Song, M. 2026. How Social Networks Help with Proactive Resilience: Evidence from Chinese Companies. ***AIB Insights***. https://doi.org/10.46697/001c.169495.

Article

How Social Networks Help with Proactive Resilience: Evidence from Chinese Companies

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Keywords: social networks, proactive resilience

https://doi.org/10.46697/001c.169495

AIB Insights

This study examines how social networks enable emerging market firms to develop, strengthen, and sustain proactive resilience in a turbulent global environment. Drawing on interviews with top managers in selected Chinese multinational firms, the study identifies three network pillars – domestic regulatory, domestic industry, and global networks – that can reduce vulnerability and strengthen proactive resilience. This study enhances the understanding of social networks and their role in contributing to firm resilience. It also provides three recommendations for firms faced with increasingly turbulent environments.

INTRODUCTION

Emerging market multinationals (EMNCs) are increasingly confronted with a range of challenges and uncertainties in their home-country environments (Song, Newburry, & Park, 2020). Preceding literature points to several recurring challenges confronting Chinese multinational firms, including tensions between regulatory policies and market realities (Peng & Luo, 2000), disorderly market competition resulting in industry-wide overcapacity and price wars (Côté & Hu, 2025), inability to compete on the level of international standards (Cuervo-Cazurra & Genc, 2008; Luo & Tung, 2007), and simultaneous confrontation with geopolitical and institutional risks (Luo & Tung, 2007). The accumulation of these long-term challenges and uncertainties may heighten firms' exposure to external shocks, underscoring the importance of resilience in their internationalization process. Sheffi and Rice (2005) argued that firms' vulnerability can be reduced by enhancing their resilience, which is key to long-term growth and survival.

Consistent with prior research, firm resilience refers to their capability to anticipate, avoid, and adjust to shocks when facing stress, change, and uncertainty (Ortiz-de-Mandojana & Bansal, 2016; van der Vegt, Essens, Wahlström, & George, 2015). Within the broader umbrella of firm resilience, Conz and Magnani (2020) stated that resilience is a dynamic attribute that includes three phases: the proactive phase, the absorptive/adaptive phase, and the reactive phase. Duchek (2020) highlighted proactive (resilience potential) and reactive (resilience realization) capabilities. Lee et al. (2013) also noted that firms need to measure resilience to identify strengths and weaknesses and improve before a crisis occurs. Building on previous research, this study focuses particularly on the proactive phase (before an event) (Conz & Magnani, 2020). Proactive resilience emphasizes anticipation and preparation, enabling firms to foresee disruptions, organize responses, and position resources in advance. Proactive resilience is especially important for EMNCs, given their exposure to institutional volatility, geopolitical tensions, and regulatory uncertainty.

Firms have difficulty in acquiring proactive resilience because it takes time to build, which forces them to prioritize between long-term growth and short-term financial performance (Ortiz-de-Mandojana & Bansal, 2016). This challenge is particularly salient in emerging markets, where firms generally face more stringent resource constraints and greater pressure to deliver short-term performance. Using social networks is necessary to successfully navigate this resource gap in emerging markets. Social networks encompass political ties, industry, and international relationships (Peng & Luo, 2000). Firms' social networks can enhance organizational resilience by improving access to information, knowledge, experience, and external resources (Xie, Wu, Palacios-Marqués, & Ribeiro-Navarrete, 2022). They help firms sense change proactively and adjust accordingly. When shocks or disruptions occur, these relationships facilitate firms' recovery from adversity (Asamoah, Agyei-Owusu, & Ashun, 2020). Social networks are antecedents of resilience that can bring long-term growth. In emerging markets with weak governance, social networks confer an advantage, helping EMNCs acquire resilience capabilities (Cuervo-Cazurra & Genc, 2008). Existing research fails to illuminate how firms deploy social networks to bolster resilience. This suggests a gap in the general understanding of how to build social networks and leverage them to cultivate resilience.

This study aims to understand how social networks help emerging market firms develop proactive resilience. The focus is on organizations that must navigate regulatory uncertainty, maintain government relations, and meet the legitimacy and compliance expectations of the international market. After interviews with top managers at several Chinese multinationals, three components of social networks

were identified as important contributors to proactive resilience: domestic regulatory networks, domestic industry networks, and global networks. By integrating these three network perspectives, this study explains how these different types of ties support firms' proactive resilience. From this, three recommendations are proposed.

EMPIRICAL SETTING AND METHODS

An exploratory multiple-case study approach (Table 1) was adopted, and in-depth interviews with managers from 23 Chinese firms between May and July 2018 were conducted. The interviews lasted an average of 90 minutes (SD = 27.09). All 23 interviews were reviewed to identify recurring patterns. Four information-rich cases were then selected for detailed coding and presentation because they contained extensive evidence concerning all three network types. In the interviews, open-ended questions were raised, including "how has your firm survived and sustained in the global market over time?" Further details on case selection and analysis are provided in the Appendix.

FINDINGS

Interviewees shared common features about how they navigated periods of adversity. They presented different networks, including experts, customers, peers, local governments, and overseas partners. These networks were used to diversify risks, obtain information, and acquire resources and credit. The ability of firms to face policy shocks, market contraction, and international compliance pressure was enhanced. Based on the interpretation of interviews, this study asserts that domestic regulatory, domestic industry, and global networks collectively form social networks contributing to resilience.

DOMESTIC REGULATORY NETWORKS: FIRMS' RELATIONSHIP WITH GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AND REGULATORS

Institutional rules are the market "rules of the game" in emerging markets. EMNCs must effectively navigate a rapidly changing regulatory environment (Wang, Liu, Pan, & Li, 2025). Firms must anticipate information and policy changes, align capabilities and resources, and manage risks. Interviewees found it important to quickly interpret and promptly respond to new policies. Firms leveraged domestic regulatory networks (e.g., government officials) and actively engaged them.

> We receive first-hand information on new regulations and policies by attending the city's monthly board of directors meeting. [CEO, Company A]

Government officials are better at understanding and interpreting policies. Through officials' interpretations, firms can better anticipate future regulations, proactively deploy and allocate resources, and gain a first-mover advantage.

> We view each new regulation as a signal of future policy direction. Our CEO consults government officials to better understand the new regulation and its implications. [Co-founder, Company B]
> When a new policy comes out, it is vital to let government officials explain what the policy really means so that we can prepare ahead of competitors, as sometimes they don't know the policy change or the availability of certain subsidies and resources. [CEO, Company D]

By leveraging its domestic regulatory network, Company C could anticipate changes and prepare two years ahead of its competitors.

> ...in a meeting, government officials informed us that the industry would be regulated through Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) certification. After consulting with relevant officials, we spent two years upgrading our equipment to meet GMP standards. When the requirement was later announced, many competitors struggled with costly changes and cash flow pressures while we were already prepared. [CEO, Company C]

Proactive preparation allows firms to anticipate uncertainty and mitigate potential disruptions when shocks occur. Domestic regulatory networks guide firms in anticipating and adapting to change and uncertainty, which enhances resilience (Li, Li, Yang, & Tian, 2025). While domestic regulatory networks can strengthen anticipation and readiness for compliance, they also carry risks. For example, a strong network can cause firms to become overdependent on a particular regulatory network, thereby reducing strategic flexibility (Sun, Mellahi, & Thun, 2010). Similarly, selective access to policy information can create legitimacy concerns. The resilience value of domestic regulatory networks depends on how firms use them. They are most useful when they support broader policy understanding and compliance preparation, rather than narrow dependence on privileged institutional ties.

DOMESTIC INDUSTRY NETWORKS: FIRM'S RELATIONSHIP WITH DOMESTIC STAKEHOLDERS

Domestic industry networks connect institutions and the market. EMNCs convert these connections into operational certainty by effectively embedding themselves in industry networks (e.g., industry associations, suppliers, and distributor channels). This provides a foundation for domestic firms to link to needed resources, including where to find them and how to use them (Mudambi, Mudambi, Mukherjee, & Scalera, 2017). Companies B and D mentioned that it is critical to connect with the right and well-resourced people. Behind those people are capital, supply chains, information, and the important forces that help anticipate industry development trends and adapt to technological changes.

> Employee turnover is high in our industry. Where you come from matters less than who you know. [CEO, Company D]

Table 1. General Information about Interviewed Companies

Company Code	Role of Interviewees	Duration of Interviews (Minutes)	Headquarters (HQ)/Subsidiary	Major Products	Founding	Ownership	Public	Sector	Annual Income ($) Billion	Internationalization Level (Countries and Regions)
A	CEO	112	HQ & Subsidiary	Bicycles and electronic bikes	1958	State	Y	(low-tech) Manufacturing	1.4	80+
B	Co-founder	107	HQ	Interior design	2004	Private	Y	Service	0.24	2
C	CFO	95	HQ	Pharmaceutical equipment supplier	1993	Private	Y	(high-tech) Manufacturing	1.7	50+
D	CEO	97	HQ	Brand management	2005	Private	N	Service	1.5	12

> Our CEO is well known in the industry and maintains close relationships with the boards of major industry associations. [Co-founder, Company B]

Maintaining industry networks requires firms to actively participate in industry-related associations. Through frequent communication within and across industries, firms can identify industry trends, understand competitors, access supplier networks, and even use cross-industry advanced technologies and ideas.

> We actively participate in external associations and conferences to learn from other sectors, adopt new technologies, and connect with a sharing-economy company that later became our customer. [CEO, Company A]

By leveraging and developing industry networks, Company A could build resilience and adapt to the shock of changing market demand.

GLOBAL NETWORKS: FIRM'S RELATIONSHIP WITH FOREIGN STAKEHOLDERS

EMNCs find themselves chasing international standards, which are normally a significant departure from their domestic standards. Global networks bridge international standards to diverse demands amid coexisting international technical standards and geopolitical uncertainty (Mudambi et al., 2017). Firms highlight that it is essential to establish their own global networks as early as possible. Global networks of EMNCs navigate their internationalization by complying with the regulations and policies of target markets and connecting with local resources and collaborators.

> We initially struggled to expand abroad, but conditions improved after we built relationships with local suppliers. They introduced us to clients and helped us communicate with local governments. [CEO, Company A]
> Since expanding abroad, we have built relationships with multinationals in developed markets. Through frequent communication, we learn from their more advanced regulations, practices, and technologies. [CFO, Company C]
> Our co-founder's overseas work experience helped us build connections with international companies. [CEO, Company D]

Company B communicated more effectively with clients through the Building Information Modeling (BIM) three-dimensional (3D) system, which thereby improved client retention. This proactive alignment with international standards helped avoid shocks from industry changes. Through their global networks, firms become first movers and industry standard-setters within their own domestic networks. Global networks help firms build their resilience by planning for potential disruptions and preparing to adopt new technology.

> Through our communication with the US market, we decided to adopt BIM 3D technology and became the first company to introduce it in China. Unlike 2D drawings, BIM allows non-specialist clients to understand complex designs more easily. Although our designers initially resisted the change, they adopted it after seeing that it greatly improved communication with clients. [Co-founder, Company B]

Overall, the findings indicate that domestic regulatory, domestic industry, and global networks contribute to resilience through three distinct approaches under the umbrella of social networks. Domestic regulatory networks appear especially important for interpreting policy signals, anticipating regulatory changes, and strengthening compliance readiness, which is consistent with prior research on political connections in emerging markets (Peng & Luo, 2000). Domestic industry networks play a central role in coordination, local problem-solving, and access to resources within the domestic ecosystem, aligning with research on interorganizational networks (Gulati, 1999). Global networks are particularly important for cross-border learning, exposure to new technologies and managerial practices, and identification of changes in international markets, aligning with research on network-based internationalization and EMNCs' capability upgrading (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009; Luo & Tung, 2007). The findings suggest that different networks are utilized through diverse channels and provide differing values under varying conditions. Their development strengthens intermediate capabilities like anticipation and compliance readiness, which in turn support proactive resilience. Meanwhile, being resilient through domestic regulatory networks is a double-edged sword for firms. While they may enhance firms' capacity to anticipate regulatory change, domestic regulatory networks may also lead to overreliance on specific access channels and limit firms' adaptability. These findings are summarized in Table 2.

ACTIONABLE RECOMMENDATIONS

Firms should engage regulators through transparent, lawful, and institutionally appropriate channels, such as formal consultations, regulatory briefings, industry associations, and compliance processes (e.g., GMP regulation: Company C in domestic regulatory networks). Firms should avoid dependence on privileged personal access, which may generate legitimacy concerns and reduce strategic flexibility.

Firms should learn from advanced markets, such as adopting advanced technology and embracing international standards (e.g., BIM 3D technology: Company B in global networks). Firms in emerging markets may benefit from anticipating convergence with influential international standards, particularly where access to major foreign markets depends on regulatory or technical compatibility. If aiming to align with international standards as closely as possible from the outset, firms can take the lead in reforming industry standards and reduce losses during the realignment period.

Firms should develop their own network-based support in domestic (e.g., sharing economy collaboration: Company A in domestic industry networks) and international markets (e.g., navigating internationalization: Companies A, C and D in global networks). This network-based support includes

Table 2. Challenges and Solutions

Three Components	Challenges Faced by EMNCs	Quotes (abbreviated from above)	Mechanism	Desired Resilience Outcome	Solutions
Domestic regulatory networks	Evolving policy	"*We receive first-hand information on new regulations and policies…*" [CEO, Company A]	Policy signal interpretation; regulatory information access; early warning; and compliance coordination	Strengthen anticipation and compliance readiness	Devote resources and upgrades based on possible future policies and feedback from government contacts.
	Policy interpretation	*"…consults government officials to better understand the new regulation and its implications"* [Co-founder, Company B] *"…let government officials explain what the policy really means."* [CEO, Company D]			
	Policy transparency	"*…unaware of certain subsidies and resources available…*" "*…they don't even realize the policy change…*" [CEO, Company D]			
Domestic industry networks	Anticipating industry change	*"…learn from other sectors, adopt new technologies…"* [CEO, Company A] *"The CEO… maintains close relationships with the boards…."* [Co-founder, Company B] *"Where you come from matters less than who you know."* [CEO, Company D]	Resource mobilization; collective problem solving; operational and organizational structure adjustment	Faster response to changes and disruption; increase operational flexibility	Establish a domestic network-based support through stakeholders to insulate and hedge against sudden disruptions.
Global networks	Adapting to international competition	*"…we built relationships with local suppliers. They introduced us to clients and helped us communicate with local governments."* [CEO, Company A] *"…we learn from their more advanced regulations, practices, and technologies"* [CFO, Company C]	Cross-border learning; legitimacy building; and exposure to international certification and customer requirements	Improve capability to meet international standards	Build standards and future investments based on international trends and feedback from international relationships.

upstream and downstream (e.g., suppliers and distributors) and cross-industry firms. In network-based support, key practitioners can grant access to resources. This network-based support can be extended to host-country stakeholders when firms attempt to enter international markets. Firms should prioritize maintaining reciprocal relationships with aligned firms and individuals within their network-based support.

All recommendations should be consistently implemented during periods of stability. Benefits of resilience usually take a long time to manifest and favor a proactive rather than reactive approach. Since relationships with external stakeholders require resources and time to strengthen, firms need to recognize unexpected disruptions and establish these connections with the long view in mind.

CONCLUSION

This study applies and elaborates on established resilience concepts in the context of EMNCs by demonstrating how EMNCs develop proactive resilience through different networks to face institutional and geopolitical turbulence. This study is among the first to integrate domestic regulatory, domestic industry, and global networks into a unified framework for the understanding of firm resilience. This integrated view allows us to move beyond looking at social networks as a whole and instead understand which networks matter and how to enhance proactive resilience. The findings are most relevant to firms when government relationships, regulatory uncertainty, and international standards are volatile.

This study has some limitations. The sampling of firms across multiple industries in China is relatively modest considering the substantial heterogeneity of the Chinese economy. Accordingly, this study is intended to provide analytical insights and contribute to theory development rather than statistical generalization. Collected in 2018, the initial data does not fully capture the changes that occurred afterward. Future research could focus more on recent changes and a larger sample size.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mohan Song is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Management at Central Michigan University. She earned her PhD in Business Administration from Florida International University. Her research focuses on global strategy, particularly organizational capabilities in emerging markets. Her work has appeared in journals across international business, global strategy, and hospitality management, including *Organizational Research Methods* and the *Journal of Business Research*.

Submitted: November 10, 2025 EDT. Accepted: August 25, 2026 EDT. Published: September 14, 2026 EDT.

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APPENDIX

DATA COLLECTION

Interview subjects were identified via alumni and faculty contacts of a major Chinese research school. Below is the sample selection process. First, the School Alumni Office sent an invitation email to eligible firms and invited them to take part in this study. Eligible firms should be EMNCs in either the manufacturing (high- and low-tech) or service industry. The firms must be in operation for at least 8-10 years to develop proactive resilience (Yan & Gray, 1994)[1]. In addition, eligible firms could be either privately-owned or state-owned EMNCs. Second, interview dates and times were arranged with EMNC firms that agreed to be interviewed.

Participants who agreed to be interviewed were sent an email invitation letter in advance, including the purpose and format of the interview, the researchers' bios, and a list of general questions to help them prepare. With the permission of interviewees, the interviews were recorded. An interview protocol made sure that the names of interviewees and firms were confidential. During data collection, similar patterns and responses recurring across cases were observed. Accordingly, no additional data were collected. The final sample comprised 23 firms, including two state-owned and 21 privately owned. The firms represented high-tech and low-tech manufacturing, as well as traditional service industries. The sample of 23 firms supported pattern identification across cases, while four cases were chosen for in-depth presentation because they offer particularly rich and complete evidence associated with the topic of the study: (1) All four cases lasted more than 90 minutes and provided rich information about all three networks; (2) All four cases operated for more than 20 years and had rich experience in the turbulent market; (3) They came from different sectors (high- and low-tech manufacturing and traditional service), and each of them was typical and represented their sectors; (4) All four interviewees were from the top management team.

DATA TRANSLATION

Interview recordings were transcribed into Chinese transcripts. To reduce the effects of memory biases and ensure the accuracy of information, transcripts were sent to interviewees for double-checking after interviews (Huber & Power, 1985)[2]. In addition to interviews, external resources were used as information supplements, including newspapers and magazines, company official websites, published case analyses, annual financial reports, etc. (Yan & Gray, 1994).

Then, Chinese transcripts were translated into English by one author of this manuscript, a bilingual researcher. A second bilingual researcher, who was also an outside researcher not involved in the interview and initial translation, back-translated the English version into Chinese. The back-translated Chinese text was compared with the original Chinese transcript. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved to reduce meaning loss and interpretive drift.

DATA ANALYSIS

A three-step coding process was conducted. First, each case was coded individually by extracting key terms, relevant passages, and potentially useful quotations from each interview into an Excel document. Second, coding focused on identifying recurring patterns linked to networks and resilience. Third, these recurring patterns across cases were compared and organized into a theoretical model with three components of social networks. Throughout the process, coding decisions were compared, and disagreements were resolved through discussion. A compact coding process is shown in the following table.

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1 Yan, A., & Gray, B., (1994). Bargaining power, management control, and performance in United States-China joint ventures: a comparative case study. *Academy of Management Journal, 37*(6), 1478-1517.

2 Huber, G. P., & Power, D. J. (1985). Retrospective reports of strategic-level managers: Guidelines for increasing their accuracy. *Strategic Management Journal, 6*(2), 171-180.

	Raw Quote	First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
Company D	*"When a new policy comes out, it is important to utilize the relationship, communicate with governors and let them explain what the policy really means. We prepare ahead of competitors, as sometimes they don't know the policy change or the availability of certain subsidies and resources."*	Use government ties to communicate with government officials to understand new policies; prepare ahead of competitors.	Early regulatory interpretation and anticipation	Domestic regulatory networks
Company A	"We actively participate in external associations…communicate with industry insiders… learn from other industries…apply their cutting-edge technology to our products….Our partnership with a sharing-economy company started in a high-tech industry conference…We then became one of their suppliers …"	Actively communicate and learn technologies with industry peers and other industries through associations and conferences; form partnerships.	Cross-industry learning and partnership formation	Domestic industry networks
Company B	"…we decided to move to BIM 3D technology through our communication with the US market. We were the first company to introduce BIM technology in China. Our sketch design was originally 2D and hard to understand if you don't have a design background. With BIM technology, it's 3D and more stereoscopic. Even non-professionals can understand these intersections. Clients benefit more from this technology than designers. Clients couldn't understand 2D images before. However, switching to another piece of software cannot bring about a qualitative change in our work for designers like us, who have been using 2D for over a decade and feel our expression is already very smooth. Therefore, designers were resistant at first. We persuaded them to adapt to the forward-looking concepts of the US market. Then, they discovered the advantage: communication with clients was much smoother. Thus, they continued to use it."	Learn new technology from the US market; 1st company adopting advanced concepts and technologies; overcome internal resistance; improve clients' experience.	Cross-border learning and capability upgrading	Global networks