

Researching Hybridity in Social and Economic Geography: The Case of 'Chinese' Business Networks

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About the Speaker

Henry Wai-chung Yeung has been Associate Professor in Economic Geography at the Department of Geography, National University of Singapore since January 2000. He was a recipient of the Commonwealth Fellowship and the Fulbright Foreign Research Award. His research interests cover broadly theories and the geography of transnational corporations, Asian firms and their overseas operations and Chinese business networks in the Asia-Pacific region. Professor Yeung has published widely on transnational corporations from developing countries, in particular Hong Kong, Singapore and other Asian Newly Industrialized Economies. He is the author of *Transnational Corporations and Business Networks* (Routledge, London, 1998), *Entrepreneurship and the Internationalisation of Asian Firms* (Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, 2002), and *Chinese Capitalism in a Global Era* (Routledge, London, 2004). He is also the editor of *The Globalisation of Business Firms from Emerging Markets*, Two Volumes (Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, 1999) and co-editor of *Globalisation and the Asia Pacific* (Routledge, London, 1999), *Globalization of Chinese Business Firms* (Macmillan, New York, 2000), *Remaking the Global Economy* (Sage, London, 2003). He has over 60 research papers published in internationally refereed journals and 20 chapters in books. He is Editor of *Environment and Planning A*, *Economic Geography*, and *Review of International Political Economy*, Asia-Pacific Editor of *Global Networks*, and Business Manager of *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*. He sits on the editorial boards of 7 other international journals, including *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, *European Urban and Regional Studies*, and *Journal of Economic Geography*. From 2003-2005, he is the East Asia Director, Asia Specialty Group of the Association of American Geographers. He is also the Southeast Asia Representative in the Commonwealth Geographical Bureau Management Committee, 2001-2008.

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Abstract

The concept hybridity has posed a very significant methodological challenge to our practice as social and economic geographers. While economic organizations are increasingly hybridized through such non-economic forces as social embeddedness and cultural identities, conventional methods and techniques in social and economic geography seem to fail to capture this process of hybridization and its complex geographies. In this reflexive paper, I aim to discuss how a process-based methodology incorporating some elements of actor-network analysis may contribute to resolving this complicated issue of researching into the hybridity of economic organizations. Reflecting on my own experience of researching Chinese capitalism, I show how this process-based methodology is useful in unraveling the complex and often secretive nature of the spatial organization of Chinese family firms and their business networks in East and Southeast Asia. The cultural identities and spatiality of key actors in these Chinese business networks are increasingly heterogeneous such that it becomes rather difficult to identify purely “Chinese” actors in today’s globalizing era. As such, the emergence of a new hybrid form of “Chinese” business networks entails a reconsideration of our existing research methods and practices. In so doing, I also examine the wider issue about the politics and practice of researching hybridity in social and economic geography.

Reflecting on the culturalist perspective of Chinese capitalism

In this paper, I aim to reflect critically on my own positionality in researching hybridity in Chinese business networks and to problematize methodologically Chinese capitalism research. This methodological paper is intentionally reflexive and is thus peculiar to my own experience of researching Chinese capitalism. Chinese capitalism can be defined as a historically- and geographically-specific form of economic organization among ethnic Chinese living outside mainland China, particularly in East and Southeast Asia. It is a dominant mode of economic organization in East and Southeast Asia because of not only its economic significance in the host economies, but also its complex and, yet, intricate social organization and authority systems (see Yeung, 2004a). To put the logic of my presentation upfront, I will show how my methodological approach to researching Chinese capitalism has shifted over the years from a static culturalist one to a dynamic transformative perspective.

This significant shift in my own research methodology is attributed largely to my growing awareness of my positionality as an ethnic Chinese researching Chinese capitalism *and* the dynamic transformations in Chinese capitalism in relation to globalization tendencies. In other words, my perspective on Chinese capitalism changes in relation to critical reflections on my research positionality and the material processes that increasingly hybridize Chinese capitalism in a global era.

To begin, I want to offer a confession about my own positionality in the ten-year course of producing all those published texts on Chinese capitalism. Knowingly or not, these texts are part and parcel of the wider actor networks that may shape the transformations in Chinese capitalism. In particular, all those exchanges of perspectives during my interviews with key actors in Chinese family firms, my interactions with leading experts in academic workshops and conferences and readers of my published work would have produced unintended effects on Chinese capitalism. When I first embarked on my research and writing as a half-baked “culturalist” in the early 1990s, I was naïve enough to believe unquestionably in the intrinsic importance of *guanxi* or social relationships in explaining the economic organization of Chinese capitalism. A “culturalist” is simply someone who deploys culture to explain all forms of economic action and outcomes. As a firm believer in the role of culture then, I saw the Chinese cultural trait of *guanxi* as *essentially* shaping the behaviour and activities of ethnic Chinese business firms. While my fascination with culture and ethnicity in shaping economic organizations predates the “cultural turn” in economic geography (see Thrift and Olds, 1996; Lee and Wills, 1997; Barnett, 1998; Barnes, 2001), what I did not realize at the time was that I was indeed substituting one form of (economic) essentialism with another – *cultural essentialism*. In retrospect, my false beliefs in the “culturalist” perspective on Chinese capitalism had much to do with my positionality as an ethnic Chinese born in mainland China and as a citizen in a predominantly ethnic Chinese economy

(Singapore) and a permanent resident in another under the authority of the People's Republic of China (Hong Kong SAR). I thought I was gifted with “insider” knowledge of the intrinsic operations of Chinese capitalism. But I was unaware of the inherent danger and bias in my taken-for-granted positionality as an ethnic Chinese researching the role of Chinese culture in shaping the economic organization of ethnic Chinese business firms. As the famous Chinese saying goes, an insider is so obsessed with the phenomenon that it takes an outsider to tell a better picture.

When I began my research in ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs from Hong Kong in 1993, I was attracted to popular writings about Chinese capitalism (wrongly called “Overseas Chinese business” in many instances). In retrospect, they were not anything more than ethnic stereotypes or, worst, racist caricatures. In this vast literature mushrooming during the late 1980s and the early 1990s, Chinese culture and *guanxi* networks were celebrated as the fundamental reason for the success of leading Chinese entrepreneurs and their business conglomerates in the Asia Pacific region. The popularity and prominence of such a triumphant characterization of Chinese capitalism as “bamboo networks”, “*guanxi* capitalism” or “Confucian capitalism” perpetuated an essentialist argument that all ethnic Chinese in East and Southeast Asia share similar Confucian worldviews.¹ In this “culturalist” literature, the Chinese Confucian culture was taken for granted as something both presupposing the economic success of “Overseas Chinese” and defining the “spirit of Chinese capitalism” in the same way as how Weber [1930] (1992) used the Protestant ethic to define the cultural essence of Western capitalism. Defined then as an enduring cultural system of economic activities, Chinese capitalism was therefore seen as static and self-contained within peculiar social and political contexts in East and Southeast Asia. It was not subject to any significant degree of change and transformation because of the enduring effects of cultural imprints on its economic organization – primarily evident through the pervasive presence of the Chinese

family firm. Prompted by these celebratory readings on Chinese capitalism during the late 1980s and early 1990s² and the lack of critical work in economic geography, much of my early research perspective was misplaced in unpacking Chinese business activities from such a culturally inspired position. In short, I fell prey to such a triumphant and dominant discourse that permeated much of East Asian studies at the time (see critique in Berger and Borer, 1997; Ong and Nonini, 1997).

During the same period, social and economic geography witnessed the rapid emergence of “social embeddedness”, a Polanyian concept popularized by economic sociologist Mark Granovetter (1985). It became a key concept in refiguring the economic in economic geography (see Dicken and Thrift, 1992; Thrift and Olds, 1996; Hess, 2004). In this view, the social embeddedness of economic action tends to take a methodological precedence over and above the dynamic process of disembedding. While it represents a telling move away from neoclassical economic thinking, the social embeddedness perspective remains as a form of “structuralist” thinking through a peculiar way in which economic processes are understood as inseparable from and thus embedded in preexisting structures of social and cultural networks. In brief, embeddedness is viewed as a static property that is possessed and dispossessed by social actors. Empirically, it became so natural to me that the economic action of Chinese business firms must be socially embedded in dense networks of *guanxi* or personal relationships throughout East and Southeast Asia. More crucially, I was so determined methodologically to look out consciously for the “embeddedness variable” in my early empirical study of Hong Kong investments in Southeast Asia (see Yeung, 1997a; 1997b). In so doing, I focused narrowly on the cultural embedding of ethnic Chinese economic activities and failed to notice the important underlying transformations and *disembedding processes* taking place in the socio-economic (re)organization of Chinese

capitalism. In particular, I went into the field with the firm belief that Chinese capitalism must be all about ethnic Chinese and their cultural beliefs that drive the economic system.

At both theoretical and methodological levels, I paid no attention or whatsoever to the possibilities of *non-Chinese* (e.g. foreign partners, institutional investors and international media commentators) as important actors in shaping the nature and organization of Chinese capitalism – a process of hybridization that becomes apparent to me at a much later stage of my research project. To sum up the earlier phase of my research into Chinese capitalism, I was mostly driven by the culturalist-inspired perspective on Chinese business firms and a research methodology attuned to discovering cultural convergence and structural relations of embeddedness rather than dynamic change and transformations in relation to globalization tendencies. The end result of this self-imposed “lock-in” trajectory in my research practice is the production of a series of texts that celebrated the importance of *guanxi* and personal relationships in explaining the transnational business networks of Chinese business firms from Hong Kong (see Yeung, 1997a; 1997b; 1998). In a methodological sense, this is a case of you see only what you want to see and therefore preclude other possibilities (e.g. divergence and change). I did manage to show how ethnicity and social embeddedness matter in the transnational organization of Chinese business networks. But in reproducing these “culturalist” explanations of convergence in Chinese capitalism, I failed to shed light on the dynamic transformations of Chinese capitalism in a global era.

Repositioning my Chinese capitalism research: What has culture got to do with it?

By the late 1990s and in the aftermath of the 1997/1998 Asian economic crisis, I became much more aware of my own positionality within Chinese capitalism research. Having been invited to numerous workshops and conferences on Chinese business in Asia and Europe, I realized that I was more than just an academic researcher who produces knowledge on Chinese capitalism. Indeed, my research “findings” must have a much wider

impact on the very subjects of research themselves. A special report on Asian family succession by John Ridding, a Hong Kong-based correspondent of *The Financial Times*, on 10 March 1998 quoted me, among other things, as saying, “Even if you have a good son, it is difficult for him to command the respect accorded to [the] founder and patriarch” and, “For many international investors the lack of transparency is linked to family control and succession” (p.15). Being quoted as a Chinese business expert in one of the world’s most famous business newspapers apparently opened many more doors for me. The *Far Eastern Economic Review* subsequently approached me for an exclusive interview on “succession in Chinese family business” that was also aired live on CNBC Live shortly after the FT report.

This totally unexpected coverage of my views on Chinese family business by three highly influential media products (FT, FEER and CNBC) made me aware for the first time that academics could be an important actant, in the words of actor network theory, in shaping the ways in which the business community operates. I was quite sure that the impact of my comments on the business community was further enhanced by the ongoing and unruly accusation of “crony capitalism” in the wake of the Asian economic crisis. Such leading commentators of the Asian economic crisis in 1997/1998 as Paul Krugman and Alan Greenspan had argued that the crisis resulted from the lack of transparency in the financial systems of various Asian economies. In many East and Southeast Asian economies, the existence of strong patron-client relationships between the state and business people (mostly ethnic Chinese) was suggested as the primary cause of the Asian economic crisis. The deep cultural roots in Confucianism of this kind of “crony capitalism” were revealed as something highly negative and detrimental to the efficient operation of the market mechanism in East and Southeast Asia, culminating in the economic crisis. My suggestion of the link between family control and the lack of transparency in Chinese family firms published in *The Financial Times* couldn’t be timelier! It must have been picked up by some high profile

readers in business and government to support their view of “crony capitalism” in East and Southeast Asia.

After this series of media exposures, it was clear that I needed to question my own positionality in this project on Chinese capitalism. This was partly because of my reading into poststructuralist work in human geography published at around the same time (Gibson-Graham, 1996; Thrift, 1996; Rose, 1997) and partly because of my increasing awareness of the potential “global” reach and impact of my research work. I came to realize how my own positionality might have shaped my research agenda and the unintended ways through which I communicated my research findings to the wider audience (e.g. media and professional publications).³ I thought that as an ethnic Chinese researcher speaking on the perils of “Chinese capitalism”, my words might be construed and received rather differently (and positively?) than those from such “essential outsiders” as Anglo-American scholars. I wondered whether I became part of the alleged “Western conspiracy” that, according to the former Prime Minister of Malaysia – Dr Mahathir Mohamed, brought the crisis to Asia. I began to question my own ethnic and cultural identity as an “Overseas Chinese” – overseas to where and what? Am I a believer in Confucianism and *guanxi* capitalism? Do I know and practice *guanxi* as all ethnic Chinese are allegedly expected to do? What about the Italians and the Jews or Anglos, doesn’t their form of economic activity rest on embedded relations even though it is not called “*guanxi*”? So the story and its mischief in justifying the allegation of “crony capitalism” in Asia goes on and on in these cultural essentialist writings. I began to lose faith in the culturalist perspective and went on to search for an alternative approach to study Chinese capitalism.

Why was there a u-turn in my approach to Chinese capitalism? During the course of this decade-long research into Chinese capitalism, what has apparently changed in me is not the subject of my intellectual pursuit (although how I see that subject has changed), but rather

my thinking becoming more reflexive and my reasoning about it becoming less culturalist and more transformative. While the change in my views on Chinese capitalism has a lot to do with my growing reflexivity in an intellectual sense, it is also positively correlated with the dramatic pace at which globalization tendencies have transformed the world economy and the dynamic integration of Chinese capitalism into these tendencies (as suppliers, strategic partners, and competitors). Just as reflexivity in my own positionality has changed my worldviews, there is a concomitant *shift* in the nature and economic organization of Chinese capitalism in association with the globalization of economic activities.⁴ And it is this story of *change* and *transformation* in Chinese capitalism that underscores much of the concept *hybridity*. To me, Chinese capitalism does not exist as a “pure” form of capitalism because it evolves over time just like its Anglo-American, German and Japanese counterparts. Instead, it is a form of *hybrid capitalism* that is defined by its incomplete, partial and contingent transformations towards an evolving set of capitalist norms, institutions and structures. We are indeed beginning to witness the rise of a peculiar mode of hybrid capitalism characterized by the infusion of a variety of *disembedding* economic logics and social organizations that defy easy identification and simple analysis. The very transformative nature of hybrid capitalism implies that there is no definite end-state and form because political and economic outcomes of transition depend very much on complex interactions among social actors and their embedded institutions. The territorial unboundedness of Chinese capitalism within distinctive national economies also contributes to its emergent hybridity because multiple forces and conditioning factors shaping its structures and trajectories at the supra-national scale are at work. Put it rather crudely, much of Chinese capitalism today is like a banana – yellow outside and white inside. There is a curious mixture and juxtaposition of traditional Chinese practices and established norms and conventions in global capitalism (see more empirical analysis in Yeung, 2004a; see also Ong and Nonini, 1997; Gomez and Hsiao, 2004).

My argument on Chinese capitalism thus complements Hamilton's (1999: 4) idea that "capitalism is not a stable and readily identifiable configuration that, like a flower, suddenly bursts forth in bloom. Instead, capitalism is merely a term that covers an extremely wide range of diverse economic activities organized in the context of competitive markets and whose institutional conditions include private ownership and non-state decision making". It also supports Storper and Salais's (1997) idea of the economy as a hybrid object constituted through a diversity of conventions and worlds of production in which actors organize and legitimize their action and behaviour. The concept of culture in Chinese capitalism, for example, needs to be reconceptualized as a repertoire of historically contingent and geographically specific practices that respond and adapt to changing local, regional and global circumstances rather than as permanently fixed mental and organizational structures that resist challenges and pressures to change (see also Hwang, 1987; Yang, 1994; 2002). Largely due to this reflexive thinking on the "culturalist" perspective on Chinese capitalism, my recent theoretical and empirical research has focused on how Chinese capitalism and its core feature – the Chinese family firm and its business networks – may change and evolve, and what accounts for the underlying processes of these changes.

This more dynamic approach is necessary because Chinese capitalism is not a kind of cultural artefact that is forever cast in stones. Rather, Chinese capitalism is *lived* as a peculiar set of spatial-temporal outcomes, is highly institutionalized, and consists of immense struggles and contestations by *social actors* through discursive strategies and material practices (of which I seemingly play a small role through my research and writings). Researching the transformative processes of Chinese capitalism, I have realized the importance of focusing on these key social actors. This approach requires us to focus not so much on the cultural systems of beliefs and values in Chinese capitalism, but rather on how key actors perform their social and economic imperatives in real life such that their collective

action could bring about changes and transformations in the broader structures of Chinese capitalism. Taking such an *actor-oriented approach*, however, should not be about throwing “culture” (the baby) out with the popular writings on the “Overseas Chinese business” (the bathwater). It is instead about seeing culture as a set of practices that change with circumstances and contexts *and* about paying more attention to social actors in enabling this change and transformation. By reinterpreting and retheorizing its dynamics in a global era, I believe Chinese capitalism is increasingly becoming a form of hybrid capitalism that reflects both the influence of globalization tendencies on nationally or supra-nationally organized economic systems and the impact of significant participation of key actors from those economic systems in globalization tendencies (see Yeung, 2000). As a form of hybrid capitalism, Chinese capitalism embodies the interpenetration of culturally and institutionally specific dynamics at the local and regional scales, and the growing influence of flows of people, capital, technology and knowledge on the global scale.

Problematizing Chinese capitalism research

Having clarified my positionality and changing conceptions of the nature and organization of Chinese capitalism, I want to devote the rest of this paper to discussing how the politics and practice of my research are shaped throughout my decade-long project on Chinese capitalism. Elsewhere in Yeung (2003), I discussed a process-based methodological framework for understanding the practice of new economic geographies. In this framework, I argued for special attention to four different moments of the research process: (1) the use of primary and secondary data; (2) the need to trace chains and networks; (3) the role of *in situ* research and (4) the generation of theoretical insights. Figure 1 provides a convenient summary of how these different moments of the methodological framework fit within my research of Chinese capitalism. While the following post-hoc rationalization of my own research might appear too neat and clean, the realities of my research are much messier and ad

hoc in nature. Methodological pragmatism and improvisation are my rule of the thumb. To begin, I think it is necessary to explain one of the most significant data constraints of my project – the secretive nature of Chinese business. Similar to a number of other minority diaspora groups, family business for ethnic Chinese outside mainland China has a historical existence of being a “total institution” encompassing both cultural and economic roles. The family business serves dual functions – as a provider to the founder and (almost always) his immediate family members, and as an employer of his family members and trusted “lieutenants” (Wong, 1988; Redding, 1990; Brown, 2000). Although Chinese family business has experienced some degree of internal transformation in an era of globalization, the centrality of the family in Chinese business remains relatively intact.

Figure 1 here

What then explains the secretive nature of Chinese family business? First, because of the central role of the family in Chinese business, there is a significant degree of internalization of information within the family. This results in strong cooperation within family groups and networks, but fierce competition among different business groups and networks.⁵ Trust and information are highly important to business success and thus normally only family members are granted exclusive rights to such information. Second, the host countries in which Chinese family business operates (e.g. Southeast Asia) tend to be hostile to this ethnic organization of economic activities for various political and institutional reasons (Hamilton, 1991; McVey, 1992; Hodder, 1996; Chirot and Reid, 1997; Douw et al., 2001). The internalization of information within the family becomes an important mechanism to protect one’s family and business from external threats from local states and dominant ethnic groups. This mindset among ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia, for example, has been

variously known as “the siege mentality” (Yoshihara, 1988; Redding, 1990), “the refugee mentality” (Kotkin, 1992), and “the trader’s dilemma” (Menkhoff, 1993).

Given this highly secretive nature of Chinese capitalism and its tendency to be organized around closely-knit networks of family and social relations, I encountered enormous methodological problems in understanding the material and discursive constructions of these networks in their specific time-space contexts. As I have empirically shown in Yeung (2004a), social and business networks evolved in such financial centres as Hong Kong and Singapore are quite different from those in such hostile host countries as Indonesia and Malaysia. Early emigrant entrepreneurs also brought with them very different form of business networks as second or third generation ethnic Chinese who grew up in these “host” countries. When I set out to research Chinese business firms from Hong Kong in the early 1990s, there was little that I could draw from the mainstream social and economic geography literature. Much of economic geography during the late 1980s and early 1990s was concerned with industrial districts and flexible production systems (see critical reviews in Malmberg, 1994; Yeung, 1994). This research focus in economic geography was preceded by an earlier one around the political economy of uneven development and industrial restructuring (Lever, 1985; Massey and Meegan, 1985). In this large body of economic-geographical literature, the primary methodological focus was *the firm* and its operating environment (known as a milieu). With some exceptions (e.g. Camagni, 1991; Dicken and Thrift, 1992; Conti, 1993; Cooke and Morgan, 1993; Grabher, 1993; Yeung, 1994), much of economic geography during the 1980s and the early 1990s emphasised industrial firms rather than embedded networks. In both conceptual and methodological realms, economic geographers, then, were much better in linking regional development to firm-specific activities than in unpacking the social-spatial organization of different firms through networks of intra-firm and inter-firm relations. This overt focus on firm-specific industrial restructuring

and production systems resulted in a kind of economic geography of firms and industries devoid of social and ethnic identities. With hindsight, the economic geography of the 1980s appears as “cold”, “inhuman”, “productionist”, and “economistic”.

Not surprisingly then, I started my research into Chinese capitalism with business firms in mind, although I discovered shortly afterwards that I had to open the “black box” of the firm and to focus on *social actors* in my analysis of Chinese capitalism. In methodological terms, the crucial role of dense and intricate webs of networks and relationships in Chinese business created formidable problems for my empirical research. Though not exclusive, these methodological problems are related to (1) the unit of research; (2) the discursive identity and ethnicity of actors; (3) the spatiality of actors, and (4) the role of gatekeepers (or intermediaries in actor networks). One of the most daunting methodological issues was identifying the *unit of research and analysis*. It was a problem because of Chinese capitalism’s extensive regional presence throughout Asia, and the distinctive identities discursively constructed by host countries and among the “Overseas Chinese” themselves (see Lim and Gosling, 1983; Wang, 1991; Lynn, 1998). Should the focus be on the family, the family firm, or the entire network? The complex interconnections among these three categories have methodologically handicapped previous empirical studies of Chinese capitalism. These studies focused exclusively either on Chinese families and their social practices, or took the family firms out of their social and institutional contexts and examined the economic organization of these family firms. This “methodological exclusiveness” impaired much of their analysis because of the inability to examine the family, the firm, and their networks as total institutions or integrated complexes in Chinese capitalism. Today, this methodological problem continues to pose serious implications for deciding what constitutes appropriate data (see Figure 1). Most quantitative data available on Chinese capitalism refer to firm establishments and, sometimes, their shareholding and management structures (e.g.

Carney and Gedajlovic, 2002). A straightforward quantitative analysis of Chinese family firms is unable to unravel the complex interconnections between the family, the firm, and business networks, let alone the material and discursive contexts in which they are constructed. Here, my methodological instincts were much influenced by the methodology of tracing actor-specific network relations in actor network theory – an influential perspective in the study of sociology of science popularized by Michel Callon, Bruno Latour, John Law and others (see more methodological discussion on this in the next section).

Of course, one might question whether there is anything uniquely Chinese about Chinese capitalism, and even if there is, why we should study Chinese capitalism in the first place. These questions raise another methodological issue that is synonymous with the “cultural turn” in economic geography of the late 1990s – the *identities and ethnicity* of actors in Chinese capitalism. Dirlik (1997), Ong (1993; 1997) and Yao (1997; 2002), for example, argue that much of the methodological problem in existing studies of Chinese capitalism is linked to the romanticization of “Chineseness” and the discursive constructions of Chinese capitalism as an object, an ideational construct, and a moment in the wider hegemonic discourses on global capitalism. The methodological implication is that we need to deconstruct these shifting identities and ethnicity of actors – both ethnic Chinese and non-Chinese – in Chinese capitalism and to examine the powerful effects of discourses on them. For example, Kong’s (1999) study of Singaporean transmigration in China has shown how the national identity of Singaporeans (as Singaporean Chinese) was reimagined and negotiated when they were confronted with their ethnic identity as Chinese (in China). Similar confrontation and negotiations of national identities and Chinese ethnicity can be observed among the “Overseas Chinese” in Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America (see Yeung and Olds, 2000). Given this transnational fluidity in hybridizing Chinese identities, it becomes methodologically imperative to examine not only ethnic Chinese actors, but also non-ethnic

Chinese who have assumed some form of Chinese identities in material processes (e.g. through cross-cultural marriage) and discursive ways (e.g. through academic writings and popular press reports). My research focus therefore needs to transcend actors' cultural identities and ethnic boundaries to arrive at a fuller appreciation of the complexity of Chinese capitalism – a methodological shift in my work in relation to the rise of poststructuralism in the so-called new economic geography (Gibson-Graham, 1996; Dixon and Jones, 1996; 1998; Thrift, 1996; 2000).

This concern with the *spatiality of actors* is particularly important because the geography of actor networks is increasingly complex and oblivious to conventional measurements and analysis in economic geography and management studies (see more explanations in Dicken et al., 2001; Yeung, 2004b). “Chinese” business networks are now extending across space in both material and discursive ways – they are no longer exclusively ethnic Chinese in their composition and operationalization (and hence “Chinese” in inverted commas below to describe the involvement of non-Chinese in “Chinese” business networks). This is especially prevalent among Asia’s leading “Chinese” business conglomerates. Through direct investments abroad, they are able to shape the material context in which their investment objectives (e.g. market penetration) are satisfied. As discursive constructions, actors in “Chinese” business networks attempt to encourage more analysts and financiers in major global financial centers to talk about their business transactions and therefore generate favorable discourses to facilitate their capital raising and other related activities (see Olds and Yeung, 1999; Yeung, 2000; 2004a). These actors in “Chinese” business networks may not be exclusively family members or even ethnic Chinese. They may be international bankers, accountants, and consultants working for “Chinese” business firms. These actors are capable of influencing the nature and organization of Chinese capitalism from a distance (e.g. in London and New York). Unfolding the secrets of Chinese capitalism requires making explicit

how these non-Chinese actors are enrolled into and shape “Chinese” business networks. On the domestic front, gatekeepers in home countries continue to serve as vital intermediaries in Chinese capitalism so that family firms can use their monopolistic licenses and special privileges to generate capital to sustain their transnational operations. These home country intermediaries in Chinese capitalism are typically government bureaucrats, politicians, indigenous business partners, and so on. Disentangling their complex enrollment into “Chinese” business networks is again an important task in understanding the nature and organization of Chinese capitalism in East and Southeast Asia (see below for an example of Li Ka-shing’s Cheung Kong Holdings).

Researching into the secrets of Chinese capitalism

The Chinese capitalism example above shows that not only economic institutions are embedded in social relations, but also actors in these networks of relations have hybrid identities that are strongly influenced by their discursive and institutional contexts. Returning to Figure 1, I argue that an integrated method approach is an appropriate methodology to unfold the secrets of Chinese capitalism. In this section, I aim to reflect on the methodological realities of my decade-long research into Chinese capitalism. Starting with the *choice of empirical data*, I knew at the beginning of my research that an exclusive reliance on either primary data or secondary sources would be insufficient to unfold the secrets of Chinese capitalism. Instead, I had to combine both data sources and triangulate their efficacy and complementarity. For example, conducting large-scale surveys with such actors in Chinese capitalism as CEOs of family firms – a methodological approach much favoured in business school research (e.g. Tsang, 2002; Ahlstrom et al., 2004) – may be sufficient to generate some quantifiable establishment characteristics (e.g. firm size and employment) and statistical relationships on certain dependent variables (e.g. family ownership and financial performance). But it is not a meaningful method to explain the material and discursive

constructions of Chinese family firms and their business networks, let alone provide deep insights into their transformations in relation to globalization tendencies. To me, in-depth personal interviews are much more relevant in this latter task, although Chinese and non-Chinese business people are not always willing to be interviewed.

To this end, I conducted two major rounds of personal interviews with top executives from 73 Hong Kong-based Chinese family firms in 1994 and 54 Singapore-based Chinese family firms in 1998 (see Yeung, 2004a: Chapter 4). During these rounds of data collection, I focused on both firm-level data and some highly personalized information (e.g. on *guanxi* connections and business network formation). This process of interview-based data collection, however, does not negate the relevance of quantitative data. In fact, I adopted an unconventional approach to these personal interviews (see full explanations in Yeung, 1995; 2002). I conducted those interviews with conventional questionnaires designed to extract quantifiable data on causal factors and variables. During each interview, I asked questions sequentially as listed on the questionnaire – a common experience in all questionnaire surveys. Unlike most questionnaire surveys, however, the interviewees were fully able to offer detail comments and further elaborations on issues of their interest. This qualitative information was captured through tape recording with the prior consent of my interviewees. Meanwhile, I also probed further into their answers to the questionnaires that might be important in generating unique theoretical insights. As such, my empirical data collection method was neither entirely qualitative personal interview nor a large-scale impersonal survey through postal mails. Rather, it was a curious hybrid of both quantitative surveys and qualitative personal interviews – what I prefer to call “interview surveys”. At the end of each interview, I would have one completed questionnaire and, in most cases, at least one hour-long tape-recording that contains good qualitative information. This methodological pragmatism has enabled me to compile a large quantifiable database on Chinese family firms

in Hong Kong and Singapore and a large collection of interesting vignettes that can be further developed into qualitative case studies. In this way, I have managed to bridge the quantitative-qualitative divide in existing research of Chinese capitalism by collecting both kinds of data in a single interview survey. This procedure thus minimizes the usual methodological problem of collecting large amount of quantitative data through highly impersonal postal surveys of which we have no idea *who* have really completed those questionnaires. It also circumvents the messy problem of analyzing qualitative data collected from very open-ended form of personal interviews (see Clark, 1998; Alvesson, 2003). My interview surveys therefore allow for a combination of quantitative analysis and qualitative case studies of empirical data from the *same* sources (i.e. same interviewees).

Meanwhile, a large amount of secondary data exists in the form of media interviews, biographies, oral histories, company documents, and research reports (see Figure 1). These secondary data can sometimes be very useful as a starting point to identify different kinds of actors in “Chinese” business networks. For example, the media often has special access to many leading actors in Chinese capitalism because they are well connected and willing to talk to reporters. These elite actors may be less likely to talk to researchers who, as McDowell (1998) and Herod (1999) have observed, have little to reciprocate (see also Welch et al., 2002). Published reports may have some interesting reports on specific business deals and their underlying relationships. Power relations in global financial markets tend to favor well-known credit-rating agencies and international business media that often have very good access to large Chinese business firms. In spite of their potential bias towards transactional recommendations, these reports on specific Chinese business firms or actors can sometimes be very insightful. For example, in Olds and Yeung (1999), we used a confidential company report from a credit rating agency to analyze the proposed corporate reorganization of the largest Chinese business conglomerate from Hong Kong – Li Ka-shing’s Cheung Kong

Group. This Latourian actor network analysis shows how semi-private texts for the consumption of other financial analysts and investors generated favourable views among actors in the international financial community and thereby enabled the smooth reorganization that, according to London's *Sunday Times* (12 January 1997), left the family patriarch "more firmly in control of his four listed companies, shifted value to his personal holdings and increased his group's market value by £2 billion in two days".

Other financial documents were used in Yeung (2004a) to showcase the significant transformations in the social organization of Chinese capitalism towards hybrid capitalism. In this case, Li Ka-shing made very good use of enrolling financial analysts into his actor networks so that the legitimacy of his corporate reorganization can be established via these semi-private texts at the global level in major international financial centres. This enrollment of non-Chinese elites (financial analysts) into "Chinese" business networks represents a pragmatic strategy for leading Chinese actors to capitalize on globalization tendencies (financial globalization in this case). Biographies and/or oral histories of selected actors in Chinese capitalism may also offer significant depth of information unavailable to most researchers (e.g. Chan and Chiang, 1994; Tsui-Auch, 2004). By definition, these secondary data were collected for different reasons and might contain inherent bias. I was convinced that *both* primary and secondary data were needed to satisfy my criteria of data triangulation.⁶ By triangulation, I mean the deployment of different research methods and thus different data to cross-verify and complement each other in an actual research process. In my project, I used personal interviews (or close dialogue) to verify some of the data and information contained in media and other unpublished reports. I also used secondary data to fill the gaps in primary data collected from interviews with leading actors in Chinese capitalism.

Having identified the main actors in Chinese capitalism, it is now possible to *trace the interconnections* of actors in "Chinese" business networks (see Figure 1). My earlier

discussion of the socio-spatial attributes of these actors does not intend to imply that these actors must be all powerful people and/or institutions. Instead, I believe that power is a relational construct in the sense that it “is not some ‘thing’ that moves, but an effect that is mediated, and such effects may mutate through relations of successive or simultaneous reach” (Allen, 2003: 37). An actor’s power is not a given attribute because its efficacy can only be known when it is realized (Yeung, 2004b). So we think of a person, a firm or an institution as powerful or having power when we know of prior outcomes arising from the structures of relations in which this person, firm or institution is embedded. This person, firm or institution can be deemed to possess a capacity to act within those structures of relations. Its power is dependent on the fact that this capacity is exercised eventually and successfully. For example, a patriarch in the family business may not be as powerful as we imagine if there is a significant contestation of power among the siblings outside the control of this patriarch. Similarly, a seemingly insignificant and low ranking local official in Indonesia (i.e. an intermediary), through his/her sheer lack of cooperation and support of a major infrastructural development project, may create such a havoc for a Chinese business firm that its bankruptcy becomes imminent. Tracking down actor networks in Chinese capitalism is therefore both theoretically and methodologically challenging.

Given actor network theory’s ontology and methodological framework, actor networks are defined as “the chains which give rise to natural and social realities, realities which can only be understood as stabilised sets of relations which allow the construction of centres and peripheries, insides and outsides, humans and nonhumans, nature and society, and so on” (Murdoch, 1997a: 743). In short, an “actor network is simultaneously an actor whose activity is networking heterogeneous elements” of humans and non-humans “and a network that is able to redefine and transform what it is made of” (Callon, 1987: 93, cited in Bingham, 1996: 647). Certainly the emphasis on relational practices highlighted in actor network theory is

welcome, but there is a danger that concentrating attention on actors in networks will descend into a mechanistic framework that atomizes agents and focuses solely on the links between them, without a sense of the social processes that constitute these relationships. This danger is perhaps evident in Murdoch's (1997b: 332) methodological advice that "[n]etwork analysis is quite simple: it means following networks all the way along their length; there is no need to step outside the networks for all the qualities of spatial construction and configuration of interest will be found therein... Actor-network theorists thus reject the view that social life is arranged into levels or tiers some of which determine what goes on in others; everything is kept at 'ground level'".

To begin this tracking process, a good combination of multiple sources of primary and secondary data is critical to identifying the key actors involved in these networks. Participant observation is clearly a valid and, perhaps, reliable method to "follow through" these networks and their strategic outcomes. The reality of empirical research, however, is often not as neat as proposed in methodological "cookbooks" that are aimed at undergraduates. In my own research, I experienced premature termination of my participant observation of how a particular network works precisely because my identity as an academic researcher became too difficult for those business actors to handle. Some actors in the network did not feel easy to be included in the study. Methodological opportunism emerges as an appropriate guideline in the sense that we need to be highly receptive to and prepare for new opportunities that may open doors for us. As argued by Ward and Jones (1999) in their reflections on researching local elites in England, the political-temporal contingency of the research process and the politically time-specific entry made by the researcher into the research field can significantly shape the interaction between the researcher and the researched. In my study on Hong Kong firms, for example, I capitalized on my *guanxi* or personal relationships with the family members of one ethnic Chinese entrepreneur to arrange for in-depth interviews. He was

subsequently able to reach several other key actors of the quasi-family business network in Hong Kong and in Singapore. This snowball method worked well for me in tracing some parts of the actor networks in Chinese capitalism.

Tracing actor networks clearly has a spatial dimension and, as I have argued earlier, *in situ* research is an indispensable method to enable economic geographers to go beyond using “remote sensing” to study today’s complex social and economic life (see Figure 1). By “remote sensing”, I mean those researchers who study Chinese capitalism from a distance through postal questionnaire surveys and do not really conduct *in situ* research such as personal interviews, participant observations or focus-group discussions. This “remote sensing” approach is commonly adopted in the business and management studies of Chinese capitalism and I have significant reservations on its validity and reflexivity (see Yeung, 2003). Since many actor networks in Chinese capitalism are multinational in their locational characteristics, it becomes imperative for me to engage in multi-locational fieldwork in order to track down these networks. Many such actor networks are increasingly transcending Asia in their geographical scope (e.g. Olds, 2001; Zhou and Tseng, 2001; Gomez and Hsiao, 2004). Conducting multi-locational *in situ* research creates serious time and resource constraints on my projects. But transnational research also offers many benefits, including deeper insights into the material and discursive constructions of these actor networks and better understanding of spatially differentiated contexts of these constructions. The need for multi-locational *in situ* research also generates certain scope for cross-border research collaboration. On the one hand, I can offer my expertise in theorizing actor networks in Chinese capitalism at different geographical scales. On the other hand, researchers from political science, sociology, and business management may offer relevant insights into the politics of Chinese capitalism, the social organization of actor networks, and the management of Chinese business firms in the host countries.

This multi-locational and multi-disciplinary research into Chinese capitalism takes me to the most important aspect of the integrated method approach – abstraction and deconstruction (see Figure 1). Instead of overtly concerned with describing everything about actor networks in Chinese capitalism – a methodological procedure often found in ethnography (e.g. Yang, 1994; Yao, 2002) and some quarters of actor network theory (e.g. Murdoch, 1997a), I was interested in unfolding the multiple logic(s) of these actor networks, their shifting identities and discursive constructions, and the diverse mechanisms of their enrolment. This approach to Chinese capitalism requires me to focus on key social actors and their dynamics in different spatial and temporal settings. I believed that these processes do not emerge directly from empirical observations. In other words, data do not speak for themselves. I needed abstraction to distill these multiple logic(s) and causal mechanisms of Chinese capitalism from an array of messy empirical data, and to facilitate theory development (cf. Whitley, 1992; 1999; Orrù et al., 1997). Equally important, I wanted to go beyond a materialist theory of Chinese capitalism that focuses narrowly on its economic structures and is oblivious to its discursive constructions. Deconstruction is therefore a useful method to identify different discourses of the rise of Chinese capitalism and Chinese business networks as a vocabulary in our understanding of economic organization in East and Southeast Asia. Following Derrida, Dixon and Jones (1998: 255; emphasis omitted) define deconstruction as a method that aims to “delineate the social power that fixes meanings constructive of identities, spaces, and disciplines”. By decentering hegemonic discourses of Chinese capitalism as essential products of Confucian culture, I sought to theorize the time-space dynamism of everyday life by Chinese and non-Chinese actors bound up within specific hybrid networks of social and economic relationships.

Implications for politics and practice in economic geography

There are no explicit conclusions in this methodological reflection on my torturous journey of researching hybridity in Chinese capitalism. There are, however, several implications for how we might think about politics and practice in economic geography. While it is almost axiomatic these days to say that research is *not* a neutral act, I think it remains imperative for practicing social and economic geographers to recognize their own *positionality* in any research projects (see also Yeung and Lin, 2003; Kong, 2004). Had I been more aware of my positionality in the early days of my research into Chinese capitalism, I would have saved many pages of journal space that were filled up by my various texts on the cultural predisposition of Chinese business networks! I should have been more aware of how my own positionality shaped my “oversocialized” and over-embedded view of Chinese capitalism. After all, my perceived advantage as an ethnic Chinese did not turn out to be advantageous at all – I was indeed “locked in” by the culturalist worldview of the ethnic economy. If recognizing one’s positionality is paramount in the reflexive research process, not falling victim to established methodological procedures is another. I should not and did not have to start my research into Chinese capitalism with business firms, even though the heyday of economic geography then was primarily concerned with industrial firms. With hindsight again, I could have taken a rather different methodological route to adopt, for example, a qualitatively social network analysis in the spirit of actor network theory (see Kilduff and Tsai, 2003). I could have delved into the hybrid identities of second- and third-generation Chinese entrepreneurs most of whom received their tertiary education in English-speaking countries and have tremendous international business experience. And the wish list goes on and on...

My point here though is that economic geographers should be open to *methodological experimentation*; we should not stay within our methodological “comfort zones” as those

quantitative modelers did in the 1960s or those practitioners of the seemingly endless case studies that come to dominate economic geography today. If economic geographers can be pluralistic and adventurous in their flirtations with social theories, why not spare a little time and effort to strengthen the discipline's methodological foundations? All too often, in my view, our "philosophical horse" does not come with a "methodological cart". Are we leaving too much of our methodology and practice to other social scientists like sociologists? While research methods and practices are highly guarded territory in Sociology with its specialized journals (*Sociological Methods and Research*, *Sociological Methodology*, and *Quality and Quantity*), methodological rigour is much less an issue in human geography, let alone economic geography. With some occasional exceptions of special issues on research methodology in geography journals, most of our journal pages are filled with substantive research publications that tend to gloss over serious methodological issues.

This methodological experimentation in our research requires, however, a significant mindset change that can be rather demanding. First, it necessitates our role as active academicians. It is time for us to interact with our research "subjects" not as impersonal encounters between the researcher and the researched. We need to understand that the research act is as much about learning from our "subjects" as about them gaining insights into our geographical imaginations. By way of an example, I very much enjoy the few minutes of "lecturing" CEOs about what (economic) geography is whenever they ask why am I coming from the Department of Geography. A mundane research interview might just turn out to be a highly productive two-way learning process. Second, we have to be aware of the inherent fallibility of our knowledge, just like anybody else. Contrary to conventional wisdoms, we do not have privileged access to the world around us. Social actors have as important and subjective knowledge about the fascinating workings of the economic-geographical worlds as we do. So where does that leave us in this knowledge production system? I think we do have

to drop our esteemed claim to truth and to begin to work on “local knowledges”. By local knowledges, I mean highly contextualized understanding of patterns and processes in particular geographical settings. These local knowledges might just come from ordinary people rather than academics. Think of how often we focus our research on the so-called “paradigmatic examples” at the expense of the ordinary? It is patently obvious that the ordinary will always outnumber the paradigmatic in any empirical situation. To accomplish this mindset change, we need an economic geography that is more forgiving in its theoretical and methodological embraces and, yet, less driven by fads and new found excitements that appear to be extraordinary and paradigmatic – just like how culture appears to explain the spirit of Chinese capitalism.

Notes

¹ For a representative sample of such “culturalist” works, see Redding (1990), Kotkin (1992), Kao (1993), East Asia Analytical Unit (1995), Weidenbaum and Hughes (1996), Haley et al., (1998), Hefner (1998), and Chen (2001).

² This was also the historical period during which much of the economic success in East and Southeast Asia was celebrated as the so-alleged “East Asian miracle” (World Bank, 1993).

³ Interestingly, my recent book on Chinese capitalism in a global era (Yeung, 2004a) was covered by Tim LeeMaster as a top story entitled “Traditional business merges with global reality” for *The Standard*, a major Hong Kong-based newspaper for the Greater China business community

(http://www.thestandard.com.hk/news_detail_frame.cfm?articleid=48047&intcatid=2, accessed on 5 November 2004). My view on the hybridization of Chinese capitalism is apparently making its way to reach the very research subjects themselves again.

⁴ Here, I must acknowledge specifically the positive role of Kris Olds, my long-time friend and research collaborator, in this transformation in my approach to Chinese capitalism. Our joint research into globalization and Chinese capitalism during the late 1990s brought me out of the “cultural essentialism” trap.

⁵ A similar literature on family secrets exists in the sociological literature (see Vangelisti and Caughlin, 1997; Berardo, 1998).

⁶ See Yeung (2003) for more detail discussion on different types of triangulation in research practice.

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FIGURE 1. The Integrated Method Approach to Chinese Capitalism Research

