

No. 156

**ETHNIC ENTREPRENEURSHIP:
TOWARDS AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Yasser Mattar

Department of Sociology
National University of Singapore
11 Arts Link
Singapore 117570

Tel: 8746884
Fax: 777 9679
E-mail: socsy@nus.edu.sg

ISSN0129-8186
ISBN 981-3033-50-9
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Yasser Mattar

This paper is adapted from the author's Honours thesis entitled "The Socioeconomics of Arab Ethnic Entrepreneurship in Singapore: Industries, Markets and Resources", Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, 2000. The author is now a junior academic staff member of the same department.

The study of ethnic entrepreneurship harks back to Max Weber's (1958) study on the "elective affinity" between the Protestant ethic and the "spirit of capitalism" in 16th and 17th century Europe. The current literature on ethnic entrepreneurship is vast and may be divided into two bodies, namely the body of literature labelled as "ethnic" or "immigrant" entrepreneurship (Chan and Ong, 1995), which studies immigrant and ethnic groups in industrialised nation-states in Europe and U.S. and that of the "overseas Chinese" in Southeast Asia. The body of literature labelled as "ethnic" or "immigrant entrepreneurship" came to being in reaction to the increasing numbers of new immigrants who have been engaging in small business ownership since the early 1970s (Hosler, 1998: 4). These studies are for much of the time geared to answering either or both of two questions: why immigrant groups are overrepresented in self-employment and why some groups are more successful than others in business (Razin, 1997: 60; Hosler, 1998: 21). The case studies in this set of literature are mostly of immigrants who are socioeconomically subordinate in their host societies, small businesses, ethnic minorities and contemporary industrial-capitalist societies (Chan and Ong, 1995: 529). The literature on the "overseas Chinese", on the other hand, focuses upon the economic prowess of the "overseas Chinese". Chinese business operations have been said to possess the three characteristics of being run along lines of personal trust (for example, Menkhoff, 1993, Wels, 1995), familism (Wong, 1985; Lim, 1989; Heng, 1992; Mackie, 1992) and networking. Within these three characteristics, *guanxi* (interpersonal relations) and *xinyong* (trust) are given paramount importance. These two bodies of literature are for the most part neither cross-referenced nor affiliated with each other (see Chan, 1995: 103). Despite this, a shared characteristic of both bodies of literature is that causal explanations for the phenomena of interest in these studies of ethnic enterprise are accrued to the attributes of the ethnic entrepreneurs themselves and/or the social structure within which these entrepreneurs operate.

Using a case study of the Arabs in Singapore, I argue in this paper that instead of looking at the ethnic entrepreneurs themselves or the social structure *per se*, ethnic enterprise is best studied by looking at the ecology of the economic niches which these entrepreneurs occupy. The theoretical proposition made here comes from the idea that ethnic entrepreneurs operate within specific economic niches. A “niche” is defined as the “potential set of conditions under which a group can maintain itself” (Olzack, 1992: 26) and may take many forms such as a market share or a place in the occupational hierarchy. While there are indeed entrepreneurs of similar ethnicities engaged in different economic activities, case studies of ethnic entrepreneurs in the current literature show that many ethnic entrepreneurs either control a certain industry, tap into a “protected ethnic market” (Light, 1972) or are generally middlemen in the economy (see Bonacich, 1973). Through 19 in-depth interviews and archival research, it is found that the economic history of the Arabs is an account of successive periods of niche establishment-domination and niche invasion-succession. Arab entrepreneurship from the time of their first recorded arrivals in 1819 until the 1850s was concentrated in the consumer goods industry. In the 1850s, however, Chinese entrepreneurs ventured into the consumer goods industry, tapping into a “protected market” provided by Chinese immigrants who came in droves to Singapore as indentured labourers. This “protected market” enabled Chinese businesses to successfully drive the Arabs out of the consumer goods industry by virtue of the latter’s dip in market share and consequent profit loss, and establish themselves in that niche beginning in the 1880s. The displacement of the Arabs from this niche saw them moving into another, the real estate industry. They became the major players in this industry and remained so until the 1940s. In the early part of the 20th century, however, three factors made their appearance on the social scene, which led to the end of Arab dominance in the real estate industry beginning in the 1940s. These were the policies of rent control and compulsory land acquisition instituted by the British colonial government, which were continued by the post-colonial People’s Action Party government, as well as a set of attributes peculiar to the Arab community. At the same time, compulsory land acquisition allowed the government to take over the reins of the real estate industry, with the majority of land in Singapore coming into its hands by 1970. With their displacement from the real estate industry, the Arabs either went into non-capital-intensive industries or built up their human capital

through education rather than shifting collectively into another niche, thereby exhibiting a case of “economic dispersal”.

In this theoretical vein, the literature on ethnic entrepreneurship is theoretically underdeveloped in the study of the ecology of economic niches within which ethnic entrepreneurs operate. It adequately explains how ethnic groups create new niches for themselves or establish themselves and become major players (“dominate”) in economic niches that are unoccupied, but unfortunately, it is theoretically wanting in explaining cases where ethnic groups are pushed out of a niche by other groups which subsequently take over the niche (“invasion-succession”).

Where an ethnic group ventures into and establishes itself in a niche that is unoccupied or where it creates a new niche for itself, the literature on ethnic entrepreneurship offers a host of theories as explanations as to why this group is able to effectively do so. The theory which most closely approximates the ecological paradigm put forth here is the “interaction theory of entrepreneurship” which posits that the match between the resources that ethnic entrepreneurs possess and the demand for goods and services that they provide is vital to successful enterprise. The resources that ethnic entrepreneurs possess may be divided into “class” and “ethnic” resources, the former consisting of cultural and material endowments accruing from their position in the class structure regardless of ethnicity, and the latter consisting of cultural and material endowments available to all or most members of their ethnic groups. “Material endowments” refer to the possession of physical capital, human capital and social capital¹ (Light and Rosenstein, 1995: 23), while “cultural endowments” is a broad term that refers to shared values, norms and beliefs that define a social group’s *Weltanschauung* (worldview). While ethnic-only (for example, Luo, 1995) or class-only resources (for example, Mulholland, 1997; Hosler, 1998) are possible, in many cases, a mixture of both is vital in aiding enterprise (Light, 1984) in its interaction with demand forces. This emphasis on the interaction between resources and demand parallels closely the ecological concept of adaptation to a niche, where groups are deemed to be able to survive in niches only if their needs are congruent with what the niches can provide. This theory will be applied to the case of the Arab establishment in the consumer goods industry in 1819 and real estate industry in the 1880s, as these niches were unoccupied at the time of Arab entry.

Where more than one ethnic group is involved in the same niche however, the literature on ethnic entrepreneurship is theoretically underdeveloped. The current theories focus mainly on the labour market and “vacancy chains” created by the exit of a superordinate ethnic group from niches into which subordinate ethnic groups move. The ethnic succession model of Shibutani and Kwan (1968) and Park (1974) and the “queuing” model of Lieberman (1980) focus on ethnic succession and stratification in the labour market via vacancy chains. In the realm of business, vacancy chains too have been used to explain ethnic succession, where ethnic entrepreneurs move into niches vacated by entrepreneurs from other ethnic groups to meet the demand for replacement entrepreneurs (Light, 1981; Aldrich, Zimmer and McEvoy, 1989).

These theories therefore do not account for how an ethnic group gets pushed out of their economic niche by incoming groups who possess the power to do so in the process of “invasion-succession”. Despite that there have been empirical works done on such phenomena. Ianni (1974), for example, illustrates how Blacks and Puerto Ricans in New York in the 1970s took over the reins of organised crime from the Italians because the influx of Puerto Rican as well as Black immigrants, the latter from southern U.S.A. and the West Indies, to New York since World War II had created a market led by the demand for drugs and gambling rackets into which Black and Puerto Rican underworld business providers tapped. Such a scenario implies competition between ethnic groups that try to exploit the same niche, which is best explained with reference to human ecology. Human ecologists hold that where different groups “dominate” different niches, the social ecosystem is stable. When more than one group is interested in the same niche, however, competition will ensue because the presence of one additional group reduces the opportunities for the others (Hawley, 1950). This argument follows from Gause’s (1934) “principle of competitive exclusion”, which holds that two species which attempt to exploit that same set of finite resources cannot coexist, as one will attempt to exclude the other. One of the many processes and outcomes that owe to such competition is “invasion” and “succession”. “Invasion” occurs when a group moves in to try to exploit the niche already dominated by another. “Succession” occurs in cases where the incoming group is better adapted to the niche (Marshall, 1994: 138), thereby pushing the group which was in the niche out, leaving the latter to exploit another niche or to “disperse”.

Using these insights, there are three propositions I would like to make to serve as an approximation of a theory of “ethnic invasion-succession”. These propositions would be applied to the case of the Arabs presented here.

Proposition 1: When two or more ethnic groups try to exploit the same niche, they will compete. Displacement and exclusion will result for the groups less well adapted to the niche. A multitude of factors account for the adaptation of groups to niches, but the importance lies in how these factors contribute to a congruence between what the groups need and what the niches provide.

Proposition 2: Niches contain several components, which are of interest to ethnic groups interested in exploiting the niches. In the economic sphere, these may be the lucrative market, industrial control through monopoly or certain resources. Although human ecologists note that of interest to groups are the “resources” the niche possesses (Nagel, 1986: 71; Olzack, 1986: 18-19; Marshall, 1994: 138), it is analytically opportune for us to distinguish between components of the niche. The case-study here will show that it is not only resources that groups are interested in exploiting, but also the market for goods and services as well as the control of a particular industry.

Proposition 3: Ethnic groups are indeed different from other groups in society, but a theory of “ethnic invasion-succession” should not limit itself to ethnic groups only. Ethnic groups may invade and succeed niches dominated by other social groups, such as religious groups, classes and the state (Lauwagie, 1979: 313; Nagel, 1986: 71) and vice-versa, provided they are better adapted to the niches in question.

ARABS IN THE CONSUMER GOODS INDUSTRY, 1819 – 1850s

The Arabs have had connections with Singapore and what may be termed the “Malay World” since the 9th Century AD, ever since the genesis of the Hadhrami trade diaspora (Chaudhuri, 1985; Roff, 1994: 40). They came in larger numbers to Singapore after the founding of Singapore in 1819 as a response to Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles’ invitation to wealthy Arab businessmen in the larger Malay World to settle in and conduct business in Singapore. While the 1990 census of the population (Singapore, 1992) numbers the Arabs today to be around 5,923 or 0.22% of the total population, Talib (1995, 1997: 89) places them to be around 10,000. This discrepancy is due to many Arabs being classified as “Malays” (Talib, 1995, 1997:

89) and as Indians. There are 120 Arab clans in Singapore today (*Al-Mahjar*, December 1998: 6), each with a surname of its own.

Upon the founding of Singapore in 1819 Raffles “hoped that Singapore would attract a large community of Arabs, who had played a dominating role in Southeast Asian trade for more than a thousand years and by the eighteenth century had begun to settle in various parts of Sumatra and Borneo” (Turnbull, 1977: 15). This was because he had a vision of building Singapore into a metropolitan trade centre, and needed the Arabs to spearhead this vision. As Raffles noted, the enterprise of the Arabs, Chinese and Bugis is very conspicuous. They are in general fair traders, and Europeans acquainted with them can rely on their engagements and command their confidence (cited in Morley, 1949: 165).

The Arabs provided a whole host of consumer goods, for both the Muslim as well as general market in Singapore. Table 1 shows the goods they provided with the corresponding markets.

Table 1: Goods sold and markets served by the Arabs.

	Ethnic and religious goods	General goods
Example:	<i>'attar</i> perfume, prayer mats, <i>gahru</i> , dates	<i>Batik</i> and other textiles, sharksfins, honey, sago, coconut, coffee, cocoa, pineapples, spices, tobacco, sugar, diamonds, silverware, gold and artisan-crafted items like wooden statues and furniture
Ethnic market	Arabs	Arabs
General market	Other Muslims, especially Malays	All ethnic groups

The Arabs also played the roles of retailer, wholesaler and producer. More importantly, they had forward and backward, as well as horizontal linkages between themselves. Arab retailers operated largely in Arab Street, Change Alley and High

Street (Loh, 1963: 32). It was reported that Change Alley was lined up with textile shops (bin Diab, 1983), and to find religious goods and luxury goods, one would only need to make a trip to Arab Street and High Street. Arab wholesalers largely operated in Arab Street where they stored large quantities of consumer goods for sale to Arab, Indian and Chinese retailers. Arab merchant houses provided for the import of consumer goods and at the same time acted as wholesalers to the Arab retailers. Alsagoff and Company also acted as a wholesaler to Arab retailers, providing them mainly with foodstuff such as dates, honey, sharkfins, sago, coconut, coffee, cocoa, pineapples, spices, tobacco and sugar. On top of their import-export operations in spices, sago, coconuts and coffee, and after 1878, cocoa and pineapple, Alsagoff and Company at the same time imported dates from various parts of Arabia, honey from Hijaz, shark fins from Yemen and tobacco from England mainly to distribute to Arab retailers here. As for the role of producer, Arabs generally played a lesser role as compared to their roles as wholesalers and retailers. A notable person here would be Omar Bamadhaj, who produced fezzes. He had an establishment somewhere in the vicinity of Victoria Street where he had five workers producing the fezzes by hand.

The Arabs were highly successful in this industry, so successful that Dutch scholar L. W. C. van den Berg (1886: 122, cited in Roff, 1994: 40) described Singapore as “the most flourishing, though not the largest, Arab colony in all the Indian Archipelago”. Together with the fortunes they made, the variety of roles they played signified their dominance of their niche in the consumer goods industry. What then were the factors that enabled the Arabs to establish themselves in and dominate the consumer goods industry? To explain this I rely upon the “interaction theory of entrepreneurship”, which was explained earlier.

With regards to the resources the Arabs were endowed with, there are several points to note. Firstly, the Arabs possessed the necessary class resources to enable them to engage in the industry. Arab immigrants came with a considerable amount of physical and human capital accruing from their experience in commerce through migration from Arabia to other host societies prior to Singapore. Indeed it was exactly because of this that they were invited to Singapore by the British colonials. In terms of physical capital, the Arabs were already rather wealthy prior to their arrival in Singapore, their fortunes made through their trading activities in the Indian Ocean. In terms of human capital, the Arabs had accumulated knowledge of conducting business in the region.

In terms of ethnic resources, firstly, the Arabs enjoyed the positive image the Malays and the British had of them. While it may be true that “the Malays were poor, ignorant and would put their faith in anyone and everyone” (Jumabhoy, 1981), the positive image the Malays had of the Arabs was in large part due to the latter being native to the land of origin of Islam², the faith of the majority of the Malays by that time. As Roff (1994: 41) relates, the Malays “tended to look upon all Arabs, whatever their origins, as the direct inheritors of the wisdom of Islam, and on the... [*sada*] in particular... as possessed of unexampled piety and religious merit”.

Secondly, there was a high amount of social capital among the Arabs. The Arabs helped each other in almost all social and economic matters. Earlier migrants aided those who came later, especially in the case of the Hadhramis, who possess ‘*asabiyya* (group solidarity) based upon *nasab* (lineage) (Alatas, 1997: 29).

What then of the demand for consumer goods in Singapore? The Arabs responded to the opening market in Singapore, in which there was a high demand for consumer goods as Huff (1994: 108) notes. In the general market, there was high demand for ethnic and religious products by the Malays, and there was generally adequate demand for general goods by all ethnic groups in Singapore. The Arabs had comparative advantage³ when it came to providing ethnic and religious goods, due to their ability to obtain the supply of these goods with ease, their knowledge of the Muslim consumer tastes and the positive image conveyed to them as carriers of the wisdom of Islam. Also, the demand for consumer goods increased when it came to special occasions, like holidays and festive occasions. While the Arabs did not specialise in luxury goods, the demand for these items were indeed still there, in particular from the segment of Singapore that was relatively better off, such as the Arabs themselves, the Europeans and others.

At the same time, the demand for many of the consumer goods that the Arabs provided was protected in large part by the fairly inelastic⁴ ($0 < \text{elasticity} < 1$) nature of these goods with regards to income and price. The items the Arabs sold were mostly either necessities or had no close substitutes.

NICHE INVASION-SUCCESSION: THE CONSUMER GOODS INDUSTRY

Beginning in the 1850s, however, the influx of Chinese indentured labour immigrants had a negative impact on Arab providers of consumer goods. The opening

up of Singapore as a free port attracted the Chinese who had settled in Southeast Asia prior to the founding of Singapore. The first Chinese to come upon the establishment of Singapore as a free port were from Riau and Malacca, who later came to be referred to as “Straits-born Chinese”. Most of these influential early settlers were already prosperous when they arrived (Turnbull, 1977: 14).

Wide-scale immigration of the Chinese came from the 1850s onwards as a result of both push-factors from China and pull-factors from Singapore (Wang, 1989: 554). Firstly, there was considerable Western penetration into the economy of South China by virtue of the Treaty of Nanking and the cession of Hong Kong and other treaty ports. This penetration disrupted the economy of South China and led to economic and social hardship for the lower strata Chinese there. This in turn led to unrest and the great rebellions of the 1850s especially the Taiping Rebellion. As for the pull-factors, the Industrial Revolution in Europe led to increased demand for labour in tin mines and plantations in the expanding Southeast Asian (*Nanyang*) economies. Many Chinese thus migrated to Singapore as indentured labour, being largely employed in tin mining, rice trading and milling, and the cultivation of commercial crops such as sugar, pepper and gambier (Lian, 1995: 393). This influx created a “protected market” into which Chinese businesses tapped. The “protected market hypothesis” (Light, 1972) posits that the initial market for ethnic entrepreneurs typically arises within the ethnic community itself. When ethnic entrepreneurs are able to provide their own ethnic communities with the needs peculiar to the community in question, they would have an advantage over other providers. Ethnic consumer tastes provide a protected market position, “in part because the members of the community may have a cultural preference for dealing with co-ethnics, and in part because the costs of learning the specific wants and tastes of the immigrant groups discourage... [other] firms from doing so, especially at an early stage when the community is small and not readily visible to outsiders” (Aldrich and Waldinger, 1990: 115).

In the case of the Chinese, this “protected market” firstly demanded ethnic goods such as pork and *samsu* (a kind of liquor) that the Arabs were not able to provide as the Muslim religion prohibits the indulgence of either item. At the same time, the Arabs were not endowed with the knowledge of the peculiarities of other ethnic goods like incense, joss sticks, and other items that were peculiar to the Chinese community then. Chinese retailers were thus the ones who sold these ethnic

goods to their ethnic community. Secondly, Chinese buyers then generally preferred to buy from their co-ethnic providers due to linguistic barriers that set them apart from other ethnic groups and indeed even among themselves. This served to diminish the demand and consequentially the profit base of the Arabs in the consumer goods industry. This dip in demand for Arab-provided consumer goods translated into a loss of profit for the Arabs via the mechanism of demographic change. This my informants have related in qualitative terms, and it may also be shown quantitatively. Taking 1824, when the Arabs were in the thick of the consumer goods industry, and 1871, when they were about to move out of the same industry as comparison years, it is seen that access to consumers per Arab business fell drastically. Table 2 shows the relevant demographic figures for the consumer market and Arab providers in Singapore.

Table 2: Demographic figures for the consumer market and Arab providers in Singapore, 1824 and 1871.

Year	Chinese consumers / population	Non-Chinese consumers / population	Number of Arabs	Total population
1824	3,317	7,366	15	10,683
1871	54,572	83,150	465	137,722

Sources:

Lee Poh Ping, 1974, *Chinese Society in 19th and Early 20th Century Singapore: A Socioeconomic Analysis*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, p. 65, 109; Lee Poh Ping, 1978, *Chinese Society in Nineteenth Century Singapore*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, p. 38, Table II; Cheng Lim-Keak, 1985, *Social Change and the Chinese in Singapore: A Socio-economic Geography with Special Reference to Bang Structure*, Singapore: Singapore University Press, p. 7, Table 1.2; Lim Lu Sia, 1987, "The Arabs of Singapore: A Sociographic Study of Their Place in the Muslim and Malay World of Singapore", unpublished B.Soc.Sci. (Hons) thesis, Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, p. 21, Table 1.

The Arab population here is taken as a proxy for the number of Arab businesses. This representation is valid considering that firstly, the Arabs were mostly providers of consumer goods, and secondly, migration flows dependent upon trading

conditions accounted more for the Arab population than natural increase prior to the 1930s (Loh, 1963: 10-13). If we consider that in 1824, the Arabs had access to the whole consumer market in Singapore, each Arab had access to 712.2 consumers. Compare this to 1871, upon the assumption that the Arabs only had access to the non-Chinese market, when each Arab had access to only 178 consumers. *Ceteris paribus*, this dip in consumer share represents a dip in profits.

Upon this “invasion” of the niche by Chinese businesses in the 1850s, the Arabs lost their dominance and engaged in competition with Chinese businesses until the 1880s, when the latter triumphed and the Arabs were consequentially displaced. The Chinese thus succeeded the Arabs in the consumer goods industry beginning in the 1880s, their niche adaptation by virtue of the “protected market”.

ARABS IN THE REAL ESTATE INDUSTRY, 1880s TO 1940s

With their displacement from the consumer goods industry, the Arabs began shifting their capital into real properties beginning in the 1880s, thereby establishing their presence in the real estate industry. This capital shift was almost a 100% shift, as Arabs liquidated their companies and ploughed their savings into real estate. Gujarati businessman Rajabali Jumabhoy (1981) relates that as “time went on,... [the Arabs] became the biggest landowners and landlords like the Jewish community, in fact bigger than the Jewish community”. By the turn of the century, the Arabs had come to own around 75% of the private land alienated by the British. This comes to around 50% of Singapore’s total land area, since the Crown owned about 31% of land in Singapore at that time (Pepler, 1951: 6). This percentage share of the Arabs remained more or less the same until the 1940s. Within the real estate industry, the Arabs were not only landowners; they also acted as agents of real estate investment for each other. Arabs who were moneylenders made use of real property as collateral security in their moneylending activities instead of asking for monetary interest payments so as to avoid the Koranic prohibition of usury being levelled at their moneylending activities. With such a diversity of roles, the Arabs formed effective backward and forward linkages between themselves in their purchase and letting out of real properties. Their extensive ownership of real properties as well as the diversity of roles they played shows their dominance of the real estate industry, which they maintained until the 1940s.

Again going by the “interaction theory of entrepreneurship”, the Arabs were able to undertake such enterprise firstly because they had the necessary resources. In terms of their class resources, they firstly had the necessary physical capital endowments from the fortunes they made in the consumer goods industry. With this, they could indeed purchase pieces of land and buildings in built-up areas even at high prices. Another class resource that they possessed was their human capital endowments accruing from their experience in Singaporean commerce since their arrival in 1819. They thus were able to execute their investments in real estate with ease due to their knowledge of dealing with local residents as well as the British administration. In terms of ethnic resources, they were firstly endowed with social capital which allowed them to liase with one another and perform the various roles they did in the real estate industry. Secondly, they shared a “settler mentality”, as opposed to a “sojourning”⁵ mentality, which allowed them to seek more capital intensive means of income, less liquidity and longer term investments. The “importance of land ownership and [real] property... lay not only in their potential for large capital accumulation in this period but also in the longer term nature of such investments” (Brown, 1994: 212).

Turning now to the demand variable, demand for real properties was not explicitly present at the onset of Arab establishment in the real estate industry. The British had a laissez-faire attitude towards land, and thus, people set their own arrangements on land usage. The Arabs, by virtue of their acquisition of around 75% of the private land alienated by the British, created the supply that led demand. This was because those who desired to use land had to now obtain tenureship from the Arabs, as opposed to before, when land which was yet to be alienated by the British was utilised freely without concern for the legal recognition of ownership or occupancy. By virtue of the demand which was led by supply, therefore, in its interaction with the Arabs’ resources, the Arabs were able to establish themselves in and dominate the real estate industry.

NICHE INVASION-SUCCESSION: THE REAL ESTATE INDUSTRY

Arab dominance in the real estate industry only lasted until the 1940s, however. The early part of the 20th century saw the introduction of the policies of rent control and compulsory land acquisition by the British colonial government in its

Leviathanesque (Hobbes, 1651) capacity, which affected the Arabs as the largest landowners in Singapore then. These policies were subsequently continued by the P.A.P. government upon Singapore's independence. While these policies initially had a minimal effect on Arab-owned real properties, the impact was much greater from 1947 onwards with the Control of Rent Ordinance (1947) and the Land Acquisition Act (1966).

At the same time, there were several community-specific attributes of the Arabs which directly affected their real properties and served also to exacerbate the effects of rent control and compulsory land acquisition. In many cases, Arab landowners failed to impart their knowledge of real estate management to their children and in many cases, even inform them of what real properties they owned and the whereabouts of these. They preferred to manage their real properties on their own and leave their children to their lives of luxury by virtue of the wealth accruing from real estate. Secondly, many Arab children tried to live up to their parents' "rich and famous" lifestyles. An informant of mine calls this consumptionist ethos the phenomenon of "drinking and dancing themselves to decadence". As Gujarati businessman Rajabali Jumabhoy (1981) states, despite the immense wealth Arab landowners of the past had, "unfortunately, the majority of their descendants have finished their wealth one way or the other".

The net effect of these was the erosion of the physical resources the Arabs had which were vested in their extensive ownership of and intensive dependence on real properties. This in turn resulted in the displacement of the Arabs from the real estate industry from 1970 onwards. As was the case with the consumer goods industry, the Arabs did not survive the competition with the invading group, leading to their consequent displacement from the niche. Coming in in place of the Arabs as the dominant group in the real estate industry was the government, whose invasion of the real estate industry was by virtue of its legislative power in enacting the policies of rent control and compulsory land acquisition. Table 3 shows that state ownership in Singapore gradually increased since the institution of land acquisition, putting the government's share of landholding at the majority by 1970.

Table 3: Ownership of land in Singapore, 1949 to 1990.

Year	State ownership (%)	Private ownership (%)
1949	31.0	69.0
1960	44.0	56.0
1965	39.3	50.8 ³
1970	60.0	40.0
1975	65.5	34.5
1985	76.2	23.8
1990	80.0	20.0

Sources:

Philip Motha, 1989, *Singapore Real Property Guide*, with the assistance of Belinda K. P. Yuen, Singapore: Singapore University Press, pp. 7-8; Linda Low, 1997, "The Political Economy of the Built Environment Revisited", in Ooi Giok Ling and Kenson Kwok, eds., *The City and the State: Singapore's Built Environment Revisited*, Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies, p. 82.

Note:

³ The discrepancy here is because the British military owned 9.9% of Singapore land.

THE ARABS TODAY

With their displacement from the real estate industry by 1970, the Arabs experienced "economic dispersal"; they are today found to be neither overrepresented nor concentrated in any particular niche. This leads to their lack of prominence in the economic sphere. The Arabs, however, have not totally disappeared from the economy. Although no official statistics are available on the industrial and occupational distribution of the Arabs today, my informants relate that a large proportion of the Arabs today are professionals, managers and white-collar workers employed in a variety of industries. There are a few who are large-scale capitalists, such as Zeid Alsagoff of Zac Meat Pte. Ltd. and Zac Electronics Pte. Ltd., Mohamed Bagushair and Shafik Mattar of Ganson Alban Pte. Ltd. and the Harhara family of M.A.S. Travel Pte. Ltd. There is a substantial number of them who may be

considered as petty bourgeoisie, such as the Bamadhaj family of Bamadhaj Brothers Pte. Ltd., the Aljunied family of Aljunied Brothers Pte. Ltd. and the Basharahil family of Basharahil Brothers Pte. Ltd. Lastly, there is a small number of them who are self-employed and low-level workers, such as a certain section of the Harhara family that make their living as renovation contractors, and a certain section of the Baobeid family that own and manage retail outlets as well as trade in the Bussorah Street bazaar during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan. Some of the Arabs today still own real properties, but this ownership is minimal. The trusts in which many Arab families' real properties were vested in, including the Alkaffs, Aljunieds and Alsagoffs, have already reached maturity, and have thus been dissolved since the late 1980s. The bin Talib family trust, created by Salem bin Talib in 1933, is the only trust that is still existent, and for the rest of the Arabs, the real properties they own today were bought in contemporary times instead of being brought over from their era of dominance in the real estate industry.

Why did the Arabs "disperse" rather than find another niche to exploit? The reason for this is that the Arabs chose different paths after their displacement from the real estate industry by 1970 and did not collectively seek a new niche to exploit. With the erosion of their physical resources in real estate, the Arabs primarily did one of two things – they either went into non-capital-intensive industries or built up their human capital through education to compensate for the loss of their physical capital. The large-sale capitalist Arabs mentioned above got to where they are today only through years of employment in the professions or non-capital-intensive industries. However, it remains to be seen what the future holds for the Arabs in terms of niche establishment and dominance. Under the right conditions, the Arabs may indeed establish themselves and dominate a niche to which they are better adapted than other social groups. As it is today, however, they do not occupy any particular niche. However, my informants have related that they preferred to be "dispersed" rather than dominant in any niche. My informants believe that being dominant in a niche leaves the community vulnerable to forces that might displace them yet again, as what happened in the consumer goods and real estate industries. This "dispersal" is thus positively viewed as an instance of diversification and "not putting all our eggs in one basket", as an informant relates.

To this end, we may ask whether this economic dispersal has translated into an economic "decline" of the Arab community. Certainly the Arabs may be seen to have

experienced a decline, firstly, because they are no longer in dominance of any niche, and secondly, with the erosion of their physical resources, but other factors must be taken into consideration too. My informants have noted that where human capital and liquid assets are concerned, the Arabs are actually much better off today than before. At the same time, Chiew (1991) has found that ethnic socioeconomic stratification in Singapore is most favourable to the “others” ethnic category, under which most of the Arabs are classified. This suggests that the Arabs may indeed be better off than the other ethnic groups. Unfortunately, due to the lack of available data, we are not at liberty to conclude.

CONCLUSION

The case study of Arab ethnic entrepreneurs presented here shows that the economic history of the Arabs is an account of successive periods of niche establishment-domination and niche invasion-succession. To explain how the Arabs established themselves in the consumer goods industry in 1819 and dominated it until the 1850s, and how the Arabs established themselves in the real estate industry in the 1880s and dominated it until the 1940s, the “interaction theory of entrepreneurship” has been employed as an analytical tool.

To explain the invasion and succession of the Arabs’ niches by Chinese businessmen and the government, I have forwarded three propositions at the beginning of this paper. These propositions have been supported by the case of the Arabs presented here. In the case of Proposition 1, the Chinese and the government did indeed try to exploit the same niche the Arabs were occupying, the consumer goods industry for the former and the real estate industry for the latter. Competition did indeed result, and the Arabs lost out because the niche was more favourable to the invading groups. The invading groups’ adaptation to the niche was through the “protected market” for the Chinese and by legislative power for the government. These ecological factors are different from those that allowed the Arabs to dominate these niches earlier, which were their possession of the necessary resources, the presence of demand and the lack of occupation of these niches at their time of venture. In the case of Proposition 2, the niches the Arabs occupied did indeed have the components of industry, markets and resources that the invading groups tried to exploit. Chinese businesses targeted the market which provided them with demand,

and industrial control of the consumer goods industry through networking, but not the resources of the niche. In the case of the government, it targeted industrial control as well as the resources of the niche, which was land, but not the market, as land was not compulsorily acquired for the proprietary benefit of government funds. With regards to Proposition 3, it has been shown that an ethnic group (the Chinese) as well as a non-ethnic social group (the government) were able to invade and succeed Arab-dominated niches. Their succession was by virtue of their adaptation to the niches, through the “protected market” in the case of Chinese businesses and legislative power for the government.

In conclusion, this paper has tried to forward an ecological perspective for the study of ethnic entrepreneurship using a case study of the Arabs in Singapore. It is hoped that future studies on ethnic entrepreneurship would similarly employ the ecological paradigm forwarded here, perhaps utilising the propositions put forth here as theoretical applications to other case studies.

End Notes

¹ The concept of “human capital” was introduced in the 1960s by economists like Schultz (1963) and Becker (1962, 1964) who argued that a society’s endowment of educated, trained and healthy workers are major determinants of how the factors of production (land, labour, capital and enterprise) could be put to best use. Social capital is “generally defined as the information, trust, and norms of reciprocity inhering in one’s social networks” (Woolcock, 1998: 153).

² Islam was introduced to the “Malay world” through traders from Arabia, China, India and Persia since the 8th century, but conversions then were on a small-scale. Large-scale conversions occurred around the 13th century onwards, primarily through Indians, Indians of Arab origin and Arabs coming through India (Alatas, 1997: 23-32).

³ The term “comparative advantage” here is applied loosely and although it is a derivative of, it cannot be equated with the “law of comparative advantage”, which posits that in the international economy, the country with the lowest opportunity cost of producing a good should specialise in producing that good. This law is closely related to the Heckscher-Ohlin theorem, which states that a country should produce and export the good for which production it is endowed with relative factor abundance.

⁴ Elasticity is a measure of the degree of responsiveness of the quantity demanded for a good or service with reference to changes in the price of that good or service or the income of the consumer of that good or service.

⁵ To “sojourn” is to “dwell temporarily, with eventual intention to return” (Lian, 1995: 392).

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