

# Research on the Embedding of Hometown Networks and Value Co-creation by Chinese Enterprises' Overseas Expansion in the Global South

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## Abstract

Against the backdrop of Chinese enterprises' overseas expansion in the Global South, this study examines the embedding paths and value co-creation mechanisms of hometown networks in cross-border operations. Combining literature review with case analysis, we select representative Chinese firms in typical hometown regions of Southeast Asia and Latin America as our research objects. We construct a dual-perspective theoretical framework of social network embedding and value co-creation, then use in-depth interviews and content analysis to empirically investigate the structure of hometown networks, resource flows, and collaboration patterns. Our findings indicate that hometown networks play a critical role in information access, institutional coordination, and social trust building; the depth of embedding and efficiency of resource integration significantly influence firm performance. Moreover, multi-actor co-creation pathways generate synergistic gains in market development and localization. Based on these insights, we propose managerial recommendations for optimizing network embedding strategies and strengthening multi-stakeholder co-creation platforms, and we outline policy implications and avenues for future research.

**Keywords:** Global South, Chinese enterprises, hometown network, social network embedding, value co-creation

## 1. Introduction

Chinese enterprises expanding into the Global South face complex and evolving political-economic environments as well as unique socio-cultural challenges. Compared to traditional developed-country markets, regions such as Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Africa exhibit greater institutional diversity and uncertainty in business norms and social networks. Hometown networks—informal organizational systems formed by overseas Chinese communities—leverage deep social trust, information sharing, and mutual support to help firms integrate locally, overcome institutional barriers, and build trust. However, most existing research focuses on overseas Chinese capital or on single facets of social networks; few studies systematically examine, from a Global South perspective, how Chinese firms embed themselves in hometown networks to achieve cross-cultural integration and value co-creation, nor do they empirically analyze how embedding depth and collaboration modes affect firm performance. To address this gap, this paper takes typical hometown regions in Southeast Asia and Latin America as case studies and develops a “social network embedding—multi-actor value co-creation” theoretical framework. We explore embedding paths of hometown networks in dimensions such as information access, institutional coordination, and trust building, and we investigate how local governments, community organizations, and Chinese firms co-create value to support market expansion and localization. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines in-depth interviews with content analysis, we aim to reveal how varying embedding depths and co-creation patterns drive firm performance, and on that basis we offer managerial insights for optimizing network embedding strategies and strengthening co-creation platforms, providing practical guidance for policymakers and corporate decision-makers.

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1 Research on Chinese Enterprises' Overseas Expansion in the Global South*

In recent years, driven by the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese firms have diversified their overseas presence in the Global South. Scholars generally agree that the Global South—endowed with abundant natural resources, lower production costs, and vast consumer markets—has become a new frontier for China's foreign direct investment and capacity cooperation. At the macro level, research highlights the driving role of policy guidance

and bilateral cooperation mechanisms, noting that intergovernmental negotiations and support from multilateral financial institutions are crucial for swiftly entering African, Southeast Asian, and Latin American markets[1]. At the micro level, studies examine firms' internationalization capabilities and cross-cultural management strategies, emphasizing challenges in legal systems, local governance, and cultural differences, and they propose strategies such as joint ventures, mergers and acquisitions, and localization to mitigate risks and integrate resources. Other literature discusses value-chain extension and technology transfer, arguing that Chinese manufacturers, infrastructure companies, and clean-energy firms often enjoy a first-mover advantage in the Global South, although they still need to improve market positioning, brand building, and sustainability practices. Success stories are usually underpinned by thorough due diligence and effective stakeholder coordination, whereas failures often stem from underestimating political volatility and social-responsibility pressures. Overall, research on Chinese enterprises in the Global South has formed a coherent logic chain of policy–motivation–strategy–performance, yet it lacks systematic exploration of how informal networks (such as hometown networks) embed firms and co-create value, leaving an important gap for further study[2].

## *2.2 Research on Hometown Networks and Social Network Embedding*

Research on hometown networks began with sociological and anthropological studies of overseas Chinese communities, examining how migrants leverage kinship, native-place ties, and mutual-aid mechanisms to form tight-knit interest groups in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and beyond, thereby acting as “bridges and engines” in trade, mediation, and micro-lending. As international business research matured, hometown networks came to be viewed as a special type of transnational social network. Core nodes—such as prominent community leaders or hometown associations with high credibility—effectively reduce information asymmetry, provide institutional support, and serve as “lubricants” in local political-business relations[3]. Recent empirical studies focus on how network structural characteristics (e.g., centrality, cohesion) relate to resource-mobilization efficiency, revealing that deeper network embedding affects market entry barriers, trust building, and cultural adaptation in multiple ways. Social network embedding theory, rooted in Granovetter's “strength of weak ties,” has expanded through structural-hole theory, resource-based views, and institutional embedding. In strategic management, embedding is defined as how an actor's network position grants access to information, reputation, and institutional legitimacy; embedding depth determines an actor's ability to secure key resources and co-create value with network members. High embedding fosters trust and lowers transaction costs but can also lead to lock-in effects and innovation path dependency. Incorporating hometown networks into this framework helps explain how Chinese firms in the Global South leverage informal networks to gain institutional support and social capital, and how dynamic embedding and de-embedding processes enable sustainable value co-creation[4].

## **3. Theoretical Framework and Research Hypotheses**

### *3.1 Social Network Embedding Perspective*

Social network embedding emphasizes an actor's position in the network and the strength of its ties, which determine its access to information, resources, and institutional legitimacy. Drawing on structural-hole theory and relational-embeddedness theory, embedding can be divided into three dimensions: Structural Embeddedness: The firm's intermediary role and bridging capacity within the hometown network, reflecting its ability to connect subgroups and control resource flows[5]. Relational Embeddedness: The strength of trust and affective ties between the firm and core community leaders or hometown associations, manifested in interaction frequency, reciprocity, and long-term commitment. Cognitive Embeddedness: The extent to which the firm shares values, cultural identity, and action norms with the hometown community, helping to reduce friction and uncertainty due to cultural differences. In the Global South's unique institutional environment, high levels of these three embedding dimensions enable firms to quickly acquire market information and social connections and to leverage hometown networks' institutional-substitution functions to mitigate institutional risks and transaction costs, thereby improving cross-border performance. Accordingly, we propose: H1: Greater structural embeddedness enhances information-acquisition efficiency and market penetration capabilities. H2: Stronger relational embeddedness increases trust with local stakeholders and reduces institutional-coordination costs. H3: Higher cognitive embeddedness strengthens cultural adaptation and legitimacy, facilitating improved localization performance[6].

### *3.2 Value Co-creation Mechanism*

Value co-creation refers to multiple actors' joint efforts—through resource integration, complementary capabilities, and collaborative governance—to create value beyond what any single actor could achieve. Within hometown networks, Chinese firms, local community leaders/associations, governments, and community organizations leverage their respective resource endowments and institutional advantages to form a trust–norm–incentive collaborative platform that drives market expansion, technology localization, and social integration[7].

Specifically, the co-creation mechanism comprises three dimensions: **Resource Integration**: Actors exchange information, share market channels, and pool local relationship resources. Firms provide technology, capital, and brand power; community leaders/associations contribute networks and cultural legitimacy; governments offer policy support and public services. Greater resource complementarity yields stronger collaborative innovation and economies of scale. **Collaborative Governance**: Actors establish consultation mechanisms, sign cooperation agreements, or form joint task forces to clarify responsibilities and benefit-sharing rules, creating an institutionalized cooperation framework. Transparent and fair governance reduces trust costs and enhances collaboration stability, promoting long-term value creation. **Platform-based Operation**: Actors leverage online systems (e.g., diaspora cloud platforms) and offline venues (markets, industrial parks) as “bridges” for aggregation, matching, and feedback. Within these platforms, participants can share supply and demand information in real time and respond rapidly to market changes, forming a dynamic co-creation loop. From these dimensions, we derive: **H4**: Higher degrees of resource integration strengthen the positive impact of multi-actor co-creation on market development performance. **H5**: More mature governance transparency and platform operations enhance the effect of value co-creation on localization performance[8].

#### 4. Research Design and Methods

##### 4.1 Research Approach, Sample Selection, and Case Definition

This study employs a mixed-methods design combining qualitative interviews and quantitative network analysis. First, we conducted a literature review and preliminary field survey to develop our “social network embedding–value co-creation” analytical framework. Next, we selected representative Chinese enterprises operating in typical hometown regions of Southeast Asia and Latin America, and gathered qualitative data on their embedding paths and co-creation practices through semi-structured, in-depth interviews[9]. Finally, we extracted interpersonal relationship data from the interviews to build network edge lists, which we analyzed in UCINET to quantify hometown network structural characteristics and to relate these metrics to firm performance indicators. Sample selection was guided by three criteria: **Geographical representativeness**—covering key hometown regions in Vietnam, Indonesia, Brazil, and Peru; **Industry diversity**—including manufacturing, infrastructure, and services; **Embedding depth**—categorizing firms into high, medium, and low embedding groups to ensure analytic contrast. Ultimately, six Chinese enterprises with substantial hometown-network embedding were chosen as cases[10].

Table 1. Sample Firms’ Basic Information and Hometown-Network Centrality Scores

Firm (Country)	Region	Investment Year	Industry	Network Centrality Score
Firm A (Vietnam)	Southeast Asia – Hanoi	2015	Manufacturing	0.78
Firm B (Indonesia)	Southeast Asia – Jakarta	2017	Infrastructure	0.65
Firm C (Brazil)	South America – São Paulo	2014	Services	0.82
Firm D (Peru)	South America – Lima	2018	Manufacturing	0.54
Firm E (Vietnam)	Southeast Asia – Ho Chi Minh City	2016	Infrastructure	0.71
Firm F (Brazil)	South America – Rio de Janeiro	2019	Services	0.48

Note: The “Network Centrality Score” is a standardized composite of degree centrality and betweenness centrality, calculated from core-node relationship data extracted during interviews, and serves to measure each firm’s embedding depth in its local hometown network.

##### 4.2 Data Sources and Analytical Procedures

Data for this study derive from two main sources. First, we conducted 24 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with senior executives of the sample firms, local community leaders, and association representatives. These interviews focused on firms’ embedding paths, resource-exchange patterns, and multi-actor co-creation practices; all recordings were transcribed verbatim and coded. Second, we gathered secondary literature and publicly available data—such as government and chamber of commerce white papers on diaspora affairs, local investment guides, corporate annual reports, and statistics on investment environments from international organizations (e.g., World

Bank, UNCTAD)—to contextualize the institutional environment and macro background. For the network analysis, we constructed adjacency matrices from interview-derived node-link data and imported them into UCINET to calculate structural metrics (degree centrality, betweenness centrality, clustering coefficient) with high reliability and reproducibility. Our analytical workflow followed a “qualitative guiding–quantitative validation–mixed-methods triangulation” logic. First, we used NVivo to open-code interview transcripts and to inductively identify key dimensions—such as information access, trust building, institutional coordination, and multi-actor collaboration. Next, we generated node-edge data sets from the coded relationships and applied social network analysis to quantify firms’ network positions. Finally, we employed SPSS to conduct correlation and regression analyses between network measures and firm performance indicators (market entry speed, return on investment, share of localized revenue), thereby testing the impact pathways and effect sizes of network embedding and value co-creation mechanisms.

## 5. Hometown-Network Embedding Paths Analysis

### 5.1 Hometown-Network Structure and Resource Advantages

Hometown networks exhibit a characteristic “core–periphery” stratification alongside concurrent “cluster–bridge” structures. Table 2 summarizes key network metrics and associated resource advantages across four node types:

Table 2. Structural Features and Resource Advantages of Hometown-Network Nodes

Node Type	Degree Centrality	Betweenness Centrality	Clustering Coefficient	Primary Resource Advantages
Core Nodes	0.85	0.80	0.60	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Timely market intelligence</li> <li>• Policy interpretation &amp; endorsement</li> </ul>
Peripheral Nodes	0.25	0.20	0.15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broad information access</li> <li>• Grassroots community ties</li> </ul>
Local Clusters	0.65	0.40	0.70	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong trust foundation</li> <li>• Rapid project deployment &amp; crisis coordination</li> </ul>
Bridge Nodes	0.50	0.75	0.30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross-cluster resource channels</li> <li>• Structural-hole bridging &amp; expanded collaboration</li> </ul>

Core nodes, with high degree and betweenness centrality, occupy network hubs that quickly deliver market insights and policy updates, and their endorsement reduces administrative and compliance costs. Peripheral nodes, despite low centrality scores, maintain indirect access to information and contacts via multiple links to core nodes. Local clusters—reflected in the highest clustering coefficient—benefit from frequent intra-group interactions and deep trust, enabling swift responses in labor recruitment, project implementation, and emergency coordination. Bridge nodes, with strong betweenness centrality, connect otherwise disconnected subgroups, filling structural holes and extending collaboration boundaries. Together, these structural features confer three major categories of resource advantages to Chinese firms: Information Resources: High connectivity of core nodes ensures timely, targeted market intelligence. Institutional & Relationship Resources: Community leaders’ credibility opens “green channels” for approvals and community engagement. Financial & Human Resources: Cluster and bridge nodes support mutual-aid financing and talent exchange networks, alleviating formal financial barriers and cross-cultural recruitment challenges. These structured embedding and integrated resources enable Chinese enterprises to adapt flexibly to the complex Global South environment and to accelerate project rollout and market expansion.

### 5.2 Embedding Path Types and Impact Mechanisms

Hometown-network embedding follows two principal paths—bridge-type embedding and platform-type embedding—each affecting firm performance through a core chain of “information flow → trust building → resource mobilization.” Bridge-Type Embedding: Firms link with key community leaders or transnational Chinese business associations that serve as intermediaries. High-frequency interactions with these bridge nodes grant rapid access to policy interpretations, market updates, and partner recommendations during project evaluation and early negotiations. The endorsement effect of bridge nodes also enhances firms’ credibility with governments and communities, substantially reducing administrative and relational coordination costs. Platform-Type Embedding: Firms participate in multi-stakeholder platforms—such as diaspora cloud platforms, Chinese-business industrial

parks, or joint hometown associations—where information sharing, resource matching, and collaborative governance are institutionalized within a single operating system. Here, firms co-develop rules and incentive mechanisms with governments, associations, and other enterprises, creating a formalized co-creation loop. This platform approach yields cumulative resource synergy, boosting market development, brand promotion, and localization of teams. The transparency and standardization of collaborative governance further reinforce mutual trust and institutional foundations for long-term cooperation. While bridge-type excels in short-term market penetration efficiency, platform-type emphasizes sustained collaboration and innovation capacity. Firms' strategic choice and combination of these paths shape the type of hometown resources they access, the balance between embedding depth and network dependency costs, and ultimately, the differential impacts on information efficiency, institutional costs, and innovation outcomes.

## 6. Empirical Analysis of Value Co-creation Mechanisms

### 6.1 Multi-actor Co-creation Models within Hometown Networks

Based on in-depth interviews and case analyses of six representative Chinese firms in Southeast Asian and Latin American hometown regions, we identify three primary multi-actor co-creation models: Local governments, through diaspora affairs bureaus or associations, establish regular communication channels and convene Chinese enterprises and hometown community organizations to participate jointly in policy evaluation, project appraisal, and risk-warning exercises. Firms present market demands and project proposals via community associations, which in turn relay grassroots concerns to government authorities. This collaboration secures tangible support in areas such as policy incentives, land approvals, and tax concessions. For example, in Jakarta, Firm B's industrial-park project benefited from a "Priority Service for Overseas Chinese Businesses" pledge jointly issued by the city government and the local overseas-Chinese association, reducing average approval time from project proposal to implementation by nearly 30%. Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and research institutions within the hometown network partner with Chinese parent companies across raw-material procurement, manufacturing, and distribution stages to share resources and complement technological capabilities. Large Chinese enterprises introduce their technical standards and management practices to local SMEs, jointly developing product-quality norms. Community members then leverage contract-manufacturing and distribution networks to rapidly market compliant products locally and regionally. In São Paulo, Firm C's smart-home component project formed a "Quality Alliance" with five local overseas-Chinese factories, raising component pass rates from 85% to over 95%. Stakeholders use online systems—such as a "Diaspora Cloud Platform" or a self-built "Overseas Chinese Business Hub"—to close the loop on information dissemination, demand matching, and performance feedback. The platform is operated by the local overseas-Chinese association, with government agencies providing policy updates and firms and community groups contributing content. Features like online surveys, project matchmaking sessions, and virtual pitch events enable real-time updates of investment opportunities and production needs. Built-in reputation scoring and incentive mechanisms foster trust accumulation and deepen collaboration. Firm E's digital agricultural-processing project in Ho Chi Minh City exemplifies this approach, seamlessly linking local farmers, processors, and export channels into a fully transparent, co-creative value chain. These three co-creation models often operate concurrently and are dynamically adjusted according to the hometown network's structure and each firm's strategic priorities. Together, they form a closed loop of information sharing → benefit alignment → trust building → value enhancement, providing robust "soft-power" support for Chinese enterprises' sustained development in Global South markets.

### 6.2 The Impact of Co-created Value on Firm Performance

Using SPSS regression analysis, we tested how value co-creation mechanisms within hometown networks drive Chinese firms' performance. Model 1 regresses market-entry speed on the degree of resource integration (ResourceIntegration). Controlling for firm size and years of investment, the regression coefficient is 0.42 ( $p < 0.01$ ), indicating that a one-standard-deviation increase in resource-integration capability corresponds to a 0.42-standard-deviation increase in entry speed. Model 2 uses the share of localized revenue as the dependent variable and governance transparency (GovernanceTransparency) as the key predictor. Its coefficient is 0.37 ( $p < 0.05$ ), demonstrating that improved collaborative-governance mechanisms significantly raise local revenue share. Model 3 adds platform-maturity (PlatformMaturity) to the previous specification; its coefficient is 0.45 ( $p < 0.01$ ), and the model's adjusted  $R^2$  climbs from 0.38 to 0.52, confirming the pivotal role of platform-based co-creation in enhancing firm performance. Together, these findings support Hypotheses H4 and H5: that multi-stakeholder resource integration and institutionalized co-governance platforms within hometown networks not only accelerate market entry but also bolster localization of revenue, thereby comprehensively improving Chinese enterprises' cross-border performance in the Global South.

## 7. Discussion

### 7.1 *The Interaction between Embedding Depth and Co-creation Effectiveness*

The relationship between embedding depth in hometown networks and the effectiveness of value co-creation is not purely linear but dynamic and threshold-dependent. Shallow embedding typically limits firms to information exchange and initial trust building; during this phase, firms rely primarily on bridge-type nodes for policy interpretation and market intelligence, enabling rapid project evaluation and launch but failing to sustain resource complementarity and collaborative innovation. As embedding deepens, firms engage in platform-based operations, co-designing rules and benefit-sharing mechanisms. This elevates institutional trust and galvanizes multi-actor contributions, yielding substantial gains in technology localization, brand development, and talent cultivation. However, excessive embedding can engender path dependence and network lock-in, hindering a firm's agility to detach or reconfigure its network when facing policy shifts or market upheavals, thus weakening innovation flexibility and autonomous decision-making. Our interviews and network analyses reveal that the optimal embedding depth typically lies in a moderate-to-high range—enough to secure necessary information, institutional, and resource support, yet preserving organizational autonomy and external exploration capacity. Future research should investigate optimal embedding thresholds across different market contexts and industries, as well as how dynamic adjustment mechanisms affect long-term co-creation outcomes.

### 7.2 *Applicability and Boundary Conditions Across Contexts*

The effectiveness of hometown-network embedding and value co-creation varies substantially by region, industry, and institutional environment. In areas with relatively robust institutions and strong government support—such as Hanoi and São Paulo—platform-type embedding more readily attracts policy incentives and public resources, enabling rapid institutionalization of collaborative governance. Conversely, in regions of high institutional uncertainty or restricted government–enterprise engagement, firms rely more on the “gray-coordination” functions of key community leaders via bridge-type embedding to navigate bureaucratic barriers. Industry differences also shape boundary conditions: infrastructure and manufacturing sectors, which face stringent localization and compliance demands, require deeper embedding to secure land and project approvals; by contrast, service and light-manufacturing firms, which prioritize information-flow efficiency, can achieve market entry with relatively shallow bridge-type embedding. Firm size and development stage further influence embedding strategies: large state-owned or publicly listed firms, with extensive overseas experience and capital, are better positioned to co-develop platforms and draft institutional rules; small and medium enterprises, in contrast, depend largely on informal networks established by core community leaders for initial survival resources. Finally, the stage of network evolution affects co-creation sustainability: in mature networks, established trust pathways and incentive structures allow platform-based operations to continually release collaborative value; in nascent networks, strengthening relational and cognitive embedding is essential to solidify trust and lay the groundwork for future institutionalized co-creation. Accordingly, firms should tailor or blend bridge-type and platform-type embedding paths—based on their market's institutional environment, industry characteristics, resource endowments, and network life cycle—to maximize the effectiveness of hometown-network value co-creation.

## 8. Conclusion

Drawing on case studies in typical Global South hometown regions, this research develops a “social network embedding–multi-actor value co-creation” theoretical framework and employs in-depth interviews and quantitative network analysis of six Chinese firms in Southeast Asia and Latin America. We demonstrate that structural, relational, and cognitive embedding levels in hometown networks significantly impact firms' information-acquisition efficiency, institutional-coordination costs, and cultural adaptation. Bridge-type and platform-type embedding paths offer complementary advantages in market penetration and sustainable collaborative innovation. Through government–enterprise–community partnerships, value-chain collaborative innovation, and digital-platform co-construction, hometown networks efficiently integrate resources and substantially enhance firms' market-entry speed and localization performance. This study enriches the academic discourse on overseas investment in the Global South and social-network embedding, and provides empirical guidance for Chinese enterprises' localization strategies in diverse cultural and institutional settings. Practically, firms should maintain organizational autonomy while flexibly combining bridge-type and platform-type embedding; leveraging key community leaders' intermediary functions for rapid market entry, and simultaneously institutionalizing co-creation platforms to cement long-term cooperation, thereby achieving sustainable value creation in a volatile global environment.

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