

# The distinguishing features of Chinese operated supermarkets in Pacific Island Countries

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**Abstract - Most business districts and economies now have foreign direct Investments especially within the supermarket retail operators who are first generation Chinese or of Chinese descent. In these same trading environments are locally owned competitors. Some of the locally-owned and operated counterparts have not been as comparatively successful and are not able to overcome the same challenges and business environment that the Chinese operated ones have survived in. The differentiating factor appears to include cost saving strategies, practices, coupled with great focus and concentration. This report contains a review of the contemporary cost saving practices of the Chinese operated supermarket retail enterprises in the Pacific countries, from the available literature.**

**Keywords — Chinese, competitors, cost saving, foreign direct investments, Pacific Countries and Territories, retail, supermarkets, trading environments.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

The basic daily necessities of modern life, the changes to the culture, the pursuit of certain lifestyles, and the strategic operations of some of the small and medium scale enterprises have made the presence of supermarkets almost a necessity in most towns and villages in the Pacific. Also, some of these small and medium scale enterprises retail items bought from the supermarkets. Although the operation and the ownership structure of the supermarkets may vary from place to place, their intent and goal is to maximize profits just like every operating business. This in effect drives their operations, strategies, and operations. The ownership structure, the ratio of foreign ownership to the citizens, the percentage of foreign staff and investors may also be diverse (ADB 2014). These are based on the prevailing laws and regulations in the economies they operate in. Whilst operations may vary, the strategies needed to operate or stay profitable may also vary. In spite of this, the successes of the various profit seeking and profit maximization firms depend on their ability to use their

competitive advantage in the marketplace.

Twenty-one tropical and subtropical islands make up the Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs). These are; American Samoa, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Caledonia, Niue, Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Wallis and Futuna (Yemoh and Yemoh 2022). In the Pacific, a majority of the businesses are owned and controlled by indigenous but in areas where the local laws allow, some are also owned and operated either as part of a joint-ownership with foreign owners or by owners of foreign descent. The percentage varies on the basis of the prevailing rules, and the interest of non-citizens to operate such businesses and or to stay in that country. Entrepreneurs and businesses that operate in the Pacific also do have the basic goal of maximizing profit. This is what almost every business operator anywhere will be aiming to realize.

One of the major motivations behind allowing the Chinese foreign direct investment operated supermarkets in the Pacific appears to be the fact that they supply and provide goods and products that may not be easily available or sourced in the local markets. Some of the consumable that the locals depend on may not be locally sourced or produced meaning they have to either do without it or allow whatever cheaper means may exist to augment the consumption. Providing such items into the market allows the consumers to accommodate their consumption profiles and tastes. These may not just be for the locals but for the expat communities too. The demands and need for these apparent supplies appears to be something that will stay in these regions for a while due to the continued globalization and freedom of movements in the region. What is obvious in the PICT's is that although in some cases, there are restrictive business laws and practices that aim to protect some of the types of businesses by ensuring they are only operated by the indigenous, there is an increase in the presence and operation of Chinese owned foreign direct invested supermarket operations in many of the Pacific cities, villages

and communities (ADB 2014). What is clear is that there are keys and strategies that these Chinese operating supermarkets may be practicing that may be setting them apart from the rest of the players within that market. How and why they are successful may be an area that the new and prospective business operators might find as a great asset in their business dealings. Policy makers within the economies may also find it as useful input.

Much of the research conducted have centered around Chinese business culture (Yen 2013 and Yu), business traditions (Liu 2013), Culture and business (Leung 2008), Chinese business in other countries like Singapore (Liu and Goh, 2022), Chinese family businesses (Gatfield and Youseff 2001), Chinese business ethics (Berger and Herstein 2014)

Chinese business executives and corporate social responsibility (Yin 2017). American-chinese business relations (Feldman 2013), inventory turnover within Chinese supermarkets (Khan, Deng and Khan 2016), Chinese supermarkets own brands (Song, Schein and Ravi 2012), managing in ethnic Chinese communities (Adhlstrom, Chen and Yeh 2010), Chinese negotiating behavior (Sebenius and Qian 2008), rethinking Chinese business (Tong 2014), and the communication issues that Chinese businesses face in business (Cardon and Scott 2003). Most of the prior work has focused on the culture, traditions, and within Chinese communities or their dealings with specific Countries from the point of view of the Chinese. However, there is limited research work done regarding their competitive business dealings especially in the Pacific.

This research reviews from the available literature and provides a comparative focused analysis of the operations of supermarkets in Pacific Island Countries and Territories which are specifically owned by Chinese descent operators with their native owned counterparts. The aim is to provide a summarized view of why the Chinese operated ones seem to be more successful, the key apparent strategies being employed, how prospective entrepreneurs could learn from what has been proven to be successful and the findings could serve as policy contributions where applicable.

## **II. CHINESE SUPERMARKET OPERATIONS IN THE PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES**

The Pacific region is rich in natural resources which provides for its main economic revenue generating exports and enterprises in agriculture, fishing, timber and Tourism (Balakrishnan 2022). However, due to the limited economic developments, the limited establishment of processing plants and machines that would have produced the required consumables, or goods necessary to sustain the economies, many now rely heavily on imports. Also, the eating habits of the modern Pacific Islander has incorporated more processed and imported foods for various reasons which has also added socio-economic costs to the Countries

and households (Connell 2015). The levels of developments across the region leads to the Island governments competing amongst themselves for bilateral and multilateral aid agreements. Further, they actively pursue foreign investors or expertise by offering various incentives, concessions and facilities (Fairbairn et al 1986). There is a great gap within the economies not only for investments, or processing plants and machinery but also for processed goods. The demand also includes many of the goods and services provided in developed economies that the modern islander and expat living in the Pacific Island Country desires. This is what then leads to the need for supermarkets to fill in the void of providing the goods and services that are not produced within the economy.

The Covid-19 Pandemic in 2020 and 2021 has impacted the global economies and the expectations of international trade. Trade in the Asia-Pacific regions, the South and South-West Asia is expected to reflect a contraction of 21.6% in exports and 21.4% in imports (UNESCAP 2020). The Pacific's exports are also expected to contract by 7% and imports by 9.5%. This trade related impact is in line with the fact that living on small isolated islands limits the path to economic development, or the opportunities for economies of scale or a certain level of economic diversification. As such, local entrepreneurs and their indigenous business sectors occupy a significant role in the development of the Pacific Islands. They also provide more investment opportunities, employment generation, creation of economic opportunities to the indigenous population (Fairbairn et al 1986). The Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) employ between sixty to eighty percent of the workforce and are responsible for over ninety percent of all businesses in the region (APEC 2021). In the regions where the economic development is yet to provide the required processing and manufacturing plants and industries, a lot more of the goods sold in the supermarkets are imported from the much more developed economies. Whilst, in the more developed and advanced economies, the scope and scale of these supermarkets will primarily be to provide a limited number of goods that are not produced in their economy.

Whilst there may be a varied ownership structure and compositions of the entrepreneurs operating in the various communities in the Pacific, not all of them are widespread and pronounced. Among most of the communities in the Pacific, the Chinese operated and co-owned supermarket retailers are more widespread and pronounced with regards to their coverage and spread. This is partly due to the limited interest and willingness

of the overseas investors to own such businesses or to spread into such territories. The Pacific Islands private sector is made up of large commercial operations that are normally owned or controlled by overseas business interests, multinationals or individuals, commercial ventures, joint ventures, business ventures owned by non-indigenous Pacific island citizens and the businesses owned and operated by the island entrepreneurs (Fairbairn et al 1986). The alternatives investment opportunities and their rates of returns may also be a deciding factor as to whether the investor will choose this kind of investment opportunity. The islanders appear to have an interest in traveling into the more developed economies in the region like Australia and New Zealand as compared to the relatively less developed or developing economies. It is therefore common to see a lot less of the islanders moving into other Pacific islands to run businesses as compared to the population of other Chinese owned operations. As such there is very little competition with the indigenous investors in this area.

Generally, most Chinese owned enterprises are operated by descendants from a previously migrated investor who has now integrated into their new country, but in some cases they may also be first generation Chinese migrants. The native retail business operators on the other hand would have been operating the businesses per who ever decided to open that supermarket and in many cases do not go beyond a lot of generations as many of the related families end up choosing different career and investment paths. The native operators may have a wide composition and size of family connections in the country of operation. On the other hand, the Chinese do not have a lot of other family connections in the countries and cities they live in, especially if they are the first generation of migrants. For whatever path and processes they have followed to arrive in their country of investment, the Chinese supermarket operators may have comparatively fewer dependents who could draw upon their income and earnings whilst they are running their operations. As a result, a majority of what they earn is easily returned and re-invested back into the businesses. On the contrary, where an operator lives amongst and with a lot of other family obligations and in some cases, religious commitments, village obligations and other communal obligations, much of their earnings and sometimes the capital may end up becoming a victim of the obligations. This could be one of the main deciding factors for the successes.

### III. COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES AND FEATURES

With the exception of economies that have recently achieved independence, most economies would have experienced some level of globalization and interconnectivity with the rest of the world's markets. Through these connections, they would also develop a varied traditional markets and e-commerce markets that allows consumers and suppliers to interact. These will normally be dominated by the local entrepreneur, and indigenous business operators. However, the records suggest that food security, agriculture, fishing and local food production have declined in the Pacific, in the past half century except in the most remote islands (Connell 2015). This has had a major boost to the demand for more imported goods and services. One of the major suppliers of such goods and services are the Chinese supermarkets who collectively with the other major market players fill the void. It may not be easy to interview all the Chinese foreign direct investors in all the countries in the Pacific region to ascertain their motives for choosing to stay in and transact businesses in those economies, however it is possible to notice their presence. It is evident that whilst they are present and increasing in their market share in many parts, some local businesses are becoming casualties. Having faced the same challenges and environment, it is apparent that some of the supermarkets are being run better due to a raft of various strategies.

The first area of difference is in the fact that the Chinese supermarket operators appear to be providing goods and consumables that are not easily sourced in the local markets. This may come from the fact that their licensing and business basis and restrictions limit them in many places to providing goods and services that are not being provided by the locals. This is aimed at protecting the local business operators from having to compete with the seemingly bigger competitor who may have superior advantage in various areas. Any such competition could spell the end of the local business operators in many vital business lines and most likely some segments of the economy could pass onto overseas citizens. This focus of business activities gives the Chinese operators an advantage in the sense that they have limited competition. They do not have a superior edge over the competitors as various challenges serve as a market entry barrier. Any prospective competitor in such markets will also have to overcome the accessibility challenges, and the challenge of sourcing its associated inputs of providing such goods and services. Prior research findings have reported that household expenditure in the Pacific is dominated by imported foods which provides a great business opportunity and profitability for these Chinese operated supermarkets (Connell 2015). The expected trend also suggests that the demand for their goods is likely to increase as many of these economies are not providing alternatives to these goods and services for their citizens. There is also not a corresponding development of industries and factories to provide the goods and services that these supermarkets are providing in their economy which could then

end such partnership.

The second distinguishing feature is the fact that these supermarket operators are able to provide, in most cases, cheaper alternatives for the economies they serve. Having originated from China, they are able to use whatever connections and linkages they have to source cheaper products and services that provide them the best profit. Not only are they able to provide what is not already provided but also at a cheaper price to these economies which is a great asset. Providing the cheaper alternative on one hand supports the small and medium scale businesses because many of these business outlets, retail goods that are bought from these supermarkets. On the other hand, the cheaper alternatives provide support to the customers and economy by helping keep the prices of things and inflationary pressures relatively down. Rational strategic business decisions are generally made on product differentiation by its quality or on its cost. The reports do suggest that the strategy undertaken by the Chinese operated supermarket is differentiation on cost (Loy and Weiss 2019). Differentiation on quality will require the enterprise to acquire market share through providing the best superior goods or service in the market. This is not the case in most of these economies where the sole supplier are these supermarkets. Where market share is based on the superiority of the goods or services provided, a majority of the consumers will demand the goods and services of the suppliers who provide the highest quality goods and service. Those who stay in the market earn general profits based on their market share which stays with their ability to maintain the quality of service and goods they produce. The market share also stays in the absence of competitors who enter the market with superior quality alternatives. The introduction of alternative superior options will tend to sway the customers away from the firms that had previous market share to the better alternative. On the other hand, differentiation based on price or cost normally means that the type of goods and services provided are relatively in abundance and not highly differentiated to the point that customers choose between the least cost. Theoretically in such cases, the quality of goods and services including the alternatives are similar or same and thus a higher priced supplier will easily be avoided for the least cost alternative. In such competitive environments, the firms engage in the business strategy that allows them to generate profit on selling a lot more at the least cost. The Chinese supermarket operators thus develop their market share from the stance of cost.

The third feature is the way the Chinese operated supermarkets are able to provide a cheaper option to the customers by engaging in a lot of wholesale purchasing, importing in wholesale quantities, rarely sourcing their goods locally and taking advantage of economies of scale. Most of their operations are materially bigger than their counterparts which then makes bulk and wholesale business purchases a natural step for them. Their corresponding competitors who may naturally be trading on a small scale may not be able to

afford the wholesale purchases and may also not need to retail on a wholesale quantity. This then makes whole sale purchases not a viable step for such enterprises. In some cases, restrictive laws and policies are applied in such markets with the intention of protecting the local businesses and small and medium enterprises of the locals from the potential negative effects of having to compete with international businesses. Even when such restrictions are not present in the markets, most of the local suppliers would have already established a market for their goods and services and unless the foreign direct investments can provide a cheaper alternative, they would have to struggle to enter or compete with the local suppliers. Their best enterprise opportunities arise with the bulk purchases or economies of scale operations which the local operator may not have access to which then in-turn makes them more economically friendly. The practice of wholesale purchases of stock enables them to take advantage of the economies of scale. It is rare to see Chinese businessmen sourcing their main products from the wholesale suppliers in the local markets. Many will rather import their stock from China where they will be benefiting from the cheaper prices, improving their economy and buying from the Chinese wholesale vendors that are operating in their destination countries. The indigenous on the other hand opt for small scale purchases and from the small scale retailers who end up buying at a higher price and thus after applying their mark up profits, their products and services end up selling comparatively higher than the chinese retailers. With the markets and economies suffering various shocks and financial issues, it becomes difficult for the consumers to patronize goods and services that are relatively higher when there are cheaper alternatives in the market. These are some of the challenges that the native companies face which are induced by some of these practices.

Fourthly, the Chinese operated supermarkets are able to overcome the core issue of proximity and location constraints. The globalization and interconnectivity of various species are known to provide benefits that include the ease in mobility of goods and people. This is partly true to a point as the challenges to getting goods, services and factors of production to the Pacific region has not been fully eliminated. Business operations in the Pacific do have unique location and proximity challenges. Being an island that is far from the major economies of the world also brings with it added challenges. Small businesses in the South Pacific are also suggested to face challenges with individual entrepreneur characteristics, business specific characteristics, challenges in procuring business services, and challenges in securing financing(Nair and Chelliah 2012). Others include, limited access to the trading markets, limited access to cheaper alternatives, limited access to the technology, human personal and all the resources and factors that will have aided the development of trade internationally and nationally. Some economies are also made up of various islands. With the limited development in the economy and transport networks,

trading nationality is also impacted. Many are operating in islands and economies with a limited number of airports and seaports compared to other economies. This does have an impact on their accessibility to their business inputs. They are therefore known to use the much cheaper option of using more sea freight than the more expensive option of air freight. Although it may have its related issues like delay and other factors, it ends up being the cheapest route as they also continue to source their suppliers from overseas instead of the locals.

The fifth feature are various cost saving strategies that are engaged with the view of ensuring unnecessary costs are not realized that could become a burden on the business operations. The regulatory environment in most of the Pacific Island Countries and Territories allow for unique benefits such as the option and opportunity to live in the same place of business as the operator transacts business. Many of the retailers are able to live within the same facility that they use for the business. Although this may not be the practice by every operator, it is evident that many are able to live in their places of business in the Pacific. Comparatively, running a business the traditional way will require and incur various costs not limited to providing security at the place of business whilst the operator is physically away from the premises. In various environments the majority of businesses losses have come by way of thefts and the associated legal battles to recoup any losses from thefts and or the quality insurances provided within the country(Kennedy 2018). Running the business may also incur cost of security during the times that the business operator may be away from the business. Such cost is limited and reduced where the operator is always on site due to the fact that their residence serves to be the same place of business. Their risks of break-ins and thefts in their absence is reduced and limited by this simple step. Costs like security for the different places of business with regards to the place of residence of the operator has the added pressure of increasing the operational cost of the business for their competitors who may be living at a separate property to their place of business.

The sixth strategy is that they take strategic steps that make them always available and close to the place of business whenever the business needs them. In the Pacific, like in many other economies, there are various other business operating related costs. The opportunity cost of not having enough goods available for sale will have sporadic customer affects which could lead to the losses of some customers. When customers get the impression that the retailer can not be relied on everytime, they are most likely going to prefer to attend the sites that they can have a higher chance of finding whatever they are looking for. Once customers are lost, it is not always easier to get them back especially in competitive business environments. Living in the place of business also eliminates or reduces the cost of uncertainties with regards to goods delivery. For most supermarkets that also retail perishable goods, there is a problem of delivery and

scheduling for delivery, perishable goods within a reasonable time-window(Xunyu and Tomohiro 2010). Living on the premises also allows for the reduced cost of personal transport to the business. It means they are also able to invest a lot of time and effort into the businesses as they do not have to rely on public transport or other forms of transport before they can arrive at the place of business to work on the businesses.

Another strategy employed includes running various businesses at the same time. This allows them to take advantage of every opportunity that the seasons, trade routes, shipping container spaces, and profit opportunity that may present itself. Such an investor is able to easily adapt to the business that is in season and away from the business lines that are not in season. With a portfolio of investments, their investment risks are also diversified and hedged against which provides them benefits that are not available to their counterparts.. Whilst an import of a car into the country may only allow a limited number of cars within the container to meet the legal shipping regulations in a nation like Australia, and may not allow other items within the same container for other goods, the prevailing restrictions within the PICTs allow for other materials and goods to be added to the shipment. This presents any business operator in these countries the opportunity to add other items into the shipping container either for their main business or other related business at a fraction of the cost. On the other hand, a majority of their counterparts are small scale operators which unfortunately, restricts their ability to emulate such benefits.

There are substantial differences between the Chinese and western approaches to business formation and operations(Gatfield and Youseff 2001). The Chinese operated supermarkets maintain a sole focus and undivided attention to the businesses they are running. One of the many ways you can see this is the fact that they make the decision to live in the stores and work in and on the stores even when the stores are not officially opened. Various indigenous store owners are different from those who run the day-to-day operations of the business and in most cases are also employed outside the businesses. Whilst the other competitors may be off work or away from the business premises, the Chinese counterparts will be working outside the official opening hours on various activities that will be contributing to the successes of the business. They also are hands-on business operators in their approach and take proactive steps to limit business overheads and losses including working near the point of sale, and the use of CCTV and other security equipment to limit the incidences of thefts.

Finally, their apparent deficiencies are overcome by their quick adaptation strategies and actions. Living in a new country comes with various challenges. These include the language barrier. The ability to learn a new language especially past a certain age in life becomes a lot more challenging for most people. As far as the record goes, no economy in the Pacific has any of the mainline Chinese dialects as their main language. This implies that all the new

entrepreneurs who have migrated from their country of origin into the Pacific in most cases have to learn at least one new language and in some cases at least two new languages. To be able to daily transact business in a new currency also requires quickly familiarizing themselves with the new language. What most entrepreneurs appear to start doing is by engaging the services of the indigenous in the businesses and employing some as workers who they work closely with. With their associations and connections they are able to learn the language in a way that they can operate on their own after a while.

For the Chinese business person, developing the appropriate face and related communication strategies such as indirectness, the use of intermediaries, the use of praising, requests, and shaming is of utmost importance (Cardon and Scott 2003). Operating in a totally different business environment may require adjusting to a new culture and adopting strategies and communication skills that they may not be used to. The ability to also adapt to the culture through learning the language, the business and enterprising words, working with the indigenous, overcoming some of the main problems that many of the other struggling businesses have not been able to overcome, are some of the main intriguing factors. Many Chinese are known to be enterprising, diligent, and goal focused however because of their desire to achieve, some succumb to greed, giving rise to widespread corruption (Leung 2008). Being aware of the greed that can affect their businesses leads them to put up structures that overcomes some of the common issues in their area of operation. Many attempt to limit their losses by operating the Point of sale machines or at least in proximity to it and making use of a lot of security measures like for example CCTV's. The limitations of the business operating and impacting culture factors such as official work and business dealings end on Saturday midday in some Pacific economies (ADB 2014). In other economies, there are official rules and regulations for safe work for example, not making workers work beyond their hours in a continued work and allowing them to take days away from work for their health and mental well being. The continued regulation of the safework and other legal regulations for work then allow some businesses to operate every day of the week. Being able to work every day of the day and at every time of the day does provide a lot of hours of productive work which is not yet traditional in many of the Pacific islands. However these Chinese owned entrepreneurs are able to provide alternative working arrangements that still ensures that they are profitable and thriving in the economies.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

The basic approach to business dealings normally follow the path of least cost, the use of competitive advantage, superior marketing and other advantages that the company has. The survival and successes of the company depends on

their ability to make profits and to stay profitable. One thing that is certain in the Pacific business environment is that, Chinese wholesale and retail supermarkets foreign direct investments operate in, other local businesses are also operating and in some cases are competitors. Whilst various natively owned and operated businesses are closing down after a few years of running, the Chinese run and operated appear to be surviving. In the absence of the statistics on Chinese foreign direct investment businesses running across the region, or how many are also getting out of business, what this has aimed to do was to provide the main operating differences that appears to be improving the chances that such businesses have been employing that seems to be giving them an operational edge over their compatriots. By exploring superior cost saving strategies in the market, they have a much higher mark-up profit, regardless of their country of operation.

There are various schools of thought on their presence, their importance, their impact on their local enterprises and the long term effects they may be having on the local economics, but one thing is certain, they appear to have an effective business plan and have engaged strategies that are making them in most cases the preferred choice for most consumers. The daily cash taking procedures, relative profitability, long term intentions and other important areas which may be of interest to various academics or entrepreneurs. To be able to survive and thrive in the same environment where some of the locals are struggling and going out of business will serve the interest of any current or prospective entrepreneur. Such findings will serve as a great input to entrepreneurs, to the government ministries who are in charge of business, enterprises, labor and economic development with regards to formulating policies and the environment that fosters business development. Business operators may also have important alternatives and options that could improve their business operations, determine their survival or ensure that they are taking steps that help move them towards profitability.

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