
From humble beginnings to leadership: a Hui *zu* business ownership style of Yang Jianrong in Ningxia's cashmere industry (ethnography)

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Abstract

Purpose – This manuscript presents the translated oral life history of Yang Jianrong, a Hui *zu* entrepreneur from Ningxia, whose rise from very humble beginnings to international business success offers empirical insight into an Indigenous Business Ownership Style (BOS) in China. Based on in-person interviews transcribed in Mandarin and translated into English, the case study traces Yang's progression from early humble beginnings through to industrial growth and civic leadership.

Design/methodology/approach – This case affirms the ethnographic methodological value of oral life history in BOS research and contributes to scholarship on Hui commercial practice and decentralised economic development. It avoids cultural or religious framing, offering a literal.

Findings – His enterprise model rejects nepotism and family privilege, instead favouring merit-based hiring, servant leadership, and stakeholder reciprocity.

Research limitations/implications – The only research undertaken thus far is based on the Hui religion and culture; no field research has been undertaken on the Hui *zu* Business Ownership style in Privately Owned Enterprises in Ningxia, China.

Practical implications – Providing actual one-on-one data from fieldwork relating to their contribution to the GDP of Ningxia and China.

Social implications – The Hui *zu* are totally committed to working with and networking their business with community groups, and sharing with these communities.

Originality/value – Fieldwork-based account of how one Hui *zu* entrepreneur navigated China's legal economy to achieve scale and legitimacy through diligence and self-discipline.

Keywords Ethnography, Community entrepreneurship, Traditional values, Business ownership style (BOS), Hui *zu*, Indigenous

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

This manuscript presents the translated oral life history of Yang Jianrong, a Hui *zu* entrepreneur whose trajectory from rural community to industrial and community leadership provides a grounded account of an Ethnic (indigenous) traditional history of business development in China. Based on a series of hand-transcribed interviews conducted over an extended period, this narrative is preserved in a literal format, with minimal editorial intervention, to maintain the integrity of the subject's Indigenous voice and values. Yang Jianrong's path illustrates a Business Ownership Style (BOS) rooted not in inheritance, ideology, or institutional privilege but in task-based merit, ethical consistency, and strategic adaptation. Born in a modest village in Lingwu County, Ningxia, he began life as a farm boy and eventually became the founder of Rongchang.

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Academic reflections on business owner style integrity (BOS)

[Owens et al. \(2013\)](#) and [Stilgoe et al. \(2020\)](#) assert that a business owner's style is a distinctive approach to managing opportunities and challenges, characterised by specific traits and procedures unique to the individual. This style reflects how business owners habitually undertake and manage their enterprises. In the context of the Hui business owners in Ningxia, these distinctive styles emerge as a synthesis of traditional collectivist values and adaptive strategies tailored to the socio-economic environment, illustrating how cultural heritage shapes contemporary entrepreneurial practices.

This vertically integrated cashmere processing company has grown to achieve national and international recognition. (Ningxia Rongchang Cashmere Group Co., Ltd. Company Profile | Lingwu, Ningxia). The case study unfolds in twelve narrative sections, following Yang's evolution across several critical stages: humble beginnings, entry into informal trade, entrepreneurial setbacks, structural innovations, and eventual civic leadership. This account is notable for its commercial outcomes and the values that informed each decision: restraint, responsibility, and trustworthiness. Like many Hui entrepreneurs in the region, Yang's methods demonstrate a BOS grounded in functional ethics rather than cultural tradition.

The manuscript intentionally avoids explanations based on religion or identity, focusing instead on observable actions, decisions, and outcomes. It provides a valuable empirical addition to business owner style theory, particularly within decentralised economies and informal-to formal enterprise transitions. This introduction contextualises the following sections, each drawn from the field-based translation of original oral testimony. The subject's words, manner, and principles have been retained as faithfully as possible, allowing the reader to engage directly with the lived logic of a business owner who built legitimacy through position and performance.

The paper proceeds as follows: the next section situates the study within existing scholarship on business ownership style and ethnographic entrepreneurship; this is followed by an explanation of the life-history ethnographic methodology employed; the core sections then present and analyse Yang Jianrong's longitudinal enterprise trajectory; and the paper concludes by outlining the implications of this case for organisational ethnography, enterprise practice, and future research.

Literature review

Taken together, the literature indicates a clear gap: there is a paucity of empirically grounded, methodologically transparent accounts that distinguish business ownership style from adjacent constructs such as entrepreneurship and leadership, and that demonstrate how BOS is enacted through routines, records, and decisions over time. [Christopher \(2022\)](#) ethnography theory was used on presenting a life-history ethnography of a Hui *zu* entrepreneur in Ningxia's cashmere industry, the present study contributes a longitudinal, practice-based account of BOS as behavioural governance and strengthens the empirical base for organisational ethnography in underrepresented enterprise contexts.

[Denzin \(2017\)](#), [Madden \(2022\)](#) identify methodologically, ethnographic traditions are well suited to examining governance as lived practice. Ethnography foregrounds situated action, local meaning, and the patterned repetition through which institutions are reproduced. [Argyres et al. \(2020\)](#) and [Suddaby et al. \(2023\)](#) complementary calls for history-informed inquiry argue that longitudinal evidence can reveal mechanisms that cross-sectional designs routinely miss. This study therefore positions life-history ethnography as an appropriate approach for distinguishing BOS from adjacent constructs and for documenting how governance logics persist through routine decisions over time.

Within this landscape, the Hui *zu* of Ningxia represent an under-examined empirical setting for BOS research. Sun (2005) and [Eroglu Sager \(2021\)](#) existing scholarship on Hui *zu* in modern China has primarily addressed historical positioning and broader social context rather

than the mechanics of enterprise governance. Consequently, there remains limited peer-reviewed evidence showing how Hui zu privately owned enterprises (POEs) build legitimacy, stability, and scale through repeatable behavioural disciplines that can be observed and analysed in enterprise practice.

Bass (1981) and Demirtas, Karaca (2020) scholarship on leadership and enterprise ethics offers useful but incomplete tools for explaining Business Ownership Style (BOS) as an enduring governance logic. Wagner and Hollenbeck (2020) leadership research typically centres authority, influence, and follower outcomes, while organisational behaviour emphasises coordination, decision-making, and performance under constraints. Demirtas and Karaca (2020) Ethical leadership perspectives foreground integrity and standards in decision-making, but these constructs are often treated as attributes rather than as repeatable systems of practice.

Research methodology

This study adopts a qualitative life-history ethnographic methodology based on extended one-on-one interviews conducted with Yang Jianrong, a Hui zu entrepreneur in Ningxia. The research is grounded in oral tradition (OT), a method that privileges first-person narrative, chronological recall, and reflective meaning-making to capture how business ownership style (BOS) develops through lived experience rather than retrospective abstraction (Denzin, 2017; Madden, 2022).

Data were generated through a series of in-person interviews conducted over an extended period spanning multiple years. Interviews were conversational but structured chronologically, allowing Yang Jianrong to recount key stages of his business life, including early informal trade, enterprise formation, industrial expansion, and civic leadership. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin, hand-transcribed, and translated into English. Minimal editorial intervention was applied in translation in order to preserve cadence, sequencing, and evaluative emphasis, consistent with ethnographic best practice (Madden, 2022).

Ethnography is employed in this study not as a cultural explanatory framework but as a methodological lens for examining how values, decision logics, and governance practices are enacted in everyday enterprise activity (Denzin, 2017). This approach enables the identification of BOS as an operational system grounded in repetition, accountability, and ethical consistency. As Argyres *et al.* (2020) and Suddaby *et al.* (2023) argue, historically and qualitatively informed inquiry is particularly suited to revealing governance mechanisms that remain invisible in cross-sectional or survey-based research.

The researcher's role was that of participant-observer and translator, maintaining a sustained relationship with the subject while deliberately avoiding interpretive embellishment. Researcher positionality was addressed through repeated verification of chronological events, cross-checking of operational and financial details, and retention of original narrative structure. This ensured analytical rigour while preserving the autonomy and voice of the interview subject (Denzin, 2017).

Consistent with BOS theory, this methodology allows leadership, entrepreneurship, and business ownership style to be analytically distinguished. Leadership is examined through decision authority, entrepreneurship through opportunity response, and BOS through stable patterns of ethical reasoning, hiring practice, accountability, and reciprocity evident across Yang Jianrong's enterprise history (Earley and Peterson, 2004; Sternberg and Grigorenko, 2006; Sternberg *et al.*, 2022).

Yang execution of four business owner style typologies

This life history presents the trajectory of Yang Jianrong, a Hui entrepreneur whose business development, governance ethics, and public leadership exemplify a distinct BOS rooted in

diligence, functional merit, and trust-based governance. His story adds substantial empirical weight to the study of business owner style among Hui entrepreneurs in post-reform China, a subject explored in previous fieldwork on Hui *zu* commercial networks in Ningxia (Interviewer and principal researcher).

The BOS embodied by Yang Jianrong offers a compelling framework for understanding informal business legitimacy in regional China. Yang's model defies the dominant stereotypes often associated with rural enterprises, which are usually dependent on familial ties, informal networks driven by obligation, and/or prestige. Instead, his trajectory aligns more closely with an Indigenous principle-based BOS rooted in task competence, reciprocal trust, and ethical independence. Even under social pressure, Yang's insistence on hiring by skill rather than kinship affirms the meritocratic bias often overlooked in Western readings of Chinese private enterprise.

When asked by a local elder why he had not offered jobs to distant relatives, Yang replied,

If they earn their place, they will find it. But this place is not given. It is built.

His use of precise accountability measures and refusal to mediate disputes using personal favour systems shows a conscious choice to separate professional judgment from social obligation.

Yang's use of return-ledger records, annotated transaction logs, and post-sale feedback summaries all point to a belief that transparency itself forms the basis of continuity.

If the books are clean, the hands stay clean,

He once said during an interview conducted in 2023. Notably, Yang's BOS also features what could be called reputational symmetry, which is a deliberate effort to ensure that his public conduct matches private standards. He refused to sign inflated vendor receipts, even when it cost him short-term procurement advantages. He declined bulk discounts if they required reducing staff wages.

These decisions were not performative. They were structural. He embedded BOS into Rongchang's operation rather than treating values as add-ons to the image. His leadership also reframed failure. Where conventional BOS models often emphasise risk-taking as a positive trait, Yang viewed stability and restitution as higher forms of resilience. He took responsibility for failed shipments, apologised to suppliers, and repaid partial amounts for cancelled contracts. One recurring pattern in his oral interviews was the phrase:

Loss teaches faster than profit. However, only if you answer it.

Yang's story provides a micro-case of sustainable private enterprise formation for scholars studying post-reform business systems in China. He relied neither on state protection nor clan networks. His business owner style was derived from patterns of repetition, including always being ethical, being on time, paying in full, avoiding verbal shortcuts, and preferring face-to-face negotiation over document-heavy formality.

His story also illustrates that business owner-style legitimacy does not always require institutional backing. Yang's trust capital was earned transaction by transaction. His civic leadership was not appointed but extended. His success rested not on inherited advantage or regulatory manipulation but on decision-making anchored in consistency, clarity, and visible fairness.

This style mirrors what BOS theorists describe as horizontal trust network agreements, where credibility is built not on lineage but on consistent outcomes. Yang's business path reflects four Business Owner Style typologies:

- (1) Capability-first hiring — selecting workers solely on functional suitability, regardless of kinship or background.

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- (2) Moral verticality — maintaining integrity even when economic decisions require personal sacrifice (e.g. repaying 300,000 yuan to herders to preserve the reputation)
 - (3) Network reciprocity — supporting peer enterprises through interest-free lending as a stability measure, not dominance.
 - (4) Servant leadership — his enduring role as village secretary demonstrates a governance style rooted in contribution, not hierarchy.

Unlike Western models, which distinguish between family business and commercial enterprise, Yang explicitly rejected nepotism, creating a corporate rule that barred shareholders' family members from working at Rongchang. This reinforces the Hui business owner style principle that trust is performance-based, not relational. His evolution from an informal trader to a vertically integrated industrialist aligns with the liberalisation timeline of China's reform era. Yang's actions consistently demonstrate a business-before-self logic: choosing to live modestly, refusing indulgence, and reinvesting success in shared infrastructure (roads, irrigation, job creation).

Yang's leadership also demonstrates practical innovation, transforming cashmere logistics by reducing fibre loss through the introduction of imported technology and forming joint ventures with domestic and international partners. His leadership confirms that the Hui Business ownership Style is based on traditional values that are becoming a part of modern norms it is adaptive, meritocratic, and ethically self-regulating.

Origins and early insights

Yang Jianrong was born in 1963 in Zhongqu Village, Lingwu County, Ningxia, a region shaped by arid plains and modest means. While not impoverished, his family survived on a combination of seasonal farming and livestock rearing. His father worked long hours in the fields, and his mother was known for stretching resources to feed the six family members in the household. Yang's first responsibilities included tending goats and fetching water from a communal well a kilometre away.

By age 10, he could patch clothing, weigh grain, and repair basic tools. These were not taught as chores but as essential tasks for everyone who contributed; otherwise, the system would fail. Despite limited schooling resources, Yang excelled in mental arithmetic. His teacher once noted that he could calculate grain weight faster than the school scale could settle. He was fascinated not by numbers but by the fairness they represented. A kilo was a kilo, no matter who held the scale.

He eventually enrolled in a vocational high school, where he studied technical maintenance. Upon graduation, he was assigned to a state-run agricultural depot. While the job offered stability, it quickly revealed to him the sluggishness of institutional processes. Inventory records were riddled with errors. Supplies sat unused while demand went unmet. What frustrated Yang most was not inefficiency but the lack of responsibility. Mistakes had no cost and improvement, no reward.

During this time, he observed private traders who visited the depot. They were quick-moving men with notebooks, direct language, and instincts for timing. They bought grain and animal feed at a discount and left within hours. They seemed to operate with fewer tools but a more explicit purpose. Yang noticed that while depot staff made excuses, the traders made margins.

First trade, first trust

By the mid-1980s, Yang had saved 1,500 yuan to buy a used Yuejin truck. He left his state post and began transporting agricultural goods between counties. One winter, he noticed herders in Haiyuan County selling raw cashmere at cut-rate prices. There were no local buyers, and the fibres risked spoilage. He purchased three bags and drove them to Lingwu. The profit was

small but clean. More importantly, the trade was fair on both sides. He returned to Haiyuan the next week, bringing cash, a scale, and string for bundling. He paid promptly and offered slightly better rates than those of local agents whose word had spread. By spring, herders were waiting for him with goods already weighed. Yang often said:

When they expect you to return, you've already succeeded.

That year, he travelled extensively across Ningxia and Inner Mongolia, sleeping in his truck, washing in streams, and loading cashmere with his own hands. He learned how to grade fibre by touch, smell adulterants, and identify cross-bred goats by coat feel alone. Herders trusted him because he returned debts quickly, refused bribes, and honoured prices even when the market dropped.

One incident defined his early reputation. A large shipment he brokered collapsed after the buyer defaulted. Most traders would have vanished. Instead, Yang returned to each village, explained the loss, and repaid what he could. He even sold personal possessions to cover partial debts. Years later, a village elder recalled: *"He paid less than owed but more than we expected. That is why we still trade with him."*

It was also during this period that Yang began keeping formal ledgers. He listed not just prices but each herder's name, family condition, and whether they had offered him tea or food. These were not just financial records; they were maps of relationships.

Loss, redemption, and structure

In the winter of 1991, a sharp downturn in the global cashmere market sent prices plummeting by 40%. Yang Jianrong, who had just expanded his network and invested heavily in inventory, was caught mid-cycle. He had taken short-term loans to finance larger seasonal purchases. When buyers withdrew and prices fell, he was left with unsold stock and debts he could not immediately cover. Other traders disappeared, some overnight, leaving herders and truckers unpaid.

But Yang did not run. He travelled from village to village, the ledger in hand, explaining what had happened. He apologised face to face. In some cases, he offered collateral. In others, he paid partial amounts from personal savings. Most remarkably, he sold his family's home to honour a 300,000-yuan debt:

If I disappear, I lose more than money, he told a friend. "I lose the right to return."

That crisis changed him. He began to document every transaction with obsessive care. He recorded not only prices but the quality of goods, the weather on the day of trade, and even whether an agreement had been sealed with a handshake or verbal promise. Trust remained central, but he no longer relied on memory alone. He turned trust into traceability.

In early 1992, a township official suggested Yang formalise his operations.:

We see you trading like a company. Why not register as one? they said.

After months of deliberation, he filed for a business license.

Rongchang Agriculture and Animal Husbandry Development Co., Ltd. was born in 1994, based in a borrowed adobe hall with basic weighing and sorting equipment. It had no signage, but the name was known. This marked Yang's transition from trader to enterprise builder. Yang invested in basic infrastructure: a fibre washing station, drying racks, and small carding machines.

He began employing local villagers, mostly elderly women, and youth, and trained them himself. He insisted on consistent quality standards and developed a local grading system tailored to Ningxia cashmere. During this time, he also rebuilt trust with banks and suppliers. Rather than avoid credit, he invited government agencies to review his books. He paid interest before it was due. When offered bribes for preferential access to raw materials, he refused:

If I owe someone money, I sleep on it. If someone owes me, I wait. That is how balance is kept.

By 1996, Rongchang had grown to include three fibre processing stations and a small warehouse. Though profits remained slim, Yang's reputation had solidified. Larger buyers returned not because he offered the lowest prices but because he delivered on his promises. That growth was not without setbacks. One season, a supplier delivered adulterated fibre. Yang absorbed the loss and personally replaced the defective batch before the buyer was aware of it. When asked why he did not pass the loss along, he replied:

Because I said it would be good.

These early years of formalisation taught Yang the value of systems, not just relationships. Trust, he learned, was strongest when backed by verifiable consistency. Legitimacy, he concluded, came not from paperwork but from being accountable when it mattered most.

Industrial growth and global exposure

By the late 1990s, Rongchang had outgrown its original space. Demand from regional buyers increased, and Yang Jianrong saw an opportunity to move beyond raw fibre trading into processing.

He invested in second-hand dehairing machines, drying tables, and rudimentary quality control equipment sourced from neighbouring provinces. The move was not without risk; several competitors had failed after overextending their operations. Yang mitigated this by avoiding loans and relying instead on reinvested profit and extended supplier terms negotiated personally. The new facility was located near a township transport artery. Though modest in design, it was functionally efficient. Yang personally oversaw layout planning, ventilation installation, and worker scheduling.

He continued to operate without a formal office, instead placing his desk near the packing line:

A leader should not sit further from the work than the raw fibre,

He told a visiting official. As Rongchang's capacity grew, so did its visibility. In 1999, a representative from a Jiangsu-based textile company visited unannounced. Impressed by the facility's cleanliness and staff discipline, they placed a small trial order. Yang fulfilled it early, including a detailed fibre specification sheet handwritten by his sorting manager. That single delivery led to a repeat contract five times the original volume. Over the next three years, Rongchang expanded to include fibre grading workshops, a dyeing room, and packaging units. Yang introduced monthly training sessions, developed an internal incentive structure, and delegated management roles to senior staff who had been trained under his mentorship. By 2003, Rongchang had supplied six provinces and received a municipal award for its ethical business practices.

Yang was cautious not to let growth erode integrity. When he discovered that a newly hired supervisor had falsified inspection logs to meet monthly quotas, Yang intervened personally. Rather than dismiss the supervisor outright, he called a whole team meeting. He re-graded the faulty batch in front of the floor staff and explained why compromised quality meant broken trust. The supervisor resigned the next day without being asked to do so.

At the same time, Yang had begun receiving inquiries from overseas buyers. He declined several early offers due to unclear terms or unbalanced risk. When he finally accepted an export partnership, it was with a Japanese intermediary known for strict standards. Yang travelled to Qingdao for training on international shipping requirements and implemented double-check systems for outbound batches. He later joked:

They taught me how to print labels, but I taught them why we weigh everything twice.

The pressure of international expectations was real. Fibre batches had to pass tests for moisture, purity, and tensile strength. In one instance, Rongchang's entire February output was held back due to a mislabelled container. Yang spent three days repackaging goods himself. He then created a colour-coded tagging system that reduced labelling errors by 80% in the following quarter. By 2005, Rongchang's name appeared in national trade directories. But for Yang, the measure of success remained internal. He was proudest not of export volumes but of retaining eighty-two percent of his original employees:

"A business can scale," he said, "but if your values shrink, the enterprise does too."

Civic Leadership and Rural Transformation By 2006, Yang Jianrong was no longer seen only as a businessperson. He had become a fixture in township affairs, often called upon to advise on economic planning, agricultural coordination, and infrastructure concerns. Without seeking office, he became one of the most influential civic figures in the district, a role earned through consistency rather than title. When severe flooding damaged rural roads in Lingwu's outer villages, Yang donated logistics support, fuel, and two trucks to help clear debris. He also supplied temporary fibre storage to affected herders, preventing what would have been devastating stock losses. One village leader remarked:

He acts before the meeting ends. Others talk as he loads his truck.

Yang also funded partial reconstruction of a local elementary school after a roof collapse. However, he refused to have his name added to the building plaque.

When offered recognition at a municipal event, he declined, requesting instead that the funds be used to purchase additional textbooks:

I am not doing it to be remembered. I am doing it so others can continue, he said.

In the years that followed, he was invited to join multiple advisory boards, including a provincial agricultural innovation committee and a local employment stabilisation council. He brought a direct, unpolished style to each meeting. While others proposed theoretical models, Yang provided handwritten notes, case-by-case financial breakdowns, and plain-language field reports. He pushed for policies that supported micro-enterprise finance, seasonal employment programs, and fair tendering systems for rural projects. Yet he remained wary of formality. He refused to accept a salary or compensation for his civic roles. When asked why, he responded: "*If you are paid to speak the truth, eventually you will not. Better to come freely and leave freely.*"

During the global financial crisis of 2008, many small textile suppliers in Ningxia laid off staff. Rongchang did not. Yang personally intervened to reassign workers from production to inventory reorganisation and packaging prep. He covered short-term payroll from reserve capital and deferred his own income for two quarters. These actions were not publicised; they became known only through worker testimony. When pressed on it, Yang said:

If the foundation shakes, the roof will fall. They are the foundation.

He also implemented a vocational trainee scheme in 2009. It partnered with a local technical college to provide practical experience for final-year students. Ten of those trainees eventually joined Rongchang as full-time staff. Several went on to supervise their departments, including finance, logistics, and international sales.

In 2011, after a period of sustained growth, Yang was nominated for a provincial award for business excellence. He accepted the invitation to attend the ceremony but sent his operations manager to receive the plaque on his behalf. In a private letter to the committee, he wrote: "If you honour one man, the others work in shadow. Honour the team, and they will move together." This posture, quietly effective, visibly humble, and grounded in BOS integrity, defined his approach to civic leadership. He never leveraged his status for contracts, never pressured officials for licences, and never allowed family members to benefit from his

company's public roles. His model was not one of institutional dominance but rather one of embedded trust. In the words of a county registrar:

Yang never held office. But his actions became policy.

Industrialisation and global exposure

Facing a crisis of liquidity and credibility, Yang Jianrong mortgaged his car and home to repay the 300,000 yuan owed to the herders, a defining act of honour in an unstable market. His decision not only preserved his name but also ensured his long-term survival in the business. A month later, on 16 June, a company in Bayannur League, Inner Mongolia, called at 10:00 p.m. Yang borrowed a car and drove overnight. His perseverance paid off.

The company inspected the high-grade cashmere and, upon learning the extent of Yang's risk, proposed a partnership. He would become their long-term supplier. The first transaction earned a modest 20,000 yuan, but more importantly, it marked the beginning of a reliable trade channel. Within a year, payments grew from hundreds of thousands to millions, enabling a structural transformation in Yang's operations. Yang played two essential roles: one as a cashmere seller, deeply familiar with supply regions, and the other as a logistics operator, with privileged access to China's top processors Ordos, King Deer, and Snow Lotus. But an insight gnawed at him.

Traders earned tens of thousands of yuan per ton. Processors, merely by washing and carding, earned hundreds or even millions. If he wanted to survive long-term, he had to move downstream.

In 1995, Yang initiated his most ambitious step: founding a carding and sorting factory in Chongxing Town. He rebuilt an old adobe hall using red bricks and launched Rongchang Agriculture and Animal Husbandry Development Co., Ltd., with seven carding machines and over forty workers. He was now an industrialist who was no longer dependent on market access alone but added value at the source. In September 1997, Yang flew for the first time dressed sharply, representing Ningxia's private entrepreneurs on a state-sponsored business delegation to Europe. His observations abroad in Paris, Manchester, and Milan had a profound impact on him. In Italian textile mills, the machinery's hum sounded to him like:

graceful singing.

He saw garments made from Chinese cashmere retailing for thousands of dollars in high-end boutiques. Seventy per cent of the raw material came from China, yet his: "*tofu factory*," he realised, earned only what others might spend on condiments. This moment of transnational comparison was profoundly enlightening: it informed Yang to the extent to which he needed to adapt to international markets to secure his enterprises future. He had seen the full extension of the cashmere value chain, from goat to runway. He returned home with a new ambition, no longer to survive but to grow strategically and with vision. This experience represented a paradigm shift for his indigenous enterprise.

Legacy, partnership, and national scale

The 15-day European business study tour in 1997 gave Yang Jianrong new clarity. For years, he had silently resented what he saw as the fault-finding tendencies of foreign clients.

But standing in Milan and Manchester, walking through factories with a century of accumulated excellence, he came to understand the gap and the opportunity:

"Compared to them," he reflected: "we are young. But one day, our cashmere will hang in these world-class stores."

On his return, he sent employees abroad for quality inspection and lab technician training. Though he jokingly referred to Rongchang as a “*tofu shop*,” he invested in capacity-building and international standards.

By 1997, his workshop in Zhongqu Village was too small for his ambitions. He acquired fifteen acres in Dongta Cashmere Industrial Park and built a 2,000 square-metre factory. By 2001, the expansion had occurred again. Monthly processing exceeded three million yuan, with annual output topping forty million yuan. Rongchang became the largest cashmere processor in Lingwu, and Yang emerged as a respected industrial leader. In December 2001, Yang gathered his six original colleagues and announced that Rongchang would become a joint-stock company, with shares distributed based on contribution and loyalty. As China entered the 21st century, his vision grew. In 2004, he invested three hundred million yuan in a new integrated factory with carding, weaving, dyeing, and finishing capabilities. He sourced equipment from Germany, Italy, the US, and Japan, blending international quality with domestic precision to solve industry-wide issues such as fibre damage during processing. What began as a simple wool-buying operation had evolved into an advanced processing enterprise grounded in experience, efficiency, and long-term trust.

Service, legacy, and moral responsibility

By 2007, Rongchang had reached a strategic peak. One of China’s leading cashmere brands, Ordos, formally partnered with Yang Jianrong to form the Ordos-Rongchang Garment Company, producing luxury fabrics in Lingwu. What had begun with Yang delivering goods to their loading dock 14 years earlier had now evolved into a peer partnership. “*Technology is in Rongchang*,” one Ordos executive said, “and as Chinese, we are proud of Rongchang.” In 2008, Yang launched his own ready-to-wear label, Lingwu Xue, a tribute to his birthplace. His motivation was not simply expansion but a desire to create value under a local identity.

Yang had long avoided formal public roles. However, in 1995, the party committee of Chongxing Town selected him to return as secretary of Zhongqu Village. He initially declined but was later persuaded by a personal visit from the deputy secretary and a pointed reminder from his father:

I had the right to serve. Now you have the means to serve.

His first act in office was to resolve the village road project. For over a decade, the path connecting nine village teams had remained unfinished due to conflict and a lack of funding. Yang volunteered to finance what government subsidies could not cover. Through negotiation and credibility, he persuaded villagers to allow the demolition of illegal structures and completed the work. His later projects included building a concrete irrigation canal and launching a microloan scheme for dairy cattle. These projects improved the quality of life, agriculture, and local income, all without pursuing personal gain. Yang’s return to public life was never about position. It was about responsibility. He did not seek power but could not ignore his role in shaping what came next.

Trust, Transformation, and Legacy Fulfilled.

Once plagued by dispute and delay, the 10.9 km rural road through Zhongqu Village was completed at a significant personal cost. On 20 October 1995, a city-wide ribbon-cutting ceremony was held, attended by township mayors, village heads, and the Party Secretary of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, a rare and symbolic gesture of state recognition. That day, even those who had scolded Yang lined up to shake his hand.

Next, Yang turned to water, resolving decades-old canal disputes that had pitted the team against each other during seasonal irrigation. He lobbied for government support, secured the cement, and personally funded labour and additional materials. The transformation of the earthen ditch into a modern concrete canal was completed in just two months. Then came his boldest move: in 1998, Yang guaranteed over six million yuan in bank loans from his company, enabling over four hundred farmers to invest in dairy cattle. Cows that cost 2,000 yuan in 1998

sold for over 6,000 yuan a year later. Yang created value not just for himself but for his entire community.

He rebuilt homes, sponsored disabled and mentally ill residents to live in dignity, reorganised the political structure, oversaw the formation of Zhongqu's general party branch, and gradually delegated operational leadership to preserve his energy while remaining a stabilising figure. In 2007, while on business in Qingdao, he received an urgent call: two village teams were in a deadlock over another canal repair. Upon arrival, Yang did not dictate terms; he asked for consent:

"Does my word count?" he asked. The assembly replied in unison: "Secretary, you have the final say."

The two teams handed him stakes and said:

Where you nail it, we accept it.

From a barefoot youth raised on maize husks to a respected business owner, and finally, to a trusted civic leader who mediated by moral authority, this was the legacy of Yang Jianrong.

Wisdom, Ethics, and Enduring Values In that defining moment, after decades of hardship and leadership, Yang Jianrong stood beside the freshly marked straight canal line and publicly accepted that something had shifted:

"Do you have any opinions?" he asked. "None," the crowd shouted. "Secretary, we follow you."

Tears came silently as he returned to his car.

"After more than ten years of dedication," he thought, "what more could I want in life?"

Today, the Rongchang Cashmere Group is a modern industrial complex. Its steel-framed buildings, vibrant gardens, and imported technology represent transformation. Yet Yang lives in the same modest house in Zhongqu Village, while wealthier acquaintances build villas in Lingwu and Yinchuan. He stays not out of nostalgia but out of conviction.

In 1997, he rebuilt six homes for families with disabled and mentally impaired members. He continues to provide seeds, fertiliser, and holiday support. He honours his promise not for recognition but because, as he quotes:

It is not difficult to do one good deed, but difficult to do good for a lifetime.

His son once asked for help buying a city home. Yang's reply was principled:

"A house should be bought with your money. Make a down payment, take a loan, and ask colleagues. That is how you learn." "You can help those struck by fate,"

He reasoned:

but not spoil those with strength.

For his children, loans came with terms. No indulgence, only reason. He believed:

"If you don't suffer hardship, it's hard to become strong." From a barefoot village youth to a respected entrepreneur and civic leader, Yang Jianrong's life reflects a rare confluence of wisdom, restraint, integrity, and purpose, the kind not taught but earned.

Roads not planned – an indigenous entrepreneur and adaptability

Not every milestone in Yang Jianrong's journey was calculated. Some of the most impactful chapters came unplanned, often born out of necessity or others' belief in him. One such moment came in 2003 when a fellow business owner approached him in desperation: their

logistics partner had collapsed mid-contract. With thousands of kilograms of raw cashmere stuck in transit, a bad season loomed.

Yang had just enough spare capacity, so he stepped in not for profit but to protect the supplier's reputation. He mobilised his trucks, lent staff, and helped recover the shipment:

"Business is not just what you make," he said later. "It is who stands with you when things fall."

That single action forged a partnership that lasted more than a decade.

He also acted as an unofficial mentor to younger traders. One of them, a man named Liu, had lost half a season's earnings in a pricing error. Rather than rebuke him, Yang brought him into his Lingwu workshop. He taught him sorting techniques and fibre grading. Liu eventually opened his facility and later became one of Yang's trusted suppliers. In another instance, in 2005, after Rongchang had grown significantly, a large buyer from Hebei visited and attempted to poach Yang's middle managers. The buyer promised better and easier hours. Yang convened the team that evening, saying,

If you want to go, I will bless you. But know this: We built this together, and if you stay, we continue together.

None left, not because of guilt but because of the loyalty he had earned over years of shared struggle.

Moments like these were not public; they never appeared in newspapers or award speeches, but they mattered. They were reminders for Yang that his leadership was not about titles or markets but about people, choices, and consistency in values.

Principles and family boundaries

In the final phase of his leadership, Yang Jianrong remained consistent with the values he had upheld for decades. Even as Rongchang became a core enterprise within the Lingwu Cashmere Industrial Park, he did not see himself as superior. He offered financial help to peer businesses during cash flow shortages, sometimes lending 10 to 20 million yuan without seeking repayment terms:

"No one succeeds alone," he said. "The development of Lingwu's cashmere industry is built on cooperation."

Yang established strict company rules from the outset: relatives of shareholders were not permitted to be employed at Rongchang. This rule applied to his own family. In 2004, his youngest daughter, trained in finance, completed a three-month internship at Rongchang and asked to stay. He refused, despite multiple requests, as his answer had remained the same:

You just work hard in the bank,

He told her. His son and daughter-in-law faced similar boundaries. When they could not find jobs after marriage, they opened a small village shop. Some in the family hoped this situation would change, but it did not:

"If my children work in society and earn positions through their own ability, which is what they deserve," he explained: "A company should be open to the best talent, not to family."

At home, his wife continues to farm their land and maintain the household despite the family's financial success. When asked why they did not move to the city or adopt a more comfortable lifestyle, she replied:

A Day in the fields is satisfying. I like it this way.

On 16 April 2009, in the Great Hall of the People, Ningxia, Yang Jianrong received the 2008 Ningxia Economic Figure Award. The event recognised his contributions to the region's

economy, industry, and society. From a single truck and 1,500 yuan, he had built one of the region's most respected private companies without ever compromising the values that had guided him since his youth.

The work no one sees: daily habits, routine decisions, and invisible leadership

Long before Yang Jianrong received any official recognition, his leadership was formed in daily repetition before factory buildings and branded garments. He was often the first to arrive and the last to leave. Even as the company grew, he inspected fibre at intake, running his fingers through the raw material to check for moisture, adulteration, and texture. He kept a stool next to the sorting floor:

The workers should see that I am not above them,

He once said. During winter, he carried hot tea to teams working near open doors. In summer, he distributed towels soaked in cold water. He maintained this practice well into his fifties.

His presence was not supervisory; it was part of the rhythm of the floor. Each evening, he would retreat to a small room behind the old Rongchang hall. There, he reviewed every sales slip, cost register, and loan record by lamplight, handwriting, cross-checking, and annotating. Even after the company transitioned to digital accounting, he required printed summaries and kept them in labelled folders on shelves he built himself.

Staff recall how he adjusted the payroll system to allow early wage release for workers with medical emergencies. One production worker remembered a time his wife needed surgery: *"Boss Yang did not just approve the advance,"* he said. *"He drove me to the hospital and waited until she came out of recovery."*

Yang never used an office separate from the rest of the team. He refused private drivers, flew economy, and once declined a paid hotel suite to sleep on-site after a machinery failure during production:

"If we fail an order, we don't just lose a client," he told the technicians. *"We lose trust."*

This was Yang's approach: to be visible, to bear responsibility silently, and to solve problems before they reached the surface. The work no one sees, the systems that held the business together were often of his own quiet making.

Concluding analysis: the value of a case study of the indigenous hui zu business owner style

The life story of Yang Jianrong provides a rare, grounded perspective on business ownership styles (BOS) within regional China. Through his decades-long entrepreneurial journey from humble and modest trade beginnings to national, International, and civic influence, Yang demonstrated that legitimacy and longevity do not require institutional privilege, cultural branding, or regulatory shortcutting. His model of business owner style, rooted in task accountability, ethical transparency, and relationship integrity, illustrates a repeatable pattern of success built from the bottom up.

Each phase of Yang's development reveals different facets of Hui's business ownership style principles. Survival was based on trust, effort, and punctuality in the early stages. As he transitioned to enterprise leadership, he institutionalised these values through operational systems, written ledgers, quality guarantees, and repayment honour. His refusal to use family ties as employment shortcuts, insistence on clean accounting, and preference for fairness over favour are not incidental; they are systemic choices that built longevity and reputation.

The latter stages of Yang's life underscore his business owner style civic and ethical weight. He absorbed shocks without passing them on, created jobs during downturns, and funded community infrastructure without seeking political reward. His invisible leadership, as outlined in this case study, offers a compelling counter-narrative to the dominant tropes of charismatic or

autocratic entrepreneurs. Yang's strength came from being consistently ordinary, present, prepared, and principled in every small act. This study reaffirms the value of life-history methods for business owner-style researchers in capturing grounded, longitudinal logic. Yang's story, delivered through literal translation, retains the original cadence of his reflections.

The absence of embellishment was deliberate, allowing the reader to encounter Yang's methods, ethics, and decisions in his own words. This preserves the subject's autonomy while demonstrating that business knowledge does not require Western vocabulary or institutional endorsement to hold value. In an era of performative entrepreneurship, Yang Jianrong's legacy presents a quiet yet effective model of operational excellence. His practices deserve study not because they are unique to Hui *zu* entrepreneurs but because they reveal a set of enterprise ethics applicable across communities: reward effort, honour promises, document relationships, and always return. These lessons remain relevant not just in Ningxia but in any economy where trust, time, and truth remain the foundations of commerce.

Implications for research, practice, and policy

This study offers several important implications for research, enterprise practice, and policy development. At a research level, it demonstrates the value of life-history ethnography and oral tradition for examining business ownership styles that unfold over long temporal horizons. The longitudinal nature of the data allows governance logic, ethical reasoning, and decision-making discipline to be observed as lived practice rather than inferred retrospectively. This approach is particularly relevant for studying enterprise systems that operate outside formal institutional frameworks or where written records are incomplete, fragmented, or absent. The case illustrates how business ownership style can be examined as a coherent system of behaviour, responsibility, and continuity rather than as a collection of personality traits or episodic entrepreneurial actions.

Methodologically, the study reinforces the importance of researcher proximity, trust-building, and repeated engagement when documenting Indigenous and informal enterprise systems. The reliance on extended one-on-one interviews and literal translation preserves the cadence and internal logic of the subject's reflections, allowing meaning to emerge through repetition, consistency, and narrative sequencing. This has implications for organisational ethnography more broadly, suggesting that life-history approaches are especially effective for capturing governance mechanisms that are transmitted through practice rather than formal instruction.

From a practical perspective, the case provides a grounded model of enterprise formation that challenges dominant assumptions about growth, leadership, and legitimacy. Yang Jianrong's business ownership style demonstrates that enterprise stability can be achieved through task-based merit, ethical discipline, and reciprocal accountability rather than through kinship networks, political alignment, or rapid expansion strategies. His refusal of nepotism, insistence on transparent accounting, and willingness to absorb loss to preserve trust offer practical lessons for entrepreneurs operating in volatile or resource-constrained environments. These practices illustrate how ethical restraint and operational consistency can function as competitive advantages rather than constraints.

The study also has implications for leadership development and organisational governance. Yang's approach reflects a form of servant-oriented leadership grounded in responsibility, visibility, and personal accountability. Leadership legitimacy in this case is not derived from formal authority or charisma but from consistent behaviour over time. This suggests that leadership education and enterprise training programs may benefit from greater emphasis on behavioural discipline, responsibility for outcomes, and the cultivation of trust through everyday decision-making rather than abstract leadership models.

At a policy level, the findings highlight the importance of recognising Indigenous and informal enterprise systems as sources of governance innovation rather than as deviations from formal economic norms. Yang's enterprise illustrates how ethical self-regulation, mutual

obligation, and long-horizon decision-making can support employment stability, regional development, and social cohesion without heavy reliance on external enforcement mechanisms. Policymakers seeking to promote entrepreneurship in decentralised or rural economies may benefit from supporting enterprise environments that reward continuity, accountability, and skill development rather than prioritising short-term growth metrics.

Overall, the study demonstrates that business ownership styles grounded in lived ethics, responsibility, and longitudinal practice offer viable and transferable insights for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers. By documenting one complete life-history trajectory, the paper shows how enterprise legitimacy can be built incrementally through conduct rather than conferred through status, identity, or institutional privilege.

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