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PERCEIVED ACQUAINTANCESHIP AND INTERPERSONAL TRUST: THE CASES OF HONG KONG AND CHINA

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The relationship between a person's perception of others and how many acquaintances he thinks he has is analyzed with data from a quota sample of 978 respondents in Hong Kong and 94 in China. Respondents in Hong Kong perceive one another as not trustworthy, selfish and unfair, much as in Japan, but this is not the case for China, nor for the U.S. It is competitiveness rather than culture that seems to account for this. People who don't trust one another tend not to perceive themselves as having many acquaintances.

1. Introduction

Research on acquaintance nets has so far stressed the search for objective measures of an individual's acquaintance volume, among other variables. It is the perceived number of acquaintances a person has, however, that matters in relating acquaintanceship with networking and with people's perceptions of one another. Our perceptions of one another affect the number of people we think we know. And that number affects how we use our connections.

The use of acquaintance chains – networking – may play an important role in the development of a society. How does perception of others relate to the use of acquaintance chains in a rapidly developing, newly industrialized country such as Hong Kong? We address this question indirectly, by examining the relation A in Figure 1. We have no new findings about relations B, C or D. Perception of others affects not only the *perceived* number of acquaintances but also the actual number. If people don't trust one another, they are unlikely to form and maintain meaningful and useful relationships. Both perceived and

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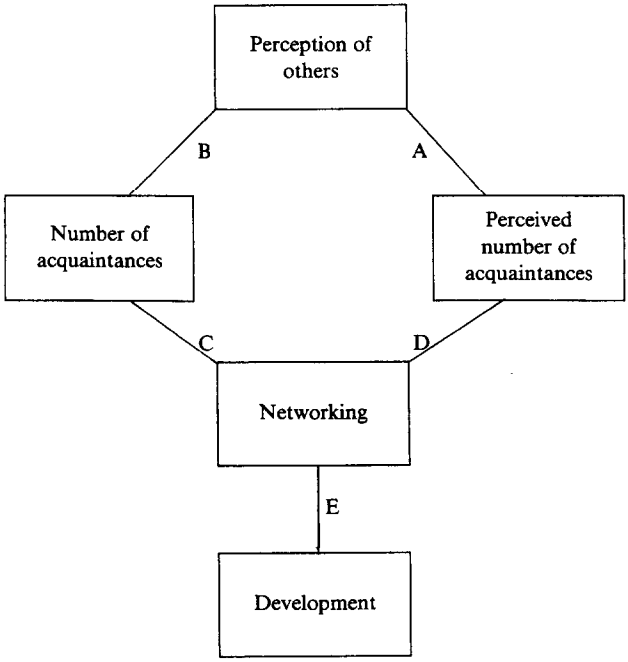

Figure 1. Relations among major factors.

actual volume of acquaintances affect networking. A person's perception of low acquaintance volume causes him to underestimate his ability to make and draw on useful contacts. All four relationships indicated in Figure 1 bear upon how acquaintance chains are used, but in this paper we focus on just one. We also assume that networking plays a role in development denoted by relation E (Kochen 1985).

The structure of the acquaintance network has been suggested as characteristic of a society. For example, in an open society such as the U.S., each member numbers his acquaintances in the thousands and these comprise several diverse acquaintance circles, reaching into all parts of the society. In a highly stratified society, such as that of India under the caste system, most members count their acquaintances in a restricted set. Political influence is propagated over acquaintance chains. Social contacts, too, are established with the help of acquaintance chains. And, of course, old-boy networks still play a key role in how

people obtain jobs, how firms acquire customers, investors, etc.; thus the acquaintance network has a vital function in the economy as well.

The study of acquaintanceship has therefore attracted a variety of social scientists. One of the first systematic studies of acquaintance nets was started by Ithiel de Sola Pool, a political scientist, and Manfred Kochen in 1957 although publication appeared only in 1978 (Pool and Kochen 1978). In 1967, S. Milgram a social psychologist, devised an ingenious experimental method (Milgram 1967) to explore further the line of inquiry started by Pool and Kochen. A number of published findings were stimulated by this seminal paper by Milgram, notably the reverse small-world technique (Killworth and Bernard 1978). The relation between perceived acquaintanceship and interpersonal trust and similar societal qualities has not, however, been extensively studied, especially in a cross-cultural context. There is of course the well-known work by T. Newcomb (1966) on the acquaintance process, and early empirical studies of reciprocity bias in a closed group (Rapoport and Horvath 1961), which bears on this relation to some extent. A unique opportunity to obtain data relevant to this question arose as part of E. Ho's survey questionnaire administered to 978 Hong Kong respondents and 94 respondents in two cities of South China in 1984–85. We hope to explain, by relating acquaintanceship use to trust, how acquaintance networks are formed instead of just observing and characterizing them.

This is a report of the findings from this survey that bear on this question. We describe next the methods used and then the results and our interpretation of what they mean. It is an elaboration of results mentioned in summary fashion in a study relating the structure of acquaintance nets and rates of societal development (Kochen 1986). In that study we reported a comparison between the 94 responses from China and a comparable set of 94 responses drawn from the 978 Hong Kong respondents. These samples were matched on age groups (10–59), occupation (professional, executive, clerk, sales, service, factory worker, student) and levels of education. We found that the Chinese gave a significantly higher estimate of how many people they believed they knew (recognize by name and face *and* vice-versa) than the Hong Kong respondents. Significantly more of the people from China than those from Hong Kong said that mose people would try to be helpful rather than look out for themselves; that most people can be trusted; that, when holding a strong opinion, they find themselves persuading others to their views. Significantly fewer Chinese than Hong Kongers

believed that most people try to take advantage of them if they get the chance. In what follows, we describe these findings, and their interpretation, in more detail and depth.

2. Methods

A quota sampling method was used with the design indicated in Table 1a for Hong Kong. Tables 1b and c show the Chinese sample. It is a process of respondent selection in which sample elements are chosen by non-probabilistic procedures in the field using prearranged categories of sample elements to obtain a predetermined number of cases in each category. The quotas are established on the basis of known characteristics of the population to be studied and in this case they are: age, sex and level of education. Quota sampling was chosen because it is easy to administer and inexpensive. But it has some methodological weaknesses. Selection of individuals to fill quotas is not conducted through

Table 1a
Representative sample (quotas) by sex, education and age groups, Hong Kong [a]

Age	Education										Total
	No schooling		Primary		Secondary		Post-secondary		University		
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
15–19	0	0	4	4	53	49	8	8	1	0	127
20–24	0	1	12	15	44	42	13	13	3	2	145
25–29	1	1	20	22	38	32	9	8	4	3	138
30–34	1	2	20	21	30	24	5	4	4	2	113
35–39	1	3	17	18	22	15	4	2	3	1	86
40–44	1	4	13	12	13	9	4	2	2	1	61
45–49	2	9	16	13	12	6	3	2	2	0	65
50–54	3	14	21	13	9	4	2	1	1	0	68
55–59	4	15	17	10	6	2	1	1	1	0	57
60–64	4	15	15	8	5	2	1	0	1	0	51
65+	5	42	20	10	6	2	2	1	1	0	89
Total	22	106	175	146	238	187	52	42	23	9	1000

[a] Derived from statistics in Hong Kong 1981 Census, Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong.

Table 1b
Chinese sample by age groups, occupation and sex

Age	Occupation														Total
	Professional		Managerial		Clerical		Sale		Service		Farmer		Factory		
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
15–24	1	0	0	0	3	11	0	1	1	11	2	4	0	0	34
25–34	1	0	3	2	1	5	1	0	1	1	5	3	1	0	24
35–44	2	0	10	0	1	3	0	0	0	2	4	0	0	0	22
45–54	0	1	5	0	3	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	11
55+	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Total	4	1	20	2	7	20	1	1	2	16	11	7	1	0	94

Table 1c
Chinese sample by education, occupation and sex

Education	Occupation														Total
	Professional		Managerial		Clerical		Sale		Service		Factory		Student		
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Primary	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	6
Secondary	0	1	8	2	5	14	0	1	2	11	6	4	0	0	54
Post-Secondary	1	0	6	0	4	2	1	0	0	0	5	3	0	0	22
University	3	0	4	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	12

chance procedures or with known probabilities of selection, so we would not know if the people chosen fully represent the similarities and differences existing among the sample elements in a given category, and might be biased toward selecting those who are more accessible. Hence, a sample may predominantly consist of white collar workers who are generally more accessible and cooperative in this kind of field work. To prevent this, a secondary quota based on occupation was established.

978 respondents in Hong Kong were interviewed. We have over-sampled the male, the better educated and the younger age groups. There were several reasons for failing to fill the quotas completely. The less educated candidate respondents frequently had difficulty completing the questionnaire and gave up.

To obtain a representative sample of the Chinese population is almost impossible, even in the context of quota sampling. Consent of Chinese authorities for this kind of field work is very difficult to obtain, and the cost of field work would be prohibitive. We did attempt to obtain a sample as diversified in characteristics as circumstances of less rigorously structured access to the population permitted. Any generalizations that might be made from analyzing Chinese data must be interpreted in light of our having neither rural nor illiterate respondents.

The questionnaire used in each population sought primarily to measure value shifts between "materialist" and "post-materialist" sets of values, following Inglehart (1981, 82). The 52-item questionnaire explored personality variables such as attitude toward life, occuptational goals, values concerning the importance of money and leisure time, entrepreneurship, timeframes for personal planning, and risk-taking characteristics. The questionnaire was translated from English into Chines for field administration. Back-translation and comparisons and clarifications assured linguistic equivalence.

Of the Hong Kong responses, 21.8 percent were obtained by personal interviews, 31.3 percent were self-administered and 46.9 percent were by mail. We usually worked through the supervisor at a company whose employees were interested in interviewing. Companies included a major transportation firm, sampler garment, electrical, shipping, food service and retail establishments, and a leisure boat manufacturer.

Field work in China was done in Shen Zhen, the special economic zone neighboring Hong Kong, and Guangzhou (Canton), the state

capital of the coastal Guangtung province and one of the largest cities in China. Employees of a restaurant, department store, garment factory and an electrical equipment factory were contacted.

Of the 52 questions administered, the following six are the basis for the analysis reported here.

Q 32. Would you say that most of the time, people try to be helpful or that they are mostly just looking out for themselves? (Variable 36)

Q 33. Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance or would they try to be fair? (Variable 37)

Q 35. Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you cannot be too careful in dealing with people? (Variable 39)

Q 37. Taking all things together, how would you say things are these days – would you say you are very happy, fairly happy, or not too happy these days? (Variable 41)

Q 41. When you yourself hold a strong opinion, do you find yourself persuading your friends, relatives or fellow workers to share your views? If so, does this happen often, from time to time, rarely, or never? (Variable 45)

Q 42. How many people do you estimate you could recognize by names and face, and who would also recognize you by name and face? (Choose one of the following: (a) under 50, (b) 50–150, (c) 150–300, (d) 300–500, (e) 500–1000, (f) above 1000.) (Variable 46)

An analysis of the gamma coefficients between the above six variables for Hong Kong, Shen Zhen and Guangzhou indicates these questions to be remarkably consistent. (Gamma coefficients are used in place of correlation coefficient when the variables range over an ordinal scale instead of an interval scale.) The instrument by and large measured what it is claimed to measure. Those who perceive others as selfish are more likely to perceive at the same time others being not trustworthy and unfair. The China and Hong Kong groups differ significantly in the sense that people of the former who perceive others being selfish (or not trustworthy) are more likely to give a higher estimate of their acquaintances, whereas people of the latter are more likely to give a lower estimate. Furthermore, the Chinese of China who are happy are more likely to give a lower estimate of acquaintances whereas Hong Kong people are more likely to give a higher estimate. The results from China are dubious, since we would expect those who

perceive others being selfish (or unhappy) to tend to make less friends and thus give a lower estimate of their acquaintances.

3. Case-wise comparisons in Hong Kong and China

As stated at the end of the introduction, respondents from Hong Kong and China are significantly different in the following:

(a) Hong Kong respondents have a significantly higher perception of others being selfish as opposed to helpful. ($p \leq 0.0005$)
(b) Hong Kong respondents have a significantly lower perception of others being fair (as opposed to "take advantage"). ($p \leq 0.0000$)
(c) Hong Kong respondents have a significantly higher perception of others not being trustworthy. ($p \leq 0.0000$)
(d) Hong Kong respondents have a significantly lower tendency to voice their opinions. ($p \leq 0.01$)
(e) Hong Kong respondents have significantly lower perceived acquaintance volume. ($p \leq 0.0005$)
(f) Hong Kong respondents are significantly more unhappy with life in general. ($p \leq 0.005$)

On the whole, these findings are surprisingly accurate and realistic. It is conceivable that the lower perceived acquaintance volume of the Hong Kong respondents is due to their unfavorable perception of others around them. When one perceives others as selfish, not trustworthy and unfair, one is less likely to make friends with others or think of them. Such perceptions could also lead to an underestimation of the number of one's acquaintances due to the judgment heuristic of "availability". (Tversky and Kahnemann 1974)

Furthermore, such perception could also explain why Hong Kong respondents are less likely to voice their opinions since they are suspicious of others. Finally, the Hong Kong respondents are understandably less happy since they perceive those around them as not helpful, not trustworthy and unfair. As to why Hong Kong people have such a perception of others, the high competitiveness in Hong Kong probably is a contributing factor. In Hong Kong, the intense competition for jobs, housing, education and other aspects of life means that one's gain is often obtained at the expense of others. Under such

conditions, it is conceivable that Hong Kong people consider their peers to be primarily competitors and thus develop the perception that others are "not trustworthy", selfish and unfair. On the other hand, competition in China is less intense as almost everyone is assured of a job and education. In a sense, such an unfavorable perception of others on the part of Hong Kong respondents may be characteristic of some developed, modern societies such as Japan. This is illustrated in the next two sections.

4. An interpersonal relationship scale

An interpersonal relationship scale (I.R.S.) was constructed for Hong Kong based on the response to the following questionnaire items: Questions 32, 33, 35.

Scores range from "1" (for those who have perception of others being helpful, trustworthy and fair) to "4" (for those who think others are selfish, not trustworthy and unfair). Therefore, a person who scores low on this index would have a favorable perception of his or her fellow citizens. Overall, those with low score constitute 46.6 percent of the population while those with high score make up the remaining. More Hong Kong people, thus, have perception of their fellow citizens being selfish, not trustworthy and unfair than those who think otherwise. Apparently, the more educated, younger generation, those who have a higher Socioeconomic Status (S.E.S.) and those whose fathers

Table 1d
I.R.S. Scale

Score	
Helpful, trustworthy and fair	1
Helpful, not trustworthy and fair Helpful, trustworthy and unfair Selfish, trustworthy and fair	2
Helpful, not trustworthy and unfair Selfish, trustworthy and unfair Selfish, trustworthy and fair	3
Selfish, not trustworthy and unfair	4

Table 2
Gamma coefficients between interpersonal relationship scale and other variables

Variables	Gamma coefficients
Education	0.140
Age	−0.110
Socioeconomic status (S.E.S.)	0.221
Father's socioeconomic status	0.113

have higher S.E.S. tend to have a less favorable perception of others than their counterparts.

Table 2 shows the correlation between this I.R.S. scale and other variables, such as education, age, S.E.S., and father's S.E.S. A weighted sample was used in this analysis to make it resemble a representative sample for Hong Kong. The results indicate that the more educated, younger, those who have a higher AS.E.S. and those whose fathers have a higher S.E.S. tend to have a less favorable perception of others.

5. Cross-national comparison

Table 3 shows the perceptions of publics of Japan, Hong Kong, U.S.A. and China on the helpfulness, trustworthiness and fairness of their fellow citizens. These comparisons should only be interpreted qualitatively because the samples were taken in different years and not all samples are weighted. Apparently, the Japanese public has a perception of quite hostile interpersonal relationship character, whereas the Chinese

Table 3
Perception of interpersonal relationship of the publics of Japan, Hong Kong, China and U.S.A., in percentages

Perception	Country			
	Japan (1978)	H.K. (1984)	U.S.A. (1972)	China (1984)
Helpful (Q32)	19	44	49	68
Selfish	74	55	46	32
Trustworthy (Q35)	26	48	52	71
Not trustworthy	68	51	44	29
Fair (Q33)	53	46	65	75
Take advantage	39	53	31	25

Table 4
Scores of publics of Japan, Hong Kong, China and U.S.A. on interpersonal index

Score	Country			
	Japan	Hong Kong	U.S.A.	China
Very high	6.4%	20.2	36.8	45.2
High	23.8	25.9	22	28.3
Low	39.1	26.1	18.4	21.6
Very low	30.7	26.8	22.7	4.9

public have a most favorable perception of others. The Hong Kong respondents are closer to the former and the American public closer to the latter. The China and Hong Kong samples are weighted, the former by education, sex and age; the latter by education.

To substantiate this observation, Table 4 shows for each public the score on the interpersonal index which we constructed earlier by combining the perception listed above. A person will score "very high" if he has a perception of others being helpful, trustworthy and fair, or "very low" if he perceives others being selfish, not trustworthy and unfair.

Coinciding with earlier observations (Table 3), the Japanese and Chinese publics, respectively, have the least and most favorable perception of their fellow citizens. The level of interpersonal trust seems to have a well-defined relationship with the emphasis on a "friendlier, less impersonal society". (This is one of the original questions used by Inglehart (1982) in the U.S. Ho (1985) used it in Hong Kong and China. It was applied in Japan by the Research Committee (1979).) Table 5 illustrates this. This result indicates that the more favorable a particular public's perception of others is, the less likely that public is to stress "less impersonal society" as a societal goal. This relationship is understandable. If one has a lower level of interpersonal trust, it is more likely that one would be less happy and dissatisfied with life in general (this is shown to be the case in China and Hong Kong; results indicate that the lower the level of interpersonal trust one has, the more unhappy one would be). Therefore, the need for "friendlier, less impersonal society" rises accordingly as the attainment of this particular goal would mean more harmonious interpersonal relationships.

Why does the Japanese public have such a low level of interpersonal trust, when the Chinese score so high on the index? It could be due to

Table 5
Comparison between scores on interpersonal trust index and percent ranking of "less impersonal society" in Japan, Hong Kong, China and U.S.A.

Percentage	Country			
	Japan	H.K.	U.S.A.	China
Percentage scored low or very low on index	70	53	41	27
Percentage of "less impersonal society" chosen as first or second priority	37	17	11	5

the level of competition, varying in each of the four countries, but having no appropriate indicator for this level we rely on general observations. Take competition in education as a case in point: Hong Kong and Japanese students must pass batteries of national examinations to proceed to the next level, say primary to secondary or to be admitted to better schools. However, this is not the case in the U.S.A. and China. Of course, there is the S.A.T. for university entrance in America, but it is not the only criterion. China, on the other hand, has recently restored the multistaged examination system. In any case, the competition experienced in school by the public under discussion is perhaps toughest in Japan, followed by Hong Kong, U.S.A. and China. This is particularly true in Japan considering how frequently we learn from the media of Japanese high school students having committed suicide. How then, does this relate to the level of interpersonal trust? It is natural that one would adopt a perception of others being selfish, not trustworthy and unfair if one always regarded others as being one's competitors. The fierce competition in Japanese schools perhaps instills in the Japanese a low level of interpersonal trust early in life. Another possible reason for the higher level of competition in Japan and Hong Kong as compared to the U.S.A. and China is the meagerness of social welfare in the former, which means the individual in Hong Kong and Japan has to rely more on himself to survive, which thus contributes to his competitiveness.

Next, we would look at the role of education in the level of trust in the publics. Table 6 gives the results of how the four nations score on the trust index when we control for education. Two things are worth noting here. Firstly, education seems to have little influence on the level of interpersonal trust in Japan and Hong Kong, but has greatly

Table 6
Interpersonal trust, controlling for education in four nations

Country	Primary/Secondary		University or equivalent	
	High	Low	High	Low
Japan	26	74	33	67
Hong Kong	46	53	48	50
U.S.A.	42	58	65	35
China	72	28	87	13

improved trust in U.S.A. and China. Second, Hong Kong publics with primary or secondary education have a higher level of trust than their American counterparts. Age, on the other hand, seems to be an important factor. Although we do not have the relevant statistics from Japan and the U.S., we found that the level of interpersonal trust is negatively correlated with age in Hong Kong and China (correlation coefficients, -0.189 and -0.126 in Hong Kong and China, respectively). Therefore, the old in China and Hong Kong would have a more favorable perception of others than their younger counterparts. This could be the result of life cycle effects. Conceivably, as one grows older, one gets to meet more people and have more friends. Consequently, one might discover that other people are more helpful, trustworthy and fair than perceived. Based on these findings, we might expect the Hong Kong persons maintaining more or less stable but low levels of interpersonal trust while the Chinese public has an even more favorable perception of others, since both societies would become better educated but affected in a different fashion by education.

6. The acquaintance network and development

Answers to question 42 are subject to underestimation or overestimation, of course, but do provide rough estimates and contribute to our understanding of the nature of social networks. Results show that Hong Kong respondents report on average 150–300 mutually-identifiable acquaintances. Table 7 shows how the number of acquaintances one has is related to other variables.

It seems that the less educated, older, those with low S.E.S. and those whose fathers have a low S.E.S. tend to give a lower estimate of

Table 7
Gamma coefficients between number of acquaintances and other variables

Variables	Gamma coefficients
Education	0.293
Age	−0.113
Socioeconomic status (S.E.S.)	0.243
Father's S.E.S.	0.169
Interpersonal trust	−0.146
Happiness	0.095

the number of their acquaintances than their counterparts. In addition, those who have a low level of interpersonal trust also tend to have, as well as perceive themselves to have, a smaller acquaintance network. These findings give support to the utility of the question. It is reasonable that one would have a smaller social circle if one has the perception of others being not trustworthy, selfish and unfair.

The assumed relation E in Figure 1, that networking at an appropriate level is related to development, has the status of an as yet untested hypothesis. It is plausible, because development involves massive social transformations. Some societies are unable to adapt and cope with the turmoil and chaos accompanying such changes. Societies that do cope, and in which successful development emerges from the disorder, do so by establishing new forms of order through human interaction. That is the function of networking. The inherent ability to adapt and reorganize derives from a sufficiently reliable, rich and stable social acquaintance structure, actual and realistically perceived. Too complex or too rich a structure may impede the ability to adapt. That may be the case for China with its overabundance of social bonds. Too simple or impoverished a structure may make the society too vulnerable, with insufficient social support resources to cope with change. The utilitarianism characteristic of Hong Kong may be keeping the use of interpersonal bonds within useful yet manageable bounds.

Interpersonal trust in a society may vary inversely with the rate of developmental change that society is experiencing. Thus, the U.S., where the degree of interpersonal trust is high, is no longer developing rapidly. Japan, on the other hand, is still developing rapidly, and there the degree of interpersonal trust is low. Hong Kong lies between Japan and the U.S. on both measures. China's rate of development is not yet

high, and the degree of interpersonal trust there is high, as in the U.S. In time, we would expect Hong Kong and Japan to increase in the level of interpersonal trust, but the level in China may go down.

7. Conclusion

Before we had data about perceptions of others in China and Hong Kong, the finding of a low level of interpersonal trust in Japan compared with the U.S. was contrary to beliefs that trust is an extolled virtue in Oriental cultures. The competition level in Japan exceeds that of the U.S. Consequently, others could be expected to be perceived as competitive threats to a greater degree than in the U.S. Therefore it is not surprising that the actual degree of mutual trust is less. Our results indicate that competitiveness, rather than culture, is a plausible explanation of the low perception of others. It applies to Hong Kong, which is about as competitive as Japan, but not to China, which has the same culture. We expect that other newly industrialized countries, such as Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore will have characteristics very similar to those of Hong Kong on our six questions. Low perceived acquaintance volume is somewhat correlated with low perception of others in Hong Kong but not in China. The comparison between Hong Kong and China shows that perception of others affects perception of acquaintance volume. We might have expected high perceived acquaintance volumes in rapidly developing societies if networking is an important factor of development. The explanation is probably that the relationship between perceived acquaintance volume and the use of networking in development is curvilinear: too high a perceived volume is unnecessary and even counterproductive; too low a perceived volume is insufficient.

If people don't trust one another, they will not perceive themselves as having many acquaintances. It is our perceptions of the acquaintance net that determines its uses rather than the actual structure of the net. The use of acquaintance chains also depends on trust, of course. Too great a degree of trust – gullibility as an extreme – may lead to disappointments. Too little trust may inhibit the use of acquaintance chains. This suggests the possibility that, on balance, there is an optimal degree of trust and caution, as there is of perceived acquaintance volume. The people of Hong Kong do not actively distrust one

another, as might be the case in the U.S.S.R. Their perspective is primarily utilitarian, and therefore they trust one another no more than they must.

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