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**The sense of Connectedness and Well-being
in Asian Urban Life:
Tokyo, Shanghai, and Bangkok**

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The sense of Connectedness and Well-being in Asian Urban Life: Tokyo, Shanghai, and Bangkok

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship of the perceived levels of well-being and life satisfaction with social human networks that individuals have. It starts by questioning existing knowledge on that relationship, which claims that being 'network-rich' and a high level of well-being are potentially correlated. It may be observed universally, though the knowledge was mainly build on a theoretical framework coming from the studies of Western societies, and yet it has not been fully sorted out for the cases of Asian urban setting. In particular, considering the socio-cultural differences in Western and Asian societies, or among urban and suburban/rural populations, how one establishes, maintains and uses his/her social networks may difference and affect their life satisfaction in a different manner. With the results of a comparative analysis, the paper then shows the perceptions of good life and the impact of social relationships in Tokyo, Shanghai and Bangkok, which will encourage further discussions about the concept of well-being.

Keyword: well-being, Asia, social network

Introduction

Urbanisation is one of the keywords of the 21st century. The urban areas have extended the borders to swell more than half of the world's population. It is estimated that 66% of the world's population will be urban by 2050 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2014). In such a social context, the meaning of 'city' and impact it has to our lives has been changing. People in the city, however, may remain the same: Some seek for better opportunities, success, or more convenient life; others must survive in poverty, in isolation, or in insecurity.

Among issues around urbanisation, individual well-being has been one crucial topic for researchers. The relevance of quality of life (QOL) and/or life satisfaction to how we link ourselves to others in social relationship (social network) is a focal point of discussion in particular. It is because how we form our community in an urban setting has been

observed different from we used to have in our traditional communities. As Wirth saw already in the late 1930s, urban lifestyle would bring 'the substitution of secondary for primary contacts, the weakening of bonds of kinship, the declining social significance of the family, the disappearance of neighbourhood and the undermining of traditional basis of social solidarity', in return for 'the benefit of many communal services' the city can provide us (Wirth, 1938, p 20-22). Nevertheless, it does not mean urbanites lose human networks. Community moves from the physical space of a neighbourhood to being located within social networks (Wellman et al, 1988), and people are still connected with someone different from traditional community in a different way.

In previous studies of networks, it has been pointed out that urban human relationships are characterised by uniplex ties, where relationships are formed between different people according to different aims, that is one purpose for one person, as well as by intimate-secondary relationship, where people form an intimate relationship but not deeply involved like in a primary group (e.g., Lin et al, 2001; Wireman, 2008). Yet we still do not have enough knowledge to judge whether or not these characteristics are also found in East Asia, where urbanisation is progressing rapidly. What kind of social networks are being constructed among city dwellers? Are the urban characteristics found in the West also observed in Asia in the same way? What kind of relationships do happy urban residents in Asia actually have? – The answers for those questions will leads us to more understanding of the issue of urban individual well-being.

This study, therefore, focuses on the relevance between individual well-being and the characteristics of people's social networks. The data for this analysis was collected through the Well-Being of East Asian Cities Research (WEA) project¹, which compares individual well-being of urban residents in Tokyo, Shanghai, and Bangkok.

Data

The data sets used in this study were obtained through online questionnaire surveys in the three Asian cities, namely Bangkok, Shanghai, and Tokyo, from 2012 to 2013. The survey focus was the primary earner in middle-class households aged 20 or older residing in each city. Defining the 'middle-class' is rather problematic; it is difficult to draw clear lines between classes in each city, as well as to make them equivalent and comparative among

¹ The Well-Being of East Asian Cities Research (WEA) Project is funded by Saitama University Research Development Fund for 2011-2013. This three-year project aims to redefine individual well-being in the context of, and from the perspective of, East Asian Cities in globalizing era.

three cities due to differences in the socio-economic structure of society. Carefully consulting with existing studies and data on each country's economy, such as average annual income, this research has defined middle-class as households of the primary earner's individual annual income falls between: 15,000 to 50,000 Baht in Bangkok, 3,000 to 15,000 Yuan in Shanghai, and 3 to 8 million yen in Tokyo.

Respondents were recruited through an online survey company in each city and selected by stratified sampling. Valid responses were 412 (male 48.5%, female 51.5%) in Bangkok, 300 (male 50%, female 50%) in Shanghai, and 1261 (male 51.9%, female 48.1%) in Tokyo. As the number of responses varies widely, necessary statistical tests were carefully done for analyses.

A matter of data equivalence also lies in questionnaire design for international comparison. The questionnaire was standardised for each city, in a way as much as possible unaffected by socio-cultural factors by primarily setting questions about objective facts. The questions were first translated from Japanese into English and then from English into local languages (Thai and Chinese languages) respectively. The back translation was used to ensure the equivalence of wording; local validation was done in the discussion with research collaborators in Bangkok and Shanghai for the equivalence of meaning and cultural connotation in different societies even though it does not necessarily fully guarantee those. Nevertheless, the data offer enough to depict urban life in three cities for now for future discussion. In order for the future full-scale study to be statistically valid, cultural biases in data will be assessed by Differential Item Functioning (DIF) analysis before using them in an elaborate comparative analysis.

This study uses the questions relevant to life satisfaction and the social human networks which individuals can rely on in facing urban life risks. Asking respondents to assume urban risks was because the time of risks occurring would uncover whom people can really trust and count on to help ease their difficulties and go on with their lives. Specifically, the questions go as below:

[Life Satisfaction]

Q22. Are you satisfied with your recent life as a whole? Please rate on a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is best.

[Social Human Networks]

Q27. When you tried to solve the problem you answered in Q25, who actually helped you? Please select all applicable choices from the list. [Q25: *In past 10 years, what is the biggest problem you have faced?*]

<Choices for answers>

(1) Solved by myself (2) Spouse (3) Parent (4) Parent-in-law (5) Child (6) Brother/Sister (7) Other Relative (8) Neighbour (9) Colleague (10) Friend in Social club/activity (11) Friend from school (12) Religious network (temple, church, etc) (13) Other friend (14) Government's assistance (15) NGO/NPO (16) Other

Q30. If the problems/difficulties you answered in Q29 occur to you, who would you seek help from? Please select up to three persons for each problem/difficulty; if there are more than one person, please answer in order of importance (someone you can rely on or trust most should come as 1st person). [Q29. *What concerns you most in your life as city dweller? Please choose three difficulties/problems (No.1 to No.3 in significant order) according to your recent importance. Choices for answers were: Unemployment; Job-related problems; High living cost; Inflation; Housing cost; Government intervention; Corruption; Illness; Child/Elderly care; Community destruction; Sanitation; Environment; Population density; Crime; Loneliness; Natural disaster; Terrorism; Education; Other*]

<Choices for answers>

(1) Solved by myself (2) Spouse (3) Parent (4) Parent-in-law (5) Child (6) Brother/Sister (7) Other Relative (8) Neighbour (9) Colleague (10) Friend in Social club/activity (11) Friend from school (12) Religious network (temple, church, etc) (13) Other friend (14) Government's assistance (15) NGO/NPO (16) Other

<Frequency of contact with above selected person>

(1) Almost every day (2) Once a week (3) Once a month (4) Less than once a month

<Level of reliability of above selected person>

(1) Always very easy to turn to/ rely on (2) Possible to turn to/ rely on occasionally (3) Somehow difficult to turn to/rely on (4) Very difficult to turn to/ rely on

Q27 was a question to identify the human networks based on the real experiences. On the other hand, Q30 asked perceived available networks, no matter how the networks can be of actual help for the respondent. It is important to know not only actual networks but also perceived ones in order to understand the role of human networks as a social capital, for individuals can feel secure, and restore their mental balance by such emotional bond.

Findings

Background Characteristics of Respondents

Origins. Respondents of each city were asked whether the city in question was the place of their origin, or they had relocated from another region. Among surveyed, 34.2% in Bangkok, 80.3% in Shanghai, and 46.7% in Tokyo were locally-born. Those who had migrated were from various regions and no specific pattern of migration flows was observed

in all cities.

Educational qualification level. The educational backgrounds of the respondents in three cities vary. In Shanghai, the percentage of university graduates was 65.7% and that of junior college/technical college graduates was 20.0%, which means over 85% of the respondents had received a higher education. Meanwhile in Tokyo, respondents were divided among university graduates (48.8%), junior college/technical college graduates (23.3%), and high school graduates (19.4%). Bangkok was distinct from the other two cities. High school graduates occupy the highest share (41.7%), followed by a group of 29.1% whose highest educational attainment was primary school (6 years or 4 years) and that of 19.9% who had no education.

Marital status and family. Married persons were found in 79.0% of the Shanghai survey, 55.3% of the Bangkok's, and 30.9% of the Tokyo's, while singles were 19.7%, 36.4%, and 55.1% respectively. Common in all cities, more locally-born respondents were married, while more migrated ones remained single (table 1). When looking at the average ages of those groups, that of locally-born respondents were higher than that of relocated one. What is interesting, however, is that the higher the average age of respondents was, the more single population existed in these three cities. As for the average family size, Shanghai and Bangkok were the same at 2.5 persons, despite much higher marriage rate in Shanghai. Tokyo's average size was the lowest among three cities, at 1.9 persons. The average number of children too shows the same trend: in Shanghai and Bangkok at 0.8, and the lowest in Tokyo at 0.3. Being deemed quasi-family members, how many relatives live in the neighbourhood was also asked to find out that the averages were 2.3 households in Shanghai, 0.9 in Bangkok, and 0.6 in Tokyo. Hence, from above, we can summarise that those who locally-born were mature and had richer family networks in all cities, albeit only marginally, and that Shanghainese have more family and sibs around, that is, they are richer in more blood relation networks, while Tokyoites relatively break away from such networks and Bangkokians place themselves in the middle of the two cities.

State of residency. How long respondents have resided in the city was asked to understand their human environment. The average period of residence in the city was 365.6 months (30.5 years) in Tokyo, or more in details, that of locally-born was 521.5 months and of migrants was 225.8 months. In Shanghai, locally-born respondents have lived in the city for 389.3 months and migrants have for 117.4 months, which make 335.8 months (27.9 years) on average. Compared with counterparts in two cities, respondents in

Bangkok have lived relatively shorter, 274.0 months (22.8 years) on average. The differences in length of city residence between locally-born and migrants are smaller too: Locally-born have lived for 325.8 months, and migrants have 247.0 months.

Within those periods, they have moved their residents 3.0 times in Tokyo, 2.3 times in Shanghai, and 2.6 times in Bangkok on average. When the locally-born and migrants are compared, the average resident period between moves of locals and migrants were 168.2 months against 75.3 months in Tokyo, 177.0 months against 45.2 months in Shanghai, and in Bangkok 120.7 months against 98.8 months. It suggests that, in all the three cities but particularly in Shanghai, newcomers have many opportunities to be surrounded by different human environment in a short time whereas the locally born remain the same human environment for a certain period of time.

Working life. Another influential human environment would be the workplace. The average period of being in paid work and number of jobs experienced to date in Tokyo were 106.3 months (8.9 years) and 3.2 jobs, in Bangkok 104.3 months (8.7 years) and 2.9 jobs, and in Shanghai 92.0 months (7.7 years) and 2.3 jobs. These mean that Tokyo residents work for 2.8 years per job, while 3.0 years in Bangkok and 3.3 years in Shanghai. The average weekly working hours were 39.9 hours in Tokyo, 53.3 hours in Bangkok, and 41.7 hours in Shanghai. From figures above, surveyed in Tokyo spend their time surrounded by the same working human environment less than those of other cities do. When locally born and migrants were compared, Tokyo-born were surrounded by the same working human environment 1.25 times longer, and similarly, Bangkok-born were 1.52 times longer, and Shanghai-born were 1.63 times longer, than those who were relocated to the city were. This suggests that locally born people tend to remain in the same human environment in working life, too, in all cities.

Although the three cities display differing trends from the aspects above, it can be inferred that city-born people have relatively more stable environment of human relationships when compared with their counterparts relocated from other regions. Stable environment may produce a sense of security in people's mind. Looking at it from the opposite side, however, stable network would be a kind of 'shackle' for some people, which drives them to emigrate despite the instability and insecurity they would face in a new environment.

Risks and Social Capitals

Potential/Perceived Supports. Risks given to the respondents in the survey were:

unemployment, job-related problems, high living cost, inflation, housing cost, government's intervention, corruption, illness, care of family, failed community, sanitation, city environment, dense residential area, crime, loneliness, natural disaster, terrorism, and education. We asked respondents to select up to three problems they currently concern most, and cite up to three people (nine people in total) to whom they will go to for help coping with and resolving those problems. The risks they selected most were; high living cost (19.7%), housing cost (14.0%), job-related problem (12.0%), followed by inflation (11.7%).

In order to solve the problems, surveyed in Tokyo answered they may seek help from 5.4 people in average, 7.9 people in Shanghai, and 3.9 people in Bangkok. The average number per problem is 1.8 people in Tokyo, 2.6 people in Shanghai, and 1.3 people in Bangkok respectively. On the other hand, in responses to Q27 'When you tried to solve the problem you answered in Q25, who actually helped you?', those who were surveyed answered with actual number of helpers. The average number of people selected in the answer were 1.35 people in Tokyo, 0.68 people in Shanghai, and 0.82 people in Bangkok. In short, many people in Shanghai and Bangkok have solved their problems on their own compared with Tokyo. However, even in Tokyo, the figure which is fewer than 2 is by no means large. Thus, when we compare the potential supports to the actual ones for individual problem they experienced, the number seems much higher in Shanghai. This means they believe they can rely on someone even in reality they would not. This was particularly prominent in Shanghai.

For four problems most named as risks living in cities – high living cost, housing cost, job-related problem/stress, and inflation -, respondents have answered from whom they may seek help as follows:

- (1) high living cost. The number of people cited as consulted about this problem was 507 in Tokyo, 639 in Shanghai, and 471 in Bangkok. In Tokyo, they were in many instances the parent (17.4%); in Shanghai, the parent (21.3%), the spouse (16.7%), and the parent-in-law (12.8%). In Bangkok, the parent (16.6%), the spouse (15.7%) and the government (15.5%) were the most mentioned.
- (2) housing cost. The number of people cited as consulted about this problem was 372 in Tokyo, 834 in Shanghai, and 54 in Bangkok. The high number of people in Shanghai and the low number of people in Bangkok were prominent. Those who were cited frequently in Tokyo were the parent (19.6%) and specialist (18.3%), in Shanghai, the parent (19.8%) and the spouse (16.1%). In Bangkok, the spouse

(22.2%) and the parent (20.4%).

- (3) stress at work. The number of people consulted about this problem was 350 in Tokyo, 400 in Shanghai, and 224 in Bangkok. More specifically, in Tokyo in many instances the parents (17.4%) and colleagues (16.0%); in Shanghai the parents (17.5%) and the spouse (15.3%); and in Bangkok, the spouse (20.1%) and parents (19.6%).
- (4) inflation. The number of people cited as consulted about this problem was 224 in Tokyo, 622 in Shanghai and 280 in Bangkok. In many instances, in Tokyo, they were the parent (19.2%) and specialist (15.2%). In Shanghai, the parent (19.6%), and the spouse (17.0%), in Bangkok, the government (16.8%), and the spouse (15.7%).

In Tokyo, spouses were consulted infrequently, and this is likely partially attributable to the high non-marriage rate among the respondents. Closer examination of this point will be done in future. In addition, the frequency of contact with and easiness of relying on people in the category of those cited as people consulted particularly often differ according to the city. People with whom respondents had the most contact were in Tokyo someone from the workplace or related to work (once a week ≥ 2.9), followed by the parent (once a week > 2.6 \geq once a month). In Shanghai, this was the spouse (almost every day > 3.6 $>$ once a week) and then the parent (3.1 \geq once a week). In Bangkok, they were parent (3.2 \geq once a week), but more respondents prefer to contact '*someone else*' (almost every day > 3.5 $>$ once a week) which means they can access outside the usual personal networks around family, job, and neighbours. Those who were easy to rely on in Tokyo were the parent (possible to rely on occasionally ≥ 2.9) and siblings (possible to rely on occasionally > 2.7 $>$ somehow difficult to rely on), in Shanghai the spouse (always very easy to rely on > 3.7 $>$ possible to rely on occasionally) and the parent (always very easy to rely on > 3.5 $>$ possible to rely on occasionally) and in Bangkok the spouse (always very easy to rely on ≥ 3.9) and the parent (always very easy to rely on > 3.8 $>$ possible to rely on occasionally).

Looking at the figures, the frequency of contact and ease of reliability were lower in Tokyo than the other cities, suggesting a sense of distance surrounds Tokyo. Still, these three Asian cities have shown that family ties are important rather than any relationship for them in the urban life.

Life Satisfaction and Human Relations

On examining the correlation between life satisfaction and people an individual has received support from in resolving past problems, almost no correlation was seen in Tokyo and Bangkok: the highest Pearson's correlation coefficient was relative ($r=.105$) in Tokyo, and child ($r=-.148$) in Bangkok. For the Shanghai data, a weak correlation was seen for oneself ($r=-.219$) and parent ($r=.246$).

For problems which they perceive to incur in their urban life, too, there seems no correlation with life satisfaction. Regarding the potential supporters, the highest correlation coefficient was neighbour ($r=.167$) in Tokyo, relative ($r=.117$) and parent-in-law ($r=.101$) in Bangkok, and spouse ($r=.115$) in Shanghai, all of which are too low to claim the existence of correlation. When looking at a correlation between life satisfaction and the frequency of contact with people cited to consult, only Tokyo data showed a weak correlation in child ($r=.331$) and colleague/someone from work ($r=.241$). No correlations were found in Shanghai or Bangkok. On the other hand, correlation between life satisfaction and the easiness of reliance on people cited to consult is found in all cities. In Tokyo, a certain degree of correlation was found in child ($r=.501$), and weak correlations were also seen in spouse ($r=.281$), parent ($r=.266$) and sibling ($r=.212$). A weak correlation with the government ($r=.364$) and relative ($r=.236$) was seen in Shanghai, while only relative ($r=.321$) showed a weak correlation in Bangkok.

This analysis suggests that whom people perceive to be connected to is not so important as how close they feel and how much they trust their potential supporters. People in Tokyo seem to be happy when they have a good relationship with their own immediate family: Bangkok and Shanghai data did not clearly indicate, though the importance of family is seen in a good relationship with relatives, instead of immediate family members. Besides, it is unique that those who have enough knowledge to access and use the government are happier in Shanghai.

Discussion

Some interesting findings have been presented above even though this is a preliminary survey and analysis. One major point is that each city shows different patterns how they perceive urban risks /difficulties and which social networks they want to use to solve the difficulties. Another is that the relationship between life satisfaction and social network is unclear in all cities.

In terms of four risks perceived and concerned most in three cities, Tokyo concerns less about inflation, while Bangkok does not worry about housing cost but do about living cost. In Shanghai, housing cost is their biggest concern, but fewer concern about job related problem such as stress. These are reflecting their social contexts – Tokyo has been experiencing rather ‘deflation’ than ‘inflation’ during the survey period; Shanghai has been in the rapid economic growth and people don’t worry about getting job but housing became highly competitive as more people come.

Social networks, on the other hand, are categorised into two groups: family (blood) ties and community ties. Richness of both social ties place the three cities in a linear line, Tokyo is one end, Shanghai is another end, and Bangkok in the middle. From this point of view, people in Tokyo are living more isolated, lonely lives than in other cities. However, when we look at the number of people they ask for a help, it suggests another story: People in Tokyo sought more helps than in other cities, even people in Shanghai believe to do so more. Besides, from whom people seek for a help in Shanghai and Bangkok are mainly family, including parent, spouse, parent-in-law, while they can be colleagues, specialists, or someone outside their family ties in Tokyo. It means, Tokyo has more urbanised style of human network, that is, more use of a uniplex and intimate secondary relationship. In Japan, there is an old saying ‘*Tooku no Shinseki yori Chikaku no Tanin* (Strangers close by are better than family far away)’: the findings of this survey has supported this saying at the end of the day.

In some existing research on social networks, the richness of social networks and subjective happiness / life satisfaction are correlated. However, this research’s findings could not clearly support it. All cities suggest a hint of some correlative tendencies, but it was not enough to claim the correlation. That is to say, the rich social network does not guarantee the owner’s happiness. Still, I recognise that the further detailed analysis is required to confirm the result, no matter which direction it would take.

From above, one hypothesis on the relation between social network and happiness in Asian cities arises: The quality of social capital would matter more than quantity of it would for life satisfaction, but not always in a direct way. However, to verify this hypothesis should wait until the further advanced analysis. I will refine the analysis to demonstrate a clearer picture of urban individual well-being in East Asian cities. At the moment, suggesting this hypothesis is an achievement of this preliminary research to open up the discussion around well-being and social capitals in Asia for future.

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Table 1. Respondents' Marital Status and Family

(L:Local; R: Relocated)

	Bangkok		Shanghai		Tokyo	
Age (average, years old)	39.7	(L 44.1) (R 37.5)	34.4	(L 35.2) (R 31.6)	44.9	(L 47.1) (R 42.8)
Married (%)	55.3	(L 65.2) (R 50.2)	79.0	(L 82.6) (R 64.4)	30.9	(L 34.4) (R 37.9)
Single (%)	36.4	(L 24.1) (R 42.8)	19.7	(L 16.2) (R33.9)	55.1	(L 50.4) (R 59.1)
Family size (average, persons)	2.5	(L 2.6) (R 2.4)	2.5	(L 2.6) (R 2.4)	1.9	(L 2.3) (L 1.6)
Children (average, persons)	0.8	(L 1.0) (R 0.7)	0.8	(L 0.8) (R 0.7)	0.3	(L 0.4) (R 0.3)
Relatives in Neighbour (average, families)	0.9	(L 1.0) (R 0.8)	2.3	(L 2.4) (R 1.7)	0.6	(L 0.8) (R 0.4)

Table 2. The Perceived Risks in three cities: multiple answers

Risk	Tokyo		Shanghai		Bangkok	
	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)
1. Unemployment	6.7	225	3.7	33	8.9	94
2. Job related problems	13.0	434	9.2	82	11.2	118
3. High living cost	18.6	622	17.4	155	25.1	264
4. Inflation	9.1	306	15.8	141	16.3	172
5. Housing cost	15.3	512	21.7	194	3.1	33
6. Intervention by Government	0.3	9	0.8	7	1.2	13
7. Corruption	0.2	7	1.3	12	3.7	39
8. Illness	8.2	275	6.4	57	6.9	73
9. Difficulty of Child/Elderly care	2.2	74	4.9	44	0.5	5
10. Destruction of Community	3.7	123	1.1	10	1.3	14
11. Sanitation	0.5	16	0.9	8	1.6	17
12. City Environment	3.7	124	7.4	66	5.2	55
13. Dense Residential Area	2.8	94	3.1	28	3.0	32
14. Crime	5.2	174	1.6	14	7.5	79
15. Loneliness	2.5	84	1.0	9	0.8	8
16. Natural disaster	3.4	114	0.2	2	2.1	22
17. Terrorism	0.5	16	0.1	1	0.5	5
18. Education	0.7	24	3.0	27	0.4	4
19. Other	3.4	114	0.3	3	0.6	6
TOTAL		3347		893		1053