

Preface

Entrepreneurship is fancy, in academia as well as in society in general. People of all walks of life can be heard referring to themselves as entrepreneurs, or entrepreneurial. This seems to be triggered by the fact that entrepreneur is derived from the same root as enterprise. The enterprise, the firm, is the pillar of economy, the vehicle par excellence for wealth creating activities. Seen from that angle, entrepreneurs are people who create wealth; for themselves, for the people they may employ, and for a number of other types of people, stakeholders.

This line of thinking is not without flaws. While ‘enterprise’ is most frequently used in its sense of ‘firm’, its original meaning, ‘undertaking’, is still used as well. One can undertake much more than a for-profit company. In its broadest sense, most of our daily activities are undertakings, activities that we undertake to reach a certain goal.

These enterprises in the broader sense often also involve a range of stakeholders. Suppose that you wish to completely redesign your backyard. You hate that old wooden shed that constantly leaks making your bikes rust and want to replace it with a brand new brick building. While you are at it, you might as well take down that ugly tree that makes the yard look dark even during a sunny day. Some of these activities may require the consent of your neighbor (who has been so happy with the shade of your tree during the hottest time of the year), or involve applying for a permit from the municipal government (this is necessary for felling trees in many countries), securing a loan from your bank (a brick bike shed is expensive), etc.

You need to craft strategies to make each of these stakeholders cooperate in the preferred way. Persuading your neighbor is quite different from getting a loan from the bank. This is related to the different social relationship you have with each stakeholder, which in turn is embedded in social practice that has been constructed in ongoing social interaction. As your relationship with your neighbor is a symmetrical one, the interaction between neighbors tends to be very informal. You would typically invite your neighbor for a drink and then introduce your plan quasi haphazardly. This would not work for the bank. Even if you have a regular account manager in your bank that always takes care of your financial matters, it is not likely that you would invite that person to your home. You would go to the bank, where

you would be requested to fill in a form. That would not surprise you, as that is regular practice in banking business.

To summarize: entrepreneurship is not a static trait of a certain person, or certain type of people. Entrepreneurship is dynamic; it is a process that takes place at the intersection of a number of social identities of the entrepreneur. As such, entrepreneurship is itself a social identity. As social identity is constructed in ongoing interaction about specific topics with other people, entrepreneurial identity needs to be studied from the relevant set of social identities of the entrepreneur.

This study intends to contribute to the general study of entrepreneurship by focusing on how entrepreneurial identity is produced in the intersection of a number of social identities of entrepreneurs. Moreover, it will place the construction of entrepreneurial identity in a historic perspective. This is achieved by combining McAdams' life story analysis with the concept of (multiple) inclusion in Social Integration Theory. To develop this model, we have opted for a case study approach. A number of Chinese private entrepreneurs with various backgrounds have been observed and interviewed. The data thus obtained have been used to reconstruct the development of the dominant social identities of each entrepreneur and pinpoint at what stage of their lives they constructed their entrepreneurial identity. While each case is an individual story, the life stories analyzed so far already reveal a number of recurrent identities that seem to play an essential role in the entrepreneurship of present day Chinese entrepreneurs.

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