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The Role of Family Ties in Ethnic Businesses

CHINESE TAKE-AWAY food businesses (called take-out restaurants in the United States) have long been a common sight throughout Britain's streets and, indeed, in many other countries. It is not uncommon to see children and other family members taking orders or packaging food in such businesses. They are, to the public eye, visible as workers in these enterprises. However, very little is known about how children in immigrant families may contribute to the running of ethnic businesses. This book examines the various work roles that children play, how they negotiate their family labor, and the implications of children growing up, in Chinese families running take-away businesses in Britain.

The Chinese in Britain provide an interesting case study of children's labor in ethnic businesses because, perhaps more than any other ethnic group, the overseas Chinese have been depicted as paragons of hard work and collective family cooperation in the literature on ethnic businesses and immigrant adaptation. Furthermore, Chinese take-away businesses are small labor-intensive enterprises conducive to the participation of children, especially since these families' home and work lives are largely intertwined.

As an important means of immigrant adaptation, ethnic businesses include many kinds of enterprises, such as Indian news-

agents, Pakistani market traders, and Korean greengrocers. Despite numerous and passing references to the importance of family labor as a key resource in many ethnic businesses, family labor and families' relations of production have rarely been examined or elaborated upon. In particular, children's labor in ethnic businesses has tended to be "invisible" in such research. The availability of family labor has tended to be treated as an unquestioned given.

For many immigrant families in North America or Western Europe, it is becoming clear that children may play key roles in the successful social and economic adaptation of their families. For instance, children in these families may not only provide labor in ethnic businesses, but they may also act as language mediators on behalf of their parents, as was recently reported in *The New York Times* (Alvarez, 1995; see also Park, 1997:83).

"Productive" roles played by children tend to contravene Western laws concerning child labor, as well as dominant norms about the experience of childhood.[1] In recent years, there has been growing interest in the rights of children and young people in Western societies such as Britain and the United States (James and Prout, 1990; Pond and Searle, 1991 Roche, 1996; Jenks, 1996)—as evidenced by the International Year of the Child in 1979 and the passage of the 1989 Children Act in Britain. Children's labor performed within a family business has traditionally been regarded as more benign than industrial employment (Maclennan et al.,1985).[2]

However, most depictions of family-run ethnic businesses in Britain have been largely disapproving. One reason why children's work in ethnic businesses may be negatively singled out in Britain, as in other Western societies, is that children's work in Chinese take-aways is performed in a racialized work niche. The work performed in these businesses is associated with derogatory images and stereotypes about "foreign" immigrant livelihoods and being Chinese. Work in a take-away business, as colorfully depicted in Timothy Mo's novel, *Sour Sweet*, does not evoke the wholesome images of children on an early morning paper route or helping out on the family farm. It is undeniable that working in a Chinese

take-away business is anything but glamorous, given the very long and arduous hours required by such enterprises.

As Morrow (1992:150) has pointed out, however, "there is a danger of taking for granted the stereotypical (and racist) image we have of 'child labor' being an entirely immigrant form of work." In one of the earlier studies of Chinese children from the 1970s, Jackson and Garvey (1974) argued that the educational needs of Chinese children were not being met in the British school system, due to their English language difficulties, and that their school performance was affected by their work in their parents' take-away businesses. The authors also reported that Chinese children were often not registered in schools: "If there are any questions, there is always the switch routine. Children are moved onto another area and another business, until the inquiries peter out"(p. 12). More recently, in *Children of the Dragon*, Simpson (1987) argued that Chinese children led "two or three different lives," a "schizoid existence"—a product of having to work in their families' take-away businesses.

The most common way in which Chinese families and children have been depicted in Britain, by social workers and other practitioners, has been in terms of family pathologies brought about by the social isolation and alienation stemming from the long work hours and confinement associated with running take-away businesses (see Fewster, 1990; Pistrang, 1990).[3] The overall image conveyed of Chinese families, and presumably of other immigrant families engaged in ethnic businesses, has been that Chinese parents are rather ruthless and hard-hearted in their manipulation of children's labor. Chinese children's lives are filled with dirty work and misery—end of story.

Even in studies that refute such stereotypes of the Chinese, it is often assumed that children's work in family-run ethnic businesses can only have negative effects upon entire families. For instance, in her overview of the Chinese catering industry in Britain, Susan Baxter (1988:122) has categorically stated that, "The ethnic take-away family business is merely another locus for the continued oppression and exploitation of the Chinese and for Chinese women and

children in particular, generating on the whole, low levels of profit." According to Baxter, running a take-away business can only be regarded in terms of the economic and social marginalization of the Chinese, given Britain's imperialist history in the Far East, including its colonization of Hong Kong.

Unfortunately, such dire assessments of Chinese families running take-aways in Britain discount the potentially complex and contradictory experiences of Chinese children working in their family take-aways. Without disputing the claim that Chinese peoples' concentration in the catering trade reflects, to a certain extent, their economic and social marginalization in Britain, I would argue that such wholly negative depictions of these families' lives are too simplistic, particularly with respect to the experiences of children in these families (see also Pang, 1993). Although this book cannot address the policy implications of children's labor participation per se, these depictions of Chinese children and families provide a useful backdrop for an exploration of these children's work roles, and their importance for families running ethnic businesses.

Immigrant Adaptation and Ethnic Businesses

Over the last three decades, the influx of nonwhite immigrants to North America and European countries has led to an increase in the self-employment rate in these countries. This has generated a revival of research on immigrant adaptation and ethnic businesses. Although Europe provided the largest source of migrants to Britain from 1945 to 1954, most contemporary immigration to Britain is from India, Pakistan, the West Indies, and other new Commonwealth countries in addition to immigrants from old Commonwealth countries such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (Solomos, 1989).[4] Since the 1965 Immigration Act, the vast majority of immigrants to the United States have originated from Asia and Latin America (Rumbaut, 1994; Portes and Schauffler, 1996).

Ethnic businesses have received considerable attention because they have been viewed by many analysts as an important form of

economic and social adaptation and mobility for various immigrant groups. The recent sociological literature on ethnic businesses has stressed their competitiveness in comparison with the small business sector as a whole (Watson, 1977a; Ward and Jenkins, 1984; Waldinger et al., 1990).[5]

Although some analyses of the "native" small business sector apply to ethnic businesses as well, the centrality of migration and of disadvantages associated with immigrant status have led analysts to treat ethnic businesses as a different kind of social phenomenon. Because many immigrant groups are relatively disadvantaged in the labor market, due to both limited human capital and the various forms of racism and discrimination they encounter, small business ownership has traditionally been a means of achieving economic and social mobility (Gans, 1962; Van den Berghe, 1970).[6] Immigrant groups have traditionally been attracted to businesses characterized by low barriers to entry. Low capital investment and low technical barriers apply to areas such as shopkeeping, clothing manufacturing, restaurants, and taxis.[7] In Britain, ethnic businesses tend to occupy rather different sectors of the economy in comparison with forms of white self-employment. While about half of white self-employment is located in construction, agriculture, and manufacturing, half of ethnic minority self-employment is located in the retail sector or catering—though a third of all self-employed Caribbeans are in construction (Modood et al., 1997:124).

Historically, early immigrant groups often started businesses in areas that did not compete with white "native" businesses, so that they could minimize racist hostility from the "native" population. Newly arrived immigrants also established businesses selling predominantly to other ethnic minorities in underserved markets, where there was said to be a gap between ruling and subordinate groups (Rinder, 1959; Blalock, 1967; Loewen, 1971). As "middleman minorities," these ethnic business owners were said to fill economic niches shunned by white people (Bonacich, 1973; Lyman, 1974; Watson, 1975). A similar phenomenon has occurred in the form of immigrant groups replacing white busi-

nesses in "changing neighborhoods" (Aldrich and Reiss, 1976; Aldrich, 1980). For instance, in the United States Korean shopkeepers play a contemporary middleman role in minority neighborhoods: Korean greengrocers, fish stores, and liquor stores have moved into predominantly poor African American and Latino neighborhoods in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and Atlanta (Light and Bonacich, 1988; Min, 1996b). In Britain, Asian (mainly Indian) shopkeepers have dominated some inner urban areas of London not served by large grocery chains (Ward, 1985).

Operating ethnic businesses was understood to be a form of economic adaptation that suited immigrants who would eventually return to their "homelands" (Siu, 1952). As a key proponent of this view, Bonacich (1973) argued that middleman minorities usually traded with the indigenous community but otherwise had very little interaction with them. Most commonly, the first waves of ethnic business ownership involved male migrants who were separated from their families and relatives, to whom they sent remittances. Since middleman minorities remained oriented toward their countries of birth, their concentration in small businesses was regarded as a temporary arrangement, and they attempted to save as much as possible so that they could eventually return home.

However, the emphasis upon temporary migrants' marginalized economic, social, and political positions is now less easily applied to societies such as Britain, where the children and grandchildren of various immigrant groups have been born and raised in Britain. The settlement of migrants was founded upon the arrival of family members, including wives and children from abroad, and the gradual growth of various ethnic communities (Castles et al., 1984). Furthermore, the establishment of thriving ethnic business communities is now generally regarded as a key indicator of the success of particular immigrant groups.

"Ethnic enclaves," which are usually inner-city minority communities, such as the Cuban enclave in Miami or Chinatown in New York City, are based upon industries characterized by vertical integration and co-ethnic cooperation. Such enclaves have