

Losses and gains to the anthropological soul

As an anthropologist, I recently found myself at a disadvantage while applying for funding from a government organization; another academic from the field of marketing and economic research, clearly had the upper hand in this case. Both of us were looking at the preferences of consumers in a specific country for a certain kind of commodity. The funder's goal is to help the industry, and it was evident that the market researcher would be their first choice. I see two major reasons for this.

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Top: Two kinds of tea leaves, processed in different ways and originating from different areas in Yunnan, China. Photo by Jinghong Zhang

Time and questions

First, for a similar project, a market researcher demands less time than an anthropologist. When the former might ask for just one year of funding, the latter hopes to get at least two years. In fact, a two-year research is still very tight for an anthropologist, who usually would prefer at least twelve months of fieldwork, especially if the research is a new area. A market researcher is likely to declare that within one year,

he or she is able to send two reports to the funding authority, publish one referred journal article and release one trade magazine article. An anthropologist, even with a much reduced fieldwork, will still be analyzing field notes or drafting a paper, by the end of the first year. Information collected from informants needs to be 'translated' from concrete forms into abstract concepts.

Second, market researchers and anthropologists ask a different set of questions. The former asks 'what', and the latter asks 'how' and 'why'. When the former asks, for instance, 'what' products are favored by female consumers, or, on 'what' occasions do consumers tend to spend more money on the purchasing of products, the latter asks 'how' the social and cultural changes influence the purchasing preferences of female consumers, or, 'why' it matters that purchasing happens frequently at one time and space, rather than another.

By discovering the 'what', and with a little bit of an explanation, a market researcher will offer specific research results, to be used by the relevant industry immediately and directly. Many questions raised by anthropologists or other social science researchers, however, could sound over-intellectual to the policy makers and the industry. Funding assessors regularly question anthropological proposals, and wonder how the research can be 'translated' into policy for the industry. Namely, even though you provide 'why' and 'how', then 'what'? The anthropologist, if given the chance to respond, would answer: without exploring sufficient cultural contexts, namely the 'how' and 'why', the discovered 'what' could be wrong.

Pragmatic solutions or open interpretations

Relatively speaking, marketing research delivers practical guidance, whereas anthropological research offers alternative ways of thinking and of identifying new questions. Anthropologists are more concerned with understanding the fundamental cultural background behind a phenomenon, rather than hastily declaring the discovery of a truth or a fact concerning the phenomenon. In fact, anthropologists often refrain altogether from stating any truths or facts. They choose instead to present information provided by informants, analyze the general meanings revealed, leave it otherwise open for interpretation, and maintain the readers' right to discern truth or falsehood.

Unfortunately, this approach rarely attracts research grants that expect pragmatic solutions and quick benefits. Policymakers and industry people don't enjoy indirect suggestions and would rather not bother with interpreting meanings themselves. In addition, government funding for academic research around the world has seen drastic cuts and the situation has resulted in many organizations turning to the world of business and industry, who regrettably demand direct benefits and swift outcomes.

Under these circumstances, anthropologists and other social scientists are forced to compromise; changing their tone of writing and ways of asking questions. More and more, anthropologists imitate the ways of market research; for example, quoting numbers and using diagrams to disclose 'facts', and stating objectives as directly as possible. In other words, anthropologists are having to translate anthropological ideas into practical guides that are appreciated by policymakers and the industry. There are perhaps advantages to this transformation of knowledge; it will encourage anthropologists to explain profound theories in straight language. Yet the problem remains that anthropological applicants have to demonstrate absolute benefits to the industry before starting the actual investigation. Understanding 'how and why consumers choose a product' becomes less important than 'how to encourage consumers to choose the product'.

Making it apply

If an anthropologist nevertheless still intends to receive such a grant, his or her research must have a strong applied aspect. If it is a linkage project, the anthropologist will work with a partner investigator from the industry. This cooperation provides useful assistance to the anthropological investigation, but perhaps also generates a lot of aggravation due to the divergence between the industrial and anthropological interests. The soul of anthropology—avoiding truth and falsehood judgments, opening doors for interpretation, and critically reflecting—is somehow lost.

However, upon finishing the applied research, an anthropologist may have the chance to win back his or her anthropological soul. The process of interacting with industry partners provides interesting cases and data for the researcher to reflect upon and analyze. The anthropologist needs to conduct another translation of knowledge: the practical guidance offered to the industry back into anthropological thoughts and cultural critique. The only uncertainty, however, lies in whether such reflections could be published as it involves the privacy of the industry partners.

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36 FROM MY OWN Thai study experience, I hope to advocate the interculturality between foreign anthropologists and indigenous anthropologists, which could be an important part of the overseas ethno-graphy. Indigenous scholars are spokesmen for their own society and culture, so their life experience, political viewpoints and academic perspective are the social facts which overseas ethnography should represent. On the other hand, the academic exchange between foreign anthropologists and indigenous scholars will form equal dialogue relationship, which leads to rethinking of authoritative discourse in the anthropology discipline and constitutes the necessary epistemological background for the overseas ethnographical practice. Valuing inside perspective, forming multi-perspectives and promoting interculturality are the basis of building the identity of world anthropology.

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ONE OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES for research in 'Asian Studies' today is to avoid the hype associated with the rhetoric of the 'Rise of Asia' or the 'Asian Century'. In today's academic environment scholars are increasingly pressured to generate research funding. Career trajectories are significantly determined by institutional and national research audits, many of which (as is the case with the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF)) explicitly assess research 'impact' beyond academia. Under such a system the temptation can be to prioritise the financial value of our research on Asia and to present it as contributing primarily to national or regional goals in the areas of foreign policy, trade, economic engagement or cultural understanding. As scholars of Asia we must stand ready to defend our research – especially that which is curiosity-driven, theoretical or which involves working with/on marginalised, remote or subaltern populations – from the tendency to regard us primarily as 'knowledge workers' whose worth is our skills in shaping the outside's engagement with Asia or Asia's engagement with the flows of global capital and culture. The potential for our research to be skewed, even compromised, by the demands of the corporatist university and neoliberal, results-oriented funding and regulatory frameworks is all too real. We must protect 'Asian Studies' (even as we critique the very concept of Asia and Asian-ness) from those who would like to see it develop into a discipline whose primary roles are to act as the servant of state and corporate interests and to facilitate particular global and inter-regional architectures of security, commerce, finance, diplomacy and trade.

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THE VARIOUS WORKS from Asian studies researchers culminate to a better understanding of a world in the past and the present world we live in. Some Asian countries have progressed rapidly within decades and it is important for scholars to capture that change and give meaning to the phenomenon that is happening. The new Asia scholars increasingly make use of technology in their work. The common use of social media and e-publishing make it easier for these scholars to exchange ideas and publish them online. There is also an increasing trend of cross-disciplinary studies. Technology has provided quick and sometimes, instant, flow of information which can be a challenge for scholars to discern the facts from opinions. Could the time spent in front of the screen be better spent at a library, museum or an archive?

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