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Chinese Entrepreneurship in Context

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to join the current research on the Chinese entrepreneurial ethic on two counts. First, we shall review the literature and identify the ambiguities in the current conceptualizations of Chinese entrepreneurial ethic. It is our suggestion that there exists the tension between, on the one hand, an emphasis on strategizing behaviour and, on the other, a tendency to insist on a culturalist collimation in the current discussion. We shall contend that existing research largely supports the strategic perspective. Furthermore, it is argued that, in order to grasp the meaning of Chinese entrepreneurship, one must place it in its social context and see it not as a value for defining ends of actions but as a tool for developing action strategies. Secondly, drawing upon survey data on social mobility in contemporary Hong Kong, we shall examine the construction of the Chinese entrepreneurial strategy in the context of social stratification and opportunity structure. Our findings suggest that entrepreneurship can best be conceived as an option of mobility strategy in an economy characterized by rapid growth and the predominance of small business. Moreover, in our analysis of entrepreneurship as a mobility strategy, we shall point out that running a small business is by no means the only channel of social mobility in contemporary Hong Kong. Equally important is the strategy of credentialism and bureaucratic career. By placing the Chinese entrepreneurial ethic in its social context, we are able to see its connection with other strategies of social advancement.

Repeatedly we have seen research findings suggesting that the Chinese populations in Taiwan and Hong Kong (see, for example, Gates, 1979; Harrell, 1985; Shieh, 1989 and 1992; Stites, 1985; Wong, 1986 and 1988a), and Overseas Chinese in various parts of the world (for instance, India, see Basu, 1991; and for a general review, see Mackie, 1992) have strong drives towards self-employment. There exists, as contended by various researchers of Chinese economic culture and behaviour, an entrepreneurial ethic shared by the Chinese, which constitutes an important

driving force underlying the phenomenal growth of the economies of Taiwan and Hong Kong and the economic achievement of the Overseas Chinese communities. Although these researchers have not come to any agreement concerning how such an entrepreneurial ethic should be conceptualized, they do unanimously regard the Chinese as having the orientation to place high value on running one's own business. Entrepreneurship is, indeed, "a way of life" for the Chinese (Basu, 1991:236).

This paper is an attempt to join the current research on the Chinese entrepreneurial ethic on two counts. First, we shall review the literature and identify the ambiguities in the current conceptualizations of Chinese entrepreneurial ethic. It is our suggestion that there exists in the current discussion the tension between, on the one hand, an emphasis on the aspect of strategizing in the concept of entrepreneurship and, on the other, a tendency towards a more culturalist collimation. We shall contend that existing research largely supports the strategic perspective. Furthermore, at the theoretical level, it is also argued that in order to grasp the meaning of Chinese entrepreneurship, one must place it in its social context and see it not as a value for defining ends of actions but as a tool for developing action strategies (cf., Granovetter, 1985; Swidler, 1986). Secondly, drawing upon survey data on social mobility in contemporary Hong Kong,[1] we shall examine the construction of the Chinese entrepreneurial strategy in the context of social stratification and opportunity structure. Our findings suggest that entrepreneurship can best be conceived as an option of mobility strategy in an economy characterized by rapid growth and the predominance of small production and business units. Moreover, in our analysis of entrepreneurship as a mobility strategy, we shall point out that running a small business is by no means the only channel of social mobility in contemporary Hong Kong. Equally important is the strategy of credentialism and bureaucratic career. By placing the Chinese entrepreneurial ethic in its social context, we are able to see its connection with other strategies of social advancement.

Entrepreneurial Ethics: Values or Strategies?

One of the attractive elements of the notion of entrepreneurship is that it captures the dialectics of structure and action. It serves as "a kind of fulcrum between two theories — the structural, based on institutions, and the cultural based on sociocultural values" (Redding, 1988:102). This emphasis on the interplay of structural and cultural factors is well reflected in the existing literature. So, despite his emphasis on the cultural dimension of the question, as indicated by the book title *The Spirit of Chinese Capitalism* (1990), Redding has no hesitation in noting the relevance of the socio-economic environment of the Overseas Chinese communities to the structuring of economic orientation and behaviour and the significance of the institutional legacy of China for the perpetuation of personalism and paternalism in Chinese business organizations. Similarly, in his discussion of the connections between Chinese culture and the modernization of Hong Kong, Wong (1986:320-4) is quick to identify the "structural features of Hong Kong society," which are conducive to channelling Chinese cultural values in the direction of economic development. These structural features include the refugee background of the post-war population, colonialism and what he has labelled as "urbanism by default." In Wong's analysis, the Chinese economic culture is both a dependent and an independent variable in the explanation of Hong Kong's economic success. On the one hand, the social setting of Hong Kong releases the economic dynamics inherent in traditional Chinese cultural values. On the other, cultural values, as expressed in the organization of Chinese firms, facilitate economic growth and modernization.

However, upon closer scrutiny, this balance of structural and cultural accounts is more apparent than real. Among students of Chinese economic culture and behaviour, there are differences in terms of their conceptualization of Chinese entrepreneurship. First, there are students who conceive Chinese entrepreneurship essentially as a set of cultural values and normative orientations.

Secondly, there are researchers emphasizing more the aspect of strategizing in the concept of the Chinese entrepreneurial ethic. While there is, perhaps, no point for us to make the normative and the strategic aspects mutually exclusive, it is important to recognize the theoretical implications of the different conceptions of the Chinese entrepreneurial ethic.

Before coming to the review of different conceptions of the Chinese entrepreneurial ethic, it should be noted that the culturalist approach, in general, aims at a more ambitious project of explaining the patterns of the Chinese family firm (see, for example, Wong, 1986 and 1988a) or those of Chinese management and business organization (Redding, 1990) than the narrower notion of Chinese entrepreneurship — mainly referring to the motivation of starting one's business and self-employment[2] — we are discussing here. In the culturalist thesis, the inclination towards self-employment is only one of the many components of the Chinese economic culture. Moreover, the meaning of self-employment needs to be understood in the wider context of Chinese economic values. Here Wong's discussion of "entrepreneurial familism" may serve to illustrate the arguments of the culturalist thesis. By "entrepreneurial familism," Wong refers to an ethos which "involves the family as the basic unit of economic competition" and promotes an orientation towards autonomy and proprietorship (1988a:170-1). This family-based normative orientation provides "the impetus for innovation and the support for risk-taking."

So, in this depiction of the Chinese family firm, there are two sides to "entrepreneurial familism." On the one hand, the drive towards self-employment, in its turn, promotes economic competition and cultivates economic dynamism in Hong Kong society. On the other, it brings about the consequence of "an abundant supply of entrepreneurs with an acute shortage of dedicated managers" (Wong, 1988b:143). The tendency for employees to move on to setting up their own business creates a centrifugal force within the Chinese firm. Consequently, the Chinese family firm tends to develop a highly centralized decision-making system, with limited delegation of authority to professional managers.

This, at least partially, explains the organizational form assumed by most Chinese family firms.

The question of the Chinese family firm falls outside the scope of our present discussion. What intrigues us here concerns the culturalist treatment of this entrepreneurial drive. Wong relates this to the traditional conceptions of equalities among brothers and the individual's effort for social advancement. The inclination towards self-employment

> is partly engendered by the Chinese family system which recognizes brothers as independent and equal claimants of the *jia* estate. Most Chinese males can look forward to the day when they will have their own portion of the family estate and become a separate family head. But the preference for self-employment, it seems, is also shaped by the longstanding Chinese cultural assumption that men are "naturally equal," meaning that they possess common attributes at birth. Social inequalities appear, according to most classical Chinese philosophers, because some people can better realize their potentials through their own efforts, especially by means of education. This conception of man buttressed the traditional Chinese system of social stratification where a strictly hierarchical structure coexisted with an ideology upholding the virtue of bettering oneself and the reward of social advancement. (Wong, 1988b:143)

In his recent work, Wong attempts to go another step further. Instead of drawing parallels between the drive towards self-employment and the traditional values of equality among brothers and the notion of social advancement by individual efforts, Wong argues for a case of socio-psychological sources of the economic vitality of contemporary Hong Kong (1988c and 1992). Echoing Weber's Protestant ethic thesis, Wong contends that the anxieties underlying the refugee mentality, which is conditioned by the uncertainties of the future of Hong Kong, have driven the Chinese population of Hong Kong to hard work, thirst for education and constant vigilance. Very much like Calvin's followers, the Hong Kong Chinese react to their deep anxieties by economic dyna-

mism. The drive for self-employment can be understood in the light of this state of social psychology.

Whereas Wong focusses on the normative as well as the socio-psychological aspects of the Chinese entrepreneurial ethic, others (Gates, 1979; Harrell, 1985; Shieh, 1989; Stites, 1985) place more emphasis on the side of strategizing. On the surface, the two approaches look more or less alike. They all see the *jia* as the driving mechanism behind the development of Chinese entrepreneurship. Moreover, some researchers of Chinese economic behaviour also define the entrepreneurial strategy as a cultural issue. For instance, Harrell (1985:215) phrases his research problem in the following way:

> The issue in question is a cultural one: Not why do people work, in general, which is presumably always a combination of perceived material rewards and perceived conformity to cultural values, but why do Chinese and non-Chinese alike perceive Chinese as working particularly or unusually hard, either to achieve cultural conformity or to gain material wealth?

But then when he moves on to the analysis of this entrepreneurial ethic, the conclusion is that "Chinese will work hard when they see possible long-term benefits, in terms of improved material conditions and/or security, for a group with which they identify" (ibid.:217). In other words, hard work and entrepreneurship are not really seen in terms of a moral or religious "calling." Rather, it is the worldly concerns of economic benefits and security which provide the impetus for entrepreneurial ventures.

Similarly, in his discussion of Taiwanese industrial workers' attitudes towards work, Stites draws our attention to the fact that "work is viewed as a temporary part in a career and a means to eventual entrepreneurship" (1985:242). Entrepreneurship is a strategy whereby the industrial workers can escape from workplace hardship and economic insecurity. The family is the locus of economic security — while the strategy of self-employment is intended to serve familial interests, the family, in turn, mobilizes resources to support entrepreneurship.

The strategizing aspect of the entrepreneurial ethic also constitutes the leading themes of the works of Gates (1979; also see 1992:182-3) and Shieh (1989). Both of them relate entrepreneurship to social stratification and mobility strategy. For Gates, the dynamics of the petty bourgeois family economy have given rise to a group of part-time proletariat who accept the low wages paid by factories in the early stage of their work lives and eventually return to either inheriting their parents' small business and/or production units or launching their own petty bourgeois careers. Gates describes this phenomenon as the "self-exploitation of the petty bourgeoisie." The petty bourgeoisie in Taiwan draw upon the resources provided by their family members to run their businesses. When manpower is abundant or temporarily not required for the family business, sons and daughters of these petty bourgeois families are released for low paid jobs in various industries. But their engagement in industrial employment is only transitory. Their destiny, or more precisely their expectation, is of running one's family business.

Connecting Culture and Action

Our review of the current discussion of Chinese entrepreneurship shows that there are mainly two different approaches to the interpretation of the meanings of the entrepreneurial ethic. At present, the two different interpretations of entrepreneurial ethic have been largely subsumed under the umbrella term "culture." However, as we have suggested earlier, upon closer scrutiny, they represent entirely different understandings of the causal connections between culture and action. At this point, it is interesting to note that discussions revolving around the issue of Chinese entrepreneurship echo debates growing out of contemporary interpretations of Weber's conception of the capitalist ethic. The crux of the matter concerns the nature of cultural explanation.

There should be no need for us to dwell on Weber's arguments in his classics *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

(1930). In essence, the mode of explanation in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is psychological (Marshall, 1982:97; Torrance, 1974). "Psychological sanctions" provide the key to understand the connections between two cultural phenomena, i.e. ascetic Protestantism and the spirit of capitalism. After arguing that the spirit of capitalism, which replaces the traditionalistic ethos, is a necessary condition for the emergence of rational capitalism, Weber proceeds to identify the origin of the capitalist spirit in the religious ideas of the Reformation. The Calvinist doctrines are found to be pertinent to explaining the rise of the capitalist spirit because the former create the psychological impulses which will, in their turn, bring about a pattern of economic behaviour of seeking profit in a rational and systematic manner. The anxieties evoked by the Calvinist doctrines of predestination constitute the motivational mechanism for linking religious ideas up with "intense worldly activities."

The problems of Weber's Protestant ethic thesis are many (see Marshall, 1982 for a review). What is most pertinent to our present discussion is that the aforementioned psychological explanation simply fails to provide the intermediate linkages between the two macro-cultural constructs — parallels between ascetic Protestantism and the capitalist spirit are drawn without specifying the material mechanisms through which culture and action are connected. Indeed, in his later work on the Protestant sects (Weber, 1948), Weber made an obvious move away from simplistic psychological motivation explanation and turned to recognize the pertinence of social context as determinant of the affinity between religious ideas and economic behaviour. As noted by Torrance (1974:132-3), while *The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism* does not reject the psychological argument in the earlier Protestant ethic thesis, "it subordinates it to a definitely sociological one." The link between religious ideas and economic behaviour is no longer the psychological anxieties evoked by the doctrine of predestination, but the *social* need of proving oneself before one's fellow sectaries. The significance of this turn to group identification is that it marks a new theoretical departure — social causality is introduced to relate Calvinism and the spirit of capitalism.

Whether Weber has at the end of his career made a materialist turn or otherwise is a matter of interpretation (for such a view, see Collins, 1980). The point we intend to make is that Weber's efforts at searching for social causality in his explanation of the connections between religious ideas and economic values reflect his awareness of the problems of a psychological analysis. Indeed, even in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber is well aware of the issue that "the ethos of ascetic Protestantism outlast its ideas" (Swidler, 1986:276):

> The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. (Weber, 1930:181)

True, it is Weber's intention to examine the ascetic Protestantism of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the origin of rational capitalism, and not economic values and behaviour thereafter. But the point is that, given the recognition of the impacts of religious ideas on the constitution of the capitalist economic order and the over-determination of the latter on subsequent development of economic values and behaviour, the Protestant ethic thesis can no longer be posed in its original way and abstracted out of the context of contemporary capitalist economies. In other words, should we be interested in the question of the motivation behind contemporary entrepreneurship, we need to investigate not so much religious doctrines or moral texts of the distant past as the meanings behind economic actions in context (Marshall, 1982:111ff; also compare Granovetter, 1985). Weber has been criti-

cized for treating religious texts as if they were the authentic motives of the Protestant capitalists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This problem will become more acute if the same conflation of religious ideas and meanings of economic actions is practised in the analysis of entrepreneurship in contemporary capitalist economies wherein, in Weber's own words, the economic subjects are selected "through a process of economic survival of the fittest" (Weber, 1930:55).

So far we have argued that the psychological thesis is inadequate at explaining the connections between religious ideas and economic behaviour. However, neither is it clear how Weber would have developed his idea of social causality in relating cultural values and economic actions. Here our concern is not to give yet another interpretation of "what did Weber really say" about the development of capitalism. Rather, we suggest that there are hints in Weber's writings pointing to a sociological, rather than psychological, explanation of the entrepreneurial strategy. To recapitulate our critique of the psychological thesis, its inadequacy lies primarily in the failure to grasp the motivations and meanings behind the actions of the capitalists. In order to make sense of entrepreneurial strategies, we need to take the embeddedness of economic actions seriously. That is, we need to relate the economic actions of the capitalists to their structural positions as well as to the economic context wherein their actions are undertaken (for a different way to disentangle various dimensions of the embeddedness of economic actions, see Zukin and DiMaggio, 1990). At this point it is interesting to see how Molley's (1980) non-Parsonian interpretation of Weber's *The Religion of China* (1964) can help illustrate the significance of structural position as well as social context in the structuring of economic action. Briefly, Molley argues that the "Parsons-through-Yang" interpretation of the text greatly simplifies Weber's arguments — juxtaposing China and Western rational capitalist societies, the former is found to possess no less favourable material conditions for the development of capitalism; Confucianism and, to a lesser extent, Taoism and Buddhism are thus deduced as the unfavourable

conditions blocking China's path to rational capitalist development. Instead of reiterating the simplistic normative account, Molley suggests that the key to an understanding of the causal mechanism between religion and economic actions is the distinction which Weber has made between practical ethics and economic ethics. The question, then, is how these two kinds of ethics interact in the context of the interconnected "material" and "ideal" factors. And his answer to this question is the "elective affinity" between the Chinese literati and Confucianism — the former appropriate Confucianism as a status ethic and their interest situations in a patrimonial bureaucracy constitute the "directive elements" in shaping Confucianism in the direction of "secular rationalism." In short, it is the status situation of the Chinese literati and the concomitant life chances under patrimonial domination that form the intermediate linkages connecting religious ideas and economic actions in traditional China.

To relate our review of the Protestant ethic thesis back to our discussion of the concept of entrepreneurial strategy, it is our contention that the culturalist approach is far from adequate to explain the connections between cultural values and economic actions. The idea of the embeddedness of economic actions points to a new direction in the interpretation of the entrepreneurial ethic. If cultural values really matter, they are pertinent not in the sense that values define the ends of economic actions, but rather they provide some actors with the "tool kit" (or repertoire) (compare Swidler, 1986:277) from which they select certain elements for organizing their actions. But then, of course, while recognizing the autonomy of culture, the ways culture constitutes our strategies of actions are by no means random. As argued earlier, in order to grasp the meaning behind economic action, we need to identify the structural and contextual factors which are shaping the economic concerns of the actors. And this, again, relates back to the Weberian problematics — the class situations and the life chances of individuals in given economic contexts. It should be noted that the emphasis on class positions does not necessarily entail a class reductionist argument. Economic strategies are not

simply determined by class positions. Class matters, but its effects cannot be abstracted from the broader socio-economic context in which individuals attempt to move across class boundaries and find their own paths of social advancement. In short, we bring class analysis into the study of entrepreneurial strategy not in the sense of putting forth a class determinist framework, but rather that of showing how classes and the class structure operate as the structural and contextual background shaping entrepreneurship as a form of economic strategy.

Opportunities for Entrepreneurship

To follow our earlier review of the concept of entrepreneurship, here in this section we shall examine the construction of the Chinese entrepreneurial strategy in the context of social stratification and opportunity structure of contemporary Hong Kong. Like the economy of other "little dragons" in the region, the economy of Hong Kong has experienced phenomenal growth since the post-war years. The reason for the success of the colonial economy, particularly its manufacturing industries, partly lies in its articulation with the world economy through international subcontracting (Chu, 1988; Landsberg, 1979; Lui and Chiu, 1993) and trading activities. However, it is also important to note that local manufacturers and business groups have always been quick to respond to the changing economic environment and to seize the opportunities of developing their businesses. So, in the following discussion of opportunities for entrepreneurial attempts, the Hong Kong Chinese entrepreneurship should best be seen as more than an outcome of a pre-existing opportunity structure. Entrepreneurship is both constituted and constitutive. It is constituted by the existing social structure and, in its turn, structures the business environment for entrepreneurial ventures.

As a result of such rapid development of the economy, opportunities have been created for social mobility. Differently put, rapid economic expansion brings about the loosening of the social

structure and creates new positions open to competition. Elsewhere we have analysed the overall pattern of social mobility in contemporary Hong Kong (Wong and Lui, 1992a). What is pertinent to our present discussion can be briefly summarized under two points. First, a large measure of inter-generational social mobility in contemporary Hong Kong is due to structural mobility, i.e. mobility as a result of the expansion and the restructuring of the economy. In other words, structural changes of the economy have created vacancies for a significant portion of the people of Hong Kong to move to class positions different from their fathers'. Secondly, class differences notwithstanding, there are opportunities and openness in Hong Kong society which allow people to cross class boundaries and to pursue advancement in climbing up the social ladder. Without going further into the discussion of the openness and fluidity of Hong Kong society, it suffices here to say that class origins do not form unsurpassable hurdles for social mobility. And such a general description of the structuring of social mobility is an important background for us to understand the notion of entrepreneurship in contemporary Hong Kong.

Since our interest here concerns the desire for running one's own business, we shall concentrate on the social background of the entrepreneurs instead of dwelling upon social mobility in class terms. Table 1 gives a summary of the outflows and inflows of people categorized according to their employment statuses. Focussing on the small employers (i.e. employers employing less than 20 persons) and the self-employed, it is evident that the Hong Kong Chinese entrepreneurs mainly come from two socio-economic types — from families with entrepreneurial experiences (that is, self-recruitment) or simply moving up from the rank of employees. For the small employers, 38.7 per cent of them come from the same background and 8.1 per cent from the self-employed origin. It is interesting to observe that only 4.8 per cent of the small employers come from families of employer status employing 20 or more persons and almost half of them (46.8 per cent) experience upward mobility from the employee origin. A similar pattern is found in the inflow of the self-employed — 43.9 per cent

coming from the background of small employers and self-employment and 53.7 per cent from that of employees.

Table 1 Inter-generational Mobility in Terms of Employment Status

Origin	Destination					Total
	Employer employing 20 or more persons	Employer employing less than 20 persons	Self-employed	Manager	Employee	
Employer employing 20 or more persons	11.8 **13.3**	17.6 **4.8**	0.0 **0.0**	11.8 **3.3**	58.8 **1.7**	100.0
Employer employing less than 20 persons	1.3 **13.3**	15.5 **38.7**	5.2 **19.5**	12.3 **31.7**	65.7 **17.7**	100.0
Self-employed	3.0 **20.0**	5.1 **8.1**	10.1 **24.4**	1.0 **1.7**	80.8 **13.9**	100.0
Manager	0.0 **0.0**	4.6 **1.6**	4.6 **2.4**	31.8 **11.7**	59.0 **2.3**	100.0
Employee	1.7 **53.4**	6.3 **46.8**	4.8 **53.7**	6.7 **51.6**	80.5 **64.4**	100.0
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	

Source: 1989 Social Mobility Study.

However, the inflow statistics only show one side of the composition of the Hong Kong Chinese entrepreneurs. In terms of outflows, slightly more than 10 per cent (11.1 per cent) of those from the origin of employee status are able to attain the statuses of small employers and self-employed. But then when we observe the mobility pattern of those with family experience in small business entrepreneurship, it is evident that, compared with people of other origins, there is a stronger tendency for them to retain their entrepreneurial origins. The 15.5 per cent of those with their fathers being small employers end up running their own small business. Despite that, quite a significant portion (80.8 per cent) of those from the self-employed families move down to the status of employees, still about one-tenth (10.1 per cent) of them become self-employed.

The mobility opportunities for movements into self-employment and the status of small employer are more revealing in the inflow and outflow patterns of intra-generational mobility (see Table 2). Indeed, the mobility pattern shown in Table 1, especially movements in and out of self-employment and small employers, is conditioned by the fact that most of the respondents' fathers had their jobs in mainland China before the establishment of the Communist rule, which was an economy having a relatively large sector of petty commodity production and informal trading. So, for inter-generational mobility, given that the fathers and sons participate in two rather different economies, a significant proportion of the latter have been "structurally forced out" of their petty bourgeois and small employer origins (also see Mitchell, 1969:137-50). Table 2, which is about intra-generational mobility in terms of employment status, tells a different story. In the course of their career development, our respondents have witnessed an expansion of opportunities for entrepreneurship. In terms of inflow, about 90 per cent of those respondents coming from the employment status of employee have edged into the leagues of self-employment and small employers. And in the outflow pattern, while those who started their careers with entrepreneurial activities show their ability to retain their positions, nearly 15 per cent (14.4 per cent) of the employees have made their way into entrepreneurial ventures.

Table 2 Intra-generational Mobility in Terms of Employment Status

First job	Current job					Total
	Employer employing 20 or more persons	Employer employing less than 20 persons	Self-employed	Manager	Employee	
Employer employing 20 or more persons	0.0 **0.0**	0.0 **0.0**	0.0 **0.0**	0.0 **0.0**	100.0 **0.2**	100.0
Employer employing less than 20 persons	0.0 **0.0**	30.0 **4.6**	20.0 **4.1**	0.0 **0.0**	50.0 **0.9**	100.0
Self-employed	0.0 **0.0**	8.0 **3.1**	12.0 **6.1**	0.0 **0.0**	80.0 **3.4**	100.0
Manager	8.3 **6.3**	0.0 **0.0**	0.0 **0.0**	66.7 **15.4**	25.0 **0.5**	100.0
Employee	2.1 **93.7**	8.3 **92.3**	6.1 **89.8**	6.1 **84.6**	77.4 **95.0**	100.0
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	

Source: 1989 Social Mobility Study.

It is, perhaps, not an overstatement to suggest that small business constitutes an important channel for social advancement in Hong Kong. The existing structures of local manufacturing and distributive trades make room for entrepreneurial ventures. Tables 3 and 4 summarize the size structure of the manufacturing sector and the distributive trades sector respectively. The predominance of small establishments in the two sectors (with the exceptions of restaurants and hotels activities, which have average employment sizes of more than 20 persons) is evident. In relation to our discussion of opportunities for entrepreneurship, such a character of the two sectors can be looked at from two perspectives. On the one side, it reveals that competition in the two sectors is fierce. In the case of manufacturing, local factories depend to a

significant extent on subcontracting with larger firms and upon orders received through import-export houses (Mok, 1981; Sit, Wong and Kiang, 1979:339-46; Pang, 1978:121; Sit and Wong, 1989). They have to work very hard to obtain adequate orders to maintain production at a profitable level. Rush jobs and demands for services marginal to the main production lines are also accepted to keep production running (Sit and Ng, 1980:508). The competition is especially keen as entry is generally easy; "mushroom firms" grow quickly to make the best of a booming market. On the other side, such an industrial structure allows entrepreneurs with limited capitals to enter for the competition. In many instances, it is more crucial to have the right connections (especially those related to the subcontracting networks) than to raise a large amount of capital to start one's business in the field (Vong, 1993). The notion of centrifugal forces within the Chinese firm, as depicted by Wong (1988b), only confirms our discussion of the opportunities in the manufacturing sector of contemporary Hong Kong. For the industrial entrepreneurs deliberately choose to start their careers in those industries "with a view as to its growth potential and the prospect of acquiring sufficient know-how to set up on their own" (Sit and Wong, 1989:104). Their working experiences provide them with the basic understanding of the operations of their businesses as well as with the business contacts for starting their production. So the operations of the subcontracting networks in the manufacturing sector encourage entrepreneurship. While larger firms are happy to utilize the subcontracting connections to shift risks of production in fluctuating markets to smaller factories, small factories are given opportunities to find their niches in the networks.

Table 3 Average Number of Persons Engaged per Establishment Analysed by Activity in 1984 and 1988

Activity	Average persons engaged per establishment		
	1984	1988	% change
Wholesale	4.58	4.57	-0.22
Retail	3.37	3.71	+10.09
Import/Export	6.07	5.88	-3.13
Restaurants	22.91	22.05	-3.75
Hotels/Boarding houses	28.31	22.69	-19.85
Overall	5.91	6.01	+1.69

Source: Census and Statistics Department, 1990a:113.

Table 4 Distribution of Manufacturing Establishments and Employment by Size (%)

Size of establishment	Establishment				Employment			
	1961	1971	1981	1991	1961	1971	1981	1991
1-9	38.9	51.9	65.4	73.2	6.0	6.9	13.3	18.6
10-19	21.6	19.1	15.6	12.9	8.4	7.5	10.9	12.3
20-49	18.2	15.5	11.1	8.7	15.1	14.0	17.9	18.7
50-99	6.7	6.6	4.7	3.1	12.4	13.2	16.2	14.8
100-199	4.0	3.9	2.0	1.3	14.7	15.7	14.4	12.5
200-499	2.5	2.1	0.9	0.6	20.3	18.6	13.7	13.4
500 and over	0.9	0.7	0.3	0.1	22.9	24.2	13.6	9.8

Sources: Sit, et al., 1979:25-6;
Census and Statistics Department, 1990b:38;
Industry Department, 1993:21-2.

In the above discussion, we have only reviewed the structuring of opportunities in the manufacturing sector. As regards the operations of distributive trades, they are not as well documented as those in manufacturing. However, as we may observe from the statistics in Table 3, it is safe for us to assume that the predominance of small establishments in distributive trades would also give much room for entrepreneurship. For wholesale, retail, and import/export activities, compensation of employees and operating expenses constituted 9.3-17.3 per cent of total sales and other receipts in the period 1984-1988 (Census and Statistics Department, 1990:114). The major item in the cost composition lies in the cost of goods sold. Entrepreneurs can start their businesses with small structures, both in terms of assets and size of establishment.

To recapitulate, the economic structure of contemporary Hong Kong provides people with much opportunities for entrepreneurship. In the first place, the expansion of the economy in the past four decades has given rise to many new forms of economic activities which are open to entrepreneurial ventures. Secondly, the structure of the economy, that is the predominance of local small establishments, encourages people to appropriate opportunities opened up in the process of economic development in the forms of small businesses and self-employment. In a sense, the economy is structurally conducive to entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurial Strategy and Mobility Experience: Entrepreneurship or Bureaucratic Career?

But to show that the economic environment of Hong Kong is conducive to entrepreneurship is insufficient to explain why the Hong Kong Chinese are so keen to run their own business. More importantly, as we have tried to point out in our literature review, the really pertinent question is not so much why are the Hong Kong Chinese so inclined to entrepreneurship as who are more likely to adopt the entrepreneurial strategy in their pursuit of economic interests? Furthermore, we have argued that the Hong

Kong Chinese notion of entrepreneurship has to be understood not as a quest for cultural values as such, but as a repertoire of economic action for individuals in a given economic context.

In the 1989 Social Mobility Survey, respondents of the employee status were asked of their intention to start their own business. In all, 46.1 per cent of them gave the answer that either they had previously made the attempt to start their business or had the desire for entrepreneurship. To probe the associations between the drive towards entrepreneurship and various background variables (such as place of birth, education attainment, and the experience of interruption in schooling), it is found that those inclined towards running their business were more likely to be born in Hong Kong (χ^2=9.31806, df=1, p<.005). The desire for entrepreneurship is not related to the level of education and the experience of interruption in schooling of the respondents. Our data suggest that the motivation for starting one's business is not initiated by the frustration of being a migrant and late-starter in social advancement. Nor is it simplistically generated by non-fulfilment in the educational channel. The point is not that entrepreneurship as a strategy of social advancement has nothing to do with one's frustrations. But the frustrations are from other sources.

Indeed, if "blocked mobility" functions as the mechanism for triggering off one's desire for entrepreneurship, it would work well mostly among those who feel the urge for social advancement. Otherwise put, unless we expect the drives towards success and mobility are simply randomly distributed, there are differences in one's perception of the meaning of success and thus variations in one's sense of urgency in appropriating the entrepreneurial strategy. More importantly, there is no reason why we have to confine our analysis of the motivation of entrepreneurship to reactions to frustrations and "blocked mobility." The orientation to entrepreneurship can be reactionary as well as induced by optimism generated by upward mobility. Table 5 sums up the connection between inter-generational mobility experience and one's inclination to starting a business.[3] Respondents who are

most positive towards entrepreneurship are found among those who have experienced downward mobility from Class I (i.e. service class) and those have moved up from Class II (intermediate class) to Class I, and from Class III (working class) to Classes I and II. Mobility experience works two-ways. The impetus for entrepreneurial ventures among those who have experienced downward mobility from Class I to Classes II and III can be seen as the exemplary cases of a combination of an urge for success and frustration in social advancement. Given their origins in Class I and the subsequent experience of sliding down the mobility ladder, this group of respondents has felt the frustrations and deprivations of downward mobility most intensely, and entrepreneurship has probably been the only available option they can take for fighting their way back to the upper end of the social hierarchy. However, it should be noted that downward mobility *per se* does not initiate the entrepreneurial drive. As shown in Table 5, respondents of the origin of Class II with downward mobility experience to Class III do not give the same degree of positive response towards running their businesses. Elsewhere in our analysis of the mobility pattern of Hong Kong (Wong and Lui, 1992a), we have found that there is a class boundary between Classes I and II on the one side, and Class III on the other. Downward movement from Class II to Class III is like crossing a "threshold," with a dampening effect on the individuals' hope of returning to non-manual jobs.

Table 5 Attitudes towards Entrepreneurship and Further Studies According to Mobility Experience

Origin	Destination	Positive attitude towards entrepreneurship (%)	Positive attitude towards further studies (%)
I	I	40.0	55.3
	II	63.6	54.8
	III	53.3	26.7
II	I	54.3	70.2
	II	50.0	49.7
	III	41.2	29.8
III	I	51.5	77.1
	II	54.1	51.5
	III	46.0	24.8

Notes: I = Service class; II = Intermediate class; III = Working class.
Source: 1989 Social Mobility Study.

Table 5 also reveals that upward mobility experience is associated with a high percentage of positive response to entrepreneurship. Those who have moved from Class II to Class I, and from Class III to Classes I and II have been energized by the optimism generated by upward movements in the social ladder. Entrepreneurship can be a means for further advancement; being one's own boss will be a major leap in one's career. Their experience of being upwardly mobile gives them confidence of mobility by their own efforts and generates higher expectations of life. Entrepreneurial ventures serve as the connecting point between previous self-striving efforts in the course of upward mobility and further advancements in their future careers.

Those who are least positive towards entrepreneurship are found among respondents remaining in the class positions of their origins. Immobility seems to lead the respondents towards a

structured career — they are happy to stay in their class positions, pursuing the typical career strategies of their own classes.

Obviously, entrepreneurship is not the only strategy available for social advancement in contemporary Hong Kong. Equally important is the channel of bureaucratic career by means of credentialism (also see W. P. Wong, 1992:169-70). In fact, the neglect of the strong desire for education among the Chinese in the literature on entrepreneurship is rather striking (but see Rozman, 1991 for a discussion of different types and strands of Confucianism). Such neglect is problematic not only in that it fails to take note of the traditional emphasis on education and the viability of social advancement through education. More importantly, it fails to give a realistic assessment of the economic success of East Asian capitalism. If entrepreneurship constitutes an essential element of the success formula of the economies of Hong Kong and Taiwan, it is equally important to recognize that their success also hinges upon efficient managerialism in both the private business world and the governmental administrative apparatus. To make sense of the Hong Kong Chinese entrepreneurial strategy, we also need to understand the orientation towards the other channel of social advancement, *viz* education.

The respondents were also asked whether they had thought of further studies after work. Of them, 41.9 per cent gave positive answers, that is either they had tried to attend courses or had an interest in further studies. The inclination for further studies is associated with the birth place (χ^2=55.38523, df=1, p<.0001) and education attainment (χ^2=146.64871, df=3, p<.0001) of the respondents. Those who were born in Hong Kong and of higher education level were positive towards the idea of further studies. Unlike the entrepreneurial strategy which can be used by those relatively deprived of human capital for social advancement, further studies as a means to improve one's status only makes sense to people who are equipped for this strategy. One needs to have sufficient human capital to pursue this mobility strategy.

While education attainment is critical to deciding on the relevance of further studies for one's career strategy, mobility experi-

ences have a significant impact on the likelihood of its adoption. Table 5 shows that those respondents who had experienced upward mobility, from Class III to Classes I and II, and from Class II to Class I, were most likely to have attempted or would like to pursue further studies. Such thirst for education can be seen as a continuation of their proven successful strategy for mobility, i.e. mobility through the education channel. The channel to move to professional, administrative, technical and office work of the service class and the intermediate class is primarily structured by bureaucratic practices and credentialism. For the respondents who had been successful in moving upward to these class positions, status had been achieved by performing well in the educational system. Their positive attitude towards further studies was a reflection of their mobility experience as much as their commitment to bureaucratic careers.

As to the orientation to further studies, origin in Class I seems to make a special impact on the respondents' emphasis on education. For the immobile service class as well as those who had experienced downward mobility to Class II, there was a slightly higher than average positive response to the question of further studies. This shows the impact of fathers' human and cultural capital on the respondents' attitude towards further studies and the relevance of credentials in their current jobs. But it is the comparison between the Class I origin respondents and the upwardly mobile service class respondents which is most interesting. There is a high percentage of positive responses to further studies among the latter. Their mobility experience gives spur to the quest for education.

So far, what we have tried to argue is that the drive towards entrepreneurship as well as credentialism are embedded in one's class position and mobility trajectories. That there are variations in the respondents' attitude towards entrepreneurial ventures serves to illustrate the inadequacy of a simplistic culturalist thesis. To take entrepreneurship simply as some given Chinese culture does not help to answer the original question concerning the widespread entrepreneurial manoeuvres in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and

Overseas Chinese communities. The missing links are: who are the entrepreneurs? and why do they launch onto an entrepreneurial career? Furthermore, our findings suggest that there are different meanings behind the desire for starting one's own business. Those experiencing downward mobility from Class I and the others moving up from Classes II and III surely pursue entrepreneurial ventures for very different reasons. If culture matters at this point, it is more a repertoire of economic actions from which the respondents choose for interpreting their behaviours than a set of values defining the ultimate objectives of action. Even if one can trace the elements of the entrepreneurial spirit back to sources in Chinese folk culture and traditions, it still begs the question. The more interesting research question is under what situations would someone adopt the entrepreneurial strategy? Our answer: it is structured by one's mobility experience which, in turn, conditions one's perception of the meaning of economic success and the choice of action for social advancement. Traditions and folk wisdom emphasizing the entrepreneurial spirit are "tool kits" or repertoires for economic action, shaping the organization of practices rather than determining the ends to which actions are oriented. Culture itself does not determine how it should be appropriated. But life chance and fate in the class structure do.

In other words, entrepreneurship is an economic strategy for social advancement. Our emphasis on the strategizing aspect does not deny the relevance of the family as the unit of economic action. In fact, social advancement is still a collective, familial effort for the Hong Kong Chinese (see, for example, Salaff, 1981). The family serves as an agent for pooling and allocating resources for an individual's mobility. While the abstract ideal of family prestige may have faded, the economic well being of the kins is still an important practical concern of the local population (Lau, 1981). The family plays an important role in the actual process of strategizing. It is because of this focus on the strategizing practice that we can understand how entrepreneurship can fit in with some people and not the others. The same is true for the strategy of credentialism. As a consequence of economic development, the

social structure of contemporary Hong Kong has opened up a wide variety of channels for mobility. Entrepreneurial ventures constitute one of the available options; and bureaucratic careers (as professional administrators and managers) form another. Each of them attracts followers of different backgrounds and fates in the class structure. Chinese culture does not inform who should take which kind of strategy. Rather, these followers draw upon different sources of Chinese culture to construct their lines of action (for a further elaboration of the connection between culture and social action, see Wong and Lui, 1992b).

Concluding Remarks

The arguments developed here point to two issues concerning the analysis of Chinese entrepreneurship. First, in our review of the literature on Chinese entrepreneurship and our study of the connection between mobility experience and drives towards running one's own business, we have suggested that the notion of entrepreneurship is more a repertoire of economic actions than normative values governing economic behaviour. The inadequacy of the culturalist approach lies in its failure to see how cultural elements are appropriated for developing strategies for social advancement. The entrepreneurial spirit works as a "tool-kit" and is called upon for selecting the lines of economic actions, rather than defining ends and objectives. In this way, we see entrepreneurship as an economic strategy through which individuals, under given conditions and constraints, work out their ways for climbing up the social ladder.

Secondly, entrepreneurship as an economic strategy is one among many viable options and attracts people of certain mobility experiences. Channels of social advancement, even for the poor, are not confined to entrepreneurial ventures. Education and the related careers in bureaucratic organizations in the business world as well as in the government apparatus constitute other major channels of mobility. Our emphasis on strategizing leads us

to investigate the choice of different strategies among people of different backgrounds. Entrepreneurship or managerialism: it is only with the availability of choices that strategizing makes sense. More interestingly, it also leads us to rethink the social and economic conditions bringing about rapid growth and economic success of Hong Kong and Taiwan in the post-war decades. Entrepreneurship alone is insufficient to guarantee growth and development. The growing interest in the role of the state in the research on economic development (on Hong Kong, see Castells, Goh and Kwok, 1988; Schiffer, 1991; on Taiwan, Amsden, 1979 and 1985) only reminds us that a study of the managerial strategy is long overdue. A one-sided emphasis on the entrepreneurial strategy can, at best, get half of the success stories of these economies right.

Notes

1. Our discussion is based upon the result of a Hong Kong-wide survey conducted in 1989. Our target population consisted of male household heads aged 20 to 64 in January 1989; our sampling frame, Hong Kong-wide households randomly chosen from district- and block-stratified sample blocks, was provided by the Census and Statistics Department. We successfully interviewed 1,000 household heads. The technical details can be found in Wong and Lui, 1992a.
2. For a discussion of small business as entrepreneurial activity, see Chan and Lau, 1993.
3. Our class scheme is adopted from Goldthorpe (1987). In the following discussion, instead of using the original 7-category scheme, we shall use a simplified version by collapsing the seven classes into three aggregated categories. So thereafter, Class I denotes "service class" (professionals, administrators, managers, higher-grade technicians, and large proprietors), Class II "intermediate class" (routine non-manual employees, small proprietors, artisans and contractors with or without

employees, lower-grade technicians and supervisors of manual workers), and Class III "working class" (skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers).

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華人創業精神之社會處境分析

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（中文摘要）

本文嘗試介入現時有關華人創業精神的討論。首先，筆者檢閱了相關的文獻，指出現時的討論存在著兩種不同的分析取向——一種觀點視創業為策略性行為，而另一種則強調經濟行為的文化性質。現有研究資料主要是支持策略性行為的論點。筆者又指出，要瞭解華人企業家精神的意義，必須掌握創業行為的社會環境，並視創業為發展策略行為之工具，而不是一種界定行動目標的價值觀。

筆者繼而引用「一九八九年香港社會流動調查」的資料來分析華人創業行為之構成。資料顯示創業精神可被理解為一種社會流動之策略。出現此策略之社會背景，乃一發展迅速、並以小企業為主之經濟結構。與此同時，市民大都認為，在當代香港社會，創業並非爬升社會階梯之唯一選擇，同樣重要的是以文憑、學歷為手段之職業策略。

從社會處境的角度入手分析華人創業精神之形成，可幫助我們加深瞭解它與其他社會流動策略之關係。