



## The Creation and Development of Entrepreneurship in Asian Chinese Communities

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**Abstract:** We study the creation and development of entrepreneurship in two Asian Chinese communities, i.e., Hong Kong and Singapore. Addressing a theoretical puzzlement why these two communities have shown different patterns of the changes, we propose a model of social Gaia which highlights the effects of four social forces, i.e., local cultural factors, foreign cultural factors, local government interventions and local firms' activities. While stressing that all these four forces are malleable or continuing evolving, we pay special attention to their symbiotic processes and co-evolutions. Several important interactive processes are identified, such as the co-evolution between local firms' activities and local cultural factors and that between local government interventions and foreign cultural values. All these also cause the changes in entrepreneurship and OD among local firms in a relatively short period of time. This paper concludes with a discussion of implications of this Gaia-based model for future academic research and managerial practice.

**Keywords:** government interventions, cultural values, organizational design and the Gaia perspective.

### Introduction

Many authors have studied the effects of societal culture on organizational design (OD) and the development of entrepreneurship (e.g., Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961; Hofstede, 1980). In spite of the studies, it remains unclear how societal culture should influence organizational changes in OD and entrepreneurship. Specifically, prior studies have either implicitly or explicitly treated culture as a constant that always functions as a significant independent variable (e.g., Hofstede, 1980). This approach, however, has been challenged by empirical evidence in recent years (e.g., House, et al., 1999). For example, while prior studies have shown that Hong Kong and Singapore share similar cultures so that they should have similar

entrepreneurship, one can see significant differences in the development of entrepreneurship among firms between these two cities (to be discussed in detail below). Current theories have difficulties or limitations when explaining this theoretical puzzlement, which can prevent us from further understanding the processes of organizational changes.

Our current paper addresses this puzzlement from a theoretical perspective borrowed from biology and ecology --- a perspective of Gaia. This Gaia perspective was first proposed by Lovelock at the end of 1970s (e.g., Lovelock, 1979), which maintains that the advent of life on Earth has had a homeostatic tendency to influence or regulate Earth's environment in a direction favourable for the continuing development of life. This Gaia



perspective has a very important proposition --- Earth's environment is shaped by all processes and activities of life. Consistent with this perspective, we posit that environment for social entities, such as entrepreneurship, is also shaped by activities of all major social factors/forces, including local cultural factors, foreign cultural factors, interventions by local governments and local firms' activities. Applying this perspective, our current paper addresses the theoretical puzzlement above, i.e., given similar historical heritages and similar Chinese cultural traditions, why should the changes or evolutions of entrepreneurship and OD differs between Hong Kong and Singapore (to be discussed in detail later).

This study should make several important contributions. First, it provides a new alternative theoretical approach to understand the issue of organizational changes. As mentioned above, current theories have mainly focused on a specific set of independent variables when explaining the changes in organizations. This approach has been popular, but fails to provide a comprehensive model taking into account the joint effect of all the social forces/factors that influence the changes. Our current study tries to develop a new approach that can help overcome this weakness.

In addition, our current study should contribute to the research on several specific issues of organizational changes and development, such as the relationship between government intervention and entrepreneurship (the government-entrepreneurship relationship). For instance, prior research has documented that social forces, especially the coercive forces brought to bear by governments, create the candidate models of organizational designs considered by decision makers (Bates, 1997; Pearce, 2001). Prior research has also suggested that coercive power of local government has had a very significant effect on

organization structures (Tolbert & Zucker, 1983; Rao & Singh, 1999). It remains unclear the long-term effects of government interventions. This issue is especially relevant to East Asia where governments have a tradition of wielding influence and intervening in firm activities. For example, as we will discuss in detail below, the Singapore government has been very active in coordinating activities among Singapore firms in recent years, such as their organizational design (OD). Are these government-sponsored OD activities really in the interest of local firms or of the society as a whole in terms of development of entrepreneurship? Our current study will provide an answer from a Gaia perspective.

Moreover, our current study can also help understand the relationship between societal culture and entrepreneurship (the culture-entrepreneurship relationship). Prior studies have shown that individual and organizational performances are influenced by their societal culture, but failed to address the issue of why, given similar societal cultures, certain dimensions of individual and organizational behaviours and activities can be very different. These dimensions include the development of entrepreneurship and organizational design (OD). To bridge this research gap, our current paper can make another new contribution.

Practically, the findings from our current study can help firm managers to understand comprehensively the major forces shaping entrepreneurship and OD of their firms. The results from this study can also help government officials to do a better job in developing entrepreneurship among local firms. Before discussing these issues further, we first provide a brief introduction of the Gaia perspective. After that, we apply this perspective to study the cases of entrepreneurship and OD among Chinese entrepreneurial firms in two very similar Asian cities, i.e., Hong Kong and



Singapore. Based on this case study, we propose a new theoretical perspective on the interactive effects of the major forces in a subsystem of Gaia on the change of entrepreneurship and OD for the survival and growth of entrepreneurial firms.

### Literature Review

The perspective of Gaia hypothesis is related to the concept of symbiosis (Lovelock, 1979; Margulis, 1984). Gaia, an old Greek name for a planet, is defined as a biosphere, or the sum of all the living organisms other than an arbitrarily chosen organism (Margulis & Sagan, 2002). For an understanding of evolution in both natural and social environments, there are two important points to be noted from the Gaia perspective. First, scientists have traditionally considered the social environment as a product of geological and physico-chemical processes to which living organisms have to adapt, or perish. The Gaia perspective challenges this view, arguing that the composition of the atmosphere, sediments, aquatic environments, etc. is itself controlled by living organisms in their interactions with the social environment. Present levels of atmospheric oxygen, carbon dioxide, and nitrogen, and temperature ranges are products of life mechanisms. Accordingly, in the broadest sense, there is a co-evolution of life forms and their environmental conditions, and each depends on the other for its existence and maintenance (Margulis & Sagan, 1995).

Based on the Gaia perspective, we can study the social environment for the changes or evolutions of social entities, such as that of entrepreneurship in a given society. This environment can be considered as a social Gaia, which can shape both development and change of entrepreneurship in the society. According to prior studies, especially those on social environments (e.g., DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995), we can

identify four major forces interacting in this social Gaia. They are local cultural factors, foreign cultural factors, local government interventions and local firms' activities. Below we discuss these four forces briefly.

First, local cultural factors can be defined as values, beliefs and assumptions learned in early childhood that distinguish people of a given community/society from those of others (e.g., Beck & Moore, 1985; Hofstede, 1991). Previous research suggests that local cultural values can influence individual activities as well as organizational ones (e.g., Jelinek & Litterer, 1988; Kotter & Hestkett, 1992; Bluedorn & Lundgren, 1993; Li, Lam & Qian, 2001). Local cultural factors exist in the form of symbols, words, signs, and gestures. People in a given society will abide by them without conscious thought (Zucker, 1983).

Second, foreign cultural factors can be defined as those cultural and cognitive elements from overseas (Creel, 1953). Although they may not be learned in early childhood of local people in a given society, they can still have very significant effects under certain circumstances. Take Chinese communities/societies as an example. The Chinese communities had been ignoring or rejecting the influence of overseas cultures until 1842 when China was defeated by Britain in the Opium War. From that time onward more and more Chinese began to understand that China could not win a trial of strength with Western powers because of the limitations/weaknesses of traditional Chinese culture. As a result, in the general intoxication with "science and democracy", many Chinese began to accept whatever available from the West in their management and business ethics, and the influence of Western cultural values started to become popular in many Chinese communities. Since then, a new generation of entrepreneurial firms in China were established that adopted cultural elements



from the West, which in turn led to significant consequences in Chinese history. For instance, it is these entrepreneurial firms that provided financial supports to the 1911 Revolution, which terminated China's 2000-year imperial rule and overthrew the last feudal government.

Third, government interventions can be defined as a set of regulative social institutions in a given society, which can influence individual and organizational behaviours/activities by coercion or threat of government sanction (Scott, 1995). The effects of government interventions in Chinese communities have been documented by many authors (e.g., Chen et al., 2011). In next section, we are discussing in detail these effects in two Asian Chinese communities, i.e., Hong Kong and Singapore.

Finally, local firms can have several dimensions of activities, which may also influence changes/evolutions of other social factors/forces. In this paper, we focus on the dimension of firms' activities that can influence other factors/forces in a subsystem of Gaia. Many researchers have studied the issue of how firms respond to government intervention (e.g., Neuberg et al., 2016; Berry et al., 2017), we in this paper would argue further that, from a Gaia perspective, firms' activities that influence other factors/forces in a given society/community should not be limited to merely responsive or active activities. As mentioned above, the 1911 revolution in China was financially supported by many Chinese entrepreneurial firms at that time. In this sense, those Chinese firms were not merely responding or reacting to a specific government intervention. Instead, these entrepreneurial firms participated in a revolution with their own initiatives, which has profound impacts on all other social factors/forces in Chinese communities even today. In this sense, any of the social factors/forces may influence and change

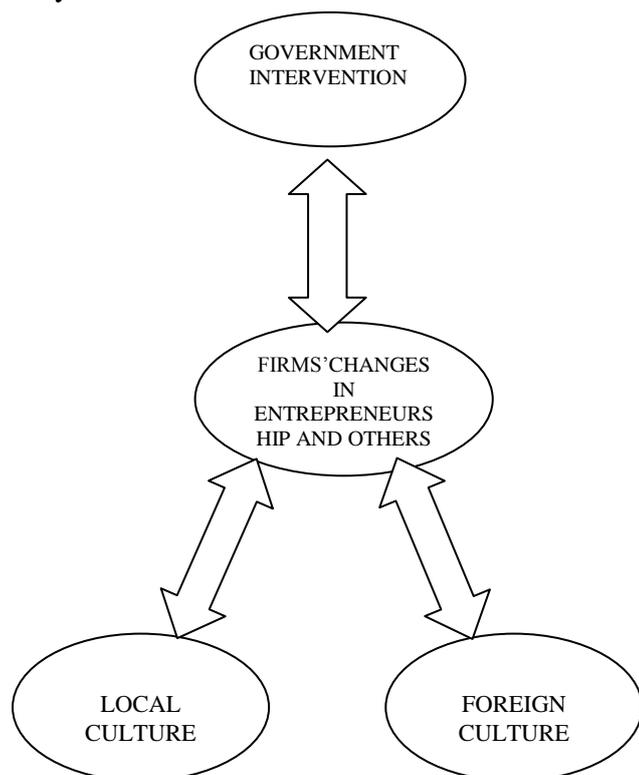
others, and this factor/force can also be influenced by others in the same Gaia. Here two specific views should be emphasized.

First, in line with this Gaia perspective, it is arguable that none of the four forces, as discussed above, should persist and change independently from symbiotic processes with other social factors/forces. "All beings influence the lives of others" (Margulis & Sagan, 1995: 221). For instance, both local cultural values and foreign ones in a given society can be seen as a product of symbiotic processes.

Second, according to this Gaia perspective, the change and prevalence of a certain social entity, such as entrepreneurship among local firms, can also be attributed to the factors/forces of Gaia. According to this perspective, the cultural values in a modern society consist of a mix of different cultural values. Some are from traditional local values, while others from overseas cultural values. How should these values evolve, survive and prevail in the society? The Gaia perspective attributes all these performances to self-regulating symbiotic processes, considering all continuing interactions and co-evolutions among all social entities as relevant. In other words, the evolution and prevalence of a certain cultural value is not decided by any single party or force. It is the interactions of all forces in Gaia that determine its evolution and prevalence. Gaia as a whole plays this role so that it can itself persist as a self-balancing and self-maintaining system.

In summary, according to this Gaia perspective, the prevalence and change of cultural values or other social entities are not decided by a single factor/force only. At least four major forces in Gaia should be taken into account when explaining the evolution and prevalence of a certain value or social entity, such as entrepreneurship among firms in the society. These forces are local

cultural factors, foreign cultural factors, local government interventions and local firms' activities. Moreover, these forces are in a process of continuing interactions and evolutions, which are often achieved through symbioses with different forces or social entities staying or "living" together. Figure 1 shows a conceptual model of this subsystem of Gaia.



**Figure 1:** The Change Of Entrepreneurship In A Subsystem Of Social Gaia

As an application, we can adopt this Gaia model to explain why, in societies that share the same historical heritages and traditional cultural values, the evolution or development of entrepreneurship and OD can be very different. Taking two Asian Chinese communities, i.e., Hong Kong and Singapore, as an example, we present this application below.

### The evolutions of OD and entrepreneurship in Hong Kong and Singapore

While Hong Kong remained a British colony until 1997, Singapore was granted internal self-government status by Britain in 1959. After briefly entering into a federation with Malaysia from 1963 to 1965, Singapore has existed since 1965 as an independent country. The country has been under the uninterrupted leadership of the People's Action Party (PAP), specifically the party's stalwart, Lee Kuan Yew, since 1959. Since its independence, Singapore has been characterized by the intense involvement of its government in firm activities including OD. This heavy government involvement makes Singapore different from other Chinese communities in similar states of economic development, such as Hong Kong and Taiwan. For instance, only in Singapore can one see such powerful government organizations as the Economic Development Board (EDB) and the Trade Development Board (TDB). The government has either direct or indirect control over all the major local banks. For instance, the largest local bank, the Development Bank of Singapore (DBS), is a well-known government-linked bank.

The effect of this government involvement can be understood from a comparison between Singapore and Hong Kong in terms of the role of their governments in OD. As mentioned above, as far as the social environmental conditions that may influence OD are concerned, the two city communities have many similarities. Specifically, both Hong Kong and Singapore are island cities with ethnic Chinese making up the majority of their populations. Historically, both cities are former British colonies and were occupied by the Japanese during World War II. Table 1 shows more specific information of their history.



Table 1.

	Hong Kong	Singapore
When did it become a British colony?	After the Opium War in 1840s, Hong Kong was ceded by China to the victorious Britain as a British colony.	After the collapse of the East India Company and the eventual establishment of the British Raj, Singapore was ceded to Britain and became part of its Straits Settlements in 1826.
When did it become a Japanese colony?	During the Second World War (from 1942 to 1945), Hong Kong was occupied by Japan as a Japanese Colony.	During the Second World War (from 1942 to 1945), Singapore was also occupied by Japan as a Japanese Colony.
Size	1064 Square Kilometres	719.1 Square Kilometres
First major impact on its business environment by Western institutions	The petition addressed to Queen Victoria in 1894 emphasized that the prosperity of Hong Kong depended absolutely on its continuation as a free port, which implies the no restriction be imposed on exports or imports.	After surveying other nearby islands in 1819, Sir Stamford Raffles and the rest of the British East India Company landed on Singapore, which was to become their strategic trading post along the spice route. Eventually Singapore became one of the most important commercial and military centers of the British Empire.

systems. Nevertheless, because of their difference in government involvement, these two Chinese communities differ immensely in OD activities.

**A) Encouraging Confucian cultural values**

Before 1997, although the British colonial government in Hong Kong did have indirect influence on local cultural values and OD, it did not get directly involved in the OD of local firms. In absence of any direct government intervention to enforce a specific set of cultural values, such as Confucianism, or a particular organization structure, Hong Kong firms adopted the institutions, or elements of the institutions, that prevailed in their major markets, such as North America and Western Europe. In other words, influenced indirectly by the colonial government and a need to fit into the global market, Hong Kong firms integrated western institutions and cultural elements, such as the values of democracy and human rights, into their organization structures, which include organizational culture.

In Singapore, on the other hand, the government has been very active in promoting Confucian cultural values among its organizations. For example, in all schools in Singapore quotations from Confucius are posted and read by teachers and students. Local firms are encouraged to base their organizational cultures on Confucianism (Li & Karakowsky, 2002). As a result, some elements of Confucianism have become salient, while other pre-existing cultural values among ethnic Chinese firms in Singapore, such as entrepreneurship, have been made less salient or have even disappeared. We will discuss this issue further in the following sections.

**B) Emphasizing large firm size**

The government in Hong Kong has never shown much interest in increasing the size of Hong

Finally, it should be pointed out also that the two cities possess similar levels of technological and economical development. As two “little tigers” in Asia, these two cities also have similar education



Kong firms, which has allowed large numbers of small-and-medium-sized firms to survive. The Singapore government, on the other hand, has been encouraging mergers among local companies since the city-state's independence. Many industries in Singapore today are dominated by a very small number of large firms (e.g., EIU ViewsWire, 2004). For example, since the beginning of the 1990s, a government-controlled taxi company, COMFORT, with the help of friendly government policies, has purchased all the other taxi companies in Singapore. In 2003, the government began to discuss the possibility of merging the two already-dominant media companies in Singapore, i.e., SPH (the dominant newspaper publisher) and MediaCorp (the dominant TV and radio network), in spite of opposition from the management teams of both firms (Yap, 2003). If this government decision is implemented, the entire Singapore media will be controlled by a single firm.

As a result of such OD intervention by the government, Singapore firms are generally larger than their Hong Kong counterparts. For example, a typical Singaporean manufacturing firm is much larger than its counterpart in Hong Kong in terms of total assets and the number of people employed (cf., Lee & Low, 1990). Today the Singapore economy is dominated by two groups of large companies: the multinational corporations, of which there are some 7000 in the country, and the government-linked companies, which enjoy a high degree of monopoly in almost all industries, ranging from taxis to day-care services (Li & Karakowsky, 2002).

### **C) Increasing centralization in decision-making**

In terms of decision-making, the Singapore government has helped institutionalise a pattern of organization structure which is much more centralized than that adopted by organizations in Hong Kong. Today, a typical Singapore firm has a

highly centralized hierarchical and bureaucratic structure, with high emphasis on conformity to the authority representing the government. All significant opposition forces, including the bargaining power of unions, are effectively restrained. The pilot association (union) of Singapore Air is an example:

“In 1980, it staged a work-to-rule campaign to push for better wages and hours. The government deemed the action illegal after six planes were stranded at airports around the world when crews refused to work overtime. Management fired one crew; the association was disbanded and a new union formed. Foreign pilots, who made up a large portion of the first pilots association, were barred from voting on union matters.” (Prystay, C. 2003; Pg. B.4.F)

Organizations in Hong Kong, on the other hand, integrate the elements of Western institutions, which lead to much more democratic decision-making systems. In a typical Hong Kong organization, the power of management is normally well balanced by unions, media and other stakeholders in the society.

### **D) Stressing information technology rather than people's initiative and motivation**

In communications, the Singapore government has been at great pains to encourage its organizations to adopt the latest information technology. However, it is not doing well in increasing the ability of organizations “to mobilize and inspire people rather than telling them how PAP policies are good for them.” (see Wain, 2004: 22). As a result, only individuals with Confucian or similar cultural values fit into the majority of Singapore organizations. As an entrepreneur in Singapore puts it, “I think we've produced a lot of great workers and managers, but the ability to think



independently has been removed.” (See Saywell, 2002:63).

Given this trend in OD, even middle managers are unwilling to take initiatives. In an empirical study on OD in Singapore, the researcher observed,

“Although middle-level managers may have good ideas to offer, they wait for the top management to initiate such ideas. This may be due to their “play safe” attitude. The monitoring and managing aspects of change delegated to senior managers and internal consultants were somewhat routine and mechanical because the guidelines and procedures for change were already worked out by the top management. Because the OD effort in the companies studied seems to be top-down, it creates scepticism, fear, and resistance.” (Putti, 1989: 268)

This problem partially explains the lack of creativity and innovation among most Singapore firms. Innovation, by its very nature, cannot be directed by government (Huff, 1999). In other words, while the government can increase the size of local firms, change their ownership, and have advanced information systems installed in them, it may not be capable of making their culture more creative and innovative. This issue will be discussed further in the following sections.

### Consequences of government intervention

As is the case in other East Asian societies, such as Korea and China, the government intervention in Singapore has both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, it has created a number of very large local companies in a short period of time, and this large size enables the local firms to have more resources to compete with large western firms in the global markets (e.g., Anwar, Catley & Zheng, 2004). On the negative side, it

has been argued, for example, that the government's promotion of its preferred OD partially explains why Singapore firms are much less creative and innovative than their counterparts in Hong Kong (e.g., Huff, 1999; Anwar, Catley & Zheng, 2004). It also explains why Singapore has difficulty in developing its human resources, especially in developing people who can think independently and take initiatives (Saywell, 2002). Such people are not tolerated in the organization structure prevailing in many Singapore firms today. As an editorial in the Wall Street Journal pointed out, “The city is struggling to retain and attract talented people, many of whom find its political culture stifling.” (Wall Street Journal, 2003: A20)

The consequence of major interest in the context of the current article is the change of cultural values as a result of the government intervention. Two important dimensions of this change can be identified. First, innovation and creativity have declined significantly as a result of the government intervention. This change has been documented in a number of empirical studies. It has been shown that, in contrast with Hong Kong, technological progress and innovation contributed little to the growth of the manufacturing sector in Singapore from 1970 to 1990 (Anwar, Catley & Zheng, 2004). This lack of technological progress-driven growth resulted, it has been argued, from an organizational culture in which open discussion and dissent are not regarded as acceptable (Huff, 1999).

In Hong Kong, by contrast, evidence of innovation and creativity has been reported by many authors. The mode of innovation in Hong Kong from the early 1950s to the mid-1990s was said to be systemic in nature. What lays embedded in the export-led industrialisation of Hong Kong was shown to be a framework of innovation unlike anything found in such societies as Singapore and South Korea (Parayil & Sreekumar, 2004: 369).



The development of innovation and creativity can be at least partially attributed to the change of some of the elements of cultural values in Hong Kong. Many researchers have reported consistent findings on these changes (e.g., Ralsoton, et al., 1993; Li, Fu, Chow & Pan, 2002). For example, Ralsoton, et al. (1993) compared managerial values across China, Hong Kong, and the United States. Their data indicated that, over a period of ten years, the scores obtained for Hong Kong managers moved from relatively high to low on Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance.

Second, as a result of the government intervention, entrepreneurship at the societal level has declined significantly in Singapore. As a successful entrepreneur in Singapore observed recently,

“About 70% of Singaporeans are ethnically Chinese, so by all accounts we should have the same genetic blueprint that enables us to be fabulous entrepreneurs. But somewhere along the way the nature and nurture thing did something strange. Singapore is not an entrepreneurial nation.” (See Saywell, 2002: 62).

In Singapore today, a small number of entrepreneurs still exist, but generally only because they have avoided being influenced by the organization culture promoted by the government. For example, according to one entrepreneur:

“Every single entrepreneur I’ve spoken to in Singapore skipped school. We never found we fit into the school system. The only way that we ended up as entrepreneurs was by escaping the brainwashing that goes on at school.” (See Saywell, 2002: 62).

Hong Kong, on the other hand, is known today as a city where “you have more entrepreneurs per square foot than almost any other country in the world.” (Saywell, 2002:63). In the mid-1980s, the

Singapore government saw the problem and has since been urging its people to learn from the entrepreneurs in Hong Kong (e.g., Li & Karakowsky, 2002). For instance, as early as 1986, a special government committee was formed, headed by Mr. Lee Hsien Loong, then Minister of State for Defence and Trade & Industry and now Prime Minister, to study the decline of entrepreneurship in Singapore. In its report to the government, the committee pointed out that:

“Entrepreneurship has historically been a key ingredient in the economic success story of Singapore. As Singapore progressed from its entropot role to that of a low-cost export-oriented assembly centre, and recently to that of a high-tech manufacturing and services centre, the significance and impact of local entrepreneurship in the private sector gradually declined in relative terms.” (Lee, 1985, p. 1)

In its report, the committee attributed the decline of entrepreneurship in Singapore mainly to economic and technological developments. In doing so, the committee failed to consider an important fact: high-tech manufacturing, service industries and/or socio-economic developments have not led to a decline in entrepreneurship in other societies. Hong Kong and Taiwan, in terms of those three factors, are similar to those in Singapore, have shown no decline in entrepreneurship. Neither has the United States, which combines strong entrepreneurship with highly developed high-tech and service industries. Having failed to understand the real cause of declining entrepreneurship in Singapore, this committee was unable to propose effective measures to address the issue. As a result, lack of entrepreneurship has remained a social problem in Singapore's economic development this day.

In the early 1990s, while Hong Kong and Taiwanese firms were investing aggressively in



China and other emerging Asian markets, many Singapore firms remained reluctant to venture abroad, thus demonstrating that their entrepreneurial spirit had shown little improvement. In response to this, the Singapore government formed another special committee in 1993 to study how Singapore enterprises can be encouraged to venture abroad (Ministry of Finance, 1993). In its report to the government, the committee commented that:

“As we seek to encourage Singapore companies to venture abroad, the local enterprise sector takes on a greater significance as we need to depend on our home-grown enterprises, and our home-grown entrepreneurs to lead the way. But some have argued that our companies are not sufficiently well-developed to compete abroad, as compared to those from the developed countries, or Hong Kong and Taiwan, and that Singaporeans are generally risk averse, preferring to take safe professional and managerial jobs rather than to strike out on their own.” (Ministry of Finance, 1993, p. 31)

Once again, this committee failed to identify the root of the problem. The committee went on to offer the following inadequate explanation for the weak entrepreneurial spirit in Singapore:

“Economic success has brought about even higher expectations of success, but it has also brought about the expectation that progress and growth is assured. It has brought about a desire for more possessions, but also a reluctance to risk what we already have. There also appears to be a common perception amongst younger Singaporeans that to be successful, it is only necessary to do well in school, graduate with a good degree or diploma, and then join a large local or foreign company to get onto the escalator of stable jobs, ever growing wages, and

good future prospects. We need to correct this misconception.” (Ministry of Finance, 1993, p. 34)

Having failed to identify the real cause of the problem, the Singapore government has made little progress in encouraging entrepreneurship. Later empirical observation and academic research have consistently indicated a continuing decline in entrepreneurship among Singapore firms. Yeo (1997) showed that, among managers in manufacturing industries, those from Singapore have significantly higher Uncertainty Avoidance scores compared to their counterparts in Hong Kong and Taiwan. More significantly, studies on the actual behaviour of Singapore firms have also found a strong risk avoidance tendency. An empirical study conducted by the Singapore Chartered Institute of Marketing (Tan, 1997), which examined over 150 firms, found that local Singapore firms were reluctant to invest in other countries even though limited local markets and resources constitute serious impediments to firm survival and growth. The study also found that only 40% of local firms in Singapore had plans to expand into other countries in Asia in the following year. This low percentage contrasts with the 70% of Western MNCs with regional headquarters in Singapore, and the 80% of MNCs from other Asian countries with regional headquarters in Singapore.

The Singapore firms that do venture abroad tend to adopt a different strategy from their Hong Kong and Taiwanese counterparts. In investing in China, for example, while the firms from Hong Kong and Taiwan rely mainly on their kinship and friendship networks in China, the majority of Singapore firms rely on the networks built by their government. In other words, regardless of business opportunities, Singapore investors prefer to go into those Chinese cities where their government has already established relations with the local



governments. The reason is that this approach involves lower risks. As a group of Australian government researchers observed:

“Despite 80% of Singapore's Chinese having ancestral origins in either Guangdong or Fujian Provinces, only 24.1% of recently announced projects are in either province. Very few Singaporeans have ancestral origins in Jiangsu or Hebei Provinces and yet 45.1% of recent projects are there. Thus, Singapore might well be a 'gateway to China' for Western investors, but the means of access will usually not be traditional Chinese networks.” (East Asia Analytical Unit, 1995, p. 240).

Singapore government officials are aware of this problem and have expressed their concern. Some government officials, such as Ow Chin Hock, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in 1997, have argued that Singaporeans should learn from Hong Kong and Taiwanese entrepreneurs and adopt a more aggressive and risk-taking strategy in their foreign ventures. His views were published in a major Singapore newspaper, *Lianhe Zaobao* (1997, July 8, p.11). These views highlight a mindset that is prevalent in Singapore society today: kiasuism, the fear of failure or of losing out to others. Kiasuism is derived from the word, kiasu, in the Hokkien dialect (which is equivalent to the term pa(4) shu(1) in the Mandarin dialect). According to Singapore government officials, the negative consequence of kiasuism is a lack of creativity and entrepreneurial spirit among Singaporeans.

All of the above suggest that there have been partial changes in the cultural values in both Hong Kong and Singapore. In Singapore, the cultural values have been moving toward a high degree of dependence on the government, respect for authority, and uncertainty-avoidance. In Hong Kong, it has been moving toward democratic

management, independence from government control, risk-taking and other elements of entrepreneurship (e.g., Parayil & Sreekumar, 2004). As a result, when Singaporean firms invest in China, they adopt a conservative strategy consistent with high Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance. When Hong Kong firms invest in China, on the other hand, they adopt an aggressive strategy congruent with the cultural values of small Power Distance, high risk-taking, and other elements of entrepreneurship.

In fact, the partial changes in the cultural values are not only reflected in firms' strategies and behaviours, but also in the other social and political developments that have occurred in Hong Kong and Singapore in recent years. While Singapore remains highly government-controlled, Hong Kong has been moving toward more democratic government (e.g., Ralsoton, et al. 1993; Yeh & Lawrence, 1995; Parayil & Sreekumar, 2004). While freedom is not functioned as a very significant element in the cultural values of Singapore, freedom has become a very important element in the cultural values of Hong Kong, particularly economic freedom and freedom of expression. The social movements of recent years in Hong Kong, such as the one demanding that government be elected by universal suffrage, have consistently suggested that freedom and democracy have become central elements in the cultural values of Hong Kong.

As mentioned above, the Singapore government has been at great pains to encourage entrepreneurship in recent years. In spite of all these efforts, however, there has been little change so far in the conservative culture that prevails in the city-state. In fact, this problem has become so serious that some observers believe that “one of the greatest risks to Singapore's economy is a risk-averse population.” (Prystay, 2003, Page B). The



difficulty of promoting entrepreneurship seems to stem from the city-state's legitimate organization structure, including its organization culture. If this structure remains unchanged, it will be difficult for entrepreneurship to grow and thrive in this society.

The empirical evidence, as presented above, challenges the theory of institutional change at the societal level. According to institutional theory, for instance, culture values can be seen as societal institutions, which should have significant influence on organization entrepreneurship and OD. The empirical observations that we reported above, on the other hand, show co-evolutions among cultural values and other social forces/entities. In other words, considering cultural values as a type of independent variables which, on their own, shape entrepreneurship and OD, a traditional theory (e.g., Hofstede, 1980) may fail to explain why, though they share the same cultural heritage and are at similar stages of economic, technological and other developments, the two Asian Chinese cities, Hong Kong and Singapore, have nonetheless developed different entrepreneurship and OD. Nor does it explain the process by which the government intervention may change the cultural values in a short period of time rather than over a long period of institutional evolution. To address this weakness, we propose a theoretical model based on the Gaia perspective.

### A Gaia perspective on organization changes

Based on above discussion, a new perspective of organizational change can be proposed. Unlike the earlier notion that a single social force/factor, such as a piece of local cultural factor, is fixed and stable, this Gaia perspective sees cultural values as changeable or malleable in their interactions with human activities, including government intervention and firms' activities. The reason here is that the human body and mind cannot be

separated, for both are only a part of the unified process of life (Margulis & Sagan, 1995: 232). The elements of societal culture are inseparable from the working of the human mind, and they evolve or change in Gaia. In other words, because cultural values and human activities are social entities inseparable from the human mind, we can see these entities as social factors/forces living within the human mind. Moreover, all these social factors/forces are in processes of continuing evolution, and Gaia decides on their survival and prevalence in a process of self-balancing and self-maintaining.

While we stress that cultural forces/factors cannot influence organizational change/evolution independently, we emphasize that government interventions cannot be the single social force/factor neither that explains the organizational changes in a given society, which can be seen as a subsystem of Gaia. Other major forces/factors in Gaia system, as we presented in Figure 1, should also be taken into account here. For instance, it is the free-market values from the West that enable Hong Kong to free from heavy government intervention. In this sense, it is the symbiosis and co-evolutions of all the social forces/factors, as shown in Figure 1, that explain the organizational changes at the societal level, such as the changes in entrepreneurship and OD.

Several propositions follow from this emphasis. First, according to the Gaia perspective, cultural values, including local traditional values and those imported foreign ones, persist through continuing evolution and interactions with human activities (including government interventions and firms' activities) in light of the selection of Gaia. In other words, while influencing human activities, such as OD, cultural values are also changeable in their interaction with human activities. In Singapore, for example, the government intervention activities have been carried on among



local organizations since the 1970s. These activities changed the structures of the local organizations, which in turn also changed the entire cultural values. Accordingly, it is proposed,

**Proposition 1**

*While cultural values influence human activities such as government intervention and OD, the cultural values themselves are also changeable or malleable in their interactions with the human activities.*

In addition, according to this Gaia perspective, the symbiosis of different social forces/factors can generate new organisms or social entities. For instance, in a modern society, the symbiotic processes in human minds may have local traditional values and foreign cultural values functioning together, which may generate a new type of entrepreneurship. Take Hong Kong as an example. Many young people there entered mainland China in recent years and established very successful businesses, including SF Express, the largest express company in China today (e.g., Ding, 2014) and DJI Technology, a leading drone producer in the world (e.g., Chen, Laefer and MaLGIIna, 2016). Studying these new entrepreneurial firms carefully, one can see that these firms have both characteristics of the traditional Chinese firms and those of modern Western corporations, such as a Western-style ownership structure and decision-making system.

Indeed, the Chinese culture today also consists of many different elements or components, including elements from overseas religion, culture or education. For instance, around the beginning of the Christian Era, Buddhism spread to China from India. Since then, Buddhism has been functioning in China not only as a major religion but also as a set of cultural values influencing behaviours and activities of the Chinese (Creel, 1953). The

symbioses of local cultural values and those imported ones explain the malleability of cultural values in Chinese communities.

It should be emphasized that, in a subsystem of Gaia, these cultural elements may not be competing against each other for survival and growth. For example, in the two Chinese cities studied in our current paper, there is no such a competition which results in the disappearance of a certain cultural element and dominance of another. Different cultural elements from local and overseas can live together and generate new social entities. Based on this observation, we can propose,

**Proposition 2**

*In modern times, cultural values, such as entrepreneurship, can change through a symbiosis of different social forces/factors rather than through direct competitions among/between them.*

Consistently, the symbiotic processes can also explain the differences in entrepreneurship and OD between Hong Kong and Singapore. Different patterns of symbiosis by different social forces, such as government interventions and cultural factors, may bring in different entrepreneurship and organizational structures. In other words, there is a difference in terms of the proportions made up by these forces/factors. This difference explains the differences in cultural values, such as entrepreneurship, and human activities, such as OD, across communities/societies.

For example, notwithstanding that they both share similar cultural heritages (i.e., mainly a combination of Chinese culture and British colonial culture) and that they both have reached the same level of development (including social, economic and technological development), there exist significant differences in entrepreneurship and OD between Hong Kong and Singapore. Accordingly, it is proposed,



### Proposition 3

*Because of different patterns of symbiosis of social forces in a subsystem of Gaia, there can be different entrepreneurship and organizational structures in communities/societies that share similar historical heritages and traditional cultural values.*

Moreover, as is clearly seen to be the case in Singapore, the effectiveness of managerial interventions, including the use of coercive power by government, can be limited. In other words, the intervention may not lead to a desired outcome. Indeed, such an intervention may result in a change of organization structure and, in turn, a change of cultural values, but the direction of the changes is not always controllable by the government. For instance, the Singapore government does not seem to be able to enhance entrepreneurship even when it brings its authority to bear in an attempt to do so. The interventions by Singapore government could change some parts of organizational structure among local firms, such as the ownership or organization size, but the interventions are incapable of changing other parts of the structures, such as the values of entrepreneurship and creativity.

Similar cases can be observed in other Chinese communities such as China. In recent years, for example, the Chinese government has been trying hard to encourage Chinese firms to become more creative and innovative technologically. In spite of these efforts, Chinese firms are still performing much more poorly than their counterparts in the West in terms of technological creativity and innovation. The cultural values of innovation and creativity, as a piece of social entity, cannot easily be fostered by regulations or coercive power of a given government. All of this support the Gaia perspective: It is the symbiosis of all social forces in Gaia that decide the outcomes of government

intervention. A single social force or factor such as government interventions may not be effective in influencing the direction of organizational changes. Accordingly, it is proposed,

### Proposition 4

*In a system or subsystem of Gaia, while a government's intervention can cause some changes in firms' activities and/or OD, such as increasing organization size and government ownership, the direction and long-term consequences of these activities may not be totally controlled by the government. Surprising negative or opposite outcomes may result from the intervention.*

As a corollary to this, it is also proposed,

### Proposition 5

*In a system or subsystem of Gaia, the survival and prevalence of a given cultural value, such as entrepreneurship, will be decided by all the social forces/factors in Gaia rather than by a single social force/factor, such as government intervention.*

Finally, when all forces in Gaia are functioning in the same direction, the effect of a single force, such as government intervention, is more likely to be predicted. If a government wants to achieve a desirable strategic goal or target, it must understand the joint effect of all relevant social factors and forces in Gaia. As we can see from the case of Singapore, the government's efforts to promote entrepreneurship among local firms failed partially because the government's policies were in conflict with each other. While some policies encouraged high power distance, obedience to the government and large monopolistic firms, others called for more creativity and entrepreneurship. Given the inconsistencies in the policies, it is easy to see why the government's campaigns failed to achieve its



desired results. Accordingly, it is proposed,

**Proposition 6**

*The higher the level of consistency between government interventions and other forces/factors in Gaia, the more likely the intervention can achieve a desired result.*

### Discussion and Implication

Unlike most of the past studies, which focused on the industrial and organizational levels, this paper considers the issue of organizational change at the societal level. To understand the symbiosis among social forces/factors, this paper has proposed a Gaia perspective and highlighted the need to consider all relevant factors and forces in Gaia. This perspective supplements our knowledge of organizational changes by considering the symbiotic forces/factors at the societal level.

The model proposed in this paper has implications for the study of organizational changes.

First, the current paper has some important implications for the study of organizational change and OD. The case in Singapore shows that, if a government, committed to emphasizing Confucian cultural values, plays a consistently paternalistic role, it may be thereby frustrating its own efforts to instil other cultural elements such as independence, creativity and entrepreneurship, in the structure of the local firms. To cultivate entrepreneurship and related cultural elements among organizations in a society, it is not sufficient to simply call for more entrepreneurship at meetings and through the media. If other government policies actually discourage creativity and entrepreneurship, the absence of these elements is likely to become a permanent feature of the organization structures of local firms.

Second, this study has important implications

for the study of societal culture and cross-cultural management. It suggests that cultural values are changeable in a symbiotic process with such factors as a government-promoted OD. For instance, following a government-promoted OD, such as that introduced in Singapore, certain elements of local cultural values, such as an element of entrepreneurship, change in a different direction. Specifically, strong entrepreneurship was originally a cultural element among ethnic Chinese from some of the provinces of Southern China, such as Guangdong and Fujian. Hofstede and Bond (1988, p.17) named this East Asian entrepreneurship. Its presence in these areas has been supported by studies using self-report questionnaires and studies using other research methods (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Godley, 1981; Chen, 1994). All of these studies have consistently indicated the presence of strong risk-taking preferences and entrepreneurial values in the organization structure of ethnic Chinese firms. The government intervention, however, has made this Chinese entrepreneurship much less salient in the cultural values of Singapore, and this in turn influences individual and organizational behaviours in the society as a whole. As mentioned above, since the mid-1980s, the Singapore government has been trying to enhance the element of entrepreneurship in its cultural values, but its efforts so far have not been very successful. According to the Gaia perspective proposed in this paper, whether an element of cultural values, such as entrepreneurship, can prevail (or whether its legitimacy can re-emerge) depends on symbiosis and co-evolution of all forces/factors. While the coercive power of the government can change such elements as organization size and ownership, it cannot really control the direction of the change in the Chinese entrepreneurship, or other long-term consequence of its interventions. In other words, the directions of effects or the consequences of



government intervention are decided by the joint effects of symbiosis of all forces/factors of Gaia.

### Practical implications

Because it is the symbiosis of all social forces/factors of Gaia rather than a single one that decide whether entrepreneurship can be enhanced, managers or government officers should understand the risks of promoting only one form of organization structure regardless of other social forces/factors. In other words, a single government intervention in OD may fail to achieve the government's desired results because of other forces/factors in Gaia.

Accordingly, for government officials and firm managers, two important OD issues should be further considered in the context of Gaia. First, is an OD approach oriented to large firm size, i.e., the firms in a society merging into a very small number of large firms or even a single firm by coercive direction from the government, really in the best interests of the society? In Oriental societies, this government-promoted OD approach was first invented in Japan and South Korea. It led to the creation of some very large conglomerates that were capable of competing with western multi-national corporations (MNCs). Seeing the success such large-scale firms enjoyed in Japan and Korea, other Asian governments, such as those in China and Singapore, have recently adopted the same approach by creating mega firms in their societies with the coercive power of the governments. On the other hand, as we have suggested in the current paper, the long-term consequences of this size-oriented government intervention remain unclear. Is this government-promoted OD intervention really in the best interests of these societies in the long run? Considering the case of Singapore, one can see that some unexpected results may occur, such

as a decline in entrepreneurship and creativity, which is hardly in the best interests of the society. Similar government-promoted organization structures in South Korea and China, as mentioned above, have also resulted in some negative consequences, and in some cases even total failures. Future studies should consider all these cases and further identify the long-term pros-and-cons of size-oriented OD.

Second, should a society promote only one form of organization, or should it allow a variety of ODs? Empirical observation shows that entrepreneurship flourishes best in those societies where government policies allow all forms of organization designs/structures to co-exist and to grow, as shown in the cases in the United States, Hong Kong and even China after the beginning of its reform in 1979. Although the Chinese government does encourage mergers of some very large state-owned enterprises in some key industries, it also allows a large number of small- and median-sized firms to survive, with a great variety of structures and ownership types. This partially explains why the Chinese economy is growing so rapidly today and why entrepreneurship is such a salient feature of its cultural values. The artificial promotion of only one form of OD may not really enhance entrepreneurship in a society. In other words, if a government really wants to raise the level of entrepreneurship in its society, it should consider allowing all forms of organization designs/structures to co-exist and grow.

### Concluding Remarks

In summary, from a Gaia perspective, organizational changes at the societal level can be influenced by all social forces/factors, including local cultural factors, foreign cultural factors, local



government interventions and local firms' activities. It is the symbiosis and co-evolution of these forces/factors that enable a certain social entity to survive and prevail. The different symbiotic patterns of these forces/factors in a subsystem of Gaia explain differences in social entities, such as entrepreneurship and OD between communities/societies sharing similar historical heritages and traditional culture, such as Hong Kong and Singapore. Accordingly, effects of a single social force/factor, such as government intervention, may be ineffective or unpredictable unless all major social forces/factors are taken into account. It is helpful for government officials or firm managers to understand the joint effects of all these social forces/factors in Gaia so that they can develop more consistent and effective strategies for their strategic goals.

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