Hong Kong’s Diaspora, Networks, and Family Business in the United Kingdom: A History of the Chinese “Food Chain” and the Case of W. Wing Yip Group*

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Abstract

In this article, the authors assess how the Wing Yip group, the leading Chinese enterprise in Britain’s thriving Chinese food sector, has...
evolved. The key concern of this study is to analyze the nature of the ties between owners of companies in the Chinese food sector as the owners of the major firms in the Chinese food sector are from Hong Kong. This article begins by studying the meanings of Chinese family business networks and the history of the Chinese catering services in the United Kingdom. It assesses the mode of development of this family firm, a major form of corporate ownership among ethnic Chinese in this sector. Among the key issues that is determined is how these Chinese family firms cope with socioeconomic changes within this developed economy. How do members of this Hong Kong diaspora interact with each other? How do their ethnic-based institutions function, and what are the key factors that inform their pattern of business development? The answers to these questions provide important insights into the importance of culture and ethnicity in the development of enterprises among the broader Chinese diaspora.

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As of April 2008, there were roughly 38 million ethnic Chinese living outside China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Around 760,000 live in Oceania, 6.6 million in the Americas, 1.8 million in Europe, 28 million in Asia, and 32,000 in Africa.¹ Much of the academic literature on the Chinese diaspora pertains to their business ties involving, in a number of cases, their interaction with the state, especially in Southeast Asian countries.² Chinese enterprise in much of the literature is characterized as being family based, with interlocking networks involving kinfolk and with coethnics.³ Such intraethnic business networks are seen as a mechanism employed by the Chinese diaspora to develop their firms.

The use of family firms by businesspeople and the prevalence of kinship ties to facilitate enterprise development are, however, not traits unique to the Chinese. The reason why the family ownership mode is widely seen as a cultural trait unique to the Chinese is that the evolution of these enterprises has not been placed in historical context. The contention that Chinese cultural traits deeply influence the pattern of enterprise