's status was intricately tied to her natal and/or married family. She was highly dependent as daughter, wife and mother of men within a highly structured and hierarchical patriarchy. She was also tightly bound to the observation of the Three

Obediences as spelled out in the *Book of Rites*. Here, Chinese women, irrespective of their class status and regional differences, were subjected to the patrilineal and patriarchy structure together with the rules on filial piety (Ebrey, 1990: 197–223).

Despite the restrictions placed upon Chinese women, they were able to make use of their knowledge and social skills as a form of cultural capital to exert and enjoy unofficial power. Women with talents in education, Confucian virtues and beauty were able to convert these three talents into cultural capital to their advantage. In Ko's work, Chinese women with education became writers and poets as well as teachers of daughters of literati class (Ko, 1994:126). Within the domestic realm, these educated women were confined to the inner chamber and they began to form strong ties and exclusive networks such as the poetry club that straddle across several domestic households, including neighbours and other women of the same noble or literati class (Ko, 1994: 202—209). Ko argues that Chinese women were also constantly mitigating the patriarchial power structure through their positions as *de facto* household manager, mother and educator of their children where they wielded much influence (Ko, 1994: 11).

Chinese women from lower class too often created social networks within their families and among their extended kin to provide themselves with the necessary information and resources to help them cope with the overall oppressive patriarchal structure. Likewise, women were also able to draw on their own cultural and social capital to assist them in their routine life and in other activities. Thus, despite the often-heard argument that Chinese women did not have a voice and were tightly regimented within the patriarchy, women did—and continue to be able to—manoeuvre their actions and became socially visible within the accepted social boundaries.[1]

One of the most obvious examples was the formation of the spinster network system during the early 19th century, within which girls would "bun" up their hair and pay allegiance to a goddess in order to avoid getting married. These girls formed a network of sworn sisterhood and were joined by some married women who left their husband and married family. Many of them eventually migrated to Southeast Asian countries and became bondservants to wealthy families and remained single throughout their life (Stockard, 1989; Jaschok, 1988). Even as these women migrated to Southeast Asia and settled down there, they continued to form women's networks for social interaction and religious purposes

(Gaw, 1991: 95–109). As they aged, they organised socio-religious networks to look after themselves (Kuah-Pearce, 2003: 116).

NEGOTIATING LOCAL AND TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS: CHINESE WOMEN AND THEIR MIGRATION EXPERIENCE

With modernisation, development and globalisation, the status of women in modern-day Chinese societies throughout the world has changed drastically. Chinese women are becoming more visible and vocal in their daily lives and in their pursuit of social and economic recognition. The empowerment of women, in part, is attributable to the emergence and the embracing of the feminist ideology that has penetrated into the Chinese society. This, coupled with the possession of knowledge and educational qualifications and facilitated by modern communication, has made the Chinese women more mobile and global in their outlook. While in the early decades, women migrated as accompanying spouses for family, today, a sizeable proportion migrate for work reasons. Women worked in both the professional sectors and in the labouring sector as production and domestic workers[2] as well as in the sex industry, either by choice or coercion. (Kempadoo and Doezema, 1998)

Irrespective of whether they are at home or have migrated to a new place, women have found it imperative to utilise their existing store of cultural capital and build up network structures and accumulate network capital for their present and future needs. The need to lock into existing or build new networks are even more crucial among Chinese migrant women in the Diaspora. Bryceson and Vuorela (2002) argue that there are four categories of networks that migrant families locked into to provide them with new social spaces. These are the (i) original home area networking, which in the Chinese case, is translated into the native home networks, (ii) neighbourhood networks, (iii) transnationals' contingent space network and (iv) moral universe networks. In large cities, migrants and their families may find the needs to forge new links with like-minded migrants by becoming involved in activist movements of a local, national or transnational nature (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002: 22). These migrants' involvement in non-ethnic organisations or those connected to their native homes is often a reflection of their desire to move away from the traditionally based types of networks. Such an attitude could be link to their desire to "modernise" and downplay their

identification with their home country (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002: 22). Some long established migrants consciously establish moral universe networks based on their cultural and moral values, especially those based on religious values. They establish such types of networks in order to accumulate symbolic and social capital to enhance their social standing in the community (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002: 23).

In modern day society, many professional and skill-laden Chinese women have full-time jobs, are able to accumulate substantial wealth and are economically independent of their husbands. Some have chosen to remain single in their lifestyle choice. Besides, they are also intellectually smart and articulate in their dialogue with men. In short, many of them are successful in their economic pursuits and among them, we found businesswomen, academics, teachers, doctors and an array of others.

To increase their competitive edge, these highly educated and skilful women have created a feminine substructure within the patriarchy to further their own needs and the needs of other women. They either join or establish formal institutions or informal social networks to enhance their own social status. Women-led and women-oriented NGOs and informal social and economic networks have now become common in all societies. Thus, unlike what Edwin Ardener has stated, modern Chinese women, in many societies are no longer muted groups who articulate the ideology of the dominant culture (Ardener 1975: xi–xvii). They attempt to structure their own ideology to suit their own needs.

Yet, it is also the case that while women in general have benefited from the feminist movement, the social and class status of women often dictate the extent to which individuals benefit from it. It is commonly noted that urban elite women who possessed high level of education and skills and are economically independent also possessed a high level of social capital and networks and they are able to use them to further their social, economic and even political causes. They therefore are the ones who would benefit most from the feminist causes and are often active participants in these movements.

However, among the Chinese women migrants, irrespective of their high level of education and skills and good job at home prior to migration, they are unable to land themselves with good jobs that require their skills in their adopted home. Among the few successful ones who managed to land themselves in a good or professional job, these women continue to face the glass ceiling and have greater barriers than their white

counterparts to surmount in their pursuit of economic equality with their male counterparts.

Often, they were unable to find jobs that commensurate with their qualifications and skills. Many have opted to undergo retraining for other kinds of jobs. Likewise, others have opted for lower status, menial and lower paid jobs because either their qualifications are not recognised by the host country or they are unable to find jobs in the area of their qualification. Thus, many migrant families have experienced a drop in socio-economic status and a lowering of their class status in the Diaspora. Chinese women, in addition to this, experienced a lowering of the mental and physical wellbeing.

Among these Chinese women migrants, they have found themselves increasingly dependent on different sets of local and transnational social networks to help them either in the domestic or work spheres within the Diaspora. With the rise of the nuclear and transnational family as a result of cross-border and global migration, women found that they have to renegotiate some old social networks, especially those based on extended family, lineage and kinship structures. Often, migration led to a breakdown in these network structures where older female kin members of the family were no longer available to assist with childcaring and domestic chores. This is particularly so in western countries where there is a shortage of government subsidised childcare facilities and where private childcare are beyond the reach of many Chinese migrants as many do not hold highly-paid or regular jobs.

So, middle class working Chinese women, who could afford it, found it necessary to recreate the network links by applying for relevant visa for their kin to migrate to the host country. When successful, the extended family would constitute an important social network that helped with childcare and domestic works, thereby freeing these women to concentrate on their economic and sometimes, educational pursuit, the latter to upgrade them and become more competitive. For some other women, they managed to form local networks either based on kinship or co-ethnic ties where women will assist one another with their routine domestic chores and childcare. They are thus able to get on with adapting to a new environment. There are also some who cannot afford the expenses involved in getting visa for their kin members to migrate; these Chinese women choose to send their children back to their homeland in order to tap into the transnational extended family network to look after the children. They tap into the local and transnational kinship network

structure in order to free themselves from the mundane routine of childcaring and domestic works to engage in a wage labouring economy.

For other women, they used their youth, beauty and marriage as a form of cultural capital and network with either Chinese men or local Caucasian men. Younger Chinese with youth and beauty could often find a ready pool of both Chinese and local Caucasian men to network with and who are willing to go into a *de facto* or formal marriage relationship. They are therefore able to secure economic resources as well as a permanent residency visa to live in the host country.

Within the Chinese society, education is regarded as an important instrument for upward mobility. Within the family, great emphasis has been placed on children achieving good academic qualification, so that they will get into a good university and then eventually landed a good job. For girls, education is also regarded as an important cultural capital that would not only land one with a good job but also with a good marriage. Thus, for the sake of the family and children, middle class Chinese women also use their financial and educational resources as cultural capital to network themselves with other like-minded women to seek out information and other forms of educational resources. By forming informal networks of this nature, they are able to provide all the necessary resources that they perceived as essential for the success of their children in a highly competitive education system. This explains why many children in Asia, including Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, China, Singapore and Malaysia, are sent to "cramp schools" or "tuition schools" where they are given extra lessons and taught to excel in an examination oriented school system. This is also the case where Chinese parents in America and United Kingdom would consciously tapped into established networks among themselves to ensure that their children would eventually graduate with a degree. This explains why the percentage of young people of Chinese descent with a college degree is much higher than the national average in America and United Kingdom.[3] An example of how Chinese women use their education and financial resources as cultural capital to further the children's education can be found in the case of Singapore.

It is therefore possible to argue that middle class Chinese women possessing a high level of cultural capital are able to actively involve and or contribute to the creation of specific forms of network structures that are geared towards their own needs. In a way, by networking with their kins-people and co-ethnics, they are able to empower themselves and develop a social and sometimes, economic niche for themselves within a