

Entrepreneurship and the Internationalization of Asian Firms by Henry Wai-chung Yeung. Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, 2002 pp.311
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One of the main motivations for Henry Yeung writing this book on international entrepreneurship in transnational corporations (TNCs) is, he states, that 'we still know very little about the real actors and their behaviours' (p7) in these companies. Working from the perspective of a new economic geographer, Yeung sets out to examine through both quantitative and qualitative research what exactly entrepreneurship can be understood to be in today's large TNCs and how the activities of the entrepreneurial actors involved are shaped by the institutional context in which they operate. In that sense, the book develops a critique of conventional approaches to 'entrepreneurship studies' (p5-18) to propose what Yeung calls an 'institutional perspective on transnational entrepreneurship' (p19). The book is thus concerned to theorise how entrepreneurship occurs within the largest firms in the global economy and examine the way in which different national institutional regimes affect entrepreneurial activity.

Yeung sets out to address what he sees as three questions about the nature of entrepreneurs and their activities in the global economy: 'why some entrepreneurs choose to operate in foreign markets' at the level of the individual rather than the firm, 'how entrepreneurs operate abroad' and 'why some entrepreneurs are more successful than others in international business' (p40-41). This is an approach then that is seeking to move beyond conventional economic theories of entrepreneurship by shifting both the research and theoretical focus from firm-level numerical indicators to 'thicker' analysis of individual actors within firms and the national institutional contexts in which they are operating. Yeung is thus grounded firmly in the approach of new economic sociologists whilst engaging with the research questions and problems commonly discussed within the mainstream of management and business studies.

The book develops this theoretical and empirical enquiry into transnational entrepreneurship that circumvents the theoretical impasse between entrepreneurship and international business studies 'by integrating concepts from both areas of study' (p41). The key medium for Yeung's marriage of these theoretical perspectives is through comparative analysis of transnational entrepreneurship in two different 'home economies': Hong Kong and Singapore. The book's empirical basis rests around a comparison of two studies conducted in the 1990s, first on Hong Kong firms and then on Singapore-based firms a few years later. These studies are both based on large numbers of interviews with corporate executives and secondary data sources.

The analysis of entrepreneurship follows a sequence of discussion through successively smaller scales. Chapters two and three provide the extensive national economic-base analysis which form the context for the book's overall arguments concerning transnational entrepreneurship. As a basis for the later discussion, the chapter to some extent covers similar ground that Henry Yeung has written about before: the post-war trajectories of economic development in Hong Kong and Singapore, the much more

laissez-faire nature of Hong Kong's institutional base compared to Singapore's 'developmental state' and the contrasting forms of firm organization in the two economies (Yeung 1999; 2000). However, it goes on to bring this discussion to bear on the issue of entrepreneurship, arguing overall that Hong Kong with its strong presence of 'indigenous entrepreneurship' differs substantially in the kind of TNCs it produces from Singapore with fewer entrepreneurial resources – a consequence of its developmental state approach. This scale of discussion continues in the subsequent chapter as Yeung turns to consider data on 'the global reach' of Singapore and Hong Kong as city states. The main measure of this global reach is the historical development of outward investments (FDI) from these economies. However, the latter part of the chapter is where the arguments become interesting as Yeung presents data from his interviews on the individual characteristics of TNCs in terms of outwards investment. He explores how the different institutional contexts have shaped the outward investment strategies of firms differently but ends with the argument that it is the role of individual entrepreneurs which is the key to understanding international entrepreneurship.

Chapters four and five take up this issue of the individual role in transnational entrepreneurship in depth. Yeung argues that the key to successful international business are people who 'are well-endowed with networking skills and capabilities that enable them to participate actively in cross-border business' (p151). In this respect he distinguishes between what he terms transnational entrepreneurs (both owners and operators) and 'transnational intrapreneurs' (corporate managers given a mandate by shareholders or stakeholders) (p152). It is the ability of these people to enrol successfully in 'actor-networks' at different spatial scales that determines the success or otherwise of transnational entrepreneurship. Through a series of detailed case-studies, these chapters thus explore qualitatively the nature of decision-making, social networks, kinship relations and cross-border management practices in the process of constructing an argument that both transnational entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs are key actors behind the globalization of economic activities. Embedded in national institutional contexts, it is the ability of these people possessing a variety of technical, managerial, socio-cultural and informational skills that creates successful international business. In the conclusions, Yeung therefore argues that firms themselves need to nurture and facilitate the activities of these individuals in a range of ways, as well as states adapting their policies to support entrepreneurial activity at the firm scale (p265-274).

Overall, this is an impressive book which presents a considerable amount of original research into the nature of Hong Kong and Singapore's economies and more importantly into how economic globalization actually takes place. Yeung's analysis is clear, thorough and well-argued and the conclusions he draws are powerful. To my mind, the strongest part of the book is these latter chapters where a considerable amount of time is devoted to detailed analysis of case studies and thick description of the activities of business transnationalization. Clearly, some of the insights drawn out bear more relevance beyond the Asian context than others but the book certainly fulfils the objective of enhancing theories of the global economy and just as importantly in breaking down the disciplinary divide between business studies and other areas of the social sciences.

However, I do have a reservation about this book and its approach which I think raises an important issue for economic geographers and others in the social sciences, notably those working within the new economic sociology. My criticism is that, in methodological terms, Yeung is at times almost defensive in his insistence on using quantitative (or pseudo-quantitative) research techniques. Notably, the earlier chapters make much use of 'tick-box' surveys and tables that I found added little to the arguments being made overall. In this sense the book is sometimes self-contradictory in its arguments: on the one hand it suggests that the quantitative-based approach of international business studies is not very helpful and that qualitative analysis will shed much more theoretical understanding, yet on the other substantial parts of the first three chapters rely heavily on this kind of methodological approach. It appears almost that Yeung felt unable to abandon these techniques for fear of losing the confidence of the audience he is trying to convert. Whilst clearly there is a need for quantitative data, I found many of the tables in chapter two and three concerned with 'soft' socio-cultural indicators unnecessary - those reporting executives attitudes and thoughts on entrepreneurship, for example. Such quantified summaries of broadly-defined social and organizational attributes add little to the detailed understanding of the key actors in international business that the book is seeking to develop.

In that sense, whilst I firmly agree with Yeung's critique of business and management studies I would have liked the book to go further. In the end, the book is too modest in its critical claims. If economic geographers are to develop better theories of individual actors and their roles in the global economy, then the merits of the kind of (quantitative) research methodologies that Yeung identifies as so dominant in business studies need to be scrutinised much further than this book manages to do. That said, it is a very positive step in the right direction.

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