

Family First?

Debates about Tradition and Modernity in Singaporean Small and Medium Enterprises (SME's)¹.

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Abstract

In official Singaporean discourse family is still viewed as a building block of society and as one of the 'basic values' of national culture. Family and business are seen as intimately interlinked and mutually beneficial; the success of one reflects on positive functioning of the other. However, with the advancement of globalization and development of transnationalist trends, the question of tradition versus modernity emerges. I inquire how the evidence of changing family and business relations within Chinese Singaporean firms aids this question. As my data from the study of SME's demonstrates, there is evidence of difficulty in maintaining family business over time². This article aims to demonstrate to academics and practitioners that the dichotomies between 'traditionalist' and 'modern' views of Chinese family business can be misleading. Within family firms business practices, such as encouraging innovation through diversifying work force, can be drastically improved. Responding to the results of my research, firm managers were able not only to identify problem areas within their firms but also to think of improving their HR policies and think of more creative intervention strategies.

¹ According to the homepage of Singapore-SME.com, the definition of SME is given as:

- At least 30% of local equity
- Fixed productive assets (defined as net book value of factory building, machinery and equipment) not exceeding S\$15 million

Employment size not exceeding 200 workers (for non-manufacturing companies)

² I hereby define family business as the one owned, managed and operated by the family members (Lea, 1991). According to Poon (1997) a family business is a unique business organization that integrates a business system with a fundamentally different family system. Another definition of Rosenblatt et al relevant to my case is that of a business in which control lies within a single family whereby two or more family members are at some time directly involved in business (Rosenblatt et al, 1985). This article is not intended to discuss the intricacies of definitions of 'family business' or 'Chinese business' as it attempts to address the informants' own definitions of these. The author has consciously chosen for the emic perspective regrettably having to leave academic arguments behind in order to expose some ways in which the ideas of 'family' and 'business' are being viewed by the business practitioners themselves.

Keywords: *Chinese family business, ethnic and national identity, Singaporean SME's, transnationalism, globalization.*

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My research is based on the interviews with fifty Singaporean SME's from different sectors of the economy (with traditional manufacturing sector dominating my sample) conducted between May 2002 and April 2003. Firms were contacted and interviews were taken with the help of my Cantonese and Mandarin speaking research assistant Chee Kong Wong. The sample roughly reflected national distribution: majority of the firms were electronic parts producers, followed by traditional manufacturers, and finally service firms. Most firms had between 10 and 50 staff members and had owners and managers and little or no middle management (particularly in the case of 'family firms'). Over 85% of the firms were (ethnic)-Chinese owned, with other ethnicities including Malays, Indians, and European. Over 70% were Singaporean-owned, with other nationality owners including Malaysians, Indians, Taiwanese, Hong-Kong, mainland Chinese, and European. Over 40% Singaporean-owned firms employed foreign nationality workers, both in skilled and low skilled categories. Within the Singaporean worker category, the Chinese formed a majority (between 60 to 95% in Chinese owned firms).

In open interviews I have asked the respondents to reflect upon the notions of national and ethnic identity on the one hand and on the more pragmatic question of hiring practices on the other hand, finding remarkable discrepancies between the ways these practices were officially presented and actually played out.

Contemporary debate about organizational cultures centres on the question of whether organizational culture generally supports some broad socially shared values, or whether organizational cultures typically reflect only an elite group's interest and conviction, or if culture typically stands for frozen, non-conscious ideas that restrain free thought, creativity and open-minded problem-solving (Alvesson, 2002:39)

We may apply this question to Chinese businesses in Singapore, by asking whether family business, hereby simply defined as a firm having family members in managerial role³, can be discussed and understood in terms of these cultural paradigms. *In other words, we ask whether and why Chinese Singaporean SME's involve family members in business, subsequently inquiring whether the idea of family business has anything to do with the notion of 'Singaporeanness' or 'Chineseness'.*

Debates about Chinese Culture and Business.

Traditionalist view of Chinese families presents the distinct cultural pattern quite different from a Western model:

Unlike contemporary Western idealisations of the family as a voluntary association of coequals, the Chinese family is patrilineal, patrilocal..., and unambiguously patriarchal; there is no question of inequality of the sexes and generations (Hefner, 1997:13).

Chinese business in traditionalist view is closely interlinked with families. The key component of Chinese organization is the family. Firms are family property, and the dominant value concerns the family, not the firm. When the firm prospers, so does the family. Thus, after enough wealth has been accumulated, it is divided among family members who invest in other businesses... (Castells, 2000:193).

Recently, a debate about success of the Chinese business model arose, questioning whether there is anything specifically 'Chinese' about the modern Chinese way of doing business (Gomez and Jomo, 1997; Ong, 2002; Wels, 1996). Weber (1996) spoke of Confucian values explaining Asian business success, and attributed economic development in Western Europe to the 'Protestant values'. Redding (1990) challenges Weber's argument through his theory of indigenous capitalism, arguing that the Confucian values and family networks provide an alternative to Western capitalist model based on rational principles. Capitalism could thus emerge under different social and cultural conditions, still rooted in (Asian) history but serving same purposes of global capitalism (Dahles and Wels, 2002:4). Wels (1996) argues that the supposed Western individualism is not necessarily opposed to Eastern collectivism, but both can be seen as two sides of the same coin, present in both geographical areas. Ong muses:

Indeed, there may not be anything uniquely 'Chinese' about flexible personal discipline, disposition, and orientation; rather, they are expressions of a habitus that is finely tuned to the turbulence of late capitalism (Ong, 2002:191).

³ I am familiar with various definitions of family business but since this article addresses the issues of family and business as separate – although interconnected, I will define 'family business' thus narrowly and explore possible implications of such businesses in concrete settings.

Contested Identities: Modern versus Traditional.

The turbulence of late capitalism might well be responsible for modernisation and Westernisation of Singaporean Chinese as well as for problematising the notions of Chineseness (if it can still be viewed as ethnicity enacting 'traditional' values in family and business structures) and Singaporeanness (as the government supported ideology of developmentalism, claiming to adhere to global and Western values). Visscher (2002) argues that modernity and tradition have co-existed in Singapore from the very start, since Singapore was populated by economically minded (mostly Chinese) immigrants who left their homes in expectation of new opportunities. They have however held on to their roots and traditions as a form of cultural ballast, providing certain comfort of familiarity to an uprooted group of opportunity seekers.

Despite this historical precedent of combining economic thinking (often seen as 'modern') with tradition, it is often argued that modern day Singaporeans are effected by Western ideas that effect family structures in quite a different way that brushes tradition aside in favour of modernity (Murray and Perera, 1996; Tay, 1994). This implies that hierarchical structures and loyalties attributed to traditional Chinese families are substituted by the Western brand of individualism:

Ties with the extended family may not be close. Some younger Westernized Singaporeans might grow up and pass relations and cousins on the street, never knowing who they are. They might see each other only at weddings and funerals when they are young, and later, perhaps not at all (Craig, 2001:51).

Most tourist guides describe Singapore as a kind of hybrid between 'traditional Asian values' and the striking Western appearance that supposedly hides deep underlying (implicitly Chinese) culture. Visitors and expatriates are advised to follow the strict "do's and don'ts" of the supposedly basic 'Asian culture':

If some Singaporeans appear very Westernized, the Westerners should not automatically take this as an invitation to be informal and casual with everybody. Whether in a Singaporean home or at work, watch how the older and the higher-status people are addressed and treated and what the older and higher-status people do, then follow their customs (Craig, 2001-57).

Generational shift is often noted, thus contrasting 'new and young' with 'traditional and old' worlds. In the case of Chinese family businesses, 'traditional and old' stands for the grand Chinese history imbued with Confucian values and a set of cut-in-stone rules of conduct and set manner of thinking (Chew, 1988; Tay, 1994). The 'new and young' stands for Western and international. The two worlds are often described as contrasting and clashing. Simultaneously, family values and familial loyalty are often discussed as time-proven business assets, particularly

exemplifying the way the Chinese ‘traditional’ family structure has led to the success of the ‘traditional’ Chinese business.

‘In Chinese culture, you have to respect your father and mother’ notes James Yen, the president of a Taiwanese Company. ‘This respect kills creativity. If you have to respect what your father says, then you tend to kill your own thinking’. Along with the adherence to traditional Chinese values across generations, my research also reveals that the ‘life raft’ has expanded (Hamilton and Kao, 1990:27).

Returning to Visscher’s (2002) argument about historical co-existence of modernity and tradition in Singapore, we may note that advance of globalization might have added a new dimension to the word ‘modernity’(Waters, 2001). Concretely, it means that traditional family business in Singapore is experiencing transformation related to the issues of maintaining loyalties, expectations and hierarchies. Conflicts within families based on particularistic competitiveness are said to undermine collectivism and Confucian harmony, loyalty and respect (Weller, 1998:83). On the basis of my interviews I was able to establish that family business was seen as something of a necessity at the times of economic uncertainty, but also as a nuisance to get rid of when an opportunity arrives. Over 70% of my respondents reported that after the initial period of hiring family members and friends at the initial growth stage of the firm, they have later switched to what they termed ‘professional’ or ‘modern’ recruitment methods, such as newspaper and Internet advertising and head hunting. I have however noticed that even though familial membership seemed to be something my respondents felt uneasy about, family members were still factually present at most of the firms that started as family firms⁴.

Related to the staffing issue and hiring practices in the issue of succession. Poon (1997) notes that the issue of succession is problematic among modern Singaporean businesses. During my interviews, a few founding fathers of the firms complained that their sons do not wish to ‘continue family business’ and abandon family tradition in favour of doing ‘their own thing’.

One speaks of hybrid or negotiated forms of doing business, combining two or more cultural styles and developing business practices derived from both ‘traditional’, ‘new’, and ‘hybrid’ domains (Dahles, 2002). But despite the attempts to reconcile perceived dichotomies, binary thinking is perhaps only accentuated by a forced effort to bring them together.

Singaporean and Chinese: National versus Ethnic.

⁴ I was unable to establish accurately how many firms have reduced the number of family staff over time as reports differed greatly within a single firm. In many cases it appeared that the managers were unwilling to delve into the intricacies of personal hiring strategies and to disclose real numbers of family members presently employed or employed in the past.

Singaporean identity is intricately fragmented and complex:

The extent of pluralism in Singapore today is still far more complex than is commonly believed. Within Chinese society, for instance, there are no less than twelve dialects, in addition to the most common language of Mandarin. By and large, the various ethnic groups were, and still are, although to a much lesser extent, compartmentalized. They live side by side and seldom interact with each other except in the market place (Cheng Lim-Keak, 124:1985).

Singaporeanness is often seen as opposed to Chineseness, at least as far as 'traditions' and 'parochialism' were concerned (Foon, 1987). Epitaphs applied to Singapore in the press and echoed in the interviews with my respondents included 'melting pot' and 'internationalised', applied not only in reference to investment practices abroad but as a national characteristic extended to social and cultural spheres, from which ethnicity is conspicuously excluded.

Benton and Gomez (2001) address the issue of ethnic networks inside family firms, reflecting on the debate about the strategic use of ethnic networks and its use as information source within business networks (Bhopal, 2001). They particularly ponder whether SME's can be said to be the repository of the 'tribal' values imputed to ethnic Chinese business and the site of family-based ownership and intra-ethnic co-operation, or are they, as Singaporean SME's are said to be, lacking in 'ethnic style' (Benton and Gomez, 2001:20). The authors point to the lack of conclusive evidence in the case of Chinese in Southeast Asia. My data indicates that family business in Singaporean SME's finds itself in the uneasy position of being challenged by what is seen by the managers themselves as a 'new' way of doing business.

Formal and informal discourses on family in business.

Independent of whether the firm employed family members, the managers acknowledged that the main reasons for having family members are connected to the notions of trust, loyalty, and hard work; while the reasons for avoiding family hires had to do with resolution of conflicts and the danger of becoming (or being seen as) 'unprofessional'. The latter point deserves special attention as most of the interviewed managers saw having family members in a business as somehow 'traditional', evoking notions of succession, 'following the path', 'continuing (old) good practices' – the actual expressions of business or knowledge as 'running in the family' were used. Although pragmatic reasons for having a family played a big role and were readily acknowledged, the link with the past and with 'Chineseness' was implicitly stressed.

Based on my research, a non-Chinese professional manager cannot expect the same level of trust he or she would have as a family member in the company. Outsiders can never know family insiders as well as they know each other. And non-Chinese professionals often have to work doubly hard to understand reasons underlying certain decisions (Hamilton and Kao, 1990:27).

On the other hand, the idea of being a modern enterprise and part of ‘Singaporean’ (sic: not Chinese) way was stressed, evoking images of stereotypical modernity: open, cosmopolitan, generalised Western standardized business practices, including hiring processes based on merit rather than relations (Thomson and Tambyah, 1999; Wagener, 1994). Throughout the interviews, the positive connotation of ‘traditional’ concept (centuries-proven success formulas) was undermined by the more negative connotation of ‘traditional’ being an archaic, outdated, inefficient at best and impeding progress at worst kind of practice. Inherent weaknesses of family business, such as the problem of succession, were amply emphasised, as noted by Held:

If the family is a source of strength for Chinese business, it is at times a weakness. Whereas elder patriarchs can depend on the loyalty and unpaid labor of their subordinates, patriarchal authority depends on a father who inevitably grows old and dies (Held, 1997:14).

Concretely, the hiring practices, which included word-of-mouth information and particularly family connections, were labelled nepotistic and even corrupt. Even those managers that acknowledged having family members in the business were adamant about the fact that these hires were based on pure business incentives – namely, that the family members in question were the best qualified for the position, independent of their relatedness. Of the 40% of family-containing firms, almost 80% insisted (only in two cases being confirmed) that other means of hiring practices were used: newspaper and Internet advertisements, head-hunting, and – by all means – open, fair and publicly accessible selection process.

This insistence on the use of ‘modern’ (the word being actually consistently used throughout interviews) hiring practices was particularly apparent among larger companies, particularly the three members of Enterprise 50 group (the top-of-the-year SME’s selected by the government as show-cases for less successfully growing SME’s).

On one occasion during the interview with the manager of one of the more successful Enterprise 50 firms, I was assured that the hiring occurs ‘externally only’ and uses ‘the strictest selection criteria based on qualifications only’ as well as ‘Western methods of quality hire’. My direct question as to whether any family members or former colleagues or other personally connected individuals were working for the firm, an emphatic ‘no’ was the clear answer. However, during the consequent interview with the European partner and a couple of interviews with Malaysian clients of the firm, I was astonished to find out that there were at least three brothers of the interviewed top manager working as middle managers, one of whom had a wife heading the production unit and another one had two of his former class-mates working under

him. Apparently, it was seen as embarrassing and inconsistent with the ‘modern’ characteristics of ‘Enterprise 50’ firm to allow family presence.

This situation was typically replicated throughout my interviews when the workers apparently hired ‘from the outside’ (particularly, foreign nationals or members of other ethnic groups) were readily presented to me as living examples of modern – and international hiring practices of the firm. If such individuals were not to be found (as in the case of a few under-ten-employees family firms), future intentions for outside hires were expressed. The ‘father’ (in both connotations) of a small firm reflected (encouraged by the nodding heads of his shadowy-present wife and son):

‘We shall be advertising (to hire more staff) as soon as our profits grow. At the moment this [sweeping the room with an apologetic gesture] is what we have and this is what we can afford... At the moment we are self-sufficient. If we loose [profits] this year, we can manage. We only have ourselves [family] and our debts... But yes, we certainly do want to grow and when times are better we could afford to take someone [outside the family] on’.

Thus, success and security were linked to expansion, expansion and growth, in turn, were linked to having outsiders. When asked why not hire more family members, the same respondent retorted:

‘We have enough family [already working here]. What we need is... is to be able to compete and that comes from expertise. We have family members working in car industry and [other industries], nobody in our field, so we’ll need to involve those who do [know about our business]’.

The idea of competitiveness was thus linked with the expectation that outsiders’ expertise is ‘better’ than insider’s knowledge. The same respondent has further gone on to explain that this is the ‘Singaporean way’ – taking on the best qualified, not being ‘afraid of hiring strangers’ – particularly foreigners. The last remark was clearly directed towards the interviewer, being, however, often replicated in other interviews in answer to questions targeted to shed light upon the question of national identity. ‘Singapore invites the world’, as one of the tabloid posters proclaimed – a motto, clearly finding reflection in the minds of even the smallest firms’ owners.

This point was reflected through the interviews with the ethnic Chinese non-Singaporeans (Taiwanese, Hong Kongese, Malaysian, and Chinese nationals in my sample): according to whom cross-border business practices have become a norm throughout South East Asia, purportedly spreading uniform ‘Western’ or ‘modern’ business practices. As a Taiwanese female firm owner reflected in relation to hiring practices among the ethnic Chinese:

‘It’s the same principle in both countries [Taiwan and Singapore]... We are no longer hiring our own kind [ethnic Chinese]. We select the best... In my firm, I’m always open to the idea of keeping family close. I encourage my workers to invite their families to unofficial meetings and gatherings. But they [the family] don’t work for my firm; they only participate in after-work social events. That’s what happens everywhere [across the region]’.

A Singaporean pet products manufacturer reflects on this point, adding an aspect of generalised ‘Asian values’ to the idea of Chinese business:

‘For the Chinese it feels better to have family members, because of trust, and they are easier to talk to. They work harder and bear more responsibilities. However, sometimes they can be a nuisance... I prefer to work without kin, but then I like to have them around for friendly [social] meetings... Asians prefer to work for their own kin, and if they cannot they want to keep their family close. Business and family are close, that’s what you call Asian values’.

Work and family in Singaporean SME’s may also be seen as two separate domains, as one’s work responsibilities are different from those of the household (Ahmad, 2003). Throughout my research I have observed that the family members, if not present at work, were indeed often present at social gatherings – not only accompanying spouses but members of extended families as well. One of my respondents referred to the planned informal dinner with colleagues as ‘grandma’s’ gathering’, explaining to me that grandparents and even uncles of his colleagues will turn up at dinner while they have no stake in the business. The latter point is disputable because, although I was regrettably unable to attend the above-mentioned ‘grandma’s’ gathering’, I did attend a couple of informal after-work meetings where extended family members were present and through conversations with them I deduced that they were major stake holders and investors in the firm, thus being what one manager (with a social science degree) termed ‘shadow’ supporters and hidden beneficiaries.

Family: Good or Bad?

Most of the firms’ owners interviewed reflected that having family members working for them had both advantages and disadvantages, and the relationship was often ambiguous. Here are a few statements issued by three different SME’s owners regarding their views on family involvement:

‘I could think of a few advantages of family members: comfort, security – delegation of tasks and fulfilment, trust. This does not necessarily apply to us as we try to hire only the best qualified staff...Disadvantages of having family members are social: it’s difficult to keep them disciplined, reprimanding your own family members leads to conflict within families... Also outsiders, seeing family members working side by side, become sceptical’.

‘Family can be important because of blood ties, one’s kin knows the business much better... However, family businesses can hardly grow and expand, often you need to hire new staff to be really successful. SMEs’ operations are limited, market is limited, therefore knowledge is also limited... On the other hand, the big conglomerates are able to diversify into uncharted territories; families can keep the company intentionally humble’.

‘Family is OK to start with. But as the [business] grows, family becomes less important. In my experience, [after expansion] family becomes like a fifth wheel’.

Majority of the interviewed noted that while it was at times necessary to hire family members at the start-up stage of firm development, it is desirable to hire non-family members in the consequent stages. The explanations for the necessity of the family participation at the initial stage included lack of start-up capital (due to limited or unavailable government funding), and precedence (history of working together in another business or having a ‘family tradition’ in the same business). The explanations for excluding family members afterwards included the need to professionalize (by employing skilled professionals when the firm’s activities and production range has diversified), imperative to grow and expand, and desire to avoid conflicts and tensions.

Having been presented with the results of my research (charted into qualitative tables and presented in the form of summary rapports), one of the managers of the traditional food company (fish products), reflected:

‘It seems that others have the same issues [as we do here] with having family members [at work] and dealing with it... I might call up a HRM meeting to discuss how we can address these issues at our own level. I realise that we might have been too polite or too scared to diversify our workforce while [all of us] knew that’s what the [firm] needs’.

In summary, the following reasons were used for and against family employment:

1. Negative (Reasons why as soon as the firm is strong enough, it gets rid of the family tie obligations, diminishing family staff):

1. To avoid in-fighting between family members and between non- family members. Being part of the family will generate envy; also family members will compete with each other.
2. To preserve professional hierarchy and at the same time preserve family integrity.
Without family members, the boss does not have to worry about firing or criticizing his subordinates;
3. To promote better quality, hiring highly qualified staff rather than less qualified family members.
4. To eliminate the problem of succession (replacing the old father, fighting between brothers, lack of interest in or qualifications for continuing family business, etc.)

2. Positive: (Reasons for having family employees):

1. To use family members to pool together start-up capital; family serving as a financial stronghold in the hard times when official sources are mistrusted.
2. Trust and loyalty: ‘blood is thicker than water’.
3. Family members work harder and feel personally responsible for results produced.
4. Family members can take criticism and yet remain loyal to the firm.

Family Matters.

Alvesson (2002) questions organizational cultures, namely whether organizational culture generally supports some broad socially shared values, or whether it reflects only an elite group’s interest and conviction, or whether it stands for frozen, non-conscious ideas that restrain free thought, creativity and open-minded problem-solving. On the basis of my research, it appears that organizational cultures present within Singaporean SME’s are both reflective of broader societal trends (such as the movement towards modernity, Westernisation and/or transnationalism at both social and business levels) as well as holding on to elite’s group conviction. The way the owners and managers of SME’s speak of family involvement in business is not necessarily reflective of the way they act. As far as business practice is concerned, a large degree of flexibility and adaptability to the conditions of the modern market is present, while the same holds true of flexibility within social or familial spheres. In other words, modernity, at least in the restricted stereotypical business sense, does not exclude adherence to certain social or cultural traditions.

For most of the firms in my sample, family still matters, but so does public opinion (or researchers' judgement?) and so do business interests. It is through this interplay of organizational interests that organizational culture of Singaporean SME's, and perhaps the whole of Singaporean culture, enacts the intricate balancing act of succeeding in (modern) business and retaining the eternal torch of unique Singaporean (Chinese) identity.

The data generated from this research was fed back to its participants and their critical comments were evaluated. It appears that the potentially sensitive and emotionally loaded subject of family businesses, when placed in comparative context, became more 'manageable', or in most cases more open to objective evaluation and discussion. Instead of talking (or thinking) of family business with a sense of pride or shame, the managers felt that the issues they have grappled with could be openly debated with their colleagues. Opportunities resulting from this research identified by the managers related to improvements in HR policies, encouraging innovation through diversifying work force, improving intervention strategies and drastically reducing the level of counter-productive competition and conflict.

This process, as I may cautiously observe, is not without hidden dangers since once a Pandora's box is open, restraining its content to a polite and coded discourse might no longer be an option. Granted the fact, however, that all the managers in my sample wished to better understand and in most cases improve the way their business was run and to compare their reasoning to that of their competitors, such an open discussion seems to be well justified.

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