Understanding the Representation of Social Bonds:
Based on the East Asian Context

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Abstract

This paper deals with not the recent change of social bonds, but the recent confusing representation of them. This task will be carried out through a case study of Japan. The question being raised here is: why this odd representation of social bonds becomes acceptable? In the process of answering this question, we will explore the possibility to create sociological theories from the East Asia.

In recent years, the significance of social ties has repeatedly been emphasized in Japan. One example is the frequency of use of the Japanese word, *kizuna* (social bonds). It sounds strange because conventionally *kizuna* indicates strong ties but now it also implies weak ties. Here we examine the reason why a new usage of the word *kizuna* becomes acceptable. We interpret this phenomenon from the viewpoint of sociological systems theory and assume that the representation of social bonds among strangers becomes more probable by the rise of so-called social media, such as BBS, blog, SNS, video hosting services, social games and so on.

In the Western context, connection through social media tends to be regarded as an extension of "offline" relationships. However a lot of empirical examples of new social ties beyond the distinction between online and offline have been reported such as *internet suicide*, *off-line meeting* (meeting online friends IRL), internet dating, getting married IRL through MMORPG, etc. These phenomena are seen worldwide but they seem to start in East Asia. By using the sociological distinction between embedded and disembedded, social relationships through social media can be understood as disembedded. Then, what are the *new* characteristics of them? We will answer this question through the classic sociological distinction between personal and impersonal. Based on the East Asian use of internet, social relationships through social media can be categorized as personal; however it is sharply distinguished from the relationship in a traditional community or primary group. What is going on now can be understood as "re-personalization". It is the reason why the odd representation of social bonds becomes acceptable in recent Japan. This can also be a clue to rethink modernity because sociology has been understood the process of modernization as impersonalization. Moreover, we can foresee the idea of solidarity suitable for globalizing era, that is, the personal connection between heterogeneous strangers.