

Research Methodology

Defining the Subject

There are two aspects of being an “immigrant” here. The first indicates that the entrepreneurs were immigrants. They must have been born on the Chinese mainland, or somewhere outside Hong Kong, before coming to live and start businesses in the city. Although they later moved their businesses back to the mainland and now spend much of their time there, their families, or the core members of their family, still live in Hong Kong. The second aspect is a description of their “nomadic” lifestyle. Because their businesses are not fixed in one place, they have to keep going back and forth among various locations. They will often stay in A for some time before going on to B to take care of their business, then move on to C to visit a client. Their lives are marked by such frequent shuttling movements.

To qualify as an “entrepreneur” in this study, each subject needed to meet two major requirements. In terms of ownership, the entrepreneur had to be one of the stockholders of the enterprise, which could be either self-established or inherited. Second, the entrepreneur, instead of being a mere financial investor, had to be personally involved in managing and operating their business.

In-Depth Interviews

The information this book has gathered comes mainly from in-depth interviews we conducted between February 2004 and April 2005. As well as the interviews, we attempted “field observation” by attending various social functions with some of the entrepreneurs. These functions included anniversary celebrations of former schools, inauguration ceremonies of alumni associations, new office opening parties, signing ceremonies of new projects, and so on. We found such “field observation” very helpful: on the one hand, we were able to develop a substantial understanding of our informants’ daily lives; on the other hand, through such engaged observation

“in the field”, we were able to obtain some valuable information that was not readily available from interviews, for example, what type of people they associated with; what their business talk centered on in public social settings; and how they presented their differential identities as situations changed. Such data not only granted us access to the entrepreneurs’ interpersonal networks – aspects that were more personalized and truer to life – but also gave us a practical understanding of their self-identities.

Our informants did not come from a random sampling but were “snowballed”, i.e., recruited mainly through the authors’ family members, acquaintances, former school-mates, and so on. Of all the immigrant entrepreneurs willing to be interviewed, the majority were from Fujian Province. This sampling approach will inevitably be questioned as “unrepresentative”, despite the fact that no research method can be entirely so. In fact, behind each of our immigrant entrepreneur’s pioneering projects there was an exceptional and intriguing story. To be of the same origin does not mean they encountered a homogeneous set of problems in life and work. Their managerial experiences are like the individual tiles of a jigsaw puzzle – similar, yet unique. Only when we have put the pieces, be they big or small, back together against a particular historical milieu can we claim to have a more global and accurate understanding of their life stories.

The interviews generally lasted between one and three hours (with most being completed within one and a half hours), and took place in the informants’ Hong Kong offices, sometimes in their homes or hotel rooms, in restaurants, eateries, or community organization offices. In some cases, they were carried out in their offices and residences in the mainland. Cantonese was the major interview language, with a few conducted in Hokkien and Putonghua.

While the interviews were open-ended without questionnaires or directive answering requirements, they had central themes. The first theme concerned our informants’ experiences as immigrants. The conversations centered on their early days in Hong Kong, the major setbacks they encountered, their social circles, and so on, so that we could probe into the connections between immigrant experience and entrepreneurship. The second theme looked at the specifics of enterprise management, focusing on how our immigrant entrepreneurs got started, their managerial problems and challenges, marketing strategies, and so on. The third theme was about our entrepreneurs’ life and work at different business sites. The data collected here shows how they managed to mobilize and integrate the social resources at different locations in order to create room for development. Despite having these main themes as a focus, our interviews did not follow a particular procedure but were adjusted to suit different interviewees and their life courses.

Our Informant’s Background

In total, 18 informants were interviewed, 16 of whom were immigrant entrepreneurs (see Table 1), the other two being family members. Of these two, one was in charge of operating the entrepreneur’s business and served as a management representative.

Below we outline some of the characteristics our immigrant entrepreneurs displayed in terms of their business operations and personal backgrounds. As regards

Table 1 Interviewees' Personal Information

Interviewees	Age	Education	Place of origin	Year of arrival	Business location(s)	Business nature (past and present)
Mr. Yee	38	University	Fuqing (Fujian)	1986	Shenzhen, Hebei, Zhuhai	Mixer truck fleets, intelligent networking, real estate
Mr. Chiu	36	University	Jinjiang (Fujian)	1986	Hong Kong and Zibo, Weifang, Qingdao of Shandong,	Plush plants, chemical fiber plants, textiles factories, toy manufacturing, clothing, trades
Ms. Siu	43	Master's degree	Xi'an (Shaanxi)	1995	Hong Kong, Shenzhen, Xi'an	Electronic products, fruits trades, salons, health products franchisee
Mr. Kam	31	Master's degree	Shishi (Fujian)	1985	Hong Kong, Fujian	IT and web design
Mr. Lok	35	Master's degree	Beijing	1985	Hong Kong, Shenzhen	Pest control services
Mr. Kei	34	University	Indonesia	1985	Hong Kong, Shenzhen, Indonesia	Electronic products trades
Mr. Shin	54	Junior high	Quanzhou (Fujian)	1961	Hong Kong, Shenzhen, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Fujian	Plastic box manufacturing, 3D film material, laser imaging, laser labels, laser security packaging
Mr. Ngai	31	Master's degree	Quanzhou (Fujian)	1989	Hong Kong, Fujian	Network services, fruits and vegetable exports
Mr. Kwok	36	Senior high	Jinjiang (Fujian)	1996	Shenzhen	Silk screen printing, pad printing, varnish spray, insulating material
Mr. Chuk	36	Senior high	Fuqing (Fujian)	1998	Hong Kong, Shenzhen, Wuhe, Bozhou, Shanghai, Yingtan, Jiujiang	Real estate, bowling centers
Mr. Wing	57	Senior high	Jinjiang (Fujian)	1961	Fujian, Tianjin	Printing plants, chemical plastics factories
Mr. Yue	62	Senior high	Nan'an (Fujian)	1958	Hong Kong, Dongguan	Printing plants
Ms. Lee	43	Senior high	Jilin (Changchun)	2000	Dongguan	Shoes-making
Mr. Yam	43	Master's degree	Ningde (Fujian)	1976	Hong Kong, Shenyang	Marketing, glass manufacturing
Mr. Chun	63	Senior high	Wenzhou (Zhejiang)	1958	Hong Kong, Guangzhou	Petroleum and petroleum products
Ms. Chai	31	Master's degree	Jinjiang (Fujian)	1989	Hong Kong, Fujian	Garment factories

management, their businesses varied in size, with staff numbers ranging from a handful to more than four thousand. Most were small to medium enterprises, each having a crew of one or two hundred people. The nature of their business was just as varied, covering a spectrum of industries: construction materials, transportation fleets, real estate, textile factories, printing plants, garment factories, international trade, fruit and vegetable exports, glass manufacturing, petroleum products, etc. Fourteen out of the 16 businesses had two or more business locations, the most being seven. Nearly all (14 of 16) had Hong Kong offices. About half (seven of 16) had chosen to set up businesses in their place of origin, while the others were converged in Guangdong Province or in areas where the industry was concentrated.

The following four features were identified from the personal backgrounds of our immigrant entrepreneurs. First, with regard to their place of origin, 11 out of the 16 were from Fujian Province (though from different cities, counties, or towns), and none of them knew each other before coming to Hong Kong. The others were from Xi'an in Shaanxi Province, Changchun in Jilin Province, Beijing, Wenzhou in Zhejiang Province, and Bandung, Indonesia. Second, in terms of gender, the majority of the immigrant entrepreneurs we approached were male. Of the 16 entrepreneurs, 13 were male and just three were female. Third, as regards age, our informants fell within a wide age range, between 31 and 63. Fourth, with regard to education level, seven had completed secondary school and the other nine held Bachelor's or Master's degrees. The older informants were generally found to have a lower education level than their younger counterparts. In addition, they arrived in Hong Kong over a period of time spanning more than 40 years. Some of them came to Hong Kong as early as 1958, while the latest arrived as late as 2000. Having lived through different periods of Hong Kong's development, they have been witness to this city's history and have, with their substantive life experiences, painted it in the distinct hues of their times.

Methodology: Difficulties and Limitations

The information for this book came mainly from the spoken word of the immigrant entrepreneurs. In fact our greatest challenge was to find suitable informants who, apart from being "immigrants" themselves, were also running businesses in mainland China. Since no government statistics as yet show the exact number of such people in Hong Kong, we had just two channels through which we could find the right people: through Hong Kong-registered ethnic associations (*tongxiang hui*) and secondary school alumni associations. These secondary schools, mostly founded by early immigrant Chinese businessmen, have had a major enrolment of new immigrants from the mainland and were generally labeled "leftist patriotic schools" before the handover of Hong Kong back to the Chinese government in 1997. There were five major "leftist patriotic schools": Fukien Secondary School, Pui Kiu Middle School, Hon Wah College, Heung To Middle School, and the Workers' Children Secondary School. Statistics from Fukien Secondary School show that

before it became government-funded, new immigrants from Fujian made up more than 90% of its enrolment. With the help of organizations closely related to these immigrants, we were able to come up with a preliminary list of suitable informants. The list, however, was only the first step. For most of these bosses, who have to travel around all year long, the interview sessions were a time-consuming chore. As a result, many turned down our requests.

As well as the difficulty of finding suitable informants, there was a general reluctance among our subjects to talk with a “stranger” about matters related to their business, especially because the interviews included accounts of business operations or even of business secrets. So even having found the “right” informants, we still had difficulties conducting successful interviews and obtaining the data needed for our study. Some of the results did not come up to expectations, and in some areas the details provided were, at best, inadequate.

The “interview” as a data collection method of course has inherent limitations. First, our informants live in a state of hyper-mobility and their lives are not anchored to any particular place. To understand their intensely mobile life, we may draw on John Urry’s conception of a “mobile sociology”.¹ Urry says sociological research must concern itself with the diversities and processes of the mobility of daily life. Thus, as much as its subjects are fluid, its research methods must also be so “fluid” as to avoid fixing the subjects at a specific time and place. Having said this, and our subject being a group of people ever on the move, we sociologists often adopt a rigid research method, extracting, at fixed times and places, information that bespeaks only of a past. Such a fractured method of data collection has rendered us vulnerable to accusations of being partial, subjective, biased, out-dated, even irrelevant.

In addition, an interview dialog is always the result of a particular interaction matrix that involves the personalities of interviewer and interviewee. For various reasons, an interviewee may say different things to different people on different occasions to achieve different effects, thus making objectivity and coherence of personality somewhat irrelevant. Motivated by a particular ideology, the interviewer may sometimes “select, condition, and mould interviewee’s responses”.² He or she may also intervene and interpret differently based on his or her own experiences and assumptions, thus distorting further other’s life drama.³ The data gleaned from the interview may eventually be appropriated for the interviewer’s self-fulfillment – as the contents of the conversation are misinterpreted and misrepresented.

At the same time, we have to admit the complexity of personality. During the interviews, we were inevitably confronted with problems arising from the “double

¹ John Urry, “Mobile Sociology”, *The British Journal of Sociology*, 51, No. 1 (January/March 2000), pp. 185–203.

² Anthony Seldon and Joanna Pappworth, *By Word of Mouth: “Elite” Oral History* (New York: Methuen, 1983), p. 18.

³ Chan Kwok-bun and Claire Chiang, *Stepping Out: The Making of Chinese Entrepreneurs* (Singapore: Prentice Hall, 1994), p. 21.

psychological spheres” of the human psyche, which is divided between a public sphere and a private, secret sphere, thus resulting in a further divide of a personality between the public persona and the private persona.⁴ This may be a prevalent psychological phenomenon in interviews, since the interviewees may be inclined to their own ways of reconstructing their lives and histories, giving out, as it happens, “truths”, “half-truths”, “untruths”, or a salad of the three. They may have two separate systems of expression (*huayu tixi*) for their own use, one for talking in public, the other for talking with their friends.⁵ In narrating their personal experiences, they may highlight certain truths and downplay others; their utterances, before reaching the interviewer’s ears, may have already been modified or even partially dramatized. The process of storytelling is, therefore, always haunted by the storyteller’s cautious attention to his or her own image.⁶ We had to decide which system of expression the interviewee used, how much of his or her narration was truthful portrayal, and how much else was deliberate exaggeration. This was a daunting task.

Any sociological research method is bound to be handicapped in one way or another. Any discipline that involves the collection of personal data, that attempts to reconstruct people’s lives and histories, is necessarily confronted with problems of subjective tailoring, cultural manipulation, ideological prejudices, and so on. It does not follow, however, that the information gleaned from an interview is innately short of value: while a narration may have been cautiously selective, there is “no more factually correct picture of a ‘real’ person than the one created by the subject himself”.⁷ Denied access to the absolute truth, the interviewer is at least given a partial and yet unique path into the subject’s emotions, ideas, personality, reflections and interpretations of events, anxieties and aspirations – all via the subject’s own words which, being at once individual and true to life, can never be copied or reproduced. Contextualizing these partial truths within the unique historical contingencies in which they are uttered, we can in one way or another obtain fragments of historical significance that will contribute to our understanding of the interaction between the self and society. When necessary, of course, we may use associative interpretations and inferences in a cautious and disciplined way and, with a bit of sociological imagination, even luck, seek to deepen our analyses.

⁴ Li Qiang, “‘Xinli erchong quyu’ yu zhongguo de wenjuan diaocha” [“‘Double Psychological Spheres’ and Opinion Surveys in China”], *Shehuixue Yanjiu* [Sociological Research], No. 1, 2000, p. 40.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁶ Chan and Chiang, *Stepping Out*, p. 25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

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Kwok-bun, C.; Wai-wan, C.

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