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Guanxi and Wasta: 20 Years of Evolution and Future Directions for Informal Network Research

Kate Hutchings[1] | David Weir[2] | Sa'ad Ali[3] | Sven Horak[4]

[1]Department of Management, Griffith Business School, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia | [2]York St John University, York, UK | [3]Department of Management, College of Business, University of Doha for Science and Technology, Doha, Qatar | [4]Department of Management, The Peter J. Tobin College of Business, St. John's University, New York, USA

Correspondence: Kate Hutchings (k.hutchings@griffith.edu.au)

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an examination of the evolution of networking in China and the Arab world over two decades and provides an update to, and new insights arising from, an article called *Guanxi and Wasta; A Comparison*, published in *Thunderbird International Business Review* in 2006. This article highlights the continued theoretical and practical importance of guanxi in China and wasta in the Arab World and how research, understanding, and practice of guanxi and wasta have developed over 20 years including integrating (limited) focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion. As well as presenting the 'dark' and 'light' sides of guanxi and wasta, the article explores how institutional development has weakened use of informal networks but to a greater extent for guanxi than wasta. The article provides practical insights into managing informal networks in international business. The article suggests future directions for research and practice in guanxi and wasta in respect to responding to major foci of business internationally including digitalisation, artificial intelligence, and diversity and inclusion.

1 | Introduction

This article examines the evolution of informal networks in China and the Arab world[1] over two decades and provides an update to, and new insights arising from and since, an article titled *Guanxi and Wasta: A Comparison*, which was published in *Thunderbird International Business Review* in 2006 (Hutchings and Weir 2006). That article delivered the first detailed comparison of guanxi and wasta networks and their implications for international business. Research interest in guanxi and wasta since 2006 is evidenced by that article having gained, at the time of writing the current article, 459 Google Scholar citations and 239 Scopus citations.

Whilst there has been considerable development in how guanxi and wasta are operationalized in society, substantive research on guanxi, and a not insignificant growth in research on wasta, only one ranked journal article (Yahiaoui et al. 2025) has directly and systematically compared and analyzed guanxi and wasta. Informal networks provide a bridge between culture and institutions (Minbaeva et al. 2023) and often operate in the absence of formal institutions and, as such, it is salient to understand their implications for international business and how managerial practice can work effectively with the networks.

Insight into how these two networks have evolved and how they compare is important for international businesses that operate within a context of guanxi in China (and other countries that have a Chinese culture that is influenced by guanxi) and wasta in the Arab World. These regions of the world cover a significant part of the total world population and are economically and strategically critical to world affairs. This

All authors contributed equally to writing this article.

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article addresses an important scholarly gap in elucidating guanxi and wasta research, which remains not just theoretically relevant but also very practically important for international businesses now and into the future as they respond to dramatic transformation resulting from, amongst other local and global forces, greater diversity of workforces and digitalization.

Since the 2006 article was published the field of research on informal networks has expanded considerably including analyses of blat/svyazi in Russia (Ledeneva 2008), yongo/inmaek in South Korea (Zhang et al. 2021), compadrazgo and jeitinho in Latin America (Ben Yedder et al. 2025; Lee Park et al. 2018), sifarish in South Asia (Nadeem and Kayani 2019) and ubuntu in Southern Africa (Ikpeh and Federico Awi 2025). This indicates that such networks (including vast differences in cultural and institutional contexts) are ubiquitous across the world. Amongst this research there has been growing interest in guanxi (e.g., Bian 2018; Chen et al. 2013; Luo et al. 2012; Xian et al. 2019; Yang et al. 2021; Yang and Yang 2020) and wasta (e.g., Alsarhan et al. 2021; Alsarhan and Valax 2021; Baranik et al. 2023; Mohamed and Mohamad 2011; Tlaiss and Kauser 2011; Weir et al. 2016). This current article highlights the continued theoretical and practical importance of guanxi in China and wasta in the Arab World and how conceptualization, research and practice of the two forms of networks have developed considerably over 20 years. In examining the consolidation of guanxi research alongside some fragmentation of wasta research, the conceptual and theoretical uniqueness of these practices within informal network research is examined. As well as presenting the 'dark' and 'bright' sides of guanxi and wasta, the article explores how institutional development has weakened use of informal networks but to a greater extent for guanxi than wasta. In reviewing and critiquing extant research and its relevance for international business, the article explores where have we been and where we are (or where we should be) going in guanxi and wasta research.

The next section explores guanxi and wasta research since 2006 commencing with a summary of key points from the 2006 article and then examining the (limited) research since 2006 that has directly compared guanxi and wasta. This is followed by a section that considers what has changed in research examining guanxi and wasta since 2006, focusing on consolidation, differentiation and legitimacy in guanxi research, the development of wasta research from fragmentation to theory and outcome focus, guanxi and wasta in migration, methodological issues in guanxi and wasta research, and highlighting the uneven agenda in ethics and legitimacy across guanxi and wasta. Then, guanxi and wasta is explored in relation to broader network research, providing new insights into conceptualization and theory that has occurred alongside decreasing use of networks in practice. Subsequently, implications of research and practice in guanxi and wasta for international business are highlighted, focusing on how businesses operating across these cultures can gain value from informal network research. A broad range of directions for future research is thus presented including: digitalization and artificial intelligence (AI); diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI); and the need for more quantitative research in the field. The article concludes with summarizing key contributions.

2 | Taking Stock: Guanxi and Wasta Research Since 2006

In this section the focus and key points raised in the 2006 article are examined. Then the research published since 2006 that compares guanxi and wasta is reviewed.

2.1 | What Was Examined in the 2006 Paper?

In their article Hutchings and Weir (2006) explored the Chinese tradition of doing business and creating rules for the operationalization of organizational structures and processes through informal linkages characterized as guanxi. They also showed that in the Arab (and usually Muslim) markets of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, similar informal business linkages are typified as wasta, known in local management slang as 'Vitamin W'. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) (2026) defines guanxi as "a network of personal connections and social relationships one can use for professional or other advantages" but interestingly, wasta does not appear in the OED. Hutchings and Weir (2006) described wasta as having similarity to guanxi, with a focus on "obtaining favors" as common characteristics of such social networks and influential relationships. This "same but different" basis of distinction was a thread in the article that sought to clarify the sameness and difference in interpretations of these two social processes.

Typically, such comparative research would follow a standard review of relevant literature but at the time there seemed to be a paucity of sources, particularly for wasta, apart from Cunningham and Sarayrah's (1993) study based on an ethnographic field study in Jordan. Guanxi and wasta were rarely the prime focus of new field-based research though often reported as unanticipated findings of research planned in other frameworks or alluded to as widespread practices that were outside of the planned theoretical frames but understood to be widely influential and usually deplorable. Even major texts on cross-cultural management/business, such as Hofstede (1980), did not depict wasta and guanxi as mainstream topics and this omission had been noted, for example, by Buttery and Wong (1999).

Hutchings and Weir (2006) examined guanxi and wasta and identified what was similar and different within two deep-rooted and sinuously implicative generic contexts that were often described as *sui generis* though wide-ranging in their behavioral outcomes. Little attempt was made to seek bases for definitional specificity or field-based operationally distinct practices. Both guanxi and wasta were seen as deeply embedded, informal relational networks functioning as context-specific mechanisms for business and social interaction in China and the Arab world, respectively. No attempt was made either to link explanation of the sameness or the difference between historically event-driven facts or assumptive patterns of traditional or other belief-patterns or ideologically framed discourses, such as one might expect within the terminologies of, for instance, Marxist, Foucauldian, or colonialist framings. Guanxi was viewed as loosely rooted in Confucian ethics and utilitarian, reciprocal exchanges, while wasta was based on tribal, family, and clan ties supported by Islamic values.

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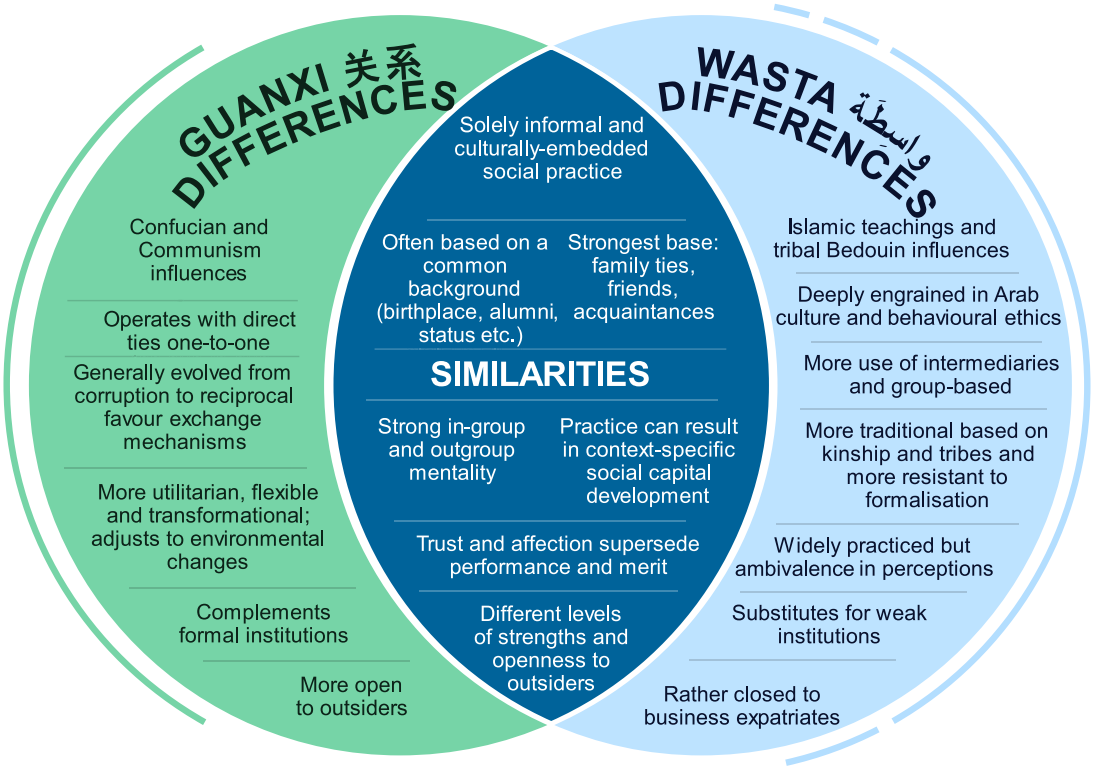

FIGURE 1 | Similarities and differences in guanxi and wasta identified in the 2006 article. *Source:* content developed by the authors. Graphic design by Jasmine Reyes. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Hutchings and Weir (2006) painted guanxi as related to Chinese economies of both capitalist and socialist forms, endemic in Chinese culture, and could be seen in locales where Chinese behavioral patterns could be realistically expected, including Singapore and Chinese enclaves and minorities in Western and other countries. Guanxi was loosely defined as a complex system of structures and processes that could be personal, often long-term connections and relationships where favor-exchange and mutual loyalty were central to understanding business and organizational behaviors, rooted in Confucian behavioral ethics, including strong family ties, respect for hierarchy, and behavioral wisdoms around managing uncertainty. How guanxi worked out in practice was seen in utilitarian terms as facilitating action, enabling skillsets, and could be used to navigate bureaucracy and build trust in an operational preference for pragmatic techniques and an emphasis on a results-justified environment.

Hutchings and Weir (2006) argued wasta embodied much of this core set of descriptors and measurables as well as offering a picture that emphasized differentiation from and adverse comparison with the presumed benefits of the legal-rationality of the Western capitalist model, often glossed to negative behavioral features as bribery, corruption, favoritism, and nepotism. Wasta grew from the ruling philosophy of Islam throughout the Arab Middle Eastern world and tribal survival-fostering traditions of the desert Bedouin. Wasta implied the use of connections, influence, mediators, or middlemen to achieve desired individual or familial outcomes, particularly in navigating governmental, collective, or corporate structures in which well-connected individuals, known as waseets, may play the role of mediators. These practices were depicted as deeply ingrained in tribal traditions, family, kin/clan membership, and Islamic ethics. Wasta-based network structures might have unanticipated or incorrect economic outcomes enabled and facilitated by individually profitable outcomes to secure employment, expedite or gain favor and thus denote a social network bridging personal and business life. Many of these points are rather loosely justified in the 2006 paper and almost every point required better justification than the authors were able to give at that time but they are part of a rough fabric that has been generously smoothed by others since then and the original authors are grateful for later developments in research. It is important to point out that for expatriates and other international managers or migrants it is often difficult or even impossible to penetrate wasta ties for business success as wasta is often exclusive and closed for outsiders. Guanxi may be characterized as more explicitly utilitarian and flexible with a subtle implication of being handily more adaptable to modern business. Hutchings and Weir (2006) emphasized that these practices could not be easily substituted for one another as they are shaped by distinct cultural and institutional environments. Figure 1 provides a diagram examining similarities and differences in guanxi and wasta as elaborated in Hutchings and Weir's (2006) article.

2.2 | Review of Research Comparing Guanxi and Wasta Since 2006

Since 2006 there has been considerable research examining guanxi (e.g., Bian 2018; Chen et al. 2013; Luo et al. 2012; Xian et al. 2019; Yang et al. 2021; Yang and Yang 2020). There has also been steady growth in research on wasta (e.g., Alsarhan et al. 2021; Alsarhan and Valax 2021; Baranik et al. 2023; Mohamed and Mohamad 2011; Tlaiss and Kauser 2011; Weir

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et al. 2016). Much research on guanxi in China and wasta in the Arab World has focused on implications for (international) human resource management (HRM), international management and business ethics. However, despite developments in understanding the concepts and the practical application of both guanxi and wasta and their implications for international business (as we explore later), there has been limited post-2006 research undertaking specific comparisons between the two practices. Some research has examined guanxi and wasta alongside other informal networks including blat/svyazi, compadrazgo, jeitinho, sifarish, ubuntu and yongo (e.g., Ledeneva 2008; Lutomia et al. 2017; Smith, Huang, et al. 2012; Smith, Torres, et al. 2012; Velez-Calle et al. 2015; Zhang et al. 2021) (and is discussed in a subsequent section). There have been conference papers and commentaries comparatively examining the two networks but there has been only one article (Yahiaoui et al. 2025) in a ranked journal that has directly compared guanxi and wasta.

Yahiaoui et al. (2025) research compared guanxi in domestic and international firms in China and wasta in domestic and international firms in Lebanon and Tunisia in relation to the four HRM functions, namely, attraction, recruitment and selection, training and development, performance management and rewards management. Based on interviews with 44 managers across the three countries, their findings highlighted that foreign firms in China are adopting more formalized HRM practices that align with global HRM frameworks of multinational corporations (MNCs) while selectively and discreetly using guanxi in HRM, respecting the pragmatic and cultural benefits of guanxi while ensuring alignment with corporate standards. In Lebanon and Tunisia informal wasta networks were seen to have a strong presence in both domestic and foreign MNCs due to the more complex and bureaucratic business environments. Yahiaoui et al. (2025) further suggested that informal networks have both dark and bright sides for HRM practices and argue that international managers in emerging markets should adopt hybrid approaches that leverage the benefits while mitigating the downsides.

3 | What Has Changed in Guanxi and Wasta Research and Practice Since 2006?

In this section consolidation, differentiation and legitimacy in guanxi research since 2006 are examined. Then, the development of theory, logic and outcome focus in wasta research since 2006 is traced. Issues related to migration and methodology are examined. Ethics, legitimacy, and managerial navigation in both guanxi and wasta are also considered.

3.1 | Guanxi Research: Consolidation, Differentiation, and Legitimacy

Guanxi research has advanced significantly since 2006 through theoretical consolidation and cumulative empirical work. Chen et al.'s (2013) integrative review marked a turning point by systemising prior research and clarifying the core dimensions of guanxi and its antecedents and consequences. This work enabled more rigorous theory-building within international human resource management (IHRM), business ethics and international business research. Guanxi research has developed in three main ways:

1. Conceptual tightening: this includes research that highlighted type differentiation; with a main example being guanxi business ties and guanxi government ties (e.g., Luo et al. 2012). Level differentiation: dyadic interpersonal guanxi (e.g., supervisor–subordinate) (Miao et al. 2020) and Dimension differentiation: differentiating *guan* dyads from *xi* networks (Li et al. 2019).
2. Methodological development: development in quantity and quality of research facilitated meta-analytic consolidation (e.g., Luo et al. 2012) and large thematic reviews (e.g., Li and Bian 2024).
3. Development of guanxi practice in response to institutional and technological development in China: from focusing on instrumental use of guanxi and the possible 'bright' outcomes of guanxi to its role in a more institutionally developed context and possible ethical-corruption boundaries (e.g., Niu et al. 2024). Studies subsequent to Hutchings and Weir's (2006) article increasingly focus on embedded guanxi within institutional and ethical frameworks, particularly in light of China's intensified anti-corruption campaigns from the early 2010s onward, reflecting increased internationalization of China through enormous expansion in foreign direct investment as well as growth of the emerging market's own MNCs. Contemporary research examines how managers reassess relational practices under heightened enforcement and reputational risk (Ulusemre 2022). This has shifted the analytical focus from whether guanxi works to when and under what conditions it is perceived as legitimate. Moreover, studies have begun to explore digitally mediated guanxi, illustrating how relational logics persist even as interaction channels change (Hong et al. 2025).

Overall, post-2006 guanxi research reflects an evolving field and now complements earlier, more traditional perspectives by conceptualizing guanxi as a dynamic organizational capability. In this view, guanxi is constrained by institutional frameworks and embedded within culturally determined social practices shaped by locally shared values, norms, and behavioral ethics (Chen et al. 2013; Horak et al. 2020).

3.2 | Wasta Research: From Fragmentation to Theory, Functions, Logics and Outcome Focus

Compared with guanxi, wasta research remains largely fragmented and often characterized by normative critique or descriptive accounts. A major post-2006 development was Ali and Weir's (2020) explicit effort to consolidate the field by systematically reviewing research on wasta based on timeline of publication, geographical distribution of publications, theoretical lens used and journal outlets where research was published. This effort resulted in advancing a holistic approach that bridges the dominant macro (institutional theory-based) and micro (social capital-based) research on wasta. From there, contemporary studies of wasta have developed in three key aspects:

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1. There has been an increasing focus on distinguishing between different uses and outcomes of wasta, differentiating between so-called "positive" wasta—associated with social support, facilitation and access to information—and "negative" wasta which manifests in nepotism, exclusion and the erosion of meritocratic capabilities. This ethical perspective has resulted in a more balanced view of wasta, distinguishing between unethical uses and legitimate support mechanisms in contexts characterized by weak formal institutions. Consequently, wasta emerges not as a unitary practice but as a situationally enacted mechanism with outcomes ranging from enabling coordination and inclusion to reproducing exclusion and capability decay, depending on contextual and organizational configurations (Abid et al. 2025; Helal et al. 2023).
2. Research on wasta has also shifted away from broad, aggregate socio-economic characterisations toward more segment-focused and actor-centered analyses. For example, research on women's use of wasta shows that it is often mobilized as a compensatory and strategic resource to navigate gendered exclusion and institutional constraints (Ali et al. 2025; Alsarhan et al. 2021). Similarly, studies on its use in small-medium enterprises (SMEs) highlight the role of wasta in facilitating access to resources, trust and survival under conditions of regulatory ambiguity, while also exposing its limits in scaling and professionalization (Abid and Alsarhan 2025). In public-sector organizations, wasta is shown to intersect with bureaucratic logic, producing tensions between formal rules and informal expectations that shape perceptions of fairness and legitimacy (Alsarhan and Al-Twal 2024).
3. The scope of wasta research has also expanded geographically to include a range of settings such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Tunisia (Ali and Weir 2020) in addition to multi-country studies (Baranik et al. 2023). Evidence from this growing body of work demonstrates that wasta does not operate uniformly across these contexts. Instead, its functions, legitimacy, and outcomes vary systematically in response to differences in resource availability, state capacity, and institutional stability (Abid et al. 2025; Helal et al. 2023). This necessitates that managers of international businesses operating in Arab countries need to move beyond a generic understanding of wasta to developing knowledge of localized practices.

Table 1 shows the main differences in the development of research about guanxi and wasta.

3.3 | Ethics, Legitimacy, and Managerial Navigation: A Shared but Uneven Agenda

Across both the guanxi and wasta literature one of the most consequential post-2006 developments is the repositioning of ethics and legitimacy from peripheral concerns to central analytical questions. Whilst Hutchings and Weir (2006) acknowledged the moral ambiguities surrounding favor exchange, subsequent research has moved decisively beyond implicit recognition to systematic examination of how informal networking practices are evaluated, justified and constrained. In the guanxi literature, this shift is closely tied to institutional strengthening in China, particularly intensified regulatory enforcement and anti-corruption campaigns, which have redirected scholarly attention toward compliance, boundary-setting and the conditions under which relational practices remain legitimate (Ulusemre 2022). Within this, ethics is analyzed primarily through the lens of institutional conformity and reputational risk.

By contrast, wasta research tends to approach ethics through questions of fairness, inclusion, and organizational justice within environments characterized by uneven institutional capacity. Rather than focusing on regulatory compliance alone, studies examine how wasta practices shape access to opportunities, reproduce or mitigate exclusion, and interact with HRM systems in contexts where personal connections remain structurally embedded (Alsarhan 2022; Helal et al. 2023). This work treats ethical evaluation not as externally imposed but as negotiated by actors who operate at the intersection of formal rules and informal expectations.

Importantly and recently, neither literature frames informal networks as practices that can be straightforwardly eliminated through formalization. Instead, contemporary scholarship converges on managerial navigation as the core problem: how organizations recognize the persistence of informal ties while actively shaping their use, visibility and legitimacy. Research highlights strategies through which managers constrain, reframe or selectively legitimize informal networking to balance relational realities with meritocratic principles, organizational justice and performance outcomes (Ali and Weir 2020; Horak et al. 2020). Taken together, this work signals a shift away from binary assessments of informal networks as either functional or corrupt, toward a more nuanced concern with governance, boundary-setting, and ethical management under contextual constraint. For instance, the lack of strong/functional informal institutions and state economic/social support failure signals the important role of international managers in appreciating context when operating international businesses in China and the Arab World.

3.4 | Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) and Informal Networks: Research Developments Since 2006

At the time of Hutchings and Weir's (2006) comparative analysis of guanxi and wasta, research on DEI within informal networking contexts remained largely unexplored. The 2006 article acknowledged gender as a relevant dimension of informal networks but did not systematically examine how demographic characteristics shape network access, participation, and outcomes. Over the subsequent two decades, a small body of scholarship has emerged examining the intersection of informal networks with gender and ethnicity, revealing complex patterns in which informal networks simultaneously perpetuate exclusion and serve as adaptive strategies for marginalized groups navigating structural barriers. This development represents one of the most important post-2006 evolutions in informal network research, transforming understanding of these practices from culturally embedded relational

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TABLE 1 | Differences in development of guanxi and wasta research.

Dimension	Guanxi research	Wasta research
Starting position (pre/around 2006)	Relatively established body of work but conceptually diffuse; often treated as a culturally embedded relational practice with instrumental value in Chinese business contexts. Hutchings and Weir (2006) provided an early comparative benchmark.	Largely fragmented and descriptive; dominated by normative critique and assumptions that wasta would decline as formal institutions strengthened. Often framed as dysfunctional, inefficient or corrupt (Barnett et al. 2013).
Key consolidation moment	Integrative review by Chen et al. (2013) systematized prior research, clarifying core dimensions, antecedents and outcomes, enabling cumulative theory-building in organizational behavior and international business.	Systematic review by Ali and Weir (2020) mapped the field by timeline, geography, theory and outlets, bridging macro-institutional and micro–social capital perspectives into a more holistic model.
Conceptual development	Strong conceptual tightening through: Type differentiation (business vs. government guanxi) (Luo et al. 2012). Level differentiation (dyadic vs. hierarchical guanxi) (Miao et al. 2020). Structural differentiation (guan dyads vs. xi networks) (Li et al. 2019).	Conceptual development focused on *functional and outcome differentiation*. "Positive" vs. "negative" wasta. Emphasis on situational use and consequences rather than fixed meanings (Abid et al. 2025; Helal et al. 2023).
Methodological maturity	High methodological consolidation: Meta-analyses (Luo et al. 2012). Large-scale thematic and integrative reviews (Li and Bian 2024).	Predominantly qualitative work with a lack of quantitative approaches, hence limited theorizing
Ethics and legitimacy focus	Shift from asking *whether guanxi works* to *when and under what conditions it is legitimate*, particularly following China's anti-corruption campaigns (Niu et al. 2024; Ulusemre 2022).	Ethics: distinction between unethical uses (nepotism, exclusion, discrimination, relational corruption, opportunism) and ethical support as functioning under weak formal institutions (Abid et al. 2025; Helal et al. 2023).
Actor- and segment-level analysis	Increasing attention to role-based and relational positions (e.g., supervisor–subordinate guanxi), but still largely organization-centered.	Shift toward segment-focused analyses: Women's strategic use of wasta (Ali et al. 2025; Alsarhan et al. 2021). SMEs (Abid and Alsarhan 2025). Public-sector organizations (Alsarhan and Al-Twal 2024).
Overall trajectory	A mature and consolidated field treating guanxi as a dynamic, institutionally constrained organizational capability rather than a culturally deterministic practice.	A transitioning field moving from fragmentation toward theory (Ali and Weir 2020), functions, logics and outcomes (Abid et al. 2025), with increasing contextual and ethical sophistication (Abid et al. 2025; Helal et al. 2023), but lower cumulative consolidation than guanxi.

phenomena to sites of inequality reproduction and resistance, contexts within which managers of international businesses can either reinforce inequalities or work with local staff to engender changes to improve organizational and societal inclusion for marginalized, diverse groups.

3.4.1 | Women and Guanxi: From Exclusion to Strategic Navigation

Since 2006 research on women and guanxi has progressed from documenting systematic exclusion to examining strategic navigation and agency within gendered network constraints. Studies conducted post-2006 focused on and confirmed that women faced substantial barriers in guanxi formation, particularly exclusion from male-dominated networking activities. For instance, Huang and Aaltio (2014) examined women managers in China and Finland, finding that women's guanxi networks were characterized by significant gender differences, with female-to-male dyads concerning power and influence while female-to-female dyads focused on private life and crisis support. This research established that women information technology (IT) managers had relatively limited guanxi bases compared to their male counterparts.

Subsequent scholarship moved beyond deficit models to examine how women actively construct and mobilize alternative guanxi pathways. Scott et al. (2014) demonstrated that women entrepreneurs leverage family backgrounds, educational connections, and mentorship relationships as forms of guanxi-based

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social capital, creating alternative network pathways that differ from traditional business socializing. Research by Aaltio and Huang (2018) confirmed that women managers use functionally differentiated networks, developing separate networks for power-related professional advancement and personal support. This work revealed that women's guanxi practices often emphasize trust-building and long-term relationship maintenance strategies that differ from more transactional patterns common in men's business guanxi.

More recent work examines how women navigate multiple network systems. Zhang et al. (2020) explored women intrapreneurship in tourism organizations, demonstrating how women managers utilize different forms of guanxi-based social networks to construct professional identities while managing gendered expectations. Critical scholarship notes, however, that women's continued reliance on informal networks may inadvertently reinforce gender inequalities by legitimizing workarounds rather than demanding institutional reform.

3.4.2 | Women and Wasta: Compensation, Constraint, and Ethical Tensions

Minimal scholarly attention examined women's wasta use prior to Tlaiss and Kauser (2011) who established that access to informal networks was perceived as one of the most important barriers for women rather than education and gender, highlighting that women in Lebanon use wasta to remove barriers for career success. Subsequent work has examined gender differences in wasta access and usage patterns. Bailey (2012) and Abalkhail and Allan (2016) found that, in Gulf countries, women needed their male relatives to access wasta networks and progress to more senior positions. On the other hand, Alsarhan et al. (2021) highlighted that whilst women in Jordan had more access to wasta, they needed to navigate ethical tensions when using wasta, revealing acute dilemmas between leveraging wasta for career advancement and upholding meritocratic principles. Interestingly, with the rapid socio-economic developments in the Gulf, Ali et al. (2025) found that this barrier to informal networks access is reducing for women and women in Saudi Arabia are having more access and relying more on their own wasta. Most recently, Aldossari et al. (2026) produced a conceptual model that explicates how wasta functions as a gendered informal institution, reinforcing patriarchal power structures while simultaneously generating new often invisible barriers to women's participation and advancement in both internal and external labour markets.

3.4.3 | Ethnicity and Informal Networks: Limited but Emerging Research

Hutchings and Weir's (2006) article did not explicitly address ethnic dimensions of guanxi or wasta and research on ethnicity and access to informal networks in China remains limited. China recognizes 55 ethnic minority groups comprising approximately 8.89% of the population, with the largest minorities being Zhuang, Uyghur, Hui, Manchu, Miao, Yi, Tibetan, and Mongol populations. These minorities occupy vast territories in western, northwestern, and southwestern China, regions that have become increasingly important economically. Very recent research started to explore the differences in how such minorities form and access guanxi. For instance, Sun et al. (2024) explored a sample of Chinese students from three different ethnic groups (Min Kao Min, Min Kao Han, and Han), finding that whilst these groups access social capital in similar ways, including via the Chinese class-based cohort model, faculty and staff, engagement in social media and online platforms, and other on and off-campus social connections, they significantly differ in the formation and use of informal networks. They found that this is influenced by pre-college education and internet literacy. While wasta has been researched in a number of countries in the Arab World, the literature does not specifically compare the experiences of ethnic minorities within countries in relation to how they network.

Across the literature examining the experiences of women and ethnicity in relation to guanxi and wasta, there has been little systematic discussion of how international managers function within these social networks. Discussion is limited on how managers may support marginalized groups in their businesses and the societies more broadly within which they have subsidiary operations.

3.5 | Guanxi and Wasta in Relation to Migration

Wasta and Guanxi relationships are relevant to research into migration patterns, and this field remains important and contributes to other related fields of interest such as labour market imbalances. Hu (2008, 104) comments that "The increase in the movement of people from rural to urban areas since the mid-1980s represents the largest labor migration ever experienced in China" and "social networks [*guanxi* connections] play a significant role in the process of migration selection in China". Hu bases this case study in a northern village in rural China, interestingly at the points of origin of the migrancy process rather than on the receiving location, as was the focus of many previous migration studies including the classic research by Mitchell and colleagues (1969) about rural to urban men in Central Africa.

Studies of women-based guanxi show that the influence of guanxi in driving internal migration is not always beneficial as the move from rural to urban may entail as women becoming trapped in gender-specific low wage occupations after losing the more rounded opportunities of an original local base (Zhang 2006). Moreover, guanxi-reliance may not support political trust (Chen et al. 2020). Callahan (2002, 4–5) found that the guanxi relationship is not merely between ethnic Chinese and for economic gain "and links the national and international and public and private bases of guanxi to 'network capitalism' that works according to guanxi-relationships between diasporic Chinese entrepreneurs and officials in the People's Republic of China." The implications of a multiplex world characterized by a "Look East" policy of Western economies and the potential for the wasta-based economies of the Arab MENA region to learn from the successful experience of the evolution of the Sino region may be substantial as may be the growth of African economies possessing similar traits. These interests have relevance at the levels of political science and governmental strategies as, for instance, "whether such relations might consolidate

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autocratic capitalism and neoliberalism without democracy and, or benefit MENA civil societies' quest for a grassroots and egalitarian development and democracy" (Mahdavi 2024, 101). Hameed (2020, 54) questions whether the digital commerce revolution of innovative "wealth flows and connectivity" will disrupt received structures. Many of these studies reinforce the network capitalism thesis of Boisot and Child (1996).

Brass (2022) expands the discussion on brokerage. Thakur shows how the existence of ur-wasta ties amongst the Mapillas of Kerala (India) has facilitated the migration to more promising economic labour markets in the Arabian Gulf (Thakur 2023). Mirzoev and Stephan-Emmrich (2018) argue a similar case for the migration of Tajiks to the Gulf states. Further, wasta overlaps gender (Makhoul and Harrison 2002) and migration between Arabian Gulf and Kerala cultures (Osella 2014). Other studies use these methodological improvements to reinforce and restate received wisdoms of the literature such as the important role of interpersonal trust in establishing and continuing guanxi and wasta links (Burt et al. 2018).

3.6 | Methodological and Empirical Issues in Guanxi and Wasta Research

Guanxi and wasta networks are special types of informal networks, and some types of formal modeling, especially those expressed in mathematical formulations, are not necessarily readily applicable or usable in research; but there are longstanding pleas for research into guanxi and wasta to use more formal paradigms and mathematical models (Mitchell 1974; Weir and Ali 2022). Research into the processes of establishing, generating, and strengthening guanxi and wasta networks extends the need for process modeling (Bedford 2011; Chen and Chen 2004).

Wasta research is still over-reliant on short-time-frame case studies that are mostly qualitative, from which it is hard to generalize and to specify procedurally research protocols. While these studies have improved in their theoretical, practical, and methodological rigor, there is a need for more mixed methods including longitudinal and statistical modeling research. There is a strong field of mathematical modeling of social network structures that might be available as paradigms (Amati et al. 2018; Z. Li 2023). Pfaltz (2013) introduced the notion of continuous change and its network qualities of locality and nodal connectivity to propose rigorous specification of the fuzzy nature of these types of networks and thus the likely importance of fuzzy closure more appropriate to relational structures. Freeman (2000) proposed the possibility of visual representation of informal networks to create insights into network structures and to communicate them comparatively, though there are examples of visual representation in educational settings (Hoemmes et al. 2012) and some use of software like Ontovis (Shen et al. 2006). This approach can be applied also to online influence networks, important in contemporary influence systems and processes (Heer and Boyd 2005), and to informal networks as knowledge bases of social capital (Hu and Racherla 2008). Barbalet (2023) uses the notion of the institutional void characteristic of emerging markets in which guanxi and wasta informality introduce a measure of control, stability and, ideally, measurability, to recraft guanxi as a type of informal institution. Lu and Reve (2011) followed Heide (1994) to categorize networks into the three dimensions of network initiation, network maintenance, and network termination, each based on different time phases to interrogate the qualities of structural holes and closure to suggest that the reliance of exchange diminishes rather than enhances the network utility of guanxi relationships. But there has been little methodological progress on such elements as the components of the role-set of guanxi or wasta relations, the degree of 'mesh' or consistency between these roles, and the relative weight or intensity of each particular link (Mitchell 1969, 123).

Granovetter (1973, 1361) classically hinted at the difficulty of finding accurate measures for behavioral performances and "the inherent complexities of precise network analysis" when he noted that "the strength of interpersonal or dyadic ties can be defined as the combination of the amount of time spent in interaction, the emotional intensity, the intimacy, and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie." These affective elements may be overlooked in simplistic network analysis based only on formal modeling though they play an important role in fostering or frustrating both guanxi and wasta linkages in international business for example in considering "the influence of social networks on expatriate performance and adjustment. Likewise, antecedents of social networks remain poorly understood" (Horak and Yang 2016a, 1030).

4 | Framing Informal Network Research: Distinct Lenses, Concepts, and Theoretical Propositions

Research building on Hutchings and Weir's (2006) article has generated deeper insights into the characteristics and working mechanisms not only of guanxi and wasta but also of informal networks that exist in every country and culture. In retrospect, Hutchings and Weir's (2006) research can be seen as a foundational contribution that marked a transition from conceptualization, clarifying, and defining constructs toward theory development concerned with explaining and predicting informal network dynamics.

4.1 | Domain Demarcation and Theoretical Propositions

What makes informal network research distinct? While social network research, in a nutshell, tends to focus on exploring the structural properties of social ties and their consequences for information flow or performance, by trend it abstracts networks from their cultural and moral foundations (Borgatti and Halgin 2011; Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994; Xiao and Tsui 2007). Such abstraction overlooks that "networks create culture and are created by culture, networks embody local culture of their own" (Pachucki and Breiger 2010, 217).

Research on informal networks such as *wasta*, *yongo*, or *compadrazgo*, by contrast, foregrounds the cultural embeddedness of relationships, emphasizing how ties are constituted and sustained through shared norms, values, obligations, sympathy and affection, and moral obligations and expectations (Abid

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and Alsarhan 2025; Abosag and Ghauri 2022; Ben Yedder et al. 2025). Hence, informal network research may be seen as extending classic cross-cultural management research in international business rather than being rooted in social network analysis in quantitative sociology. Unlike conventional social network approaches, informal network research highlights the socially bounded, normatively charged, and often opaque nature of relational systems in which access, legitimacy and reciprocity are culturally regulated rather than universally available (Chen et al. 2013; Xiao and Tsui 2007). From this perspective, informal networks are not neutral configurations of ties but culturally embedded and complex systems that simultaneously enable cooperation and coordination, provide identity and belongingness, reproduce inequality and generate ethical tensions (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994; Horak et al. 2026; Pachucki and Breiger 2010).

Although knowledge about informal networks continues to advance, many country- and culture-specific network forms remain insufficiently defined, such as *parti barzi* in Iran, *sifarish* in Pakistan (Nadeem and Kayani 2019) or *jaan-pehchaan* in India (McCarthy et al. 2012), to name a few examples. At the same time, the field is moving from conceptualizing network constructs toward empirical inquiry, largely qualitative and increasingly toward theorizing. One prominent theoretical proposition is the *Substitution Perspective*, which holds that as formal institutions in market-based economies become more effective, predictable, and enforceable, they increasingly substitute for informal networks as mechanisms guiding individual behavior and coordinating activities. Informal networks have thus been theorized as having a substitutive function, particularly in contexts characterized by institutional uncertainty (Guthrie 1998; Millington et al. 2006). This view has been especially influential in research on transition economies. For example, Peng and Heath (1996) argue that when previous formal constraints weaken and new market institutions remain underdeveloped, informal constraints play a larger role in regulating economic exchanges.

However, the Substitution Perspective has been challenged by the *Persistence Hypothesis* (Horak and Klein 2016) which assumes that informal networks endure and adapt even as formal institutions strengthen. Informal networking is guided by values and norms that constitute central pillars of culture and, because culture tends to change slowly (Hofstede 2007), informal networks do not simply disappear with increasing institutional effectiveness. Evidence supporting this view has been documented in both emerging and developed economies (Anderson and Yiu-chung Lee 2008; Baez-Camargo and Ledeneva 2017; Luo 2011; Smith, Huang, et al. 2012; Smith, Torres, et al. 2012). Decades after the fall of socialism in the former Soviet Union, many transition economies have substantially strengthened their formal institutions yet informal networks remain salient (Baez-Camargo and Ledeneva 2017; Efendic and Ledeneva 2020). Empirical research suggests that *guanxi* in China continues to exert strong influence (Bian 2018, 2019), and that informal networks play a central role in advanced East Asian economies such as Japan and South Korea (Lee et al. 2022; Li and Xie 2019). Informal networks are still pervasive in many countries. Estrin and Commander (2022) in their recent book 'The Connections World: The Future of Asian Capitalism' argued that informal networks play(ed) a central role in the economic development of Asian countries. South Korea, in particular, is an interesting example as it illustrates how rapid economic development, democratic consolidation and effective rule of law can coexist with pervasive informal networking practices and related institutions (Ha 2024; Horak et al. 2026; Lew 2013).

Further theoretical propositions address foundational assumptions about the ethical and relational dynamics of informal networks, particularly *Ethical Duality* and *Network Inaccessibility*. Ethical Duality refers to the coexistence of the "bright" and "dark" sides of informal networks (Horak et al. 2020). From this perspective, networking is neither inherently positive nor negative but simultaneously generates ethical benefits and ethical risks. Informal networks may compensate for institutional deficiencies, foster solidarity, sociability, and mutual support, enable access for marginalized actors and facilitate trust-based coordination. Under such conditions, informal networking may be perceived as morally legitimate, particularly where formal institutions are ineffective or unjust. At the same time, the same relational structures can entrench in-group favoritism, discrimination, exclusion and opportunistic gatekeeping, undermining meritocratic, procedural and fairness norms (Alsarhan et al. 2024; Alsarhan and Al-Twal 2024). Ethical evaluations of informal networking are therefore inherently positional as identical practices may be experienced as supportive or unjust depending on actors' location within the network. Ethical Duality is thus treated as a defining condition of informal networks.

A related theoretical proposition in international business research highlights *Inaccessibility* as a core feature of many informal networks. Contrary to widespread assumptions of universal network accessibility, access in practice often depends on biographical attributes such as lineage, ethnicity, gender, regional origin or sectarian affiliation. Network ties are frequently predefined and dormant, requiring activation rather than development from scratch. This produces a relational liability of foreignness, whereby outsiders and expatriates remain excluded from influential networks regardless of competence or effort (Horak and Yang 2016b; Y. H. Kim 2000; Y. T. Kim 2007). Network Inaccessibility assumes that disadvantage arises not from individual deficiencies but from structurally bounded relational opportunities. Limited access to decision-makers, influence and resources is therefore reframed as an outcome of informal network structures rather than a failure of adaptation or skill.

5 | Insights for Practice: Why Informal Network Research Matters for Managers of International Businesses

Managers of international businesses may approach international operations in emerging and developing economies with little or no knowledge of informal networks or from an assumption that, as formal systems (contracts, compliance and standardized HRM practices) strengthen, personal relationships in the context of business should matter less. This is a view reflective of research demonstrating that informal networks historically developed in the absence of law. Research

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on guanxi and wasta consistently shows, however, this does not necessarily happen. While the form of use of informal networks may have changed with globalization and legislative compliance, informal ties continue to operate alongside formal governance because they perform functions organizations still need: building trust, reducing uncertainty and facilitating coordination (Ali and Weir 2020; Bian 2018; Chen et al. 2013; Horak et al. 2020).

In practice, managers of international business subsidiaries rarely choose between formal-rule-based management and informal-relationship-based management; rather, they find that they need to operate within both. Empirical research shows foreign firms operating in China and the Arab world often follow global procedures while selectively relying on local networks to have work done and maintain legitimacy (Yahiaoui et al. 2025). In some cases, a challenge is that headquarters' governance systems are designed as if relationships do not/should not exist and, as such, may not provide sufficient recognition or funds for international managers to work within the confines of local practice. Accordingly, managers of international businesses require knowledge from informal network research about guanxi and wasta to develop their understanding of practice in networked societies in a number of respects.

5.1 | Governing Informal Networks in Organizations

5.1.1 | Corporate Governance: Control Influence, Not Relationships

Informal network research suggests there must be a shift in managerial thinking for those in international businesses. Formalization does not replace relationships; it changes how organizations must manage them. International organizations that are effective in countries that use guanxi and wasta need to develop hybrid governance systems that maintain trust-based coordination while protecting procedural legitimacy (Helal et al. 2023; Horak et al. 2020; Yahiaoui et al. 2025). The core challenge for international businesses is not cultural adaptation but legitimacy management. That is, operating simultaneously within formal corporate rules and locally embedded relational systems.

Amongst leaders and international managers that are familiar with informal networks of guanxi and wasta, some managers of international subsidiaries will treat informal networks as suspicious, and this affects their ability to effectively engage in these networks. This rarely works. In network societies, ties are socially legitimate and operationally necessary (Bian 2019; Helal et al. 2023). Prohibition simply makes influence harder to detect (Baez-Camargo and Ledeneva 2017). A more effective approach separates access from authority. Local employees and managers may use relationships to obtain information or introductions to customers, suppliers, other businesses and planning and approving authorities, but decisions must remain accountable. International organizations can achieve this by:

1. Separating recommendations from decision authority.
2. Documenting justification for discretionary decisions
3. Rotating gatekeeping roles.
4. Monitoring patterns of repeated influence concentration

The goal is preventing capture of decisions in in-groups, not to prevent relationships (Doughan 2024).

5.1.2 | Codes of Conduct: Define Boundaries Rather Than Prohibit Informal Networking

Traditional anti-corruption rules focus on bribery. Informal networks rarely operate through explicit violations. Instead, they shape who is included and considered in capital distribution (Chen et al. 2013) and facilitate opportunities. Effective codes therefore clarify behavioral boundaries—when relational advocacy becomes obligation-creating exchange (Ali and Weir 2020). This allows managers of international businesses to preserve trust-building practices while maintaining legitimacy from the perspective of headquarters' managers, who are often educated on local practice by expatriate managers.

5.1.3 | Employee Voice: Addressing Exclusion Without Accusations

Network-based decisions often generate silence rather than complaints. Employees see outcomes as socially predetermined and therefore do not use whistleblowing channels (Horak and Yang 2016a, 2016b). Thus, expatriate managers of international businesses need voice mechanisms that allow fairness challenges without there being allegations of corruption from headquarters management. These include:

1. Transparency processes and outcomes.
2. Appeal processes based on fairness.
3. Independent mediation channels

Such mechanisms align relational environments with organizational justice expectations (Helmke and Levitsky 2004; Horak et al. 2020).

5.1.4 | Making Networks Visible

The main risk for the success of international businesses is not networking—it is opacity. Hidden influence prevents organizations from distinguishing coordination from gatekeeping (Baez-Camargo and Ledeneva 2017). Rather than surveillance, international businesses can normalize disclosure by:

1. Keeping records of hiring, training and development, and promotion decisions
2. Documenting intermediaries in negotiations

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3. Acknowledging relationship involvement in supplier selection.

Visibility turns informal networks into manageable organizational resources.

5.2 | Building Knowledge for Operating in Guanxi and Wasta Contexts

As some managers of international businesses leading organizations in China and the Arab World may have limited knowledge of, and experience with, guanxi and wasta, respectively, international businesses would be advised to assign to their subsidiaries in these parts of the world people who have prior relevant experience. This could encompass long-term assignees from other countries in the region including from non-government organizations and not-for-profit organizations, self-initiated expatriates with deep cultural knowledge, and inpatriated locals who have experience at headquarters as well as being embedded in local networks. Moreover, as emerging economies, including China, and developing economies in the MENA region, are rapidly developing their own MNCs, other international businesses would benefit from leveraging, in an advisory capacity, their experience in building and/or facilitating networks involving foreign staff. Such advisors could also illuminate critical factors for building trust and working with reciprocity and providing understanding of operating effectively with guanxi and wasta networks, which may not align with globally standardized business practices.

6 | Future Research Directions

Guanxi and wasta are special types of informal social networks, and Reinders (2011) offers a reminder that networks exist because they are useful in offering solutions to problems encountered in social life. The interest in these types has become a major focus influencing larger theoretical concerns in economics, especially. The research interest has not been strictly evenly balanced, and, as previously noted, studies of guanxi predominate over those of wasta. From the initial focus on behavioral aspects of specific regional, local, and tribal cultures, sometimes ineptly portrayed as 'traditional', guanxi and wasta concerns are evolving into more general paradigms of the socio-economic global world. There are several emerging themes and enlarging research boundaries.

6.1 | Artificial Intelligence/Digitalization

Since professional online platforms such as LinkedIn have become synonymous with networking, they are likely reshaping informal networks. Exactly how these platforms influence relational dynamics remains an important question for future research. Informal network research emphasizes that relational ties provide access, coordination, and problem solving under uncertainty through trust-based interaction, while remaining morally ambivalent and context dependent. Whether these mechanisms operate similarly in digital environments remains unclear. Because interpersonal trust and peer pressure traditionally underpin network cohesion and coordination, a central question is whether online professional platforms can generate outcomes comparable to guanxi and/or wasta as they operate in offline contexts.

Emerging research provides initial insights. Au (2022) shows that online networking platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WeChat reconceptualize homophily and tie formation in guanxi networks. Digital platforms appear to weaken status boundaries and expand relational reach, enabling information exchange and relationship strength to reinforce one another. Consequently, guanxi formation increasingly shifts from reciprocity-driven and status-based homophily toward assortative connections based on shared values and interests. Similarly, Hansen (2020) finds that social networking technologies complement traditional guanxi amongst Chinese entrepreneurs. While traditional guanxi remains stronger in rural than urban settings, entrepreneurs increasingly use WeChat to maintain strong ties and access weak ties through digital communities, thereby expanding access to information and opportunities.

The growing influence of AI, algorithmic decision-making, and digital communication technologies is likely to further transform how organizations coordinate work, allocate opportunities and evaluate individuals. AI may formalize decision processes and reduce discretionary gatekeeping (Kellogg et al. 2020); yet it may also reproduce inequality when trained on biased data (Chen 2023; Rigotti and Fosch-Villaronga 2024). Compared to research on online networking platforms, the implications of AI for informal networking remain largely unexplored. As human-to-human and human-to-machine collaboration increasingly coexist, the key question is not whether informal networks will disappear but how they will be reconfigured through the interaction of culturally embedded relational logics and algorithmically governed digital environments.

6.2 | Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Hutchings and Weir (2006) did not address marginalized groups in their research, reflecting the absence of the topic from mainstream informal network research at the time of writing the article. Since then, and reflective of growing focus on DEI in national and international businesses, there is a growing literature examining women's experiences with guanxi and wasta. However, there are substantial and critical research gaps in relation to other marginalized groups.

Despite extensive literature on disability employment in China documenting structural barriers and discrimination (Shi and Foster 2024), virtually no research explicitly examines how people with disabilities access or are excluded from guanxi networks. While studies document that people with disabilities in China face enormous barriers to employment and rely heavily on family support networks, the specific role of guanxi in mediating these employment outcomes remains unexplored in published research. Similarly, how people with disabilities operate within wasta networks has not been explored. The absence of research on disability (including psychosocial/mental

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health disabilities and neurodivergence) in relation to informal networks represents a striking omission given the size of populations in both China and Arab contexts and thus likely significant numbers of people with disabilities within a potential talent pool for international businesses.

The limited research on ethnicity and guanxi within China's multi-ethnic society fails to address how ethnic minorities navigate informal networks in contexts of Han Chinese economic and political dominance. The lack of research on ethnicity in the Arab world in respect to wasta also has not been addressed even though there are a number of religious groups in the region. In addition to research on the experience of people with disabilities and of ethnic minorities within guanxi and wasta networks, future research also needs to consider other aspects of diversity and how people from marginalized groups operate within informal networks (and potentially mitigate barriers as outsiders), namely, people of diverse ages, socio-economic groups, genders, and sexualities.

Many people across society represent intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) in that they identify with multiple categories. The intersection of the identities may exacerbate the disadvantage, discrimination, and stigma they experience across society and organizations (Hutchings 2022) and potentially increase their experience of being 'othered' (Udah 2019) in a society in which they are in a minority. For instance, a woman who has a disability, has caring responsibilities, is of a lower socio-economic group, and is also from an ethnic minority is likely to face exclusion in many forms. Thus, future research needs to examine intersectionality more systematically, exploring how gender, disability, ethnicity, and other demographic characteristics combine to shape informal network experiences. Additionally, scholarship should investigate how institutional development, anti-discrimination policies, and organizational practices can constrain the exclusionary effects of informal networking while acknowledging the relational realities of organizational life. The role of policy, practice, and leadership in international businesses in providing requisite employment and promotion opportunities and equitable rewards for local and expatriate staff within the operation of guanxi and wasta networks must be part of future research. Similarly, consideration needs to be given to how DEI is operationalized in informal network relationships that managers of MNCs have with other key stakeholders including customers, suppliers, and partner organizations.

6.3 | Limited Quantitative Research in the Field and the Need for Scale Development

Methodological approaches in informal network research reflect the developmental stage of the field and popularity of specific constructs. For emerging or less-explored informal networking phenomena, conceptual approaches are dominant as scholars seek to clarify construct boundaries, contextual embeddedness and distinct practices (Abosag and Ghauri 2022). Research on more established constructs such as guanxi and wasta increasingly relies on empirical inquiry, with qualitative methods, particularly interviews, being most prevalent (Yahiaoui et al. 2025). Interviews enable rich contextual understanding and facilitate discovery, which is particularly valuable given that informal networking practices are often implicit, culturally embedded and difficult to observe. The prominence of qualitative research can also be explained by the limited availability of validated measurement scales. Existing instruments frequently capture construct-specific and context-bound characteristics, limiting cross-cultural applicability (Yen et al. 2011). Expanding the diversity and robustness of measurement scales would significantly support future research by enabling more quantitative inquiry, improving replicability and strengthening theory development. The fields of mathematical modeling (empirical research) as well as statistical analysis are much more broadly available than the uses currently made of them and there are important opportunities available, for instance, in neural systems modeling (Weaverdyck and Parkinson 2018; Yang et al. 2017) and importantly in gaming models that illustrate the significant reminder that guanxi and wasta behavior contradict fundamental assumptions of rationality and utility maximization (Blair and Chareunsy 2018). Both guanxi and wasta can be categorized as adaptively complex systems (Wong 2010) and methodological developments will follow newer methods in adjacent research areas. Beyond scale development, greater methodological diversity of opportunities to refine theoretical insights by examining informal networking from multiple analytical perspectives. Given that informal networking is closely tied to human behavior and frequently involves socially sensitive or tabooed practices, accessing reliable data remains challenging. Experimental and mixed-method approaches hold considerable promise for generating more objective insights and uncovering behavioral mechanisms that may remain hidden in self-reported data (Kilduff and Brass 2010; Van Witteloostuijn 2015). In sum, an extended and more diverse methodological toolbox will help advance the field and generate deeper insights into the conditions and behavioral dynamics of informal networks.

7 | Conclusions

This article compared and contrasted developments in research and practice in guanxi and wasta and thus addressed a gap in the literature over the past 20 years which, whilst highlighting substantive growth in guanxi research and advancement in wasta research, had shown limited direct examination of the developments across both networks. This article traced the evolution of guanxi and wasta research and practice since Hutchings and Weir's (2006) article elaborating similarities in guanxi and wasta. Research has demonstrated conceptual development, methodological maturity, and theoretical grounding of the two networks alongside a practical focus on ethics and legitimacy, albeit with wasta having less cumulative consolidation than guanxi. Further, this article considered guanxi and wasta in respect to a decrease in network usage given institutional development in the countries in which it has operated and the extent to which this aligns with the broader research on informal networks internationally. This article identified key challenges and strategic insight for managers of international businesses in diverse cultural and institutional environments in China (and some other countries with a Chinese culture) and the Arab World. In presenting a range of suggestions for future research, the article highlights the need for further exploration of the salience of guanxi and wasta in international businesses

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affected by a rapidly evolving and volatile global context shaped by geopolitical uncertainty, technological disruption, and societal complexity.

Author Contributions

K.H.: conceptualization; methodology; writing – sections of draft; writing – review; editing. **D.W.:** conceptualization; methodology; writing – sections of draft; writing – review. **S.A.:** conceptualization; methodology; writing – sections of draft; writing – review. **S.H.:** conceptualization; methodology; writing – sections of draft; writing – review.

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ChatGPT and Claude AI were used to check for any missed research or references in the article and to assist in checking the articulation of arguments in some parts. All the suggested references were reviewed and incorporated into the article by the authors. The conceptualization of the article and the development of arguments was undertaken entirely by the authors.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Endnotes

[1] We define the Arab World as including Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. There are also countries in North Africa and East Africa/Horn of Africa that are members of the Arab League and where Arabic is widely spoken, including Algeria, Comoros, Djibouti, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan, and Tunisia (Nations Online 2026).

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