

# Preface

This is an age of hypermobility. Migrants have travelled to all ends of the Earth.

To and fro, back and forth, they linger between the complexities of life in a strange land and their ingrained memories of their native homes, hovering between the urge to move on and their desire to go back. It is precisely in such lingering that life manifests itself in all its intricacies and paradoxes.

The group of immigrant entrepreneurs that make up the subject of this study speak eloquently for this age of mobility. They shuttle from city to city, place to place, between time zones. Part of their life is always packed up, ready to move. Looking ahead, tickets in hand, they have no idea what their next destination will be. In business, it is their most glamorous time. In daily life, however, they are just ordinary people, frustrated, torn between their loves and hates, struggling between flesh and soul, as they seek the best out of life. Yet existing studies generally focus on the entrepreneur's 'business behavior' while largely ignoring their 'human' side. Why, in fact, does the immigrant entrepreneur 'linger'? How do they linger, and how do they resolve their various emotional entanglements?

It is by no means the economist's monopoly to study man's economic behavior, since sociologists have long been working in the area. From Georg Simmel's observations on the symbolic meanings of money to Max Weber's exposition of the intrinsic links between protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, from Mark S. Granovetter's discussions of the utilitarian impact of interpersonal ties on economic development to the theoretical studies of social capital and social networks that have prospered since the 1980s, sociology has actively engaged itself in understanding man's economic behavior. Along the same lines and building upon theories of sociology, the present study situates the individuals within the global landscape of their time and, by so doing, not only seeks to reconsider the underlying functions of cultural factors, but also probes the most secret crannies of the individual's *emotional terrain*. In this way, the dual perspectives of economic sociology and social psychology provide us with certain fairly startling insights.

Entrepreneurship has always been an important lifeline for this commercial city of Hong Kong. Yet, to sustain the territory's vital spirit of entrepreneurship in the face of globalization, we need imaginative and creative powers that are at once

transnational and unconventional. 'Mobility' turns out to be the most powerful dynamo of such imaginative and creative energies. A 'mobile sociology' is therefore urgently needed, not only to understand the nature of 'mobility' but also to look into the individual's 'human' joys and woes in the very midst of mobility, thus necessarily evoking a 'sociology of emotions'. Mobility has brought about change and innovation as well as impact. In the 'Cover Notes' to the 1 April 2007 issue of the *Yazhou zhoukan* (Asia Weekly), Qiu Liben had this to say: 'Talents around the globe refuse to yield to adversity, they will not believe in tears. They are creators of life's miracles. They are creators of national miracles'. Much as they refuse to submit or yield to adversity, tears, however, are no strangers to the travelling entrepreneurs. Tears as such flow *within*, turn invisible and run dry, amidst unknown pains and frustrations. This does not concern the economist, and the sociologist is not sufficiently sensitive either. The present study makes a fresh start. It seeks to explore the emotionality of these travelers, hoping to fill these gaps in sociological work.

Hong Kong entrepreneurship has had its glory days, when early Chinese immigrants settled in the territory and started their own businesses, when booming ethnic entrepreneurship constituted the motor of the city's sparkling vivacity. It was a time of numerous individual legends, the legends of this new metropolis of Hong Kong. Yet research of ethnic entrepreneurship in this international immigrant city has generally betrayed serious ethnocentric tendencies. Besides studies of ethnic Chinese enterprises (e.g., Wong Siu-lun's survey of Hong Kong textile industrialists), we have hardly touched upon other ethnic businesses (Indian, Pakistani, Nepalese, Indonesian, Thai, Vietnamese, Philippine, etc.) that have flourished in the territory. Indeed, for Hong Kong's entrepreneurship to go through another period of prosperity, it needs to 'walk on both legs': as much as transnational corporations are welcomed, ethnic businesses that are rooted in the territory, hidden in all corners of the city, and charged with creative vigor, are also needed. While this book seeks to make a fresh start in the study of Chinese immigrants, we are well aware of the urgency of probing other ethnic immigrant groups.

Migrancy has always been the subject of much critical attention. As time elapses, fundamental changes take place in migrants' social situations, their daily lives, the problems they encounter in corporate management, their dilemmas, and so on. The entrepreneurs in this study are mostly small-to-medium enterprise owners who, once highly valued by local governments when they entered the mainland Chinese market in the 1980s, are now put on the back burner, as the local governments are more attracted to transnational corporations and syndicates. Being increasingly 'marginalized', these entrepreneurs from Hong Kong may serve as a mirror for the mass of SMEs now operating on the mainland of China. Challenged by the changes in the state of affairs without government participation or assistance, these people can only unite to protect themselves on the mainland. But such small unions are hardly powerful enough to be effective. What the Hong Kong government must do at this point is work closely with local mainland governments and begin to think about developing measures, policies, and institutions to help and support them.

From knowledge comes prevision, and from now comes the future. Our exercise in economic sociology has the promise of insights which have far-reaching implications,

not only for our knowledge of society, but for the formulation of public policies that will help migrant/ethnic entrepreneurship out of its predicament. Good sociology must be an applied sociology, an action sociology, a public sociology.

In 'lingering,' one 'vacillates,' not only between different spatial configurations, but between different times, wistfully desiring the past and ardently anticipating the future. Chan Kwok-bun, a co-author of this study, has written two previous books on Chinese migration, *Smoke and Fire: The Chinese in Montreal*, when teaching in Canada and *Stepping Out: The Making of Chinese Entrepreneurs*, while teaching in Singapore. The current book adds a third volume to the trilogy – though the experiences, people, locations, and times are different, all three books mull over the eternal processes of 'hoping, hunting, waiting, and transforming', with or without regrets in life.

Sociological studies operate on the double tracks of retrospect and anticipation, theory and practice, fiction and reality, imagination and fact. From life it comes, and to life it has to return in order to improve it. As Marx put it so precisely, "The philosophies have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it." To the sixteen entrepreneurs who shared with us their life experiences, we extend our heartfelt gratitude. This project could never have been possible without their stories, their candidness and their enthusiasm.

Hong Kong

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