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Author 2	Benton, Gregor
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Abstract

Transnationalism, with its focus on migration and transnational business networks, is a vogue concept in much of the literature on ethnic minorities. This essay is a critique of transnational studies, which in our view diminish ethnic minorities' claim on national identity by reinforcing the indigenous communities' stereotyped belief that these minorities have little sense of belonging or of loyalty to the country they live in. Such studies dangerously distort the process of identity formation, particularly the emergence of national identity in immigrants and their descendants.

Transnationalism and the Essentializing of Capitalism: Chinese Enterprise, the State, and Identity in Britain, Australia, and Southeast Asia

Edmund Terence Gomez
and Gregor Benton

Transnationalism and Ethnic Chinese

Transnationalism, with its focus on migration and transnational business networks, is a vogue concept in much of the literature on ethnic minorities. This essay is a critique of transnational studies, which in our view diminish ethnic minorities' claim on national identity by reinforcing the indigenous communities' stereotyped belief that these minorities have little sense of belonging or of loyalty to the country they live in. Such studies dangerously distort the process of identity formation, particularly the emergence of national identity in immigrants and their descendants.

Defining Transnationalism

Guarnizo and Smith identify four key issues that define transnational theory.[1] They are: (1) the rise of globalization; (2) technological development, particularly in transport and communications; (3) political changes within society, arising from decolonization and the universalization of human rights; and (4) the activities of social networks that aid cross-border migration and economic or business dealings.

A transnational community has been defined as a social formation best exemplified by ethnic diasporas. It relates triadically to its globally dispersed self, the states it inhabits, and its ancestral homeland.[2] Its medium is the network, dynamized by new technologies. Multiple identifications and a sense of cultural fluidity, represented as creolized or hybrid, mark out its "consciousness." Economic transnationalism is chiefly the province of global corporations, but ethnic groups are also players in the world economy, by virtue of their remittances to and investments in the homelands. Governments, realizing the worth of this inward flow, play on the ethnic loyalty of "nationals" abroad to gain access to their capital. Economic resources flow through diasporic networks as well as to the homeland. As technology speeds the globalization of politics, diasporas become politically more vocal, at both ends of the migration process.

Researchers claim that the networks that typify transnational communities work at the level of the diaspora as a whole as well as in its separate "homelands" (ancestral and adopted), and that new technologies connect the triadic entity "with increasing speed and efficiency."[3] Studies assume that institutionalized ethnic networks permit diasporic co-ethnics to move capital across national boundaries.[4] Intra-ethnic business networks are said to be based on a sense of group cohesion that facilitates the movement of funds across borders and the mutually beneficial pooling of resources in enterprise development.[5]

Other interpretations of the term "transnationalism" stress the complexity of the concept of migrant "belonging." Basch, Schiller, and Blanc,[6] for example, writing about Caribbean and Filipino migrants to the United States, argue that the term as previously employed by social scientists lacked specificity and failed to recognize that immigrant groups develop ideologies, lifestyles, and networks that span homeland and host society. Defining transnationalism as "the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement," they asserted that immigrants tend to "develop and maintain multiple relationships—familial, economic, social, organizational, religious and political—that span borders."[7] They focused on the rights of individuals within nation states in an age of growing cross-border movement by corporations and people. However, the emphasis of their study was on migrant communities rather than long-settled communities with descendant generations.

On the issue of capital and transnationalism, Miyoshi drew attention to the evolution of "multi*national*" corporations (MNCs) into "*trans*national" corporations (TNCs), which are able through their web of investment networks in numerous countries to shift their operations across national borders.[8] In drawing the distinction, Miyoshi argued that a TNC, unlike an MNC, "might no longer be tied to its nation of origin but is adrift and mobile, ready to settle anywhere and to exploit any state including its own, as long as the affiliation serves its own interests."[9] Castells, on the other hand, noted that MNCs "down-size" by out-sourcing jobs as a way of lowering production costs.[10] This process of out-sourcing has led to the development of "network enterprise" in which a densely interlocking group of firms engage in a range of industries and operate in a number of different countries. Castells' formulation of "networks" is similar to Gereffi's concept of'"global commodity chains" in which production networks connect numerous different firms.[11] The networks are set up to cut costs, improve the quality of goods, and enhance innovation. Castells, however, places greater emphasis on the impact of new technologies and the rise of the "informational society" as a driving force behind the development of these networks. In the case of Chinese firms, Castells advances a relatively nuanced argument, indicating that most such enterprises are family-owned and that the production ties they engender are highly personalized, fluid, and changeable.[12] However, he exaggerates the extent to which companies owned by family members are represented in such networks. In reality, most of them include firms owned by people outside the family circle.

In the literature on Chinese transnationalism, Ong sets out to "re-orient the study of Chinese subjects" by developing the notion of "flexible citizenship."[13] In her view, "global capitalism in Asia is linked to new cultural representations of 'Chineseness' (rather than 'Japaneseness') in relation to transnational Asian capitalism." She goes on to argue that "overseas Chinese" and mainland China are becoming tied in production, trade, and finance "circuits" leading to the rise of a form of "fraternal network capitalism" and "Chinese capitalism" that "has induced long-assimilated Thai and Indonesian subjects to reclaim their 'ethnic Chinese' status as they participate in regional business networks." She fails to ask whether these long-assimilated Indonesians and Thais really are reclaiming their Chinese identity rather than, as business investors, acknowledging that ethnic identity is a tool that can be exploited to facilitate investment in China. In our view, investment of this sort is the result not of some atavistic impulse but of political exhortation by state authorities. Such discourse suggests that all ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia, even those "long-assimilated," celebrate as well as profit from the supposed rise of "Chinese capitalism" in Asia.

This tripartite link between transnationalism, capital, and identity is more lucidly developed in Ong's collaborative effort with Nonini, *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism.* Ong and Nonini point to the strength of the state in Asia and its capacity to control "globalization," and rightly maintain that much of the "new capitalism of the Asia-Pacific is state-driven and state-sponsored."[14] However, their argument that "modern Chinese transnationalism is expanding ever more rapidly across the Asia Pacific and indeed launching the capitalist development of China itself" is disappointing.[15] While ethnic Chinese business people from East and Southeast Asia have invested in the Chinese mainland, it is doubtful that they have driven China's economic expansion over the past decade. Some of Ong and Nonini's other contentions are likewise questionable. These include their assertion that "Chinese transnational capitalists act out flexible strategies of accumulation in networks that cut across political borders and are linked through second-tier global cities such as Shanghai, Guangzhou (Canton), Hong Kong, Taipei, Singapore, Bangkok, and Kuala Lumpur. These overlapping business, social, and kinship networks stitch together dynamic, productive, financial, and marketing regions that are not contained by a single-nation or subject to its influence."[16] At another point, they suggest that "diasporic capitalist interests can subvert state disciplining by transferring economic capital out of their host countries to overseas locations, and thus act to transform national economies under the rubric of 'market forces.'"[17] On the one hand, they exaggerate the role played by Chinese-owned capital in driving the economic boom in East Asia; on the other hand, they minimize the capacity of the state to discipline Chinese capitalists and exaggerate the capitalists' ability to transfer their assets across borders. Their suggestion that Chinese capitalists in the region act as a cohesive unit by means of tightly-knit intra-ethnic "networks" that enable them to emerge as a dynamo for economic growth in Asia is wrong in two respects. By creating a tripartite linkage of transnationalism, identity, and capitalism, it tends both to essentialize patterns of enterprise development among Chinese and to homogenize ethnic communities of the diaspora.

This essentializing of Chinese-owned enterprise has gained further currency in the United States through the work of Light and Waldinger, with their concepts of "ethnic enterprise" and "ethnic enclaves."[18] The popularization of terms such as "global tribes,"[19] "bamboo networks,"[20] and "Chinese commonwealth"[21] has also promoted the homogenizing of ethnic communities and culture.

The theory that ethnic Chinese of the diaspora share a strong collective identity that influences their decision-making in business and the development of their enterprises has spawned a prodigious literature that has come to be associated with the so-called "culturalist perspective."[22] According to this literature, ethnic Chinese of the diaspora share an essentially identical set of cultural traits, just as their businesses display an essentially uniform "ethnic style" characterized by family firms and intra-ethnic business networks. The "family firm" and intra-ethnic national and transnational connections (or *guanxi*) play a crucial role in capital formation and accumulation.[23] These two modes of business and social organization, i.e., family firms and intra-ethnic networks, are described as imbued with the "Confucian ethic," a perennial theme of the culturalists, for whom it is the key to explaining Chinese enterprise.

Most such scholars agree that ties of family and kinship are a key constituent of Chinese enterprise.[24] To the extent that kinship ties were an important consideration in hiring staff and acquiring funds to get enterprises going in the early days, there is nothing wrong with such arguments, for at the point of its creation control of the company remained in the hands of the founder and of key family members, who played a crucial role in setting its style of management.

However, the term "networks" is more contentious. Redding, for example, asserts that Chinese networks in Taiwan and Hong Kong share commonalities that indicate "cultural predispositions, most of which are traceable to Confucian values."[25] Researchers subscribing to this view argue that Chinese enterprise is a form of "network capitalism" or "*guanxi* capitalism."[26] Networks are said to be a unique institutional feature of "Asian capitalism," one that distinguishes it from the western notion of bureaucratization and efficiency.[27] This form of capitalism reputedly provides Chinese firms in Southeast Asia with ample competitive advantages.[28]

Others go further, to the extent of talking about "Chinese diaspora capitalism." Lever-Tracy and Tracy argue that this form of capitalism is based on personalized, long-term horizontal networks that bind together Chinese-owned family companies.[29] Such networks are "embedded in relations of reciprocity" and rest on the principle of trust. This type of capitalism is said to pre-date "modern capitalism" and to attach less weight than other forms of capitalism to corporate expansion and profit maximization.[30]

Few researchers opposed to this cultural perspective would deny the existence of "networks" created by Chinese-owned enterprises. Their main criticism concerns not networks as such but the problematic notion of "Chineseness," which they believe plays only a minor role in determining how Chinese business people make decisions and develop their enterprises.[31] In their view, culturalist analyses misrepresent the basis for and extent of business ties among Chinese firms. Networks are not formed in a single dimension but are primarily production chains or subcontracting ties that undergo processes of change and operate at multiple levels. Co-ethnic cooperation for the benefit of the community, the basis on which such networks form according to the culturalist analysis, fails to explain the creation of these business ties.

The history of the ethnic Chinese presence in Southeast Asia suggests that common definitions of transnationalism, with its triadic connotations, are in principle applicable exclusively to migrants. Moreover, there is growing evidence that even this assertion needs to be contextualized, for the identities of some longer-settled members of the migrant cohort also undergo a profound reconfiguration, in the sense that they adopt a different understanding of national identity and allegiance. This process is reflected in the growing number of immigrants who seek and win political office in Australia, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The Southeast Asian case provides an interesting study of the complexity of ethnic and national identity—how it evolves over time, how its reconfigurations are conditioned by political and economic change, and how the sense of cohesion of the migrant generation dies away. This diminished sense of ethnic cohesion is evidenced by the way in which firms owned by ethnic Chinese develop in foreign settings, i.e., when their owners invest in economies other than those of the country of their birth. When Chinese businesses in Southeast Asia invest outside the region, there is little evidence of joint ventures and interlocking stock ownership and directorate ties among the owners of these enterprises. Even capitalists from the same country have shown no inclination to conduct business ventures jointly in a foreign environment.[32] The disunity of ethnic Chinese populations (and of other ethnic minorities) belies the widespread assumption of diasporic solidarity. Co-ethnic sentiment can soon start to evaporate: research on British Chinese communities suggests that ideas like homeland, host society, and globally dispersed self are of doubtful relevance even to the first generation of British-born Chinese.[33]

The emergence of new forms of identification among diasporic groups and their descendants undermines the claim that ethnic Chinese (and other minorities) function as key players in the world economy by virtue of a flow of resources through ethnically-based networks. It also casts doubt on another fashionable theory, that ethnic Chinese channel funds into China because of the "pull of the homeland."

Normative definitions of transnationalism fail to capture the identity transformations that occur as diasporic generations deepen. The manner in which transnationalism is sometimes defined tends to repeat old discourses of fixed origins assumed to bind diasporic communities. Writings on the subject extrapolate from the experience of the migrant cohort to the group as a whole, fail to incorporate the experience either of the migrants who strike roots or (more importantly) of the locally born generations, neglect differences of class and sub-ethnic affiliation, ignore other differences that weaken group unity, generally exaggerate the coherence of diasporic groups, and elide the rich diversity and ambivalence as well as the divergent cultural histories of rooted diasporic communities.

Adopting this perspective, we identify a major contradiction at the heart of transnational studies. The concept of transnationalism makes an important contribution to the analysis of identity by focusing on the themes of hybridity and pluralism. However, a fundamental flaw is its liberal and unquestioning resort to the term "networks" and the suggestion that ethnically-based networks are institutionalized and play a big role in helping diasporic co-ethnics to mobilize capital and move it across national boundaries. As long as they stay within the domain of politics, human rights, and the creation of an inclusive nation state, transnational studies are radical and innovative, but when they cross over into the domain of capitalism they run the risk of essentializing ethnicity. It is one thing for members of ethnic minorities, particularly those born in their country of residence, to stress the multiplicity of identities and to object to the dominant majority's questioning of their loyalty to the nation state—and quite another for academics to argue that the dynamism and development of "Chinese capitalism" in Asia is due primarily to intra-ethnic business networks set up to act against an oppressive state and to facilitate the movement of funds across borders for the benefit of the community. The political argument is well-founded and defensible: its extrapolation into business is, as we go on to argue, fanciful and potentially dangerous.

Studies such as Lever-Tracy, Ip, and Tracy, Ong and Nonini, and Ong present a highly inaccurate picture of how Chinese firms operate in national and transnational perspective.[34] By using their economic theories as a platform upon which to build arguments about identity formation among diasporic Chinese, they compound their error, particularly when dealing with the identity of the "foreign"-born generations.

Such studies also fail to capture the class dimensions of the issues that transnational theory raises. Their primary focus is on people who can migrate with ease and even rotate from country to country in pursuit of better returns on their investment. However, they appear to frame their conclusions in terms of all Chinese minority communities, including poor migrants without the capacity to invest in foreign countries and even those who lack the very means to migrate. Among the prosperous and well-traveled elite, Aihwa Ong's multiple-passport holder may well be "an apt contemporary figure," but most Chinese and ethnic Chinese migrants lack the skills and independent means of the "progressive cosmopolitan intellectual," the "astronaut" commuter, and the peripatetic multicultural manager with "flexible capital" by the bagful.[35]

Since they deal mostly with migration, transnational studies inevitably tend to focus on migrants who retain homeland ties. They also focus on people with the resources to migrate, a preoccupation perhaps inevitable in an age of transnational flows of capital and a burgeoning literature on the Chinese networks through which such funds are said to flow across borders. This selective focus is a major shortcoming of transnational studies. By conceptualizing migration and networks so narrowly, they create a false impression of how migrants view themselves in relation to other Chinese in the world and how they develop their enterprise in local and foreign economies. Most studies on Chinese migration and enterprise development written from a transnational perspective fail to explore the implications of their generalizations for Chinese who do not cross borders, or for those born in their migrant parents' adopted country.[36] We would even question the extent of mobility not only of the offspring but even of the pioneers. The "myth of return" is by now a clichÈ of migration studies, for migrants talk of home but rarely return, given their investment of capital and emotion overseas and their children's lack of ties to the ancestral homeland.

Within the span of a generation, new ethnic identities form and distinct national identities emerge. Yet while migrants' descendants see themselves as British, Australian, or Malaysian, most natives continue to view them as migrants who do not "belong." Unfortunately, some transnational studies reinforce this way of thinking.

Methodology

To test our belief that transnationalism fails to capture the actual processes of identity formation and in particular the ways in which national identities emerge, and to challenge the assumption that culture, shared identities, and value systems determine ethnic business activity, we carried out a comparative study of enterprise development by ethnic Chinese in Britain, Australia, and Southeast Asia (with a special focus on Malaysia). Ethnic Chinese are a minority community in all three places. The multi-ethnic nature of Malaysia, which largely ceased accepting immigrants in the 1930s, resulted from the migration policies of the colonial government. Multi-ethnic Britain and Australia, on the other hand, continue to permit immigration. That Britain and Australia accept new migrants while Malaysia does not has a bearing on enterprise development among ethnic Chinese. This difference also has implications for identity formation and rights. Ethnic Chinese long domiciled or born in Britain and Australia have to deal with immigrants of a similar ethnic background who become citizens, which gives rise to a discourse on the "politics of immigration."[37] In Malaysia, on the other hand, the focus is on the "politics of rights."[38]

We adopted this comparative methodology because it allowed us to study a diverse range of people of similar ethnicity: Chinese migrants (to the United Kingdom and Australia) and members of a long-settled ethnic Chinese community born in Southeast Asia and with few or no attachments to the ancestral homeland. Studying the Chinese in Southeast Asia allowed us to deal with the issue of "second-class" citizens. Our methodology also enabled us to study intra-ethnic Chinese business links—between Chinese who go abroad as investors and ethnic Chinese citizens of the three places. We were therefore able to ask whether similar ethnicity facilitates corporate tie-ups and business networks and thus promotes the expansion of ethnic Chinese enterprises within and beyond national boundaries.

A comparison of the three settings would also throw light on various issues raised by transnational studies, which claim to provide major theoretical insights into the nature of capital flows and identity formation among migrants and diasporic individuals. A key question is whether common ethnicity helps engender global flows of capital and information. While transnational studies assume a high degree of diasporic identity, we stress the differences within ethnic communities, both inside and beyond national boundaries. We were also keen to determine how state policies and public discourses on ethnicity sustain, undermine, or re-invent notions of ethnic and national identity. Our primary aim was to further the debate on the nature of identity and of its formation and reformation within a nation state through a material study of ethnic Chinese enterprises.[39]

The State, Migration, and Enterprise Development

In Malaysia, Britain, and Australia, the state has played a key role in determining patterns of enterprise development by ethnic minorities and migrants. In the United Kingdom and Australia, the focus of state policies has been on promoting small—and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs), while in Malaysia the creation of large-scale domestic firms is the primary objective.

In the United Kingdom, there are four main types of Chinese. (1) Hong Kong Chinese from the rural New Territories started arriving in large numbers in the 1960s. Many moved into catering and food wholesaling and retailing. (2) Southeast Asian Chinese, who also started arriving in the 1960s, are mostly middle-class and are usually professionally trained. Some have gone into business, including catering. (3) The newest group arrived in the 1980s from Taiwan and urban Hong Kong; those in business are mainly in technology and manufacturing. (4) British-born Chinese are mostly well-qualified and work in hi-tech industries.[40] Those British Chinese interested in business are more inclined to establish enterprises with members of other ethnic communities. Although both Labour and Conservative-led governments have promoted SMEs, none of the Chinese groups has yet made an impact on the British economy. In the case of all three national settings, most Chinese-owned companies are SMEs.

In Australia, too, most Chinese-owned enterprises are SMEs. A large number of Chinese migrants and investors from abroad own publicly listed firms, but none stands out as a corporate captain. The most prominent firms are controlled by leading ethnic Chinese capitalists from Southeast and East Asia, including Li Ka-shing and Sally Au of Hong Kong, Stanley Ho of Macao, and Robert Kuok, Vincent Tan Chee Yioun, and Tan Chin Nam of Malaysia. Most have a major presence in Sydney's property and hotel sectors, although the city's main Chinese landowners are from Hong Kong. Most business partners of migrants who have become citizens and have an interest in quoted enterprises are white Australians.

The largest British Chinese enterprises, in wholesaling and retailing, are controlled by migrants from Hong Kong. Some firms trade internationally, but we found only two dealing in the import and export of food products. There is no evidence of any investing in launderettes. Unlike in the United States, none of the Chinese or descendants of Chinese who moved into the laundry business in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century managed to build on it. Chinese launderettes still operate in a number of cities but do not seem to function as companies. There is no indication of ethnic Chinese investing in hotels or small-scale accommodation, a sector popular with Chinese migrants in other parts of the world.

The lists of directors and shareholders of the companies in our UK sample provide no evidence of interlocking stock ownership or directorships. Most companies in our sample are family-owned. Some were created and run as partnerships but eventually came under the control of one individual or family. This evolution suggests that such partnerships are not sustainable, a perception common to all three countries under study. Most start-up funds come from personal savings and family members. In the early stages of growth, businesses depend heavily on the support of family members. There is no evidence of access to ethnically based funding. Company records suggest that such firms have little difficulty in securing loans from institutional lenders, including British banks. Few have made use of government grants or other services. We found only one example of financial aid provided on intra-ethnic grounds—but to the mutual advantage, in this case, of both borrower and lender. By providing funds to help ethnic Chinese around the United Kingdom to develop food-retailing outlets, the lender in question, the See Woo Holdings Group, was able to develop a wide distribution network and sustain it over a long period. A rare example of an ethnic Chinese who exploited his ethnicity to create a Chinese-based business center in the United Kingdom is W. W. Yip, a migrant from Hong Kong who started out as a waiter, became a restaurant owner, and then made a name in wholesaling and retailing Chinese food products. Yip is the owner of Britain's largest Chinese enterprise, in terms of sales volume.

In Australia after 1901, the White Australia policy led to a steady decline in the Chinese population. Strict controls channeled the trickle of newcomers into existing businesses, principally restaurants, killing off what had previously been a relatively diverse economy, the product of a tradition among early Chinese immigrants of creative adaptation to opportunity. In the early 1970s, the White Australia policy was abandoned and new immigrants set about transforming the community and its economy.

All the business people interviewed in Australia, both ethnic Chinese migrants and citizens, claimed to get no support from the state. The migrants expect no financial aid, since most came as business migrants with the intention of investing, although everyone mentioned that institutional support for founding enterprises could be better. Most migrants who have developed profitable enterprises had previous business experience. Others who have fared relatively well are professionals and consultants. A rare few have managed to prosper by capturing a niche. One example is Gordon Fu, a migrant from Taiwan who emerged as the owner of a chain of shopping centers in the Brisbane area, catering primarily to Chinese-owned enterprises.

Although most firms operate as family enterprises, informants said that they would need to create ties with non-Chinese for their businesses to expand. As minorities, they have difficulty in securing patronage from non-Asians. Some, however, find it hard to sustain inter-ethnic business relationships and fear being taken over by their white partners, especially by big entrepreneurs. Others, after getting used to their new environment, buy out their white partners. Many said that it is easier to do business in Asia, which has a bigger market and is more competitive, and where competition and the fear of being bought out drives them to work harder.

In Malaysia, where ethnic Chinese dominate SMEs and the government favors developing large Malay-owned firms, SMEs and the Chinese have received little state support. This lack of backing has hindered their development. Although they continue to thrive in the domestic economy, they do not contribute substantially in terms of value-added services, output, or even employment. In the manufacturing sector, SMEs account for more than 90 percent of domestic enterprises but for only 20.9 percent of the value-added services of all manufacturing establishments, 18.9 percent of manufacturing output, and 29.7 percent of employment. Domestic firms do not invest heavily in research and development. They are not known for product innovation and enhancing value-added capabilities.[41]

Big Chinese firms in Malaysia have not attempted to cooperate in business, either domestically or abroad, in spite of the state's failure to support their interests. Chinese SMEs have similarly shown scant inclination to cooperate with other ethnic Chinese. Most owners are not interested in passing on their businesses to their children and would prefer them to become professionals.

In Malaysia, Chinese entrepreneurs have responded in a number of different ways to state intervention in the economy and affirmative action in favor of the Malays. Their responses have a bearing on the way in which their enterprises develop. Some have refused to list their firms publicly on the stock exchange, while others have not increased the capitalization of their enterprises or have incorporated large numbers of companies when expanding, for fear of otherwise attracting the unwelcome attention of powerful politicians. Big Chinese businesses prefer to link up with influential Malay politicians. Chinese firms listed among the largest twenty quoted companies in Malaysia have all enjoyed state patronage.

Despite the actions of the Malay-dominated state, there is little evidence of intra-ethnic business cooperation by Chinese firms, even though Chinese entrepreneurs have a history of intra-ethnic business cooperation, especially among migrants in the colonial period. We have already pointed out that the list of directors and shareholders of the companies studied shows little evidence of interlocking stock ownership or interlocking directorships. Most companies are still run by their founders, usually migrants, and are family-owned. When a new generation takes over, there is evidence of management professionalization and inter-ethnic business ties. Shareholding patterns indicate that Chinese-owned firms function independently of one another. The owners of most large firms have ties with other ethnic groups, especially Malay political leaders. There is evidence of a growth in inter-ethnic business ties among SMEs and new start-ups, especially those established by the generation born in Malaysia.

Networks and Intra-Ethnic Foreign and Domestic Business Ties

Australia and Britain have attracted investment from leading ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs from East and Southeast Asia, but in neither country did we find evidence of corporate tie-ups between these investors. In the United Kingdom, the ways in which ethnic Chinese from

China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Singapore develop their enterprises differ sharply. While Taiwanese companies work primarily in the manufacture and distribution of computer products, most enterprises from mainland China are in international trade. The key areas of investment by ethnic Chinese companies from Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong are hotels, retailing, and property. A small group of firms from Malaysia and Hong Kong have invested in manufacturing, but on a much smaller scale than the companies from Taiwan. Some leading Chinese capitalists from Hong Kong and Singapore have acquired publicly listed companies, probably so that they can use the London Stock Exchange (LSE) to raise capital to fund corporate expansion. There is no evidence of ethnic Chinese from Taiwan or mainland China acquiring interests in quoted companies; nor have any firms been listed on the LSE. In their home countries, Chinese from Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore are more likely to use the stock exchange as a source of funding, an option less frequently chosen by business people from Taiwan.

There is no evidence that Chinese investors from Asia set up joint ventures in the United Kingdom or are tied to one another by interlocking stock ownership and directorates. The areas in which leading Chinese capitalists from Asia invest overlap greatly, but there is evidence of only one interlocking stock ownership tie. The Indonesian Oei Hong Leong has a controlling stake in the publicly listed Bolton Group through his holding company, China Strategic Holdings Ltd. Li Ka-shing's Hutchison Whampoa Ltd of Hong Kong owns about 10 percent of Bolton's equity. Oei seems to play no active part in managing the Group. This overlap in areas of investment in the United Kingdom by Chinese business leaders from Asia has generated far more competition than cooperation. Chinese investors from Asia also compete keenly with each other (as well as with ethnic Chinese migrants and citizens) in Australia, where their main investment is in hotels and property development, primarily in Sydney, Melbourne, and Perth.

There is no evidence of Chinese investors from Asia seeking to establish intra-ethnic ties with British Chinese. The latter do not even act as subcontractors or suppliers to such investors. Some foreign Chinese have used the professional services of British Chinese lawyers, auditors, accountants, or business consultants. These ties are important for securing advice on business opportunities and government policies and for bypassing red tape to expedite investments but have no deeper significance.

These differences in business style suggest that ethnic Chinese investors from Asia find it difficult to agree on how to achieve corporate growth and are unlikely to engage in co-ethnic collaborative ventures. In any case, there is little reason for investors in different business areas to cooperate in corporate deals. Entrepreneurs identify potential business partners by gauging the contribution they can make to developing a new enterprise. If the new venture takes place in a foreign country, the optimal partner is seldom a co-ethnic. Major business initiatives in Britain by leading Chinese entrepreneurs from Asia include Li Ka-shing's venture into telecommunications with British Aerospace. The former Irish Prime Minister, Albert Reynolds, is a director of China Strategic Holdings, in which Li has an interest. Singapore's Ong Beng Seng family has interlocking ownership ties in a company owned by Richard Branson.

Southeast Asian governments have attracted investors from Taiwan and China, but there is no evidence of them cooperating with local ethnic Chinese. In Malaysia, the Taiwanese specialize in setting up SMEs in the electronic and electrical sectors. Taiwanese firms network when they first enter the region. Such networks comprise loose groupings of SMEs brought together by big firms in Taiwan for the manufacture of special items. The networks function as supply chains and subcontracting ties. They benefit all parties engaged in producing a particular product. These Taiwanese SMEs usually belong to several production networks led by different enterprises. The networks operate at multiple levels and evolve constantly, in response to changes in demand. The production lines seldom survive for long as networks. Once the big Taiwanese firms and the SMEs settle down in Southeast Asia, they try to become more profitable, usually by disbanding old networks and creating new ones.[42] The competition within and between these networks contributes to their constant evolution and dismantling. This raises questions about their sustainability. Many subcontractors evolve through a process of vertical integration into producers, because it is more cost-efficient to do so.[43] This process of vertical integration shows that the firms have no great interest in remaining within the production networks.

Some Taiwanese-based networks eventually incorporate Malaysian firms. Taiwanese entrepreneurs like to start by dealing with ethnic

Chinese firms, which dominate the SME sector and the electronic and electrical industry.[44] Ultimately, only those firms that can produce cheap quality components stay in networks. The emergence of new patterns of production as a result of technological development also contributes to the networks' changing structure. Firms with most access to new technology can deliver goods quickest. The larger enterprises can reduce competition by taking over their competitors. Some SME suppliers initially linked with large-scale enterprises go on to compete with them. Even partners within a single enterprise tend to break away, form their own businesses, and emerge as competitors.[45] Again, intra-ethnic competition is the main trend among Chinese enterprises. Co-ethnic cooperation for the benefit of the community, the ostensible basis on which networks form, fails to explain these ties. Even in the face of competition and takeovers SMEs are loath to merge, however much it might be in their interests to do so. Ethnic identity is important, if at all, mainly when an investor first enters a country or area of business.

State Policies, Identity Formation, and Generational Change: The Impact on Enterprise Development

In all three countries, state policies have had an important bearing on integration, identity formation, citizenship, and rights. Australia has long promoted multiculturalism rather than assimilation. Malaysia has implemented policies based on affirmative action. These policies reinforce ethnic identities, though the ultimate objective is ostensibly to correct social imbalances to achieve national unity. Britain has rarely promoted affirmative action or multiculturalism, though governments have sometimes tried to develop policies that are more inclusive and responsive to the needs of ethnic minorities. These various approaches give rise to a paradox—there is some inclusion of ethnic minorities into mainstream society, but a degree of exclusion is still experienced.

In Malaysia, ethnic minorities focus not on citizenship but on equal rights for all citizens.[46] Ethnic Chinese there have a strong national identity and resent the implication that they are in some way attached to China. Most members of the majority indigenous group in Malaysia are unaware of the extent to which minorities identify with Malaysia, mainly because government policies reinforce the idea of ethnic difference.[47] In

Britain and Australia, a key issue is migrants' citizenship and their sense of national identity. In Britain and Australia, as in Southeast Asia, the issue of identity is more complex among migrants' descendants.

Generational change bears on the manner of enterprise development. For migrants to Australia and Britain, enterprise has served as a means of achieving upward social mobility and coping with isolation and alienation. In both countries, the children of Chinese immigrants excel at school and university and are disproportionately represented in the professions and the hi-tech sector. Few want to take over their parents' businesses, especially the SMEs, which they associate with a life of drudgery. Most parents feel the same way and want their children to become professionals. Even those who own larger enterprises say that if the business continues to thrive, they will sell out and retire. Some argue that since they are business owner-occupiers, they can continue to work as long as they like and need not depend on their children in old age.

All parents interviewed agreed that their children's identity differed from their own. Comments by parents in Australia suggest a difference on this issue between the children of migrants from Southeast Asia and those from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China. The sense of Chinese identity is stronger among children of East Asian parents, though even their parents worry about a possible loss of it. But however uncomfortable the idea makes them, none wishes to "go home."

Most Chinese parents in Australia send their children to Chinese-language schools on weekends and speak Chinese at home. Some respondents occasionally send their children to China or Taiwan, to help them retain their culture and language. Most define "culture" in terms of language skills and value systems. For migrants from Southeast Asia, the stress is on the need to know one's Chinese heritage rather than Chinese language and cultural habits. The chief identity markers for Southeast Asian Chinese are the family reunion at Chinese New Year and food. Religion is less important. Most respondents are either Christians or subscribe to no faith. All claim that their children have developed a strong national (Malaysian, Singaporean, or Australian) identity, while some admit that their children do not see themselves as "Chinese" or "Asian." Chinese in Australia say their children get confused when white children question their identity. Some fear that the resulting ambivalence might lead to conflict at school or in the family.

In all three countries, the concept of "territory" is inextricably linked to national identity. Where they live has a major bearing on identity reformation among immigrants and on identity formation among their descendants. In Australia, most long-time residents have come to adopt an Australian identity. Their ethnic identity—rather than their former national identity—becomes important to them in their old age, but few could say why. Some respondents felt that Asian Australians are not made to feel truly Australian and that the promotion of multiculturalism prevents Anglo-Celts from viewing non-whites as Australian. Many attribute this failing to the actions of political leaders. They question politicians' tendency to argue that Australia needs migrants' investments and skills to drive the economy. By portraying migrants as "the other," as "customers" who need to be cultivated to help open up the domestic economy to new markets, such arguments prevent the majority community from recognizing minorities or migrants as citizens. Critics say the emphasis is on "overcoming difference," whereas it should be on learning how to "accept difference."

In all three countries, generational change threatens the survival of family firms. Most descendants of the founders of SMEs resist joining the enterprise, which eventually has to close down or be sold off. Some descendants try to recruit professional managers, because such managers are better educated or equipped to develop the enterprise or better able to work with non-Chinese. The development of inter-ethnic management and business ties leads eventually to big changes in ownership and control, a reflection of the companies' growing organizational complexity.

Although "family businesses" are the rule among diasporic Chinese, they have little or nothing to do with Chinese culture. They emerge because of the problems migrants face in securing start-up capital and hiring labor. The change from family management to professional management happens in enterprises throughout the world.[48] If this evolutionary pattern is not yet evident among Chinese enterprises, it is because most are still under the control of the founding or the second generation. In other words, they are still young.

Conclusions

This study of patterns of the formation and evolution of firms owned by ethnic Chinese provides no evidence for the existence—or prospect—of interlocking networks of transnational capital. In all three countries, we came across more inter-ethnic than intra-ethnic business ties. Transnational business ties are not cultivated on the basis of common ethnic and cultural identity. Our research findings do not support the view that business networks are tightly-knit and embedded in sets of interlocking ownership and interlocking directorships with strong ethnic, solidaristic, and cultural dimensions. Where intra-ethnic networks do form, they are based on a firm's capacity to contribute to the production of a particular product. They exist in a state of flux, with little commitment on the part of members to help each other grow. There is no evidence of mergers even in the face of takeovers by big firms. The forming of such mutually beneficial cooperative networks is not new, nor is it unique to the Chinese. Similar subcontracting ties and production networks can be found among indigenous enterprises in Europe, especially in France.

Chinese enterprises in all three countries are family-owned, a supposed hallmark of Chinese business. In the case of SMEs, most descendants of migrants show little apparent interest in maintaining these enterprises on a family basis, and this form of ownership rarely outlasts the migrant generation. Where they do take the firms over, business ties become increasingly inter-ethnic. Like production networks, they are established on the basis of mutual benefit. In Malaysia, inter-ethnic business ties are cultivated to achieve access to resources as a result of the government's long-running promotion of affirmative action. Although this policy discriminates against Chinese enterprises, it has not generated intra-ethnic business cooperation. In all three countries, the most evident trait is the desire of Chinese business people to develop their enterprises independently. Most partnerships, even those forged on an intra-ethnic basis, prove unsustainable in the long-term.

We reached two main conclusions. First, we found more evidence of competition than of cooperation, thus contradicting the widely held view that the dynamism of ethnic Chinese enterprises results from intra-ethnic business cooperation. Second, in all three countries we found more evidence of inter-ethnic corporate ties than of intra-ethnic business networks. Competition among ethnic Chinese firms was intense, especially given that resources are limited and the markets in all three countries are small.

Competition rather than cooperation explains the growth of ethnic Chinese firms and their potential to emerge as a dynamic force, nationally and internationally. Even so, ethnic Chinese enterprise is rarely seen as innovative in terms of new brand products. Very few Chinese-owned companies in Malaysia are associated with a brand product of international repute. There is no evidence that any Chinese-owned firm in Britain or Australia has created a national or international name for itself by producing a particular product. One reason is that many of these enterprises diversify their ventures rather than focus on just one thing. Another is that they function—especially in Australia and Britain—primarily as a means of social mobility. Although business migrants in Australia and Britain have the potential to develop productive enterprises, they rarely invest in research and development of the sort necessary to create new technology or produce quality goods.

Our findings call into question the existence of a distinct type of "Chinese capital" and "ethnic enterprise." Firms that function as ethnic enterprises are family-owned, deal in products that can be classified as ethnic, and cater to an ethnic community. These traits define firms incorporated by migrants when they first arrive abroad. Entrepreneurs set up such companies because they are effective in the initial stages of migration. All of them—even those that operate in Chinatown—aspire and endeavor to enlarge their clientele beyond the ethnic community. By the time the second generation takes over, few retain much of their original character, in terms of market and organizational structure. The term—"ethnic enterprise" has little relevance to companies owned by ethnic communities long settled in a country, like the Chinese in Southeast Asia. Our research therefore suggests the need to "de-essentialize Chinese capital"—to challenge the idea that all Chinese businesses follow a common path of development or possess unique characteristics that facilitate their growth.

These findings about the evolution of "Chinese capital" contribute to the debate on identity formation and throw tenets of transnational theory into question. Arguments about the importance of ethnic identity as a business support are valid only at the point of migration. Migrants see ethnicity as a tool they can exploit to help cope with their new environments or spot business opportunities. Once acclimatized, they no longer have the same need. They carry abroad memories of the homeland, but few return. They deplore the migrant rootlessness and "transiliency" that transnational studies celebrate and they long for a stable environment to raise families in. Their descendants identify overwhelmingly with place of birth rather than of ancestry.

Chinese identity in all three countries has become progressively more inclusive. Some Chinese have acculturated to the host society; some sub-ethnic groups have merged to create a new transcendent Chinese identity; ethnic Chinese from Southeast Asia in Britain and Australia identify with their country of immediate origin rather than with their ancestral clan or hometown. By reinforcing notions of "host country" and alien "belonging," the thesis that ethnic ties persist unchanged across the generations does a disservice to those who would promote ethnic co-existence in multi-racial societies. The role of the state looms large in discussions on migration, enterprise development, and integration and ultimately shapes how societies and capital evolve within a country.

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