

## Moral Traditions of the Cantonese Chinese Community as Reflected in Business Activities in Contemporary Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam<sup>1</sup>

*Tradições Morais da Comunidade Chinesa Cantonesa Refletidas nas Atividades Empresariais na Cidade de Ho Chi Minh, Vietnã Contemporâneo*

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### ABSTRACT

The economic endeavors of the Chinese community have achieved significant success in many countries around the world, including Vietnam. The prosperity of Chinese businesses is attributed to various factors, among which the emphasis on business ethics stands out as a key explanation. In order to clarify how business ethics are taught and practiced within the Chinese community, this study gathers and analyzes relevant literature on business ethics and outlines the theoretical underpinnings of Chinese business ethics from traditional to modern times. On this basis, the study operationalizes the concept of moral traditions in business and applies it to research on the Cantonese Chinese, a representative subgroup of the Chinese community in Ho Chi Minh City. Using in-depth interviews with typical cases as the main research method, the author offers several observations on the contemporary moral traditions in business among the Cantonese Chinese, with particular emphasis on the education and practice of business ethics in the context of a rapidly changing modern society.

**KEYWORDS:** Moral Traditions, Business Culture, Cantonese, Family Education, Vietnam.

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## RESUMO

As iniciativas econômicas da comunidade chinesa alcançaram um sucesso significativo em muitos países ao redor do mundo, incluindo o Vietnã. A prosperidade dos empreendimentos chineses é atribuída a diversos fatores, entre os quais a ênfase na ética empresarial se destaca como uma explicação fundamental. Com o objetivo de esclarecer como a ética empresarial é ensinada e praticada no seio da comunidade chinesa, este estudo reúne e analisa a literatura relevante sobre ética nos negócios e delinea os fundamentos teóricos da ética empresarial chinesa, desde os períodos tradicionais até os tempos modernos. Com base nisso, o estudo operacionaliza o conceito de tradições morais nos negócios e o aplica à pesquisa sobre os chineses cantoneses, um subgrupo representativo da comunidade chinesa na Cidade de Ho Chi Minh. Utilizando entrevistas em profundidade com casos típicos como principal método de pesquisa, o autor apresenta algumas considerações sobre as tradições morais contemporâneas nos negócios entre os chineses cantoneses, com especial ênfase na educação e na prática da ética empresarial no contexto de uma sociedade moderna em rápida transformação.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Tradições Morais, Cultura Empresarial, Cantonês, Educação Familiar, Vietnã.

### 1. Introduction

Nowadays, Chinese people resides in many countries around the world and has consistently left profound cultural imprints in the places where they have migrated and settled. Perseverance, adaptability, and sophisticated diplomatic skills have enabled them to achieve considerable success. Drawing on practical experience and a substantial body of scholarly research, the Chinese have attained notable achievements in most fields in which they participate, particularly in the commercial and service sectors. Astute business acumen has come to be widely recognized as one of the defining characteristics of the Chinese people, a perception that is well grounded, as the role of Chinese private economic enterprises worldwide over the past several decades provides highly convincing evidence. In the case of Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City (formerly known as the Saigon Cholon area) may serve as an illustrative example. Upon settling there, the Chinese transformed the area into a highly vibrant residential and commercial zone, establishing family-based business streets specializing in different types of goods, which over time gave rise to well-known “Chinatowns.” Family-based business has long been a particular strength of the Chinese. This can be explained not only by a cultural tradition that places strong emphasis on kinship and family lineage, but also by their consistent respect for moral traditions in business, especially the high value they attach to trust and credibility in transactions with customers.

In the current period, as integration and globalization are advancing vigorously, business practices likewise require necessary adjustments. This raises important questions regarding how the moral traditions in business among the Chinese should be maintained today, and whether they differ from those of the past. Trust, which has long been highly valued by the Chinese in business activities, now plays what role as the society in which they live shifts from a tradition-based social order toward a modern market economy that emphasizes legal frameworks? To address these questions, this article examines moral traditions as manifested in contemporary Chinese business activities through the case of the Cantonese Chinese, the largest linguistic group within the Chinese community in Ho Chi Minh City. To provide a solid basis for discussion, the author conducts an in-depth case study of a Cantonese Chinese family, thereby enhancing the reliability of the analysis and interpretations.

## 2. Theoretical basis

If we conceptualize the ethics of a community as a form of social consciousness, its essence lies in reflecting social existence and is determined by that existence. In this regard, Karl Marx's (1818–1883) perspective provides a useful methodological foundation: It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. Through the development of material production and material interaction, human beings transform not only their social reality but also their modes of thinking and the products of thought (Marx & Engels, 1995). This proposition serves as the theoretical point of departure for explaining the moral traditions of the Cantonese Chinese in Ho Chi Minh City.

### 2.1. *The Formation of Moral Traditions in Business among the Cantonese Chinese in Ho Chi Minh City*

The moral traditions in general, and those in business in particular, of the Cantonese Chinese in Ho Chi Minh City are shaped and determined by objective conditions of social existence, which can be outlined as follows:

The Origins of the Cantonese Chinese and Historical Contingencies: Chinese migrants began settling in Ho Chi Minh City from the eighteenth century onward, originating from diverse regions. Under the Nguyen feudal dynasty, the Chinese community was organized into different associations (*bang*) such as Fujian, Fuzhou, Chaozhou, Guangzhou, Guizhou, Leizhou, and Hainan (Duong, 2023). This classification was primarily based on regional origin and local dialects of Chinese migrants from China to Vietnam. Among these groups, the Cantonese constituted a particularly representative group, as they accounted for a significant proportion of the population and exerted strong influence on the economic and commercial activities of Ho Chi Minh City. Guangdong Province, located along the coast

of China, has long been characterized by a maritime-oriented economy and early engagement in external trade. The region's climate is relatively complex and at times harsh, and its long history has fostered distinctive cultural traits associated with coastal and delta areas, differing from those of China's Central Plains. Consequently, prior to settling in Ho Chi Minh City, the Cantonese Chinese were already distinguished by qualities such as dynamism, pragmatism, commercial acumen, diligence, perseverance, frugality, and a strong sense of moral obligation - traits that later shaped their business ethics in the host society. These qualities constituted an important cultural endowment and starting point that they continued to cultivate within a new cultural environment—Ho Chi Minh City. From the seventeenth century onward, Chinese history experienced numerous upheavals, particularly the replacement of the Ming dynasty by the Qing dynasty. The “Restore the Ming, Overthrow the Qing” movement lasted nearly half a century before ultimately failing. Many participants were brutally suppressed by the Qing authorities, prompting some to leave their homeland and settle in islands and neighboring countries, including Vietnam. A notable group of approximately 3,000 people and more than 50 warships, led by Duong Ngan Dich and Tran Thuong Xuyen, sought asylum from the Nguyen lord. Their request was granted, and they were allowed to settle in the southern regions of Vietnam, thereby laying the foundation for the Chinese community in the Mekong Delta and present-day Ho Chi Minh City (Huynh, 2018).

Geographical, Natural, and Economic Conditions of Ho Chi Minh City: Vietnam and China—the homeland of the Chinese—are neighboring countries, and their geographical proximity has facilitated early and sustained interactions in various domains. During periods of political and social instability in China, such proximity enabled Chinese migrants to leave their homeland and seek both refuge and long-term settlement in Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh City occupies a highly advantageous geographical position as the center of southern Vietnam, connected to numerous southern provinces through an extensive system of waterways and land routes. The dense river network facilitates boat travel and enables easy connections between coastal areas and inland regions. As a result, Chinese migrants traveling by sea from southern China, as well as from northern and southern regions of Vietnam, could conveniently reach Ho Chi Minh City. The natural conditions of Ho Chi Minh City are diverse, abundant, and relatively mild compared to other regions of the country. The climate is generally warm and stable throughout the year, with minimal exposure to storms and floods, no need for winter sheltering, and an extensive network of calm rivers and canals rich in aquatic resources and conducive to water transport. The city's flat and expansive terrain is suitable for large-scale agricultural and industrial production, thereby providing a favorable foundation for the development of a commodity-based economy. From the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although the region possessed considerable development potential, it remained largely underexploited. For Vietnamese and Chinese migrants alike, settling in an area with such favorable natural conditions

offered ideal circumstances for land reclamation and the establishment of stable, long-term livelihoods. In this new environment, supported by favorable geographical and natural conditions, the facilitation of local authorities, and the determination of migrant communities, areas with Chinese settlement gradually became prosperous, with commerce and handicraft industries developing rapidly. By the eighteenth century, the Saigon–Cholon area had emerged as a vibrant commercial and economic center. The Chinese community there succeeded in establishing stable and enduring economic foundations. Ho Chi Minh City thus ceased to be merely a temporary refuge and instead became a powerful magnet attracting Chinese migrants from other regions for long-term settlement (Duong, 2023). Consequently, the moral traditions of the Cantonese Chinese were prominently manifested through business activities—the primary means through which they secured survival and development in a host country outside their homeland.

**Demographic Structure and Cultural Affinities in Ho Chi Minh City:** The demographic composition of Ho Chi Minh City is highly diverse in terms of ethnicity and culture. The moral traditions of the Chinese community have been shaped through interaction, convergence, and practice within this multicultural environment. From the late sixteenth century onward, migrants from northern and central Vietnam began settling in what is now Ho Chi Minh City, with ethnic Vietnamese forming the largest group. In addition, the region has been home to Khmer people (the indigenous population of southern Vietnam), Cham people (migrating from central Vietnam), as well as ethnic groups such as the Stieng, Ma, and Chau Ro. Today, Ho Chi Minh City has a population of approximately 10 million (as of 2024) and comprises around 46 ethnic groups. The Kinh account for approximately 89 percent of the population, while other groups include the Chinese (about 10 percent), Khmer (0.15 percent), Cham (0.07 percent), and various other ethnic minorities such as Tay, Nung, Muong, Gia Rai, Ngai, Ede, Co Ho, Hmong, Dao, and Ba Na... (Committee for Ideology and Culture of the Ho Chi Minh City Party Committee, 2005)

An additional significant factor is the cultural affinity between Chinese migrants and the dominant culture of southern Vietnam and Ho Chi Minh City, which is primarily Vietnamese (Kinh). Historically, Vietnamese and Chinese cultures have interacted from an early period and share many similarities. Both cultures developed within the context of an agrarian mode of production characteristic of East and Southeast Asia and were profoundly influenced by Confucianism as well as by Buddhism and Daoism. While Chinese culture possesses distinct characteristics, it is neither alien nor antagonistic to the Vietnamese culture that has been shaped through the process of “southernization.” Instead, the two cultures have interacted harmoniously, complementing, inheriting, and learning from one another within

a shared geographical and socio-economic space, thereby contributing to the unity-in-diversity that characterizes the broader flow of Vietnamese culture.

## ***2.2. Some Characteristics of the Traditional Moral Values of the Cantonese Chinese as Manifested in Business Activities in Ho Chi Minh City***

First, it is necessary to outline several distinctive features of the business activities of the Cantonese Chinese in Ho Chi Minh City. Among these, commerce has consistently constituted their most prominent economic activity, rather than other forms of material production. As is well known, the economy constitutes the foundation for the existence and development of any community. Karl Marx emphasized that: Every child knows that a nation which ceased to work, not for a year, but even for a few weeks, would perish (Marx & Engels, 1995). However, when migrating to new lands, the Cantonese Chinese were unable to bring with them land or other material means of production. What they carried instead were experiential knowledge and traditional cultural capital rooted in their place of origin. This situation compelled them to devise livelihood strategies most suitable for migrants, namely trade, handicraft production, and service-related occupations. As a result, business became an occupation closely associated with the migrant identity of the Chinese. Moreover, Chinese communities currently residing in Southeast Asia largely trace their ancestry to coastal regions in southern China (Chau, 2018; Du, 2006). This geographical background contributed to their heightened sensitivity to economic opportunities and maritime trade. In addition, their relationship with host societies deserves attention. The sense of being “overseas orphans” compelled Chinese migrants to integrate into local societies and to capitalize on their inherent strengths—such as independence, flexibility, and adaptability (Du, 2006)—in order to establish and sustain social networks conducive to business activities.

A further question arises as to why business activities among the Chinese in general, and the Cantonese Chinese in particular, require traditional moral values. Is this reliance on morality motivated solely by the pursuit of profit? In societies where legal systems have not yet fully developed or have not been regarded as supreme, morality plays an especially crucial role. Morality functions as a foundational spiritual resource and a powerful motivating force for communities. It regulates social relations—both within communities and between different communities—through shared norms of conduct. This is also the case for the Chinese community in Ho Chi Minh City, which has relied on moral values as a form of spiritual support that fosters social cohesion and ensures sustainable existence.

Historically, both the Chinese and the Vietnamese have been profoundly influenced by Confucian moral philosophy, which emphasizes fundamental virtues such as Ren (仁, benevolence), Li (禮, propriety), Yi

(義, righteousness), Zhi (智, wisdom), Xin (信, trustworthiness), Zhong (忠, loyalty), Xiao (孝, filial piety), Ti (悌, fraternal respect), Lian (廉, integrity), and Chi (恥, sense of shame). Confucianism places strong emphasis on personal moral cultivation and the maintenance of social order through ethical relationships, thereby forming a moral tradition that has endured for thousands of years among the Chinese and many other Asian societies. In business, profit is undoubtedly necessary; however, personal and familial honor also holds great importance for the Chinese. Their moral conduct is not guided solely by utilitarianism or rational choice, but also by the ideal of moral integrity associated with the Confucian concept of the junzi (the morally cultivated person), as well as by concern for the reputation of oneself and one's family lineage. The incorporation of morality into business practices enhances sustainability, as credibility and reputation are regarded as sacred values that enable long-term cooperation with partners and customers. The Chinese are among the ethnic groups that place great emphasis on the family, and family traditions have long influenced nearly all aspects of social life. Business activities are likewise shaped by this cultural foundation, making family-based enterprises a distinct strength of Chinese communities both in mainland China and overseas. Business operations typically originate within the family, are conducted for the benefit of the family, and are managed by family members, with intergenerational succession along bloodlines being extremely common. Although modernization and social integration have altered business practices in form, they have not fundamentally transformed the core nature of family-based business. To ensure smooth operation, Chinese families adhere to certain principles that function as a "lifeline" for overseas Chinese communities. Among these principles is absolute trust in family members and strict adherence to family leadership (Tran, 2018). In traditional Chinese thought, the family is regarded as the root, the point of origin, and the driving force behind all activities, including business. For this reason, Ming-Jer Chen (2004) argued that the term "family-driven economy" more accurately captures the essence of Chinese business practices than the phrase "family economy."

What, then, constitutes the moral traditions manifested in the business practices of the Cantonese Chinese in Ho Chi Minh City? It is worth noting that Confucianism traditionally places agriculture above commerce, viewing agriculture as the "root" and commerce as the "branch." Many East Asian societies, including China and Vietnam, have historically upheld the principle of "agriculture as the foundation". Despite being deeply influenced by Confucianism, the Cantonese Chinese in Vietnam have applied Confucian moral principles flexibly in commercial activities, using the Confucian ethical system to ensure the sustainable operation of trade within the context of a migrant culture. This flexibility stems directly from the characteristics of migrant culture discussed earlier.

Numerous studies emphasize xin (trustworthiness) as the foundational moral principle in Chinese business practices. The Chinese author Tao Zhugong (Dao, 2008), in *Chinese Business Strategies*, identified “dao” as one of the ten key factors contributing to Chinese business success, referring specifically to credibility and reputation. Commonly referred to as “trust”, this principle constitutes the core of Chinese business ethics. In fact, xin encompasses a wide range of meanings that extend beyond the realm of commerce, functioning as a universal normative principle governing social relationships. Confucius and Mencius elaborated on xin in various social contexts, including friendship, social relations, and ruler–subject relations. In *The Analects* (chapter Zi Han), Confucius stated: “Make faithfulness and sincerity your guiding principles. Do not associate with those who are unlike yourself” (Zhu Xi, 1998, p. 415) and “To conceal resentment while forming friendships is shameful.” (Zhu Xi, 1998, pp. 310–311). In *The Great Learning*, Zengzi (Zeng Shen), a disciple of Confucius, asserted: “When dealing with friends, one must keep one’s word; a person who does so may be said to be learned, even if he claims otherwise.” (Zhu Xi, 1998, p. 202) Regarding social relations, Confucius emphasized in *The Analects* (chapter Wei Zheng): “If a person lacks trustworthiness, I do not know how he can accomplish anything.” (Zhu Xi, 1998, p. 234). In ruler–subject relations, trust was considered essential, as “When those above value trustworthiness, the people will not dare to be insincere.” (Zhu Xi, 1998, p. 500). Mencius further noted in *Mencius* (chapter Li Lou, Part I): “Jie and Zhou lost the world because they lost the people; they lost the people because they lost their hearts.” (Zhu Xi, 1998, p. 1033).

In summary, xin in Confucianism represents a fundamental virtue essential to social relations. It signifies honesty and consistency between inner intention, speech, and action; it is a prerequisite for the existence of individuals, societies, and governments, and constitutes a core quality of the junzi. When the Chinese migrated to Vietnam, they brought with them their accumulated experiences, beliefs, and traditional cultural values, including Confucian ethics, which were subsequently embedded in everyday social and economic life. Family business practices were no exception to this process. If business ethics are regarded as a defining feature of Chinese business culture, then xin may be considered the central concept in discussions of business ethics among the Chinese in Vietnam in general, and in Ho Chi Minh City in particular.

Trustworthiness in business can be understood in a straightforward manner as honesty, fairness, self-respect, and respect for others in commercial activities (Dao, 2008). Confucian thought, together with classical anecdotes and moral exemplars concerning trustworthiness in trade and commerce, has become an important intellectual foundation, a source of inspiration, and a long-standing tradition that has profoundly influenced business ethics among the Chinese. A representative example is the story of Meng Xin’s family during the Northern and Southern Dynasties. In an effort to escape poverty, Meng



Xin left home to seek business opportunities elsewhere. While he was away, his family faced extreme hardship, and his son sold their only cow—despite knowing that it was ill—to a neighbor. Upon returning, Meng Xin reproached his son, repurchased the cow, and even paid additional compensation to the buyer for caring for it. Meng Xin's honesty and sense of fairness earned him widespread respect, leading many people to seek business dealings with him, and eventually his family's living conditions improved. In practice, the Chinese have applied numerous similar lessons concerning trustworthiness in business from ancient times to the present, thereby achieving considerable success in commercial activities in Vietnam.

However, in terms of its substantive meaning, business ethics is not limited solely to trustworthiness. It also encompasses responsibility toward nature and society, as well as compliance with the law in business operations. This perspective is highly appropriate, as in modern societies, sustainable economic development is always pursued in a balanced and harmonious relationship with environmental protection, human well-being, and social responsibility. The issue of aligning economic development with cultural development has long attracted scholarly attention and lively debate, and has become both a goal and a driving force in the process of national industrialization and modernization.

Within the scope of this article, the author focuses specifically on trustworthiness in the business practices of Cantonese Chinese families in Ho Chi Minh City, treating it as the foremost foundational moral value in their business activities.

### 3. Literature review

To analyze the issue of business ethics education within Cantonese Chinese families in Ho Chi Minh City, it is first necessary to review several key studies that examine family business, the core values, accumulated knowledge, and ethical perceptions of the Chinese community in business activities. In the article *"The Prospect of Familism in the Global Era: A Study on the Recent Development of the Ethnic-Chinese Business, with Particular Attention to the Indonesian Context"* (Wijaya, 2008), Yahya Wijaya analyzes the central role of the family as reflected in both the structure and culture of Chinese-owned enterprises. The author highlights the advantages of family-style management, namely, its swiftness and flexibility in decision-making processes, but also points out its limitations. Specifically, this form of management is not always well-suited to modern business environments, particularly in the context of globalization, which demands greater professionalism, integration, and openness. This study reinforces the notion that corporate culture and family culture in Chinese society are deeply intertwined.

In addition, Confucianism exerts a significant influence on business operations, as discussed by Po Keung Ip in *"Is Confucianism Good for Business Ethics in China?"* (Ip, 2009). The author examines the

impact of Confucian thought on the business ethics of Chinese enterprises, emphasizing that core Confucian values, such as the virtues of the "junzi" (exemplary person): *ren* (benevolence), *zhi* (wisdom), and *yong* (courage), as well as the Confucian approach to regulating social relationships, continue to serve as foundational principles in contemporary corporate organization and management. On this basis, businesses in China are increasingly emphasizing social responsibility as a way to adapt to new developmental contexts. This study reaffirms that Confucianism continues to exert a powerful influence on Chinese conceptions of business ethics.

The business practices of the Chinese in Vietnam have also been the subject of various studies, including the book chapter "*The Rise and Revitalization of Ethnic Chinese Business in Vietnam*" (Nguyen, 2017) by Nguyen Van Chinh, featured in the volume *Chinese Capitalism in Southeast Asia: Cultures and Practices*. The remarkable rise of Chinese-owned enterprises in Vietnam before 1975, particularly in the Cholon area, demonstrated the strength of ethnic Chinese private economic power. Despite a series of historical upheavals, especially during the 1990s and into the 21st century, Chinese business networks have undergone a process of revitalization and once again become an essential component of the city economy.

In *Chinese Culture* (中华文化) (Su and Tran, 2012), the authors analyze the traditional Chinese attitude toward wealth and material possessions in daily life, thereby offering insights into the mindset of Chinese people when it comes to trade. According to traditional beliefs, the Chinese have long regarded money and property merely as tools to ensure a modest, comfortable life. As a result, their business activities were typically small in scale, primarily aimed at maintaining family livelihoods rather than initiating economic revolutions or achieving great financial feats. Of course, this view reflects perspectives from thousands of years ago and no longer fully applies to the modern Chinese state, with its remarkable development indicators and ambitious Chinese Dream. Nevertheless, it helps explain the historical origins and development trajectory of Chinese family-based business practices that have persisted over time.

In *Approaching Chinese People and Culture* (Du, 2006), the author compares the personality differences between the northern and southern Chinese populations. He observes that southern Chinese, the predominant group migrating to various Asian countries, including Vietnam, tend to possess a natural aptitude for calculation and trade. Notably, people from Guangdong province, located south of the Yangtze River, are characterized not only by these traits but also by their strong will, ambition for career advancement, and a greater inclination toward risk-taking compared to other southern Chinese communities. These cultural and regional characteristics help explain why Cantonese Chinese in Ho Chi

Minh City are widely recognized in business circles for their quick-witted, creativity, dynamic, and hard-working.

*Unveiling the Secrets of Chinese Business* (Chen, 2004) offers a comprehensive overview of how to work with, cooperate, and compete against Chinese counterparts by fostering a deep understanding of their cultural foundations. Chapter Two of the book discusses the concept of family-based business among the Chinese. Through insightful analyses, the author argues that for Chinese families, engaging in business activities is not merely about ensuring material well-being, but also about preserving and transmitting family cultural traditions. This observation remains consistent even in the context of the overseas Chinese communities, including those residing in Vietnam.

*The Analects and the Way in Business* (Nghe, 2019) focuses on analyzing perspectives on wealth and the issue of prosperity as presented in Analects. The author discusses the concept of the “Dao” in general and its application within business practices. Drawing on Chinese historical anecdotes, the book extracts practical lessons in commerce and trade. Fundamentally, these lessons are highly generalized, for instance, the principle of “knowing the way and following it”, yet they are considered foundational and essential conditions in the art of doing business. It is evident that the thoughts of ancient sages have had a profound influence on both the style and business ethics of merchants, both historically and in the present day. This work is also one of the rare studies exploring the values of Analects through an economic perspective.

The document *Economic Life of the Hoa Community in Ho Chi Minh City* (Tran, 2018) discusses the private business activities of the Hoa people in districts 5, 6, and 11 of Ho Chi Minh City. Drawing on the distinctive personality traits and migrant culture, the author vividly reconstructs the historical development of the Hoa community’s economy. Despite many changes over time, the private economy of the Hoa people continues to play a significant role in the city’s economic structure, effectively addressing labor issues and gradually achieving substantial successes.

Overall, the existing literature has not adequately addressed changes in the moral traditions of the Chinese as manifested in contemporary business activities, nor has it examined how business ethics are transmitted and taught within Chinese families. Accordingly, this study contributes additional insights into the education and transmission of moral traditions among the Chinese in the context of modern society, through an examination of business activities among the Cantonese Chinese in Ho Chi Minh City.

#### 4. Research method

First, the study conducts a comprehensive analysis of both domestic and international secondary data to clarify the concept of business ethics and to review the current state of research on the business ethics of the Chinese community.

Second, the concept of business ethics is operationalized into four key dimensions: integrity, compliance with business law, environmental responsibility, and social responsibility. Based on this framework, the study conducted in-depth interviews with the owner of a family-run business, focusing on these specific dimensions.

The research findings are presented in the form of a summary and analysis of a representative case study.

#### *Survey location and data collection*

Ho Chi Minh City is home to over half of the total Chinese population in Vietnam, with the majority residing in Districts 5, 6, and 11. The Chinese community in the city comprises five major dialect groups: Guangdong, Chaozhou, Fujian, Hakka and Hainan. Each group has established its own community assembly halls (known as hoi quan), which serve as venues for hometown gatherings, ancestral worship, and the organization of cultural and communal events. Among the Cantonese community, two notable assembly halls are Tue Thanh Assembly Hall (District 5) and Quang Trieu Assembly Hall (District 1).

Based on information gathered from the business activities associated with these two assembly halls, the author selected and conducted a case study of a representative Cantonese household business located in Ward 1, District 6, Ho Chi Minh City.

#### 5. Results and discussion

To obtain initial information, we conducted field observations at Tue Thanh Assembly Hall and Quang Trieu Assembly Hall. From these visits, we identified and carried out an in-depth interview with a representative of a family-run business. The interviewee belongs to the fourth generation of a Cantonese family currently engaged in trading electrical equipment and beverages in Ho Chi Minh City.

To gain deeper insight into how business ethics are transmitted within Cantonese Chinese families, it is essential to begin with an analysis of the current business landscape of the Chinese community in Ho Chi Minh City. Based on fieldwork data, it is observed that the phenomenon of trade organized along guilds, associations, or streets specializing in a single product, once a hallmark of Chinese

commerce, still exists but is gradually fading. Today, there is a growing intermingling among members of different Chinese subgroups as well as between Chinese and Vietnamese traders. This shift can be explained by several factors, notably the significant emigration of ethnic Chinese from Vietnam after 1979, which altered the demographic and social structure of the community. Furthermore, the earlier trend of large-scale investment in specific sectors, such as rice or plastics before 1975, is no longer prevalent. Instead, Chinese entrepreneurs now exhibit high adaptability and market responsiveness, willing to invest in any product they perceive as profitable. This has led to a highly diversified range of goods being offered. Such transformations are largely driven by Vietnam's rapid economic integration and the accelerated population growth in Ho Chi Minh City. The increasing population has resulted in rising consumer demand, prompting Chinese businesspeople to shift away from traditional practices and adopt more flexible, market-oriented strategies in response to the changing times.

Regarding the content of business ethics education, the interviewee shared that from the time of his great-grandfather, who was an exceptionally skilled businessman, to his father's generation, there has always been a strong emphasis on instilling the values of integrity and compassion in doing business. This form of ethical education is not unique to Cantonese Chinese but is shared broadly among the Chinese immigrant communities residing in Ho Chi Minh City. These values lead Cantonese entrepreneurs to prioritize product quality and develop a deep understanding of customer psychology. Such principles are also closely aligned with the widespread veneration of Guan Gong, a deity symbolizing loyalty and integrity, among Chinese merchants. The worship of Guan Gong represents a form of expression of the dialectical relationship among Confucianism, business culture, and migrant culture. The veneration of Guan Gong by the Cantonese Chinese in business contexts is not mere superstition; rather, it constitutes a highly pragmatic moral-social mechanism for several interrelated reasons. First, Guan Gong embodies core Confucian values such as loyalty, righteousness, trustworthiness, and integrity. Second, for migrant communities living far from their homeland and engaging in commercial activities within unfamiliar social environments, a certain form of moral assurance is required, in which ethical commitment grounded in a shared belief system plays a crucial role. Third, the formalization of such commitments through oath-taking rituals before the altar of Guan Gong in clan halls or guild halls produces a strong psychological effect, functioning as a form of symbolic and psychological sanction that helps safeguard values such as loyalty, righteousness, trustworthiness, and integrity. This ethical outlook directly influences how businesspeople select employees or partners, often prioritizing honesty as a key trait. Furthermore, business ethics are also manifested through solidarity and fairness among traders. These values are reflected in practices such as negotiating prices transparently, avoiding undercutting competitors, and mutually supporting each other's growth. It is common for Chinese entrepreneurs to gather and socialize

during religious celebrations, particularly on the feast days of deities, at various assembly halls across Ho Chi Minh City.

Overall, the values of integrity and *compassion* among Cantonese Chinese are reflected in both customer relations and partnerships. The Chinese consistently place trustworthiness and moral conscience at the forefront, as they regard these values as what ought to be done, what must be done, and what is necessary for the sustainable existence and development of individuals, families, and their community. These values constitute a sense of conscience, honor, responsibility, and moral obligation that individuals must recognize and act upon if they wish to avoid social exclusion and the loss of respect and trust from others. From the perspective of rational choice theory, Chinese entrepreneurs prioritize these ethical principles not merely out of moral obligation, but because they aim to maintain their inclusion within the collective. What they seek in return is the respect and reassurance of others, factors that are considered foundational to long-term business success. Historically, Chinese migrants to Cholon chose to settle in close-knit neighborhoods with others who shared their dialect and cultural background. This strong sense of community fostered mutual dependence and psychological security in business dealings. Consequently, the loss of integrity would not only harm one's reputation but could result in social isolation from the community. This deep-rooted collectivism plays a crucial role in shaping the business philosophy of the Cantonese in Ho Chi Minh City.

However, in the context of a growing market economy, adapting to the modern business environment requires an expanded understanding of business ethics. As previously emphasized, contemporary business ethics should encompass not only integrity but also environmental responsibility, social responsibility, and legal awareness.

With regard to these broader aspects, the interviewee acknowledged the necessity of self-learning about Vietnam's business laws, paying more attention to environmental protection, and actively participating in community service. Specifically, the business owner emphasized the importance of understanding legal regulations, regularly reminding staff about waste management practices, and organizing charitable activities, such as distributing rice to the poor. These actions are seen not only as moral duties but also as strategies that enhance business credibility and trust within the broader society.

This raises an important question: Is there a significant difference in the general business culture or specifically in the moral education practices of Cantonese Chinese compared to other Chinese subgroups? Interview data suggests that the most notable distinctions lie in the personality traits characteristic of each group, which, when combined with family-based ethical instruction, contribute to divergent business practices. For instance, Cantonese entrepreneurs are often described as assertive and open-minded in their dealings, whereas Teochew individuals are known for being cautious and frugal.

These temperamental differences manifest in business styles: Cantonese products are typically more elaborate and meticulously crafted. In the case of food, for example, the price may be higher than that of competitors from other Chinese communities, but the trade-off lies in the stringent emphasis on product quality.

In terms of methods of moral education in business, the case study reveals that beyond direct guidance and experiential transmission from older generations, Cantonese Chinese families often encourage their children to observe and learn from successful business figures within the community. This exposure to real-world examples plays a significant role in shaping ethical business understanding. Furthermore, it is still common today for younger generations in Cantonese families to continue in family businesses despite lacking formal academic training in business or economics. Instead, they typically gain knowledge through self-study, media, and networking with like-minded peers, as well as learning from more experienced mentors. Evidently, a strong entrepreneurial instinct remains prevalent among the younger Cantonese generation. The demands of the contemporary market compel these individuals to continually adapt, innovate, and refine their business practices to stay competitive and relevant.

Thus, the business practices of the Chinese community in general and of the Cantonese in particular, have undergone notable transformations before and after 1975. In addition to the traditional emphasis on integrity and compassion, the moral education of business ethics within the family has gradually expanded to include new elements such as understanding business law, environmental responsibility, and engagement in charitable activities. These values are instilled not only through role modeling by senior family members but also by highlighting the success stories of accomplished entrepreneurs in society. Moreover, younger generations demonstrate a high level of initiative in acquiring knowledge, actively engaging in self-directed learning, and drawing lessons from real-life business experiences. In addition, the coordination between the family and the community has undergone notable changes. Clan and regional associations are no longer organized in the same manner as before; they are now maintained primarily for linguistic and cultural purposes and no longer function as all-encompassing institutions as they once did. Similarly, the education of moral values in general, and modern business ethics in particular, has evolved in terms of its agents, content, and modes of transmission. Coordination among the family, educational institutions, and society has become increasingly close. Chinese children now learn business and business ethics not solely within the traditional frameworks of the family or clan associations, but also through formal education, where they receive more systematic training and acquire modern, advanced, and comprehensive educational knowledge. This transformation clarifies the relationship between tradition and modernity: tradition is reinterpreted and renewed within a modern society in which the market economy and diverse economic sectors are developing vigorously. Tradition

does not disappear, but it cannot remain unchanged; likewise, modernity does not emerge from nothing but must necessarily inherit the rational elements of tradition. The emphasis on trustworthiness and moral conscience in the business ethics of the Cantonese Chinese represents a clear example of this dynamic.

## 6. Conclusion

Drawing on data from the case study and grounded in theoretical perspectives on business ethics, this study addresses its two research questions. First, perceptions of business ethics among the Cantonese Chinese have changed markedly before and after 1975. This shift has been shaped primarily by processes of urbanization and social integration in Ho Chi Minh City, as well as by demographic transformations within the Chinese community since 1979. Second, while trustworthiness and moral conscience remain core values, Cantonese Chinese business ethics have expanded to incorporate greater attention to environmental, social, and legal responsibilities, alongside diversified forms of education and self-education.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the moral traditions of the Cantonese Chinese in business constitute a dynamic and evolving value system that adapts flexibly to the contemporary socio-economic context. Within a competitive urban environment governed by modern legal frameworks, traditional values, such as trustworthiness, righteousness, integrity, respect for commitments, and the emphasis on personal, familial, and associative reputation, continue to play a foundational role in organizing and sustaining business activities. This adaptive transformation represents a positive and necessary development, enabling Cantonese Chinese businesses to maintain continuity while achieving further growth and long-term success.

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