

Stephen J. Appold
Abbreviated Summary of Research Interests

July 2004

My research centers on the work and residential aspects of what could be called, “new industrial places,” linking careers, corporations, and community. That interest led me to gather systematic data on engineers and high technology firms in the U.S., on multinational firms in Thailand and their employees, on various types of enterprises in Vietnam and their employees, and, finally, on Singaporean firms, individuals, and social organization. Most of this research builds on original data collection for which I secured funding. The research addresses the role that social relationships, human resource use, labor control, inter-organizational linkages, and location decisions have on the formation and character of such new industrial places – whether they are here in Southeast Asia or on the other side of the globe.

New industrial places are formed by the aggregation of establishments. While urban and regional economic theory often posits that clusters of firms are the result of the search for economies of agglomeration, labor markets for semiconductor engineers during the critical period of spatial restructuring were not geographically bounded (“Labor Market Imperfections and the Agglomeration of Firms: Evidence from the U.S. Semiconductor Industry's Emergent Period”). Local supply chains do not improve firm performance (“Agglomeration, Inter-Organizational Networks, and Competitive Performance in the U.S. Metalworking Sector”). Neither codified nor tacit knowledge is geographically “sticky” (“The Ambiguous Effects of Agglomeration on Plant-Level Technological Change”) and universities have no operational, but possibly a symbolic, effect on the location of laboratories (“The Location Processes of Industrial Research Laboratories”). Further, knowledge-intensive activities are not sensitive to place-based policy interventions (“Research Parks and the Location of Industrial Research Laboratories: An Analysis of the Effectiveness of a Policy Intervention”). Such agglomerations are not expressions of a search for operational efficiency, as spatial economic theory holds, but are created by the inability to control high-skill labor, resulting in entrepreneurial spin-offs (“The Control of High-skill Labor and Entrepreneurship in the Early U.S. Semiconductor Industry”) and by mimetic location-decision making, possibly driven by uncertainty or social appropriateness (“The Location Patterns of U.S. Industrial Research: Mimetic Isomorphism, and the Emergence of Geographic Charisma”). If entrepreneurship is a function of labor market mismatches (“A Labor Market Theory of Entrepreneurship in Knowledge-Intensive Industries”), it follows that labor market withdrawal is also (“How much longer would men work if there were no employment dislocation? Estimates from cause-elimination work life tables”). Continuing research is needed to fully understand the processes of aggregation whereby firm locations lead to uneven economic development.

Cross-national research identified both systematic and idiosyncratic variations on the structure of industrialization (“National Industrial Structure and the Global System”). South East Asia, containing perhaps the highest concentration of Newly Industrialized Countries, offers a natural laboratory to examine substantive issues with the several countries providing opportunities to examine different issues. While my research in the U.S. took a telescopic view, my research in Southeast Asia has relied more heavily on surveys of firms and individuals. The quasi-experimental conditions afforded by the heavy penetration of multinational firms in several branches of industry in Thailand allowed me to test for the effects of culture on business practices. Contrary to the predictions of cognitive institutionalism, nation of firm origin did not have an effect on the employment of women as managers and professionals (“The Employment of Women Managers and Professionals in an Emerging Economy: Gender Inequality as an Organizational Practice”) nor on the nature of inter-organizational relationships in supply chains (“Interorganizational Supply Linkages and Firm Performance among Multinationals in Thailand: An empirical exploration of institutional theory”). Rather, the employment of women is determined by the reactions of male employees while supply chains respond to operational, rather than cultural, imperatives. The cultural distance between host

and source countries does not affect organizational commitment and job satisfaction, the degree of integration into the organizational hierarchy does (“Cross-cutting Group Affiliations and Employee Attachment: Cross-national management among U.S. and Japanese transplants in Thailand”). Asia provides an interesting site to examine the relationship between gender and work because the degree of labor force participation and of occupational segregation both varies within the region and contrasts with the patterns found in many Western countries.

Vietnam’s transition from a planned to a market economy permits the relationship between institutions and economic activity to be explored. Control, rather than ownership, appears to be the critical factor across a range of situations. While information asymmetries are often invoked to explain the poor performance of enterprises in Socialist systems, the data point toward asymmetric power dependencies resulting rent-seeking patron-client relationships (“Patron-Client Relationships in a Restructuring Economy”). Ownership makes a difference in human resource practices, including in the use of women's labor, as well as internal and external participation in decisions by ownership type (“Variations and Flexibility in Human Resource Practices in Vietnam;”) but no difference in organizational commitment between private and state-owned firms (“Work Attitudes in Vietnam: Organizational Commitment and Job Satisfaction in a Restructuring Economy”). In contrast to the expectations of the literature on industrial districts, we found limited evidence of cooperative behavior among the micro-enterprises studied and little kinship support for inter-firm linkages (“Family and Friends in Small-Scale Businesses”).

More recently collected data indicate that the social embedding of economic relationships to be a) common but not pervasive, b) used but neither necessary nor sufficient, c) generally similar across regions, and d) not closely to business performance or regional economic welfare (“Social embedding: prevalence and profit among small businesses in Vietnam”). These findings challenge a common conception of regional development based on untraded interdependencies. Looking more closely, we find that social embedding is not effective at reducing search and selection costs or at enforcing agreements but may be used to insure against broader contingencies (“Social embedding as a solution to a control problem? Evidence from Vietnamese small business”). These findings suggest a need to refine thinking on the role and efficacy of social capital. Further analysis will consider the extent to which the social ties are expressions of dependencies, rather than instrumental mechanisms to address costs. The next step will be to collect data that allows the analysis to merge theory of insurance with theories of social capital.

The results of the research in Vietnam led me to rethink the political economy of NICs and examine the tensions between political legitimacy and task performance. The pattern of inter-organizational ties in Singapore suggest the predominance of state control efforts over attempts by firms to gather operational information, suggesting a re-examination of contentions about “embedded autonomy” (“Consultation and Control: the Singaporean Business Elite between Democracy and Authoritarianism”). Some ostensibly efficient human resource practices may waste human resources (“Is Meritocracy Outmoded in a Knowledge-Based Economy?”). Not surprisingly then, the tensions between legitimacy and task performance have led to a deteriorating economic position of university graduates (“Singaporean University Graduates in the New Century: Over-educated but Under-skilled?”). An ongoing project is collecting data on 1,000 Singaporeans in order to measure social support, inter-ethnic relations, and public participation. By examining the patterns of individual networks, the project will be able to explore how individual-level social capital is related to collective social capital.

While most of my analysis focuses on the social organization of work, research in the U.S. (“Central-City and Suburban Migration Patterns: Is a Turnaround on the Horizon?”) and Singapore (“Singaporean Family Life in High-Rise Apartment Blocks”) examines the nature of community life in new industrial spaces while other work, relying on very different methodologies, suggests that entrepreneurship is not a key driving force in economic growth but may be important to building communities in Thailand (“The Changing Pattern of Entrepreneurship in a Rapidly Developing Nation”), the U.S., and Vietnam (“Building Community through Entrepreneurship: Lessons from Vietnam and the United States”).