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Family, Gender, Ethnicity, and Pragmatism in Contemporary Diasporic Chinese Entrepreneurship

An Introduction to the Special Issue

家庭，性别，族裔和务实性与当代海外华人创业 特刊简述

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Abstract

Entrepreneurship has been an integral part of the long-standing history of Chinese emigration and a central force in diasporic development. This special issue includes six articles and one research report pertaining to contemporary patterns and emergent themes of diasporic Chinese entrepreneurship. As the special issue editor, I highlight the distinctive characteristics of diasporic Chinese entrepreneurship and discuss the significance of considering the interplay of family, gender, ethnicity, and pragmatism in the study of diasporic Chinese entrepreneurship. I then provide an overview of the works included in this introduction.

Keywords

diasporic Chinese entrepreneurship – family business – ethnic network – gendered entrepreneurship – intergenerational transmission – pragmatism

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摘要

创业一直是悠久的华人移民历史一个重要的组成部分，也是海外华人社会发展的核心动力。本特刊精选了六篇论文和一份研究报告，内容涉及当代海外华人创业的模式和新的论题。作为特刊的主编，我简要地指出海外华人企业的特点以及探讨家庭、性别、族裔和务实性等因素的相互关系在海外华人创业研究中的重要性，并为读者提供了本特刊论文的综述。

关键词

海外华人创业 – 家族企业 – 族裔网络 – 性别化创业 – 代际传递 – 务实性

1 Introduction

The idea of a special issue on diasporic Chinese entrepreneurship was stimulated by participants in the International Symposium on Global Chinese Entrepreneurship, hosted virtually by Asia Pacific Center (APC), University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), held virtually on 20–21 November 2020. The symposium focused on contemporary patterns of entrepreneurship by diasporic Chinese, who are defined in this special issue as Chinese migrants (including temporary, permanent, circular, or undocumented migrants) who live and work outside their ancestral homelands, together with the descendants of these immigrants. Diasporic Chinese entrepreneurship falls under the rubric of immigrant or ethnic entrepreneurship, which has long been an important social phenomenon for scholarly inquiry. Often the concept of “ethnic entrepreneurship” and that of “immigrant entrepreneurship” overlap because the majority of immigrant entrepreneurs are themselves members of ethnic minorities in their host countries. As is well known in the research literature, immigrants are generally more visible than natives, including those of their own ethnic groups, in their engagement with entrepreneurship (Light 1972; Nazareno et al. 2018; Valdez 2011; Waldinger et al. 1990; Zhou 1992). The stereotypical images of immigrant- or minority-owned enterprises are small-sized and family-owned, concentrated in retail and service industries in the informal economy. Immigrant entrepreneurs are either ethnic-enclave entrepreneurs who do business in their own ethnic communities with deep social relations with their ethnic group, or middle-minority entrepreneurs who run stores in non-coethnic spaces with a fragile relationship to the communities, often underprivileged and marginalized, in which their businesses are located

(Zhou 2004). However, in the era of accelerated globalization and the cross-border movements of people, capital, and goods, immigrant entrepreneurship has grown out of its conventional boundaries of ethnic enclaves, local markets, and nation-states. For many immigrants, entrepreneurship is no longer a force-choice means of economic survival but a pathway to upward social mobility proactively pursued and practiced. Their enterprises have also grown size, scale, scope, heterogeneity, formality, and institutionalization (Zhou 2004; Zhou and Liu 2015).

Entrepreneurship has been an integral part of the long-standing history of Chinese emigration and a central force in diasporic development (Wang 1991; Zhou and Liu 2015). Chinese merchants and traders, also referred to as *huashang* (华商), dominated much of the emigration from China prior to the large-scale labor migration of the mid-19th century (Wang 1991). In the past, overseas trade was largely concentrated in Southeast Asia, or the Nanyang (南洋, literally, “South Ocean”), and required that *huashang* physically travelled from a sending community in the Fujian or Guangdong provinces of China to a foreign place in the Nanyang and back due to the underdeveloped state of communications and transportation. *Huashang* used to take with them workers who were mostly their relatives or fellow-villagers. They stayed overseas for a while and then returned home to prepare for the next journey. Such circular migrations led to the formation of distinct Chinese communities, which in turn served as centers and marketplaces for *huashang* and their resettled coethnics (Zhou and Benton 2017). In the process, *huashang* grew their family businesses, established intricate systems of kinship networks and ethnic organizations, and planted seeds for further Chinese trade and emigration (Tong 2014; Wang 1991; Zhou and Benton 2017). In fact, the *huashang* pattern has dominated Chinese emigration and transnationalism in historical and contemporary times (Poston and Zhang 2021; Yeung 2005; Zhou 2017). Entrepreneurs are well represented among contemporary Chinese immigrants, or *xinyimin* (新移民), in developing countries in Africa, Asia, Southern and Eastern Europe, and Latin America.²

Diasporic Chinese entrepreneurship (DCE), or the *huashang* phenomenon, has remained one of the most fascinating subject matters in the study of Chinese overseas mainly because of the predominance of the *huashang* pattern in migration, resettlement, and community formation. As the special issue editor, I briefly highlight the distinctive characteristics of DCE and discuss the

2 See chapters on *xinyimin* in Ghana (Karsten Giese), Zimbabwe (Xiaolei Shen), the Philippines (Fan Dai), Cambodia (James Chin), Spain (Minghuan Li), Czech Republic (Horalek et al.), Latin America (Weinong Gao), and Cuba (Evelyn Hu-DeHart) in Zhou 2017.

significance of considering the interplay of family, gender, ethnicity, and pragmatism in the study of DCE. I then provide an overview of the works included.

2 Unique Characteristics of Chinese Diasporic Entrepreneurship

The existing literature has highlighted several unique characteristics of DCE. First, DCE is rooted in the Chinese family. Influenced by Confucianism, which emphasizes order, hierarchy, patriarchy, and the primacy of the family, many overseas Chinese enterprises start out as family businesses and have remained such even after growing in size and achieving extraordinary success. The internal organization of these enterprises is insular and atomistic, with control and decision-making centralized in the patriarch, the father, and administration and management leadership in the hands of immediate family members or blood kin (Lam et al. 1994; Tong 2014). Family members or kin are believed to be more trustworthy than outsiders and are expected to be loyal and filial to the patriarch and the family, and interpersonal relations are regulated by the norms of self-sacrifice, preserving “face,” and maintaining family honor. One of the adult children is obliged to take over and carry on the family business and the patriarch transmits tacit knowledge, business secrets, and *guanxi* to the children in due time (also see Lee, Lin, and Han et al. in this issue). Patriarchal family relations, trust and loyalty among family members and blood kin, and centralized control form the fundamental nexus of DCE. However, such an organizational structure contrasts sharply with Western and modern business models and can reduce competitiveness and constrain further growth in the contemporary globalized business world (Lam et al. 1994). Moreover, the children and grandchildren of first-generation immigrant entrepreneurs who have grown up in sociocultural circumstances vastly different from those of their parents and grandparents, obtained higher education and professional credentials in the West, and acquired a Western or cosmopolitan outlook would likely break away from family business or adopt Western or modern corporate models, even if they remain respectful of their parents’ or grandparents’ businesses. Articles by Han et al., Lin, and Lee in this issue shed new light on changes and intergenerational transmission in the entrepreneurial Chinese family.

Second, women are the backbone of the diasporic Chinese business family. Immigrant Chinese women, especially married women, play a central role in DCE, even though business ownership is in the name of man, the patriarch, and even though the leadership front appears to be male dominant. Immigrant Chinese women are often found to “hold up half the sky” (Zhou 1992). They hold the purse for the family and manage family business

finance. There is some truth in the popular saying, not just in Chinese, that “behind every successful businessman there stands a woman.” For example, it is commonly observed that the woman who sits behind the cash register of a Chinese restaurant in the diaspora is likely to be the *laobanniang* (老板娘 the owner’s wife). The existing literature shows that immigrant women participate at higher rates in the labor market, not only as wage workers but also as businesswomen, than native women (Fernandez-Kelly and Garcia 1992; Perez 1986; Valdez 2011). Although they are doubly disadvantaged as immigrants and women in host societies, many immigrant Chinese women proactively seek employment and self-employment outside the home sphere while performing their expected gendered duties, such as doing unpaid housework and providing care for children and the elderly care at home, without feeling exploited (Low and Chiang 2007; Zhou and Nordquist 1994). Women in business families are indeed doubly and even triply loaded with unpaid housework, work, and management responsibilities in order to hold the family together. They are not unconcerned about their own rights and individual interests but simply set priorities for their families. In the process of adapting economically to host societies, immigrant Chinese women are able to translate their wage work and hard-earned dollars into business ownership and home ownership, making indispensable contributions to uplifting the socioeconomic status of their families within just one generation, and feel empowered and proud of doing so (Low and Chiang 2007; Zhou 1992; Zhou and Nordquist 1994). In this issue, You and Zhou offers a case study of Chinese immigrant women in a female-dominated industry – nail salons – in New York City; and Zani tells the story of how married Chinese migrant women in Taipei carve out an e-business on their smartphones, which embeds gendered emotions not only in economic activities but also in the products they sell.

Third, DCE is embedded in the diasporic Chinese community and its intricate system of social networks. Coethnicity epitomizes this embeddedness. At the outset, *huashang* and their businesses provided the material foundation from which diasporic communities emerged. In turn, diasporic communities along with an array of interlocking ethnic institutions, based primarily on family and blood kin, friendship, and place of origin, such as family and kin associations, hometown associations, merchant-labor associations, and sworn brotherhoods, provide tangible and intangible resources to coethnic folks in socioculturally unfamiliar and often hostile host societies (Liu 1998). Ethnic institutions forge family- or kin-based networks of information, credit or *xinyong* (信用), and interpersonal *guanxi* (关系) and create mechanisms of support and control, in the forms coethnic affinity, enforceable trust, and bounded solidarity, to guide interpersonal and inter-organizational relations

and regulate internal competition to ensure continual capital accumulation, economic growth, and community development (Portes and Zhou 1992). Ethnic entrepreneurs rely on these networks to engage in economic transactions, gaining access to labor, capital, supply chains, and market outlets, and attain reputation and leadership positions through ethnic involvement (Liu 1998; Portes and Zhou 1992; Zhou and Liu 2015; also see Song and Li in this issue). In fact, intraethnic rather than interethnic cooperativeness, which is accentuated by migration and diasporic experiences, is found to be significant and unique in DCE (Chuah et al. 2016). While networks that pivot around family, blood kin, and friendship relations are manifested in strong trust-based ties, however, these networks may thus be less beneficial, of less value, and more constraining than weak ties that are occupationally based and bridged externally (Liu 1998; Tong 2014).

Fourth, DCE is generally pragmatic and outcome-focused. Historically, many host countries in which overseas Chinese resettled were hostile and legally exclusive, such as those in colonial Southeast Asia and North America during the era of Chinese exclusion. Under extremely harsh circumstances, the pragmatic orientation of DCE was reflected in entrepreneurs' survival strategies, usually through taking the path of least resistance to develop ethnic enclave economies serving the survival needs of coethnics or to carve out niches in the local economy unwanted by natives but meeting high consumer demands of non-coethnics. This survival strategy was effective and resilient because it was supported by diasporic organizations and networks. In turn, business development further strengthened and sustained diasporic organizations and networks (Zhou 1992; Zhou 2017). In contemporary times, this pragmatic orientation of DCE is greatly intensified and enlarged through tapping into business opportunities that exist in "grey" areas of the local or national economy, and venturing into uncharted territories in the primary sectors of the local, national, and global economy. More importantly, pragmatism encourages and facilitates innovation. Many diasporic Chinese enterprises, even highly successful family businesses, open up for reform, diversification, and innovation of their activities and practices that may contradict Confucian values and conventional norms (Lam et al. 1994). Lin's comparative study (this issue) of Taiwanese entrepreneurs, or *taishang* (台商), in Dongguan, China, and Jakarta, Indonesia, find that contextual variations give rise to distinct cultural adaptation and changes in *taishang* communities in the two cities. Wang and Chen's study (this issue) demonstrates how immigrant Chinese entrepreneurs in France made drastic structural changes in their enterprises to meet the challenges they face during the Covid-19 global pandemic. Song and Li's study (this issue) shows that, even though lamb meat was considered unpalatable by

ethnic Koreans, Chinese Koreans, or *Joseonjok* (朝鲜族), turned a non-coethnic street food – Xinjiang-style barbecue-lamb-skewers – into a Korean gourmet food and globalized it through innovation and adaptation.

Last but not least, DCE has remained inherently linked to the ancestral homeland, China. Like DCE, Chinese diasporic relations with China have remained pragmatic, flexible, and network-connected (Lever-Tracy et al. 1996). Although China was closed off to the outside world for thirty years from 1949–1978, these relations were rapidly rejuvenated by China's open-door policy. Diasporic Chinese entrepreneurs were the first to rush to China, and relied on coethnic affinity and the centuries-old diasporic networks to capitalize on the opportunities created by China's market reform and economic development (Wang 1993; Liu 1994). The impact was remarkable as near three quarters of foreign direct investments in China in the 1980s were made by Chinese in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia, and other multinational corporations used the Chinese diaspora as a gateway to China (Wang 1993). The linkages established between diaspora capital and entrepreneurship led to economic booms in migrant hometowns and villages in the coastal provinces of Guangdong, Fujian, and Zhejiang, which contributed to the economic take off in the entire country (Lever-Tracy et al. 1996). As China rises, diasporic engagements with China, mainly through transnational entrepreneurship, have become more frequent, routine, intense, and mutually beneficial (Lever-Tracy et al. 1996; Liu 1998; Zhou and Liu 2015; Zhou 2017). Diasporic Chinese entrepreneurs not only derive an economic profit from their investment but their Chinese cultural heritage and Chinese identity acquire a new meaning in the course of their own intense transnational engagement with China. For example, native-born Chinese Singaporeans going to China to do business invoke their Chinese ethnicity and reaffirm it as a result even though Chinese ethnicity is deemphasized in Singapore's nation building (Wang and Warn 2019; Zhou and Liu 2015). Many *xinyimin* aspire to become entrepreneurs because of the perceived and real economic opportunities in China.

As in the past, contemporary Chinese immigrants have continued to exploit entrepreneurship as an effective alternative strategy to circumvent linguistic, socio-cultural, and structural barriers, as well as other disadvantages associated with immigrant or minority status, all of which block immigrants' direct and full integration into the mainstream society and labor market and prevent them from moving ahead in host societies. In contemporary times, however, they have also done so proactively, taking advantage of new opportunities that are open to them as a result of economic globalization, homeland development, and immigrant integration (Tong 2014; Zhou and Liu 2015). As articles included in this special issue show, family relations, gendered patterns, *guanxi*

networks, pragmatism, and the China factor interact to affect DCE. However, variations in time and space complicate the understanding of these intersectional influences. Also, diasporic Chinese entrepreneurs form a tremendously diverse group in terms of demographics (e.g., generation, age cohort, marital status, etc.), socioeconomic characteristics, place of origin, migration and resettlement history, and position in diasporic Chinese communities. The study of DCE should thus be mindful of the differences in relation to the entrepreneurs' or aspiring entrepreneurs' own profiles, the resources that they command, and the exposure to entrepreneurial culture and tacit knowledge of their families, as well as the kinds of diasporic communities and the particular economic circumstances in which they find themselves (Wang and Warn 2018). Furthermore, DCE is embedded in a variety of contexts that shape business environments, opportunity structures, and entrepreneurial success. Multi-layered factors – individual agency and socioeconomic characteristics at the micro level, ethnic networks and local labor markets at the meso level, and government policies and politico-institutional frameworks at the macro-level – in the countries of resettlement *and* the ancestral homeland work simultaneously to exert influence on DCE (You and Zhou 2018; see also You and Zhou this issue).

3 The Special Issue at a Glance

This special issue starts with an article by Tianlong You and Min Zhou, who advance an analytical framework of simultaneous embeddedness. Drawing on the theory of mixed embeddedness developed by Kloosterman and associates (1999), You and Zhou argue that the broader structural contexts within which immigrant entrepreneurial activities are embedded are gendered and transnational and that attention should thus be paid not only to the host country but also to the home countries. Based on a study of Chinese-owned nail salons in New York City, the authors apply their innovative framework of simultaneous embeddedness to explain how gender patterns of a seemingly localized industry are affected by the intersection of three levels of transnational dynamics. At the micro-level, the pre-migration socioeconomic status of female business owners and the kind of social networks, family and kinship networks in particular, derived from it influence potential entrepreneurs' ability to mobilize and reproduce resources in the host country, in myriad forms of labor, capital, information and other informal business information. At the meso-level, local labor market conditions in China and the U.S. are interconnected. Access to exploitable immigrant labor for Chinese business owners in New York is directedly

and indirectly affected by changes in the local labor market in migrant-sending communities in China, such as the elevation of educational attainment among young women, skills mismatches, and labor shortages due to rapidly declining fertility. At the macro-level, broad politico-institutional factors in China, such as government policies on population control, study or tourism abroad, and entrepreneurial innovation, and structural factors in U.S., such as visa policies for international students and tourists as well as local rules and regulations, interact to enable or constrain entrepreneurial endeavors.

Beatrice Zani's paper takes gender further and deeper into migrants' entrepreneurial pursuits and activities. Based on a case study of Chinese marriage-migrant women in Taipei, Zani zooms in on an emerging phenomenon of e-commerce, paying special attention to gender and emotions, and examines how migrant women who experience the usual barriers associated with migrant status carve out a viable business niche online for the purposes of both economic adaptation and self-empowerment. She argues that the geographies of entrepreneurial activities are highly gendered, marked by women's migratory paths as well as their emotions associated with multiple affiliations, senses of belonging and attachment, and lived experiences that transcend geographies. Upon arrival in a new city with vastly different social, economic, and politico-legal circumstances but a shared language and culture on the surface, Chinese marriage-migrant women, whose Taiwanese husbands are often traditionally-minded, are doubly disadvantaged by patriarchal gender relations within the family and marginalized in the larger Taiwanese society. Rather than passively accepting adversities in resettlement, these women manipulate emotions to carve out a viable economic niche by developing virtual commercial circuits across the Taiwan Strait to sell "contested" commodities whose circulations transgress trading rules and borders as well as markets and marketplaces. Through *Wechat* – a widely used social media platform in mainland China, these women entrepreneurs rebuild, or develop, cross-border networks to capture rising consumer demands in Taipei and get relatively easy access to supply chains in mainland China. In the process, they manage to achieve their goal of economic independence, while conforming to and efficiently performing their gender role in the home.

The paper "Capitalizing on Opportunities during the Covid-19 Pandemic" by Simeng Wang and Xiabing Chen explores how ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs in France responded to and coped with challenges they have faced during the global pandemic. Based on an empirical analysis of ethnic-Chinese businesses in five major industrial sectors (import/export, retail, catering, hotel, and tobacco) of the French economy, the authors show that business transitions had already been underway in the sense of adopting hybrid forms of online

and offline business, hiring beyond ethnic networks, and paying attention to the host country's policy directions and that the pandemic created two unprecedented opportunities – fostering production locally and exploring other low-risk sectors previously untapped by ethnic Chinese. The study suggests that business transitions among Chinese entrepreneurs in France are influenced not merely by economic rationality but by the intersection of new immigration dynamics and the social engagement of immigrant entrepreneurs themselves, dynamics and engagement of a sort that crossed cultural, institutional, and nation-state borders even before the pandemic, have continued to cross them during it, and will carry on doing so in the post-pandemic future.

Changzoo Song and Haiying Li's study explores how a traditional Xinjiang-style ethnic food crosses ethnic boundaries and becomes Koreanized and is globalized by Korean Chinese, or *Joseonjok*, entrepreneurs. Based on data from various online and offline media sources of *Joseonjok* communities in China, South Korea, and Japan and interviews with more than twenty *Joseonjok* barbecue lamb skewer restaurateurs and consumers and fieldwork in Yanbian and Qingdao, China, Song and Li take a transnational approach to examine the relationship between ethnicity and entrepreneurship in the context of migration and globalization. They find that *Joseonjok*'s business success is largely due to their multi-lingual capacity and transnational coethnic networks, including coethnic ties to South Korea and Korean diasporas around the world. Coethnic networks are built and expanded through cross-border migrations, which in turn facilitate the Koreanization and globalization of a traditionally non-coethnic food. This study highlights the crucial role that coethnic capital plays in business formation and success while shedding new light on our understanding of the broad impacts of cross-space migration and cross-ethnicization through entrepreneurial innovation.

Ping Lin's paper, "School as an Entrepreneurial Enclave," is a comparative study of community building among *taishang* – Taiwanese migrant entrepreneurs – in two different host-society contexts. When *taishang* move west to mainland China and south to Indonesia to work as entrepreneurs and firm managers or to accompany family members, they build their diasporic community by establishing Taiwanese business associations or chambers of commerce and schools. Taiwanese schools are for *taishang* children, in which the Taiwanese national curriculum is prioritized and strictly followed. Based on a comparative study of two ethnic schools in Dongguan and Jakarta, Lin explores how entrepreneurial culture gets reproduced and transmitted through ethnic institutions. He finds that extracurricular activities in these schools aim not only at maintaining "Taiwanese culture," which is part of traditional Confucianism, in general, but also at promoting specifically "Taiwanese entrepreneurship,"

or *taishang* culture, which places an emphasis on local adaptation and flexible cooperation. Lin finds that this *taishang* culture is not only maintained and consolidated through activities of the business associations, but also get reproduced by the various non-curricular activities of the schools. Moreover, *taishang* culture varies by place and is adapted to local circumstance. *Taishang* culture in Dongguan is much more visible and high-profile than in Jakarta. The findings suggest that ethnic schools are not just sites for children's education but are also important ethnic institutions for consolidating, mobilizing, and reproducing entrepreneurial culture, which is shaped by local context.

The article, "Transgenerational Intent of Taiwanese Business Families in Brisbane, Australia," by Stone Han, Artemis Ching-Fang Chang, and Hsi-Mei Chung, addresses a question about the intergenerational transfer of ownership in family business. The authors develop an analytical framework to examine how differences between home country and host country in terms of family logic – a system of cultural values, beliefs, and norms, roles, relationships, and meanings that people enact in the sphere of family life – affect transgenerational intent in family business succession. They find that, due to exposure to conflicting family logics in different contexts, immigrant families vary on how parents and children relate to each other, and that parent-child relationships, especially in regard to parental role in children's career development, can significantly strengthen or weaken the desire to transfer family business ownership to the next generation. The study highlights the interactive process of meaning-making in business families that influences the continuity and succession of family business.

Kean Yew Lee's research report, "Still a Chinese Family Business?" tackles the issue of the intergenerational succession of diasporic Chinese family businesses (CFBs) from a different angle, focusing on the role of tacit knowledge and innovation. Tracking the intergenerational patterns of four exceptional multigenerational Chinese-owned businesses in the food industry in Malaysia, Lee shows how CFBs, initially started up as small enterprises by the immigrant generation, successfully grow across generations in size, scale, diversity, and market through the codification of the family's tacit knowledge – values, norms, trust, networks, management styles, and trade or business secrets – and innovative practices. Lee's analysis suggests that the success of diasporic CFBs depends not merely on intra-family resources, intraethnic networks, and an ethnic-specific market, but on the intersection of ethnicity and innovation through which skills and knowledge are accumulated and improved, thereby adding value to the product originally produced by the founder and expanding the market by incorporating the best resources from family legacy and professional management.

This special issue aims to shed new light on the understanding of diasporic Chinese entrepreneurship in the era of accelerated globalization, the rise of China, and a growing Chinese diaspora that has sustained far more than three generations. In the case of new Chinese immigrants, their children – the second generation, and people of Chinese descent in their or their ancestors' adopted homelands – have in some cases chosen entrepreneurship, but many no longer do so merely as a forced choice for survival but rather as a conscious strategy to effectively capture new opportunities and to, capitalize on unique human, cultural, social, and institutional resources for betterment and upward social mobility. Findings from the studies included in this special issue suggest that ethnicity, gender, family legacy, cultural practices, social and transnational networks, integration into the host society, and innovation are all important interactive factors to consider in understanding the origin, success, and sustainability or continuity of diasporic Chinese entrepreneurship.

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