STRONG BRIDGES

TRUST BEYOND STRUCTURE

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COVER BLURB: *Strong Bridges* is a book about a contradiction and the opportunity it offers. For decades, social network theory has drawn its maps of advantage from the idea that brokers sit astride structural holes, reaping value from weak ties that bridge disconnected worlds. But what if some of those bridges are not weak? What if the real advantage lies not just in structure, but in trust forged in interpersonal history regardless of structure?

This is the puzzle *Strong Bridges* takes up. It begins with guanxi, the colloquial Chinese term for relationship advantage, often dismissed as cultural peculiarity or corruption. But the authors treat guanxi as a strategic research site, not a cultural relic. They view it a niche-word pointing to a broader category of human experience. Combining analytic rigor with quality network data, they pull apart the Siamese twins of tie strength and network structure, documenting the prevalence and competitive value of high-trust ties that span structural holes, i.e., strong bridges.

The book offers two discovery stories; one empirical, one theoretical. The first tracks how guanxi bridges operate in the personal networks of Chinese entrepreneurs. The second reshapes core assumptions in network theory. Across industries, events, and even a pandemic, strong bridges emerge as resilient assets distinct from embedded ties, more predictive of cooperation, and more durable than theory currently expects.

This is a book about the anatomy of network advantage. It reframes brokerage not as a fragile position, but as a relationship earned, remembered, and surprisingly strong.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We state our argument in terms of networks anywhere, but our empirical evidence comes almost entirely from surveys of Chinese entrepreneurs in 2012, 2018, and 2021. The first author of this book had little familiarity with China before the work reported here began. What he had was considerable admiration for the second author, who was about to publish her 2012 award-winning book with Victor Nee on private enterprise in China: *Capitalism from Below*. The book made frequent reference to social networks around the people leading private enterprises, but contained none of the network data so frequently gathered on managers in the West. Much of the network module Ron wrote for inclusion in the 2012 survey is included here in the fieldwork Appendix. One thing led to another and here we are; married and living in Milan.

In the decade of work since the initial survey, we have presented results at numerous seminars and workshops, which we acknowledged in papers published over the decade. Deserving special note are the three colleagues who served as lotsen in our Oxford workshop on the book proposal: Douglas Guilbeault, Martin Kilduff, and James Moody. Their comments triggered thought and revision in the final text. With the permission of publishers, we here draw on a few of those papers: Burt and Opper (2017) from *Management and Organization Review*; Burt, Bian, and Opper (2018) and Burt (2019b) from *Social Networks*; Burt, Opper, and Holm (2022) from *Organization Science*, Burt and Opper (2024) from the *American Journal of Sociology*. Our foundational Chapter 2 overlaps with our chapter on evaluation in network context for the *Oxford Handbook of Organisational Social Evaluation* (Burt and Opper 2026) and with a chapter on the fragility of brokerage in the Nobel Symposium volume, *Social Networks* (Burt 2026). We are grateful for the able research assistance provided by colleagues during their student years: Katarzyna Burzynska, Jiongni Mao, Yujun Wang, Ke Zeng, Chenlin Zhao, and Na Zou. We are grateful also to Bocconi University and the University of Chicago Booth School of Business for financial support during the work reported here. Sonja Opper is grateful to Riksbankens Jubileumsfond for a sabbatical grant, and to the Center for East

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

A meritocracy is widely understood to be a governance system that distributes resources in proportion to merit. Such systems are worthy of aspiration, but typically noted for their absence. Familiar barriers to a practical meritocracy include accidents of birth, friends, ignorance, love of one's own kind, obligations, quotas, sloth — it is a long list. The yawning gap between aspiration and reality generates frustration and anger. It is not surprising that people in diverse cultures have a word for relationships that provide a way around meritocracy; a manifestation of insider wisdom when you are advantaged, an indicator of corruption when someone else is advantaged: There is blat in Russia, enchufe in Spain, piston in France, guan hệ in Vietnam, raccomandazione in Italy, sifarish in India, Vitamin B in Germany, yongo in South Korea — and guanxi in China.

This category of colloquial words is a playground for social network theory. Theory defines social mechanisms responsible for the referenced advantage. In a narrow sense, this book can be read as a story of building theory around one such word, the Chinese term guanxi. We treat guanxi as an example of what Merton and Barber (2004: 256) term a niche-word, a word that expresses "a familiar kind of human experience that transcends national and other cultural and linguistic boundaries." Our premise in this book is that the relationships known in China as guanxi refer to a broad category of human relationships. Elements in the category are known by other words in other cultures. The category is significant in theory and substance for its provision of strong bridges, that is to say, relationships of high trust that span structural holes. Guanxi relationships offer a strategic site for productive research on the broader category.

This is a book of two discovery stories. One story is about guanxi. Using qualitative and quantitative data on guanxi and non-guanxi relations adjacent in the personal networks of entrepreneurs, we offer resolution to the debilitating ambiguity of guanxi, a concept often mentioned in studies of Chinese business, and often cited as an example of how business in China is distinct from business in the West. Beyond China, the hypotheses applied to guanxi are a template for research more generally on the meaning of colloquial words that refer to advantage.

Our second story is about network theory and research. We offer a renovation to a widely-used concept in network theory. Returning to the above theme of individual advantage, fair or unfair, half a century of work on social networks has settled on bridge relations as a source of individual advantage. A bridge in graph theory is a relationship that connects two people who cannot otherwise be connected indirectly. In practice, it is customary to discuss as bridges any connection between people unlikely to coordinate with each other in the absence of the bridge — typically a person in this group connected to a person in that other group. More precisely, the lack of connection between two groups is a hole in social structure, a structural hole, and relations are a bridge when they connect across a structural hole. With information relatively homogeneous on either side of the hole, and heterogeneous across the hole, information advantages of breadth, timing and arbitrage accrue to the person — a network broker — who bridges structural holes. Granovetter (1973), Freeman (1977), Burt (1992), and Lin (2001a) are core sources, with a burgeoning research corpus detailing the competitive advantage of network brokers arbitraging information across groups.

Coincident with the accumulating evidence of bridge relations as a source of advantage is accumulating evidence of bridge fragility. Their value is contingent on a broker's social standing. They are prone to decay. Network bridges are weak. The summary image is that brokerage is fragile. Trust is a particular concern. Can I trust this information received from someone in that group — where interests could be less virtuous, irrelevant, or contradictory, to my own? Is it even worth the costly due diligence to establish the validity of the information?

We show that guanxi, a kind of relationship often referred to but not yet analytically defined, provides a case for separating tie strength from network structure. That separation relieves us of the widely-held assumption that bridge relations are weak. In substantial frequency, we find strong bridges of trusted contact across groups. This is not at all to say that the strength-of-weak-ties hypothesis is incorrect so much as overstated. The hypothesis has been fruitful for so long it is easy to forget that the "forbidden triad" on which it rests was a didactic device, not a fact.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The book follows a generic research flow. We start with an empirical puzzle, move to a hunch about the puzzle, state hypotheses based on the hunch, design research to test the hypotheses, delight in empirical support for the hypotheses, then cycle back to explore more detailed and distant implications from empirical support for the hunch. We believe that the empirical journey we share in this book is best travelled along the logical path we lay out here. However, to facilitate quick access to individual chapters we allow for some repetition so that key features of the survey instrumentation and analysis are always easy to locate. Before we begin, we offer this note on language: Guanxi is both singular and plural. We use “guanxi tie” to make explicit reference to guanxi as a kind of relationship, “guanxi contact” to refer to a person who is the object of a guanxi tie, and “guanxi” to refer to the category of relationships that constitute guanxi.

In Chapter 2 we introduce an unexpected data pattern and lay a foundation that makes the pattern intriguing. The chapter is organized around four textbook ideas in network analysis, cast as stylized facts. The four facts together describe network brokerage facilitating change in the status quo, with brokerage opposed by network closure preserving the status quo. We offer a summary of thinking through the 20th century, then drop into that context an intriguing, contradictory result: We find evidence of strong bridges — strong relations of trust across the structural holes in a network. What these contacts have in common is that respondents recall them as being particularly helpful during significant events in their personal business history. The implication is that the competitive advantage of network brokerage is less fragile than has been believed heretofore. If the contradiction survives close inspection, the outlier relationships have implications for competitive advantage with respect to broadening network theory, sharpening network research, and making network practice more effective.

In Chapter 3, we explain the survey data responsible for the contradictory result and comb through the data to better understand trust in the event contacts. We conclude that the high trust evident in event contacts comes from within — from the interpersonal history between two people. We base this conclusion on three facts: First, trust in event contacts is relatively independent of the surrounding network.

Trust in other contacts, nonevent contacts, increases with mutual contacts in the usual way. Second, the high trust relatively independent of the surrounding network is robust across kinds of events. Third, years of knowing a person matter. When family is turned to for support it is most likely at founding, but family is not the primary source of support, even at founding. Rather, entrepreneurs cite people they have known for many years, typically all kinds of people beyond the entrepreneur's family. The duration association with trust is not about significant events in the life of the business or the respondent. Duration is about getting to know a person, which happens during the first four or five years of a relationship, after which trust increases at only a modest rate over additional years. In sum, events seem not to be significant in their own right. They are significant as an occasion, a context, in which an entrepreneur learns that a contact can be trusted.

Our hunch was that the unexpectedly strong bridge connections came from a category of relationships colloquially referenced in China as "guanxi." For verification we returned to the field to talk with a new sample of entrepreneurs. In Chapter 4, we discuss our strategy, offer two hypotheses to test our hunch, and present strong empirical support for the hypotheses. Our measurement strategy is to include a guanxi name interpreter in a generic network survey instrument. This gives us network data on where guanxi occur and where they do not. The data lead us to believe that time and significant events are the foundational predictors of guanxi. Guanxi are long-standing relations of positive sentiment deepened to a bond through exchange during one or more significant events.

We use guanxi as a strategic research site in which the unexpected tie strength is explicitly separate from network location. Network theory and research have long been hampered by the belief that relations are weak when they bridge the structural hole between groups. In fact, there is ample evidence showing that bridges between groups are often weak. But some are not, and those exceptional strong bridges (which can be a numerous minority) are foundation for competitive advantage.

We use two hypotheses to organize our argument and evidence. Our "strong-bridges" hypothesis states criteria for guanxi operating as a strong bridge: Relative to other ties, trust in guanxi ties is higher and less contingent on structural embedding. Our "advantage" hypothesis states that entrepreneurs are advantaged by the extent to which their guanxi are bridges. In contrast to the discussion of strong ties deriving value from corroborating relations with mutual friends and colleagues (structural embedding), guanxi ties derive value from the interpersonal history between two people (relational embedding). More structural embedding around guanxi makes it less of a network bridge, resulting in lower advantage. In short, advantage is not about weak ties, bridge connections, or trust so much as it is specifically about trusted bridge connections — what we discuss as strong bridges. Absent such bridges, we find that network brokers have no competitive advantage.

By the end of Chapter 4, we have established a beachhead. We have presented systematic evidence of an intriguing contradiction to widely-held network theories of brokerage and related social science (Chapter 2), dug into the evidence to better understand the substance of the contradiction (Chapter 3), then formalized in two hypotheses our hunch that the contradiction is an example of the proverbial Chinese guanxi, and presented new evidence providing a network description of guanxi and strongly supporting the hypotheses (Chapter 4). Guanxi bridges do not compensate for an overall closed network, but they are key to the competitive advantages of relatively open networks.

We use subsequent chapters to consolidate the beachhead. We first look for evidence of confounding explanations. Multiplexity is an obvious candidate. A relationship is “multiplex” when it is composed of more than one kind of connection. Guanxi is typically multiplex in that it is — like “love” or “respect” — an invisible quality attributed to a relationship. What are the observable qualities of relationships in which guanxi is found? For example, how often does it develop within families rather than outside of kinship circles? Is the advantage we attribute to guanxi, in fact advantage from other kinds of connections in which such relations tend to occur? If we feel our brother is guanxi, how much of the trust felt is because our brother is family? In Chapter 5, we show that multiplexity is not necessary to the strong bridges provided by guanxi, though it can be a helpful coincidence.

We also look into how guanxi are used. At founding, we find no difference in help between guanxi versus non-guanxi contacts, or between structurally-embedded versus bridge guanxi. In short, founding is largely a story about finding contacts who can provide resources regardless of tie strength or network location. Network differences emerge subsequent to founding. Embedded guanxi are associated with help on multiple events, but no specific kind of help. Bridge guanxi perform familiar broker activities — not providing resources so much as providing referrals to helpful contacts outside the entrepreneur's immediate social circle. With respect to contact frequency, guanxi contacts are met neither less often, nor more often, than other contacts. In the extreme, however, it is unlikely that guanxi contacts are ignored for long periods of time. And in keeping with their personal nature, communication tends to be through more personal, less formal channels, especially with bridge guanxi, who are the contacts associated with business success.

In Chapter 6, we look into the language our entrepreneurs use to describe guanxi. A colloquial word such as guanxi can be used in different ways by different groups. Is our interpretation of the word peculiar, or limited to certain kinds of people? Do more educated people define the term differently from less educated people? Are there city differences, either linked to history or the institutional and cultural embedding? We asked each of our sample entrepreneurs to describe guanxi in his or her own words. To our knowledge, this is the first time such network and language data are both available from a representative sample of business leaders. We draw two conclusions: First, where complexity refers to the number and variety of words in a text, descriptions by our sample entrepreneurs do not distinguish qualitatively different kinds of speakers so much as they distinguish speakers on a continuum of complexity. Second, the complexity with which a speaker describes guanxi is predicted by the complexity of the speaker's network. Specifically, language complexity increases with the extent to which an entrepreneur's network contains guanxi bridge relations. To the extent that our understanding of a kind of relationship varies with the diversity of the situations in which we have that relationship, it is not surprising to see more complicated, nuanced descriptions of guanxi come from people with guanxi bridge relationships. In comparison, complexity is largely independent of an entrepreneur's personal characteristics (age, education, gender, etc.) or characteristics of the entrepreneur's business (industry, assets, size, profitability, etc.).

In Chapter 7, we take three lines of attack on network resilience. For these analyses, we re-interviewed in 2021 the heads of businesses interviewed in 2018 in the two capital cities: Hangzhou and Shanghai. The re-interviews took place during the COVID epidemic in China, as permitted by intermittent lockdowns. With new respondents drawn from the same sampling design, we have interviews with a stratified probability sample of 371 heads of medium and small private enterprises in the two cities.

Turning to our lines of attack, we begin by learning where COVID most disrupted each person's network. There are some close friends of our sample entrepreneurs who were severely affected by the disease, but they are a minority. The personal contacts most critically affected by COVID are rarely-met individuals, disconnected from others in the network around the respondent naming them. COVID is everywhere in the environment, but the severe hardship is typically at or beyond the periphery of an entrepreneur's network. Second, we look for continuing support of the strong-bridges hypothesis. Guanxi during Covid continues to be characterized by high trust independent of network context, but the context has eroded: The structural embedding associated in 2018 with trust in routine business contacts contributes significantly less to trust in 2021. In a phrase, trust becomes more personal, less supported by context — more dependent on guanxi. Third, we look into the resilience of individual relationships. This is difficult because we assured respondents of contact anonymity. Names and addresses of contacts are unknown. Still, with some bold, carefully considered, assumptions, we match a large number of contacts cited in 2018 and 2021. Strong bridges are resilient. They are distinguished by a significantly lower risk of tie decay compared to routine bridges. More than surviving, strong bridges persist as strong bridges.

By the end of Chapter 7, we are confident in the role specified for guanxi and guanxi-like relations in network theory, research, and practice. Strong bridges forged in interpersonal history are a routine feature of networks and substantively less fragile than routine bridges. They are not equally present in all networks, but they are much more familiar than currently recognized by social network theory.

We close, in Chapter 8, by taking stock of what we have learned, and looking ahead. We offer a brief summary of conclusions from the preceding chapters (now with reference to illustrative bits of evidence in the figures), and a snapshot of the process we believe responsible for creating strong bridges.

We then look ahead to replication in a variety of forms. We discuss replication through reinterpreting results in prior research, and replication through studying colloquial words akin to guanxi outside China. Beyond colloquial words, we discuss replication through exploratory data analysis, or with strong bridges identified through significant events. We discuss replication with strong bridges defined by socially expected durations (illustrated with data on American analysts and investment bankers), and replication using data on sentiment across levels of structural embedding (illustrated with data on strong bridges in England, France, Germany, and Italy).

We close with core implications for theory and practice. Our results support a break with the last decades of network theory to separate tie strength from network structure. The two conditions are correlated, but they are separate factors in successful brokerage. By cutting through to deeper, more stable, relationships responsible for competitive advantage, our results on strong bridges show that the reigning image of brokerage as a fragile advantage needs to be replaced with an image of relatively stable competitive advantage. In showing that competitive advantage is less about concrete connections than it is about a person's emotional interpretation of access, our results call for a more prominent role played by sentiment along side structure as core to competitive advantage. Finally, our results have implications for network practice in that they show no value to abundant weak ties that are bridges; value resides in the subset of bridges that are strong.