

Business ownership styles (BOS) of Indigenous Hui entrepreneurs in Ningxia: an economic ethnological study through fieldwork in Ningxia, 2022–2023

Ian Austin  and Robert Anthony Brown 

School of Business and Law, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to investigate the business ownership style (BOS) of Indigenous Hui entrepreneurs in the Ningxia Autonomous Region of China as a distinctive system of ethical governance embedded within privately owned enterprise (POE) structures. This study examines how moral reasoning, oral tradition and community-based trust mechanisms become institutionalised as operational domestic and international business practices

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing upon ethnological fieldwork conducted between 2022 and 2024, including interviews, participant observation, oral testimony and student engagement across Ningxia, this study analyses Hui BOS as a historically grounded yet adaptive model of enterprise governance. The research integrates institutional analysis with ethnological inquiry to examine how Hui entrepreneurs sustain trust, legitimacy and resilience across contemporary market conditions.

Findings – The findings of this study demonstrate that Hui BOS operates through non-familial hiring, servant leadership, ethical reinvestment, mentorship-based capability development, oral trust networks and gradualist growth strategies. Rather than functioning as informal residual traditions, these practices operate as structured governance mechanisms that institutionalise ethical reasoning within enterprise operations. This study further demonstrates that Hui BOS contributes significantly to regional economic resilience, organisational continuity and stakeholder trust.

Research limitations/implications – The authors limit the academic research included in this paper to those work that specifically address the Hui BOS.

Practical implications – This study is conducted to develop a practical awareness of the Indigenous ethnic group BOS of the Hui peoples and in doing so breaking away from any monolith thinking in relation to Chinese business practice.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to international business and institutional theory by demonstrating how Indigenous governance systems can function as durable forms of organisational infrastructure. It extends existing scholarship on entrepreneurship, governance and institutional economics by evidencing how ethical principles become operational governance mechanisms within Indigenous POEs. This study positions Hui BOS as a transferable framework for understanding trust-based governance, sustainable enterprise and alternative models of economic modernity.

Keywords Hui *zu*, Business ownership style (BOS), Indigenous enterprise, Ningxia, Institutional governance, Forms of capitalism (moral), Ethical governance, Ethnological economics, International business, Trust-based governance

Paper type Research paper



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Introduction

Over the past half-century, global scholarship in international business, entrepreneurship and institutional economics has increasingly recognised that capitalism is not a singular or universally uniform system. Rather, enterprise systems emerge through diverse historical, social and moral trajectories shaped by localised governance structures, ethical reasoning and institutional traditions (North, 1990). Yet despite this growing recognition of heterogeneity, dominant business theory remains heavily anchored in Eurocentric assumptions concerning rationality, ownership, governance and legitimacy. Indigenous and regionally embedded enterprise systems continue to occupy a marginal position within mainstream international business scholarship, particularly those operating outside familial capitalism, state corporatism or Western regulatory models.

Within this context, the Hui *zu* community of China's Ningxia Autonomous Region presents a significant but underexamined case of Indigenous enterprise governance. Historically positioned along major commercial and caravan trade routes linking China with Central Asia, Hui entrepreneurs developed a distinctive business ownership style (BOS) grounded not primarily in kinship or bureaucratic hierarchy but in oral trust systems, ethical accountability, mentorship, reputational legitimacy and collective responsibility. These governance principles continue to shape contemporary Hui privately owned enterprises (POEs), despite extensive political, economic and technological transformation. This paper examines Hui BOS not as a cultural artefact or religious expression but as an adaptive and historically durable system of enterprise governance founded upon both domestic and historic international trade engagements. In doing so, this study contributes to a broader reconsideration of how Indigenous enterprise systems can inform international business theory, institutional economics and contemporary governance debates. Rather than treating morality as external to business efficiency, the Hui case demonstrates how ethical reasoning may function as organisational infrastructure, stabilising trust, reducing transaction uncertainty, strengthening stakeholder legitimacy and supporting long-term enterprise continuity. Drawing on ethnological fieldwork conducted between 2022 and 2024 across Yinchuan, Wuzhong and Zhongwei, including interviews, participant observation, oral testimony and engagement with students and enterprise stakeholders at Ningxia University, this study investigates how Hui BOS is transmitted, institutionalised and operationalised within contemporary enterprise settings. Particular attention is given to oral mentorship systems, non-familial hiring practices, servant leadership, ethical pricing, gradualist growth logic and trust-based commercial networks (Greenleaf, 1977).

This paper argues that Hui BOS represents a distinctive Indigenous governance model that challenges dominant assumptions within both Western entrepreneurship literature and mainstream Chinese business scholarship. Unlike many models of Chinese private enterprise rooted in kinship-based ownership or state-mediated legitimacy, Hui BOS institutionalises ethical reasoning through transparent accountability, participatory trust systems, mentorship structures and relational governance mechanisms. As such, the Hui case offers a theoretically significant framework for understanding how Indigenous systems of moral governance may contribute to sustainable and resilient enterprise development in contemporary global markets.

The following sections review the relevant literature on BOS, ethnological economics, Indigenous enterprise governance and relational ethics before outlining the methodological framework used in this study. Subsequent sections analyse the operational dimensions of Hui BOS, including oral trust systems, ethical reasoning, mentorship structures, gradualist growth logic and community-centred governance practices. The paper then considers the broader institutional, international business and governance implications arising from the

findings before concluding with reflections on theoretical contribution, policy relevance and future research directions.

Literature review

BOS has gained traction in the academic discourse on entrepreneurship, particularly in the context of ethnic and regional economic behaviour. Traditionally, entrepreneurship studies have drawn from Western capitalist paradigms, focusing on traits such as innovation, risk-taking and competitive advantage. However, [Zhou \(2004\)](#), [Lin \(2012\)](#) [Bruton et al. \(2018\)](#), [Jurado and Mika \(2023\)](#) and [Sui and Bull \(2026\)](#) represent a growing body of research literature that highlights the need to examine how local traditions, community structures and historical narratives shape alternative entrepreneurial logic work on ethnic entrepreneurship provides a foundational critique of homogenised business models, arguing that ethnicity, migration history and social capital are significant determinants of ownership styles. Similarly, [Chan \(2010\)](#) explores the concept of embeddedness in Chinese ethnic business networks, noting that many business owners operate not through formal legal systems but through dense relational networks grounded in shared norms. These studies resonate strongly with the case of Hui *zu* entrepreneurs in Ningxia who rely on oral trust networks and community legitimacy to manage risk and sustain operations. [Lin \(2012\)](#) further elaborates on the pluralistic nature of the Chinese economy, identifying how informal and regionally specific business systems co-exist with formal market institutions. He argues that to understand China's economic landscape, inclusive of its interaction with international actors, scholars must recognise the continuity of traditional values and hybrid systems. [Ma \(2021\)](#) and [Jurado and Mika \(2023\)](#) build on this by examining how ethnic identity interacts with regional development in China's western provinces. Their respective findings suggest that localised practices and values often conflict with centrally imposed economic models, requiring new frameworks for understanding regional Indigenous entrepreneurship.

In global terms, BOS is often viewed through legalistic or structural lenses – sole proprietorships, partnerships and corporations – but this approach overlooks the sociocultural logic that informs decision-making. [Ma \(2021\)](#) and [Anderson \(2020\)](#) found that the Hui BOS exemplifies what may be described as a “moral economy” where fairness, service and sustainability matter as much as profitability. The oral nature of Hui BOS transmission also draws on [Anderson's \(2020\)](#) concept of “imagined communities”, where identity and trust are constructed through narrative and shared symbols. Oral tradition has received little attention in business research, yet it remains a vital mechanism in many ethnic economies. Field-based studies ([Zhou, 2004](#)) suggest that storytelling (domestic and international in origin), mentorship and community guidance provide a pedagogical function similar to formal business education. In the case of Hui BOS, this tradition not only imparts operational knowledge but serves as an ethical compass and reputational regulator. [Bu et al. \(2024\)](#) states that this is often studied through religious or cultural frames. This paper instead follows the framework set by [Ma \(2021\)](#) in advocating for a purely economic reading of Hui entrepreneurial behaviour, focusing on structures, decisions and ethical logic without recourse to religious or ritual analysis. Such a lens helps isolate BOS as a standalone construct, making it more legible in comparative research.

A less examined but relevant lens is the field of ethnological economics, which brings together traditional history, oral memory and economic practice. Scholars such as [Eroglu Sager \(2021\)](#) and [Zhang and Czirakova \(2023\)](#) argue that economic rationality must be understood about the narratives communities talk about themselves. These insights are especially valuable in contexts like Ningxia, where economic life is deeply tied to family storytelling, social reputation and intergenerational mentoring. Finally, the literature

highlights the risks of applying top-down models to embedded economies (Zheng, 2021). Policy designs that fail to account for informal trust networks or oral business logic often erode more than they build. Training programs imposed by provincial governments have failed in Hui areas not because of content quality but because they clash with community mentoring systems. (Peredo, and McLean, 2020). This review positions Hui zu BOS as an alternative business logic deeply entwined with identity, trust and social memory. It establishes the intellectual groundwork for understanding BOS not as deviant from normativity but as normative within its community parameters.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative ethnological approach grounded in fieldwork conducted across Ningxia between June 2022 and February 2023. The chosen framework allowed the researcher to capture nuanced business ownership practices shaped by tradition, oral transmission and lived community values. Ethnology, in contrast to ethnography, emphasises comparison, synthesis and abstraction of observed behaviours to uncover patterns and principles across a cultural group – here applied to Hui entrepreneurs in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region.

Research design and field locations

Fieldwork was conducted across three counties: Yinchuan (the regional capital), Wuzhong and Zhongwei. These locations were chosen for their diversity in business scale, urban/rural contexts and generational variation in enterprise leadership. The businesses spanned sectors such as fresh produce distribution, halal food production, logistics and warehousing, construction supplies, textile retail and small-scale manufacturing. In all, 38 Hui business owners participated in the primary phase. They were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling ensuring variation across business age, ownership generation, gender and industry (Du and Costello, 2025). All participants self-identified as Hui and had operated businesses for at least five years.

Data collection tools

The data were gathered through:

Semi-structured interviews: Interviews lasted 45–90 min each, conducted in Mandarin or Ningxia dialect, with informed consent and anonymity guaranteed. Participants were asked about their business practices, ethical beliefs, hiring policies, decision-making processes and sources of domestic and international knowledge. *Participant observation:* The researcher shadowed six Hui businesses over extended sessions, observing work routines, staff interactions, customer engagement and supply chain management. Field notes focused on how values were enacted in real-time.

Reflexive journaling: It is a key methodological component. As a non-Hui outsider, the researcher maintained a continuous positional log of assumptions, interactions and power dynamics. *Student surveys and oral group discussions:* It was conducted at Ningxia University with more than 1,600 students (Hui and Han) who were business owners, employees in POEs or children of Hui zu entrepreneurs. The sessions provided intergenerational and comparative insight into evolving values and BOS expectations. No digital recordings were used, which was in line with community privacy norms. All notes and quotes were handwritten and later translated. Citations labelled Oral tradition (n.d.) reflects these anonymised conversations documented with participant permission and cross-checked through triangulation.

Inclusion of oral tradition

Central to this study's methodology is the elevation of oral tradition (OT) as a legitimate source of economic data. Economic knowledge is not primarily transmitted in Hui communities via institutional channels. Instead, it is shared in mentorship sessions, moral parables, family storytelling and street-corner case studies. (These same traditions are representative of those also exercised within other indigenous groups globally including First-Nations Australians and others but as previously stated the foci of this study is on the Hui *zu*.) Following [Zhang and Czirakova \(2023\)](#) and [Bu et al. \(2024\)](#), the research treated these oral texts as anecdotal and primary data on par with written archives or formal interviews. Participants repeatedly described mentorship from "Uncles" and senior community members as their real business education ([Huang and Sultan \(2014\)](#)). Values such as "do not cheat the street" or "if you lose face, you lose trade" were treated as axiomatic business truths, absorbed long before formal business training. In treating OT as data, the researcher captured a narrative-ethical worldview of entrepreneurship that remains underexamined in dominant BOS literature ([Hamilton, 1991](#); [Harrell, 2001](#); [Tsang, 2002](#); [Zhou, 2004](#); [Sun, 2005](#); [Chen, 2014](#) and [De Massis et al., 2018](#)).

Ethical clearance

This study received full ethics clearance from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the researcher's affiliated institution (an Australian university). All participants were informed of their rights and could withdraw anytime. No incentives were offered. Identifying information has been removed or modified in all quotations.

Methodological rationale

Ethnology was selected over ethnography for two reasons: first, it allows theoretical integration across multiple observations and community practices; second, it suits this study's ambition to identify principles of Hui BOS rather than provide just a descriptive snapshot of businesses. [Günel et al. \(2023\)](#) noted that ethnological methods suit studies where qualitative rigour must interface with lived tradition and comparative analysis.

This methodology offers a high-trust, low-intrusion model for fieldwork in ethnic regions of China where researchers must navigate community sensitivities, state surveillance and tight-knit community structures. The absence of digital recordings and the prioritisation of handwritten notes further underscored the project's grounding in Hui community norms, not just academic conventions.

Hui ethical reasoning in business

Hui *zu* business ownership in Ningxia is defined by its structural practices and an ethical logic embedded in oral tradition, interpersonal mentorship and community enforcement. These ethical norms govern pricing, hiring, negotiation, customer interaction and growth strategy. While Hui indigenous BOS shares some ethical elements with broader Chinese business practices (e.g. *mianzi* or "face"), its moral principles differ in origin and application, anchored more in traditional values, collective memory and moral storytelling (oral tradition) than institutional codification.

Relational ethics and "face"

In Hui BOS, *mianzi* "face" is not merely about social image or avoidance of shame. It represents one's integrity and long-term honour within the community. Breaking a promise, lying about costs or exploiting a client is a business error and an ethical betrayal that severs

one's name and damages a business's reputation. One distributor explained: "I may lose a sale today, but I will not lose my name. That name is everything to my business". ([Oral tradition, 2026](#)). This interpretation of mianzi "face" drives decisions like honouring verbal agreements even when market prices shift; the Hui business owner would advise the customer that there has been a change and requote the customer, rather than offering an inferior product, to deliver within the original price offering transparent receipts to customers and proactively communicating delays or shortages.

Mentorship and moral learning

The concept of Uncles elderly mentors, often not blood-related, is central to Hui business pedagogy ([Huang and Sultan, 2014](#)). Business values are taught through example, not instruction. A mid-level Hui logistics entrepreneur said: "The uncles showed us how to trade without cheating and treat your workers. They did not lecture. They lived it". ([Oral tradition, 2026](#)). This mentoring system functions as an informal code of conduct transmitted orally. Several participants mentioned being advised early in their careers to "earn your seat first, then speak", emphasising humility, observation and service as prerequisites to authority.

Fairness and price transparency

Participants frequently described pricing as a response to market signals and an exercise in fairness and moral transparency. Hui *zu* business owners explained that they often disclose supplier invoices to justify price increases, absorb minor cost fluctuations to retain client trust and openly explain pricing logic to long-term customers. One respondent shared: "If you explain your costs, people understand. They know you are not cheating them. Moreover, they will return." ([Oral tradition, 2026](#)). This ethic goes beyond the transaction. It is part of relational maintenance within the indigenous traditions. Customers are viewed as buyers and economic partners in a shared story of stability and trust. Value is derived from not only the product but also the perceived moral credibility of the seller. This aligns with broader theoretical understandings of trustworthiness in commerce ([Zhou, 2004](#); [Wang and Zhang, 2019](#)), where transparency, consistency and reputation underpin durable commercial relationships.

Skill-based, non-familial hiring

One striking finding from fieldwork is the rejection of nepotism. Hui entrepreneurs stressed that hiring based on kinship often compromises work discipline, quality and business image. A business owner in Wuzhong said: "Business needs ability, not family comfort. If you hire your cousin and he is lazy, people do not blame him—they blame me and my business." ([Oral tradition, 2026](#)). This preference for family employment derives from Han-dominated business models in the region, where family-first hiring is still common. Hui BOS's best practice is to employ the best people with professional accountability and diligence within social reputation.

Principled humility and calculated growth

In Hui BOS, modesty is considered a virtue, not in appearance, but in strategic planning. Participants rejected flashy displays of wealth, aggressive pricing tactics or fast expansion. Instead, they favoured what one factory manager called "slow certainty", investing only when reputational capital could absorb the risk. "There is shame in failing your workers or customers. Better to say no to a deal than regret it." ([Oral tradition, 2026](#)). External investors, state development planners and Western-trained economists often misunderstand this

strategic conservatism as a lack of ambition. (This misperception continues to see Indigenous people's rights denied to them by multinational enterprises and other outside actors who use the "lack of ambitious" moniker to justify resources exploitation: [Callinicos, 2024](#)) In truth, it reflects an ethical calculus that prioritises long-term trust over short-term gain.

Oral narratives as ethical enforcement

The moral economy of Hui BOS is sustained by collective memory. Stories of failed businesses, community betrayals or "good name" legends are widely circulated as parables. One fruit wholesaler stated: "People will talk if someone cheats a supplier or undercuts a neighbour. That story becomes a warning to others." ([Oral tradition, 2026](#)). In this sense, oral narratives function as both caution and encouragement. They shape communal norms by rewarding honesty and punishing deception, not through law but by reputation.

Findings and analysis

This section presents five core dimensions of Hui BOS in Ningxia, based on qualitative fieldwork, interviews and observational data collected across Yinchuan, Wuzhong and Zhongwei between June 2022 and February 2023. These findings are reinforced by triangulated insights from group interviews with students at Ningxia University, informal interactions with POE owners and narratives shared by the researcher, whom Professor Sun Jianzhong introduced, the then Dean of Ethnology at Ningxia University (www.nxu.edu.cn).

Orally sustained knowledge

Unlike business education systems grounded in textbooks or structured apprenticeships, Hui entrepreneurs acquire business acumen through oral tradition. Learning occurs informally via storytelling, watching elders and engaging with "Uncles", senior figures in the community known for business integrity. (Summary [Table 1](#); [Huang and Sultan, 2014](#)). One mid-tier construction supplier recounted: "I learned pricing, delivery scheduling, and negotiation by watching my neighbour for five years. No one taught me; I just watched, copied, and asked questions." ([Oral tradition, 2026](#)). Among the Ningxia University students surveyed informally, more than 75% of Hui respondents cited community mentorship or neighbour guidance as their most trusted future business knowledge despite their execution of formal education.

Table 1. Hui business ownership style dimensions

Dimension	Key features
Oral sustained knowledge	Learning through observation, mentorship, narrative, not formal instruction
Trust-based networks	Reliance on oral contracts, personal honour, reputation-based enforcement
Ethical value practices	Transparency, fairness and integrity are embedded in daily business operations
Community-centred decisions	Stakeholder impact considered before hiring, pricing or expanding
Gradualist growth logic	Preference for cautious, reinvested, low-risk growth rooted in long-term trust

Source(s): Author (2025)

Trust-based networks

In Hui indigenous BOS, legal contracts are often secondary to verbal agreements and personal honour (Summary [Table 1](#)). Trust is institutionalised through repeat interaction, reputation and business name. “You write the contract for outsiders. For Hui people, your word is your bond.” ([Oral tradition, 2026](#)). Triangulated findings from students and POE stakeholders confirm that suppliers extend credit based on personal networks rather than credit scores. Non-Hui participants (mostly Han) expressed surprise at the absence of written enforcement mechanisms, yet Hui owners consistently reported near-zero default rates when dealing with the community. This finding supports a long-standing argument: Hui BOS functions as an oral contract economy underpinned by social sanction.

Ethical value practices

Ethical reasoning in Hui BOS is not abstract. It is embodied in daily transactions (Summary [Table 1](#)). Key ethical behaviours include Price Transparency: Entrepreneurs openly share supplier invoices with customers to justify prices. Post-Sale Accountability: Returns and service issues are resolved without resistance. Product Integrity: Downgrading quality to cut costs is widely rejected. A textile wholesaler explained: “Profit that betrays trust is not real profit. It damages the future.” ([Oral tradition, 2026](#)). Fieldwork observation confirmed owners correcting underpayments and refusing to upsell unnecessary products. Integrity, not profit maximisation, is the axis of BOS ethics.

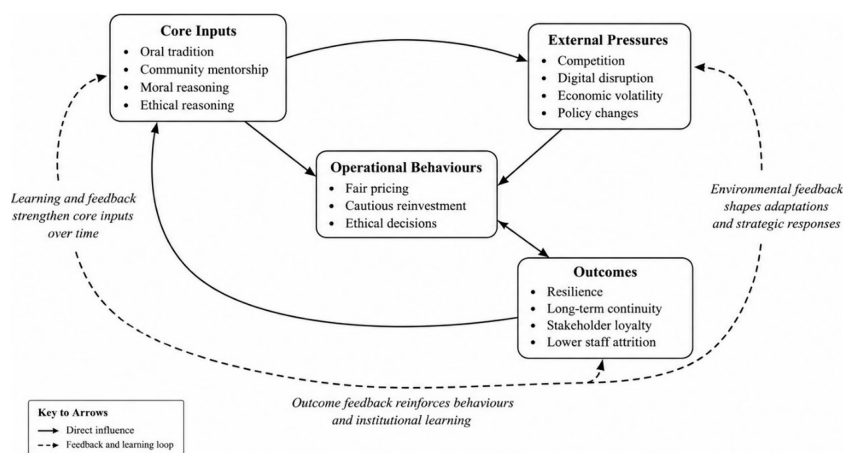
Community-centred decision-making

Strategic decisions (e.g. hiring, business relocation and vendor switching) are made not solely for operational efficiency but for their impact on community standing. Hui BOS is sensitive to reputational externalities and how one owner’s behaviour reflects on the street, market or neighbourhood. This is particularly evident in hiring (Summary [Table 1](#)). As previously stated, Hui businesses reject nepotism. Employers consistently emphasise skill and conduct, regardless of family ties. “Family comes to the house. Ability comes to the business.” ([Oral tradition, 2026](#)). This hiring ethic rejects nepotism, contrasting sharply with dominant Chinese family business models which favour kinship-based succession and internal hiring ([Tsang, 2002](#); [Chen, 2014](#)).

Gradualist growth logic

Hui business owners avoid debt-heavy expansion. Growth is financed through retained profits and reinvestment, usually over years, not the phenomena of short termism (Summary [Table 1](#)). Owners frequently cited cautionary tales of competitors who scaled too quickly and collapsed under debt or reputational damage ([Fan and Huang, 2019](#)). One appliance wholesaler shared: “I opened a second location after ten years, not two. I waited until the first could run without me. Then I hired someone who had already proven their integrity.” ([Oral tradition, 2026](#)). This approach aligns with what the Hui tradition calls collective prudence, a form of slow capitalism rooted in community accountability.

The below model ([Figure 1](#)) illustrates the internal logic and relational ecosystem of Hui *zu* BOS. Core inputs like oral tradition, community mentorship and ethical reasoning are visualised, feeding directly into operational behaviours like fair pricing, cautious reinvestment and trust-based supply chain agreements. These behaviours produce outcomes of resilience, long-term customer loyalty and low staff attrition, even under external pressures like digital disruption or economic volatility. The visual layout reflects Hui BOS’s cyclical and self-reinforcing nature: tradition informs practice, and successful practice reinforces tradition. Arrows in the diagram indicate not linear causality but interdependent feedback loops signalling a model based on relational continuity rather than competitive escalation.



Note: This model illustrates the internal logic and relational ecosystem of Hui Business Ownership Style (BOS). It is a dynamic system characterised by continuous learning, adaptation and ethical reasoning.

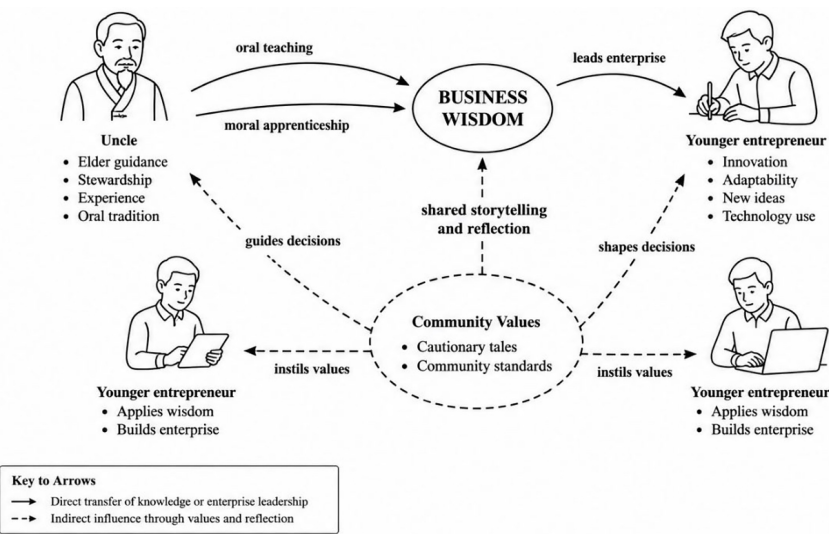
Figure 1. Hui business ownership style logic model

Source: Author (2025)

Figure 2 reveals how Hui BOS is transferred between generations of entrepreneurs through oral teaching, moral apprenticeship and lived examples rather than formal instruction or capital inheritance. Central to this process is the role of elder figures (Uncles) (Huang and Sultan, 2014), who serve as mentors, ethical anchors and narrators of BOS tradition. The diagram traces how narrative knowledge (not financial capital) moves through relational channels: observation, direct involvement and shared storytelling (domestic and international in origin). Value arrows show the passage of business wisdom, cautionary tales and community standards, reinforcing Hui BOS's ethical backbone across generational shifts. This intergenerational logic ensures the continuity of BOS values even as technology and markets evolve.

The below archival image (Figure 3), sourced from Ningxia University's Ethnological Archives, depicts Hui traders navigating the Eurasian trade and cultural route of the Silk Road. It visually anchors the Hui's commercial legacy and long-standing role as economic intermediaries across dynastic, geographic and cultural boundaries. Sources such as Gladney (1996), Harrell (2001) and Yang (2013) contextualise the economic and logistical roles played by Hui merchants in this corridor. The caravan's composition, marked by organised roles, cooperative structure and clear purpose, reflects early BOS values: collective coordination, role-based merit and mutual dependence. These caravans were not merely transport mechanisms but also mobile business systems operating with ethical codes, market intelligence and relational capital (Sun, 2020). This legacy persists in today's Hui enterprises, where BOS logic echoes caravan-era disciplines of adaptability, mutual trust and long-range planning (Ningxia Municipal Archives, 1928; Hui merchant caravan, Yinchuan trade route Ningxia Municipal Archives).

Together, these figures provide empirical grounding to qualitative findings in this manuscript. They highlight Hui BOS as a lived model and a statistically traceable economic phenomenon vital to regional stability and the evolution of ethnic enterprise in modern China. (Yinchuan's contemporary position as a critical logistics centre within the execution of the Belt and Road Initiative of the PRC government derives directly from its centuries-old role as a pan euro-Asian trading route and the role of the Hui in it.)

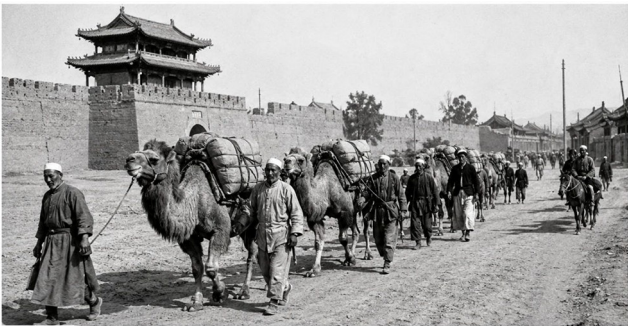


Note: This model illustrates how Hui Business Ownership Style (BOS) is transferred across generations through oral teaching, moral apprenticeship, shared storytelling and community values. It ensures continuity of business wisdom while allowing innovation and adaptation.

Figure 2. Intergenerational business ownership style transfer
Source: Author (2025)

Expanded student findings from Ningxia university

An important component of this study was integrating informal group data and semi-structured oral responses from the 1,600 students at Ningxia University. These students, most of whom identified as Hui and a smaller proportion as Han or other ethnicities, participated in open discussions and anonymous surveys on business ethics, employment practices and perceptions of business ownership across POEs in Ningxia.



This archival photograph captures a Hui merchant caravan transporting goods along the historic Yinchuan trade route in Ningxia (circa 1928). The image reflects the long-standing role of Hui merchants in regional and international trade networks linking China with Central Asia.

Figure 3. Hui merchant caravan, Yinchuan trade route (circa 1928)
Source: Author (2025); Ningxia Municipal Archives (1928)

The sessions, held between October 2022 and February 2023, were conducted in seminar halls and breakout groups facilitated by the researcher and coordinated through Professor Sun's Ethnology department at Ningxia University. Students were asked to reflect on their experiences working for Hui POEs or observing local Hui businesses within their families and communities. Themes were distilled using thematic coding and triangulated against the researcher's fieldwork interviews.

Three key patterns emerged:

- (1) *Hui BOS and ethical hiring*: Hui students overwhelmingly described business owners in their community as being merit-driven in hiring practices. They consistently reported that owners explicitly avoided nepotism, favouring candidates based on skills and reputation. Han students, by contrast, reported that family connection was a more common hiring criterion in non-Hui POEs.
- (2) *Servant leadership and community service*: Hui students frequently characterised their employers as "quiet leaders" or "helpers before bosses", reflecting the servant-leadership framework discussed in earlier sections. Bonuses, training and shared decision-making were described as common, reinforcing a participatory Hui business tradition.
- (3) *Profit sharing and training*: Around 22% of Hui students employed part-time in POEs stated they had received performance-based bonuses or been offered informal mentorship or training sessions. These findings align with the researcher's interview data and reinforce the BOS feature of bottom-up development and collective growth.

Students expressed pride in what they saw as an ethically distinctive Hui approach to business. Many framed their career goals around returning to Hui POEs or starting enterprises with similar principles of fairness, respect and diligence.

The qualitative data gathered through these student engagements provided validation and contextualisation of other fieldwork findings. The voices of these participants highlighted how BOS norms are enacted by senior business owners and actively absorbed, admired and perpetuated by younger generations. Professor Sun's Intellectual Legacy and Contribution to Hui BOS Professor Sun, former Dean of Ethnology at Ningxia University, was pivotal in facilitating this study and guiding its academic direction. His contributions extend beyond logistical support and into understanding Hui BOS through an ethnological lens. Having spent over three decades researching and publishing several books and papers on the Hui *zu*, Professor Sun has been instrumental in shifting the academic focus away from reductive narratives about religion or state policy and towards an integrated analysis of economic logic, oral history and local knowledge. His earlier work (Sun, 2005) on the Hui community, networks, traditional values and collective helped establish a foundation for this study on the tradition and modern indigenous POEs business. Through Professor Sun's mentorship, the researcher gained access to his significant student body at Ningxia University, many of whom were employees, stakeholders or heirs to Hui POEs. His endorsement of this study ensured trust from business owners and academic participants, enabling a rare degree of transparency during fieldwork.

Moreover, Professor Sun introduced the researcher to Yang Jianrong, a senior Hui entrepreneur who became a central case study in this research. Yang's life story, growing from a young boy within an impoverished community to becoming a trader to a regionally respected business owner, epitomised Hui BOS's intergenerational learning and ethical consistency. Without Professor Sun's introduction and continued dialogue with stakeholders, such a case study would have been challenging to contextualise with academic rigour.

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Professor Sun's legacy, therefore, is twofold: as a respected scholar who redefined how Hui ethnology behaviour is studied and as a bridge between academic inquiry and community engagement. His role in helping the researcher with this project was to affirm the importance of local scholarly leadership in preserving and interpreting indigenous economic systems.

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Discussion

This section interprets the findings of the Hui BOS in Ningxia through broader theoretical and applied lenses, addressing implications for entrepreneurship research, policy frameworks and regional economic development.

Business ownership style as adaptive traditionalism

The Hui BOS contradicts the standard binary between tradition and modernity. While traditional in its reliance on oral mentorship, trust-based contracts and reputational capital, it is neither regressive nor resistant to innovation. Hui entrepreneurs actively engage with modern tools like WeChat Pay, e-commerce platforms and supply-chain tracking but do so without abandoning foundational ethics. One younger Hui retailer stated: "Even online, people trust me because they know our business name means something." (Oral tradition, 2026). Rather than being disrupted by modernity Hui BOS adapts pragmatically, selecting technologies that reinforce, not replace, core relational structures. This validates the "adaptive traditionalism" lens proposed by Lin (2012) and is supported by field data.

Moral economy and relational ethics

Hui BOS exemplifies a moral economy. Pricing is not strictly based on market competition but is shaped by fairness, customer loyalty and community standing. The moral economy includes transparent dealings with buyers and suppliers, employment based on competence and integrity and risk management through slow, deliberate expansion. The literature supports this. Anderson (2020) frames such economies as guided by shared values and norms rather than institutional rules. Ma (2021) suggests that ethnic BOS systems are built not for short-term profit but for long-term relational capital, validated by Hui entrepreneurial decision-making.

Resilience without state support

Hui BOS is remarkably resilient and does not rely heavily on formal institutions. When asked how they deal with disputes, participants pointed to face-to-face negotiation, community elder mediation and reputational enforcement. One elder business owner in Zhong Wei explained: "If someone cheats, word spreads fast. No one works with them again. That is our court." (Oral tradition, 2026) This resilience is not incidental. It is systematic. Hui businesses build redundancy into networks through overlapping trust circles. In uncertain regulatory environments, such systems offer consistency and fairness without requiring state arbitration. Similar risk-buffering mechanisms have been observed in ethnic entrepreneurship more broadly where informal trust circles act as stabilisers in volatile or opaque institutional environments (Zhou, 2004; Harrell, 2001; Wang and Zhang, 2019).

Challenging Western business paradigms

Most global entrepreneurship theory still defaults to Western-centric norms: growth equals success, contracts equal legitimacy and individual innovation equals leadership. Hui BOS challenges this (Bruton et al., 2018). Its principles suggest:

- success = reputational continuity;
- contracts = oral trust, not legal text; and

- leadership = community stewardship, not individualism.

The Hui model, therefore, questions universal frameworks of “entrepreneurship” as defined in Western policy and research (Porter, 2008). Instead, it supports ethnological economic models where business forms reflect local cosmologies and kinship-based accountability (Jurado and Mika, 2023; Sui and Bull, 2026).

Policy misalignment and risks

Standardised business development programs often imposed through non-governmental organisations or government schemes fail in Ningxia. Entrepreneurs reported that: formal loan applications exclude those without family collateral, training modules lack relevance to lived Hui experience, regulatory models presume written records, not oral governance. As one participant remarked: “They want us to fill forms, but our business happens over tea, then fill out the forms.” (Oral tradition, 2026). This mismatch undermines policy outcomes. The key risk is that over-formalisation could displace effective informal systems, reducing resilience and losing BOS authenticity.

Intergenerational continuity

The BOS model also shows a strong generational handover. Unlike many traditional enterprises that collapse under succession, Hui businesses persist through embedded mentorship by respected elders (“Uncles”), deliberate training of youth in both trade and ethics, role modelling over instruction. One employee of a long-time spice merchant shared: “My father never sat me down to teach. I got a job with another Hui merchant who showed me. I worked next to him. I know what he expects.” (Oral tradition, 2026). This soft transfer process balances continuity with gradual reform. New entrants are taught how – and why – and not just what – to think, enabling BOS to evolve across time without losing identity.

Summary and synthesis

Hui BOS offers a compelling traditional and economically effective model of entrepreneurship that does not conform to dominant paradigms. It should be studied and supported on its terms not merely translated into frameworks built for vastly different traditional and institutional environments. Key features that make Hui BOS worthy of policy attention include oral-based resilience mechanisms that outperform formal institutions in crisis, ethical embeddedness that deters fraud and reinforces fairness, community-level strategic thinking that centres place, people and patience, resistance to over-scaling that protects businesses from collapse. Hui BOS shows that alternative logic can yield strong business performance and community wealth without sacrificing trust or tradition.

Contemporary pressures and business ownership style resilience

Despite its grounding in tradition, the Hui *zu* BOS in Ningxia has demonstrated strong resilience in the face of increasing modern pressures, economic, political, technological and social. This section unpacks these challenges and how Hui BOS has adapted while maintaining its ethical and relational integrity.

Economic volatility and inflationary pressure

Between 2020 and 2023, Hui business owners in Ningxia reported recurring difficulties because of rising logistics costs, supplier price fluctuations and customer affordability constraints. Inflationary pressure was felt acutely in industries like produce distribution and construction

supply. Instead of transferring these costs to customers through sharp price increases a standard market response, Hui entrepreneurs applied adaptive strategies including bulk-buying during low-price periods, pooling transport with neighbouring Hui businesses and explaining price changes transparently to customers. A vendor in Wuzhong explained: “I show them the supplier invoice. I told them what had changed. I ask if they still want it. This way, they know I am not cheating.” (Oral tradition, 2026). This transparent communication builds customer loyalty even when prices rise, reducing churn and preserving long-term revenue.

Digitalisation and technology gaps

Technology presents both opportunity and challenge for the Hui POEs. Older Hui entrepreneurs often struggle with e-commerce platforms, QR payment systems and inventory software. Trust-based and face-to-face business models make digitisation feel alien or unnecessary for many. However, younger Hui entrepreneurs are bridging this gap by adapting international digital tools to reinforce, not replace, Hui BOS logic, inclusive of WeChat groups used to maintain trusted customer bases, mini programs allow order tracking with personal notes, online promotions tailored to long-term clients, not the mass market. As one second-generation textile merchant explained: “I use WeChat to remind customers. Not to sell, but to stay in their minds. The trust is still from the business” (Oral tradition, 2026). This approach integrates digital tools as relational assets, not disruptive platforms. The Hui BOS adapts technology only when it supports existing indigenous values of service, trust and reputation.

Regulatory inconsistency and administrative pressure

Hui entrepreneurs in Ningxia frequently operate under uncertain local regulations. Interviews revealed experiences of sudden inspections without clear licensing expectations, contradictory tax advice from local vs provincial offices, discrimination or delayed service from bureaucrats unfamiliar with Hui informal systems. However, these conditions have strengthened internal BOS mechanisms. Community leaders share templates for official responses, bureaucratic coping strategies and advice on local officials’ expectations. This is often referred to as “community bureaucratic fluency.” While informal, it provides a layer of administrative navigation that substitutes for inconsistent institutional support. One small restaurant owner stated: “We provide training for everyone using this technology, so they know what is required to support our customers with best practices.” (Oral tradition, 2026).

Business ownership style integrity under pressure

Perhaps the most compelling insight is Hui entrepreneurs’ continued refusal to compromise core BOS principles even when competitors act unethically. Examples include refusal to raise prices during supply shortages, avoiding fake sales or misleading promotions and maintaining employment during temporary downturns. One logistics operator said: “My job is not just to sell. It is to be trusted. Trust cannot be repaired once broken.” (Oral tradition, 2026). This unwavering commitment to principle shows that Hui BOS is not merely a set of practices but also a philosophy a worldview of business grounded in ethical stewardship and intergenerational pride.

Summary: In the face of modern economic and institutional challenges, Hui BOS in Ningxia remains durable. Rather than fracture under pressure, it adapts strategically while preserving its ethical backbone. Hui BOS is a traditional model and a resilient and future-relevant system capable of thriving through relational capital, adaptability and deep community alignment.

Global context, institutional contribution and future directions

The broader significance of Hui BOS extends beyond regional ethnological observation and contributes directly to contemporary debates in international business, governance and institutional theory. Global capitalism is increasingly characterised by declining institutional trust, governance volatility, reputational fragility and growing concern regarding the limitations of compliance-based regulatory systems. Within this environment, Hui BOS offers an alternative governance logic in which ethical reasoning operates not as symbolic rhetoric, but as institutional infrastructure embedded within everyday enterprise practice. The findings presented in this study demonstrate that Hui entrepreneurs operationalise trust, accountability, mentorship, transparency and reputational stewardship through repeatable governance mechanisms rather than through informal or *ad hoc* social behaviour alone. In this respect, Hui BOS contributes to institutional theory by evidencing how moral principles can become formalised operational structures without losing their ethical substance. This process may be described as ethical institutionalisation: the transformation of community-based moral reasoning into durable organisational governance practice.

Such findings hold particular relevance for international business scholarship. Contemporary governance systems within global enterprise are frequently dependent upon external compliance structures, audit mechanisms and legal enforcement frameworks to maintain legitimacy. Hui BOS demonstrates a contrasting model in which legitimacy is internally generated through sustained ethical credibility and collective accountability. This does not imply the absence of formal regulation, but rather the coexistence of formal legal systems with deeply embedded relational governance.

The Hui case also contributes to Indigenous entrepreneurship scholarship by challenging assumptions that Indigenous enterprise systems are necessarily familial, informal, small-scale or incompatible with modern economic complexity. Hui BOS instead demonstrates that Indigenous enterprise systems may sustain competitive POEs while preserving community legitimacy, operational continuity and adaptive resilience across multiple generations. Importantly, this study also contributes to emerging global discussions surrounding environmental, social and governance (ESG) governance, sustainable enterprise and stakeholder capitalism. Many of the practices observed among Hui entrepreneurs, including ethical transparency, long-term stewardship, participatory accountability, mentorship-based capability development and community-centred decision-making, closely align with contemporary international governance priorities. However, unlike externally imposed ESG frameworks, Hui BOS internalises these principles as lived operational expectations grounded in collective memory, oral transmission and reputational continuity.

From an institutional perspective, the findings extend the work of [North \(1990\)](#), [Ostrom \(1990\)](#) and subsequent institutional theorists by demonstrating that informal norms may evolve into stable governance systems capable of sustaining economic legitimacy across changing political and market environments. Hui BOS, therefore, represents not merely an Indigenous business tradition but also a functioning example of adaptive moral governance operating within a modern transitional economy. Future research may extend this work comparatively across other Indigenous and hybrid enterprise systems globally, including cooperative economies, relational governance models and conscience-based enterprise systems operating across Asia, the Middle East and Indigenous communities elsewhere. Quantitative studies may further explore the measurable relationship between ethical governance mechanisms and enterprise resilience, employee retention, stakeholder trust and reputational sustainability.

Ultimately, the Hui BOS demonstrates that sustainable enterprise may emerge through not only technological sophistication or regulatory compliance but also the disciplined

institutionalisation of ethical reasoning within everyday organisational life. In this respect, Hui BOS contributes to a broader rethinking of international business governance in an increasingly uncertain global economy.

Internationalisation of hui business ownership style (BOS)

The Hui BOS, grounded in relational ethics and sustained by oral tradition, offers a compelling model for internationalisation in the context of transnational business engagement. According to oral testimony and regional interviews, Hui POEs generate approximately 70.7bn RMB (around AU\$12bn), accounting for nearly half of Ningxia's private-sector gross domestic product ([Oral tradition, 2026](#)). Hui entrepreneurs in Ningxia already exhibit several characteristics conducive to global enterprise. Fieldwork conducted indicates that Hui businesses have already engaged in cross-border logistics and supply chains. Internationalisation in this context suggests an expansion of Hui BOS into global markets through the same ethical and community-based practices that have defined its local operations ([Zweig, 2002](#)). Furthermore, the Hui BOS emphasis on ethical stewardship aligns closely with global trends towards responsible capitalism in the form of contemporary ESG ([Tsang, Frost and Cao, 2023](#)), compliance and socially embedded entrepreneurship ([Jurado and Mika, 2023](#); [Sui and Bull, 2026](#)). For example, younger Hui entrepreneurs use e-commerce platforms to build trust-based export channels for halal food, textiles and artisanal goods critical to international markets that respect provenance, story and authenticity. However, challenges remain. Overcoming language barriers, geopolitical risk and the complexity of navigating foreign legal systems will require institutional support, tailored training and the development of trusted cross-border partnerships rooted in shared values.

Conclusion

This study has examined the BOS of Indigenous Hui entrepreneurs in Ningxia as a historically durable and ethically grounded system of enterprise governance operating within contemporary POEs. Through ethnological fieldwork, participant observation, oral testimony and institutional analysis, the research has demonstrated that Hui BOS is neither an informal residual tradition nor a culturally isolated economic practice. Rather, it represents an adaptive governance architecture in which ethical reasoning becomes operational infrastructure embedded within everyday business practice.

The findings identified five interrelated dimensions underpinning Hui BOS: orally sustained knowledge systems, trust-based commercial networks, ethical value practices, community-centred decision-making and gradualist growth logic. Collectively, these dimensions generate a governance model based on reputational legitimacy, mentorship, accountability, transparency and long-term relational continuity. Such mechanisms allow Hui enterprises to maintain resilience across changing market, technological and institutional environments while preserving internal ethical coherence.

Importantly, this study challenges dominant assumptions within both Western entrepreneurship literature and mainstream Chinese business scholarship. Whereas many conventional enterprise models prioritise rapid expansion, contractual formalism and individualistic leadership, Hui BOS demonstrates an alternative rationality grounded in ethical stewardship, collective responsibility and operational trust. Similarly, the findings complicate prevailing assumptions that Chinese private enterprise is primarily structured through kinship-based ownership or state-mediated legitimacy. Hui BOS instead evidences a non-familial Indigenous enterprise model sustained through merit-based participation, oral mentorship and relational accountability.

This study also contributes theoretically to international business and institutional governance scholarship. The Hui case demonstrates how moral reasoning may become institutionalised within organisational structures through repeatable governance mechanisms, thereby transforming ethical principles into practical systems of enterprise management. In this respect, Hui BOS provides empirical evidence that trust, conscience and moral legitimacy may operate as measurable forms of organisational capital rather than merely symbolic or cultural values. At a broader level, the findings suggest that Indigenous enterprise systems have the capacity to contribute meaningfully to contemporary global governance debates concerning sustainability, resilience, ESG accountability and stakeholder legitimacy. Hui BOS illustrates that long-term enterprise continuity may be strengthened not by abandoning ethical obligations to market efficiency but by embedding ethical reasoning directly into the operational structure of enterprise itself.

Ultimately, this paper argues that Hui BOS represents more than a regional business tradition. It offers a transferable framework for understanding how Indigenous governance systems may sustain resilient, adaptive and ethically grounded enterprise within an increasingly uncertain global economy. The enduring lesson of Hui BOS is, therefore, clear: domestic and international enterprise achieves legitimacy and continuity when ethical reasoning becomes governance infrastructure.

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Corresponding author

Ian Austin can be contacted at: i.austin@ecu.edu.au