The Fruits of Business Anthropology in China (Book Review)

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This (*Business Anthropology: New Progress in China*. By Chen Gang and Tian Guang. North American Business Press, 2022) is an exciting compilation of ethnographies in Western China by the authors and their colleagues. But "exciting" is probably not the first reaction that surfaces in looking only at the chapter titles – roads, food service, NGOs, and entrepreneurs are topics that seem likely to arouse little interest except to those whose research lies in these areas. Likewise female smokers, border markets, urban-rural relations, and stone pot chicken may appear to be eccentric topics at first glance. But the talented ethnographers who conducted this research and wrote these chapters are able to deftly develop their topics and to make them come alive. They then step back and allow us to contemplate the broader significance of the patterns of business and consumer behavior that they have discovered. They show how changes hailed as modernization are affecting several of China's 55 ethnic minorities and their engagement with Han Chinese and foreigners from Vietnam, Korea, Laos, and Myanmar. In one case they are able to step even farther back and contrast Asian and African time styles and business styles and to use the chapter to comment on China's soft power and its Belt and Road initiative in Africa.

This is not to say that any of these chapters are the final word on minorities, the Western provinces, or their engagement with economic development. This is part of an evolving story. Nor is it possible to foresee the future and imagine all the long-term consequences of the changes that have occurred since the time of the ethnographies. Part of the beauty of these chapters is that they detail ordinary and everyday activities like eating, travelling, touring, and bargaining in places where Han Chinese as well as foreign visitors may find their Other. But this strength is also a weakness. By detailing certain practices, other practices are necessarily missed. For example, by focusing on Klu-Nang stone pot chicken from Tibet, the authors miss considering the more ubiquitous Tibetan momo, tsampa, and butter tea as well as considering the impact of Chinese foods on Tibetan cuisine (Wu and Chee-beng 2001; Wu and Cheung 2002). Similarly, the ethnographic chapters on ethnic minorities in the Western China province of Yunnan and the Tibetan Autonomous Region, could have provided more background on the controversies regarding China and its ethnic minorities to put this material in a broader contemporary and historical context (e.g., Dillon 2018; Roberts 2020; Zang 2016). And in the welcome chapter on China's joint project to build a glass factory in Botswana, there might have been more critical attention brought to China's Belt and Road initiative and how it is changing business and consumer life in Africa (e.g., French 2015).

But ethnographies are not intended to be broad social commentaries. Furthermore, as Chinese citizens, the authors may be somewhat circumspect in what they say and how they say it. For example, in commenting on China's Cultural Revolution in Chapter 1, they note that it "…had many unfortunate consequences and today is regretted by most Chinese." After this momentous understatement, the remainder of the initial chapter is a very nice history of business anthropology in China. This is part of an effort in restoring anthropology in China after a long hiatus – an effort in which Chen and Tian have played a prominent part. They also credit a handful of other business anthropologists located in China and abroad

who are doing research in China. They note, for example the work of Yan (1996) on gift-giving in China, although they might have also noted the work of Yang (1994) and Joy (2001). At stake here are issues involving the continuum of guanxi reciprocal relations and when they are used for benign social purposes versus predatory coercive purposes. This is also an issue raised by Polanyi (1945) as the "fictitious commodities" of land, labor, and money became commodities for sale during the enclosure movement and the rise of proto capitalism in Europe. The issues are not quite the same in bringing marketization to the ethnic minorities of Western China (Fowler, Chu, and Fowler 2020), but there are some similarities. At issue is whether bringing large scale commodification to the economies of China's ethnic minorities is necessarily a good thing as Shi (1989) proposed. And is opposing such change merely a romanticism that tries to freeze minority lives in the past? In their introductory chapter the authors don't take a stand on this issue, and it is better assessed in the specific ethnographies summarized in the book's remaining chapters.

Chapter 2 sets the tone for much of the remainder of the book by highlighting the relative absence of the COVID pandemic in the rural areas of Western China. It also sets the tone by romanticizing rural China as being pure and relatively free from the impurity of urban China. This is an old theme in Chinese history, literature, and, by the first half of the twentieth century, film (Lee 1999). The city was depicted as dank and evil, and the countryside was seen as free and good. In the treaty port foreign concessions of old Shanghai, the city was also an important site of Western consumer culture:

> The modern Chinese understanding of the "city," whether in terms of consumer culture, municipal administration, lifestyles, career opportunities, or political participation, was largely fashioned in Shanghai. Over the course of the twentieth century, the city has been alternately branded as China's pride and shame, a place of infinite glamour and unequalled squalor. These contrasting constructions said less about the conditions in the city than Shanghai's primary strategic significance in the never-ending contest between countryside and the city (Yeh 2007: 5).

Yeh (2007) shows how the city not only organized spaces as urban multistoried buildings and rural parks, but also organized time as the world of urban corporate time clocks versus the timeless rural countryside. Of course, this imagery can be reversed, and the city can be seen as modern, sophisticated, safe, and "the country's best defense against the hopelessness of the countryside (Yeh 2007: 119). Nor are these contrasting images of urban and rural life unique to China (Seabrook 2007; Williams 1975). The two are also interdependent. The city depends on the resources of the countryside, including its human resources in the form of immigrants and migrant workers. And like the relationship between economically less and more developed countries, the countryside exports raw materials and imports developed goods from the city, perpetuating an exploitative imbalance.

Rural support was also essential to Mao's rise to power in revolutionary China (Averill 2002). This was symbolically important as well as strategic. During the Cultural Revolution the countryside was not only a place of re-education, but also of purification in the Down to the Countryside Movement (Brown 2012; Tsang 2021). Thus, China's move to modernize the Western provinces and bring the benefits of highways, trains, airports, tourism, and economic development to rural areas and the ethnic minorities who live there, can also be seen as a loss of another way of life, including language, culture, self-sufficiency, and tradition. But it is more complicated than this, as the careful ethnographies of the present book reveal.

In Chapter 3 the authors draw on the work of Fei, Skinner, and even Braudel to describe how peasant markets work as a point of contact with cities and the Other. The Other in this case in Yunnan's border areas includes people from Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar. Traders on both sides of the border often speak multiple languages because of their proximity and a long history of contact. In addition, socializing and drinking together is common after trading. That is, the exchanges are traditionally extra-economic and include socializing as well. The authors also note that relatives are often chosen as favored trade partners, and they may be given a good price or even be given goods for free. Thus, the boundary between market exchange and sharing may be fuzzy (Belk 2010). This can potentially become a problem if it threatens the viability of the business. In remote Australian Aboriginal community stores, European clerks are preferred because they have no local relatives to whom they would be expected to show favoritism (Belk, Groves,

and Askergaard 2000). A further change, discussed more fully in Chapter is that with the completion of the Dulongjiang Road the isolation of the region from November to May when snow blocks the mountain pass has been circumvented. Chen and Tian report in this chapter that while rapid development and urbanization has changed some of the traditional times and spaces of border markets in Yunnan, the markets continue to function as a point of contact between urban and rural China.

Besides increased year-round physical contact with city dwellers, most towns and villages in Yunnan now have access to electricity, television, cell phones, and the internet. Since these things quickly became the new normal, it is easy to under-estimate their impact. In rural India, Tenhunen (2018) found that a similar simultaneous explosion of electricity and electronics led to better price information on agricultural produce, better access to medical care, empowerment of women, more love marriages versus arranged marriages, and greater empowerment of the young and educated. Similarly in Eastern Europe after communism, although some of the nepotism and patronage favoritism that were needed to survive under communism continued (Ledeneva 2017), there were more subtle changes that were emancipatory. They included the new availability of hair care, perfumes, deodorants, soap, toothpaste, underwear, pantyhose, lingerie, and sanitary napkins (Drakulić 1991). Although these seem like superfluous things (Clunas 2001/2004), it is precisely such superfluous things that can make a profound difference in how people feel about themselves. Nevertheless, the Eastern European situation was one of pent-up demand for products what had been the desired forbidden fruit for many years. We long to know more in the case of rural Yunnan about what was desired and how elements of "foreign" cultures were received. Some of the fruits of development may be rotten or may be desirable, but poisonous.

Chen and Tian also observe that with the loss of rural population as more people move to the city for employment (legally or illegally), the social life of the plaza where people socialized, played, and were entertained on market days has largely disappeared except for a few old people who were left behind. I suspect this was also exacerbated as people cloistered themselves indoors to watch television or communicate with now distant loved ones via WeChat. The authors also lament the decline or disappearance of ethnic holidays and festivals, but in the same breath they observe the growth of cultural tourism in Yunnan. Paradoxically such tourism has helped to preserve some of these cultural celebrations, but at a cost. Likewise, the authors end the chapter by listing some of the concomitant costs of the rationalization and modernization of markets in rural Yunnan: counterfeits, smuggled cigarettes, drugs, pornography, gambling machines, and rampant AIDS. One thing that would be of help here is a timeline. These ethnographies were conducted over a period of years, and some are more recent than others. Since costs and benefits change over time, it would be good to know the years covered by the different chapters.

Chapter 4 is a general account of the tunnel that was created under the mountain that separated the Dulong minority from the rest of China. While the new highway shortens the distance by only 16 kilometers, it shortens the driving time from 9 hours to 3. Moreover, it lengthens the driving season from 6 months to 12. The tunnel and highway were completed in 2014 and 2015 respectively and a team of Yunnan University faculty and graduate students began their ethnography in 2016. There were major landslides in 2017 and the highway along with another highway in progress to Tibet were closed until 2019 when Dulong valley was reopened to a limited number of tourists.

The research team also conducted a ethnography, that is, a study of social media posts (Kozinets 2019) on Baidu, CNKI, and other internet sources. Their report in this chapter is limited to descriptive statistics. Key among them is that the villages in the Dulong Valley and it's 4300 residents now have highways, electricity, running water, telephone, internet, radio and television. The Dulong are also known as the tattoo face people and the village studied, Longyuan, had 558 villagers living at 1800 meters above sea level. With the opening of the valley, it became a hot spot for both tourism and ethnographic research. The Shanghai government provided funds for construction of brick houses to replace the wood and bamboo traditional houses that housed family on the second floor with livestock below. The new houses have five bedrooms and pigs in back. Government efforts also helped to shift local people away from agriculture and into serving the tourist trade.

Among the other changes detected by the research team are that families no longer socialize outside; they are instead indoors occupied with TV, phones, and the internet. With all of these changes happening

in a short period of time, disruption of traditional ways of living are inevitable. The authors report that previously the low grain production in the high-altitude valley restricted alcohol production, but now cheap alcohol comes in by the truckload. As a result, alcohol abuse has risen, and some villages are thinking of banning it (c.f., Groves and Belk 2001). Besides the decline in outdoor socializing, the dead are no longer buried near the family house, even though as Christians and animists the Dulong believe that spirits are everywhere and affect the family's well-being.

There are no doubt other changes not reported in this brief chapter. One thing hinted at is the ironic duality of the Chinese government trying to modernize the Dulong by opening them up to the outside world and introducing a market-based economy on one hand and trying to capitalize on the sensational "primitive" image that is such a tourist draw on the other hand. Llamas and Belk (2011) found something similar in ethnic minority villages of Yunnan, Old Towns like Shangri La (Dukezong) and Lijiang, and Chinese "folk culture villages" in Kunming, Shenzhen, and Hainan. These locales have all been reconfigured for tourism—primarily Chinese, but global tourists as well. Museums have been built, local performances of ethnicity have been staged, hotels built, and tourist attractions like the world's largest prayer wheel have been built. Monasteries destroyed in the Cultural Revolution have also been rebuilt, but for touristic rather than religious purposes. Buddhist iconography like Dharma Wheels, Tibetan thangkas, and chortens have been appropriated and used as part of the décor of the hotels, museums, and airport terminals. Souvenir stands and ethnic restaurants abound. Yet the bulk of the revenues go to Han Chinese rather than local minority members. When much of the thousand-year-old Old Town of Kukezong went up in flames in 2014 it was rebuilt to appear authentically old, but with modern fire-resistant materials. Like the tourist performances by actors in ethnic dress, the appearance is all-important, even at the price of authenticity. Moreover, the expected disruptions of local life and authority to touristification, commoditization, and marketization emerged in these places as well (Belk and Costa 1995; Chaudhuri and Belk 2020). The authors of the present book detail some sch changes and note, for instance, that Dulong residents of the newly constructed Longyuan find that it feels crowded and that the noise at night keeps them awake. Their former ability to commune with their ancestors has also been interrupted by the distance of the new village from their buried remains. But Chen and Tian conclude that the Dulong are doing their best to cope with the cultural changes imposed upon them, even at the cost of some suicides and conversions to Christianity.

In Chapter 5, Chen and Tian detail the role of ethnic entrepreneurs in four dispersed Chinese cities: Hohhot, Shenzhen, Kunming, and Qingdao. They also examine six ethnic groups: Dai, Hui, Yi, Bai, Mongolian, and Korean. The ethnic migrants to these cities comprise the "floating urban minorities." Hui migrants to Kunming have become dominant in cattle ranches and beef and mutton are processed in their slaughter facility. Food, domestic service, healthcare, manufacturing, entertainment, cleaning services, and commercial trade are other dominant specialties with some variation between the ethnicities and among the cities studied. They also describe how when Mongolian food is served to Han Chinese the restaurant must add Han spices. This is similar to the adaptations of "Chinese" food in its diaspora to other cultures (Wu and Chee-beng 2001; Wu and Cheung 2002).

These are the minority group members who have gone to the city to seek their fortunes. They concentrate in ethnic enclaves within the cities and rely on networks of help, capital, and information. The authors characterize the more successful urban minority groups as enacting either a family "beehive" model, an ethnic "beehive," or a value-chain "beehive." In each case they are led by a "queen bee" who is a "king without a crown." Similar patterns have been observed among international migrants as well, although Western treatments tend to emphasize issues of migrant identity (e.g., Halter 2000; Rapport and Dawson 1998; Tharp 2001).

Chapter 6 is an interesting chapter about cigarette smoking among the females in some of the ethnic minorities in Yunnan province. There is an interesting backstory that could compliment this chapter. It involves the anti-American and anti-Japanese boycotts of the first three decades of the twentieth century (Zhao and Belk 2008). BAT (British American Tobacco) was so successful in introducing its cigarette brands to China that tobacco was called "the opium of the twentieth century" (Wood, 1998: 197). It faced no serious local competition until the Nanyang brothers assembled a similar array of brands. Nanyang also played the nationalism card in promoting the fact that BAT was American. This worked until BAT

discovered that one of the Nanyang brothers had taken up Japanese citizenship in order to sell cigarettes there. Then, in an ironic advertising reversal, BAT announced that it should be the choice of good Chinese citizens because Nanyang was in league with the enemy.

Chen and Tian discovered that the reason for more ethnic minority women smoking than men, is partly due to belonging to cultures, (e.g., the Lahu people), with more equal gender rights. Han women, who are more influenced by patriarchal Confucian ideology, wouldn't dare to smoke. The same is true of Miao women who can't eat with their husband's family members or even go upstairs where these in-laws live. Secondly, there is a pragmatic reason the ethnography found, in that smoking helped prevent mosquito bites for women who work in the fields 12 hours a day. For those women who smoke, the authors found that apart from their addiction, smoking is "a way to release their sorrows," We are reminded of Richard Klein's (1993) witty tribute, *Cigarettes are Sublime.*

In Chapter 7, the authors examine surviving historical brands that have become classics. They focus on five classic foods in Shantou, some of which have won coveted state recognition. All are among the twenty-plus foodservice enterprises designated as classic brands by the local tourism bureau and the local social sciences association. Branded goods may have originated in prehistoric China and some surviving brands of Chinese medicines, scissors, and other consumer goods have histories that go back hundreds of years (Eckhardt and Bengtsson 2010; Hamilton and Lai 1989; Pinheiro-Machado 2010; Wengrow 2008).

In the case of the classic brand foods and their restaurants in Shantou, their fame is sufficient to draw both locals and tourists. All current proprietors were previously "hated capitalist roaders" and were sent to the countryside for "re-education." They had learned hard work and discipline and put in long hours and a no-frills/no-waste approach that now serves them well in their restaurants. Buddhism is the dominant religion in Shantou and based on Buddhist compassion, one owner gives food to beggars and others in need at 11:00 am each day. These and other practices like rejecting innovation fly in the face of brand management principles taught in marketing texts and classes. But the passion that these entrepreneurs suggest that good food, sincerity, and authenticity may well trump corporate marketing principles.

Chapter 8 asks "Will the reduction of the Party-State control in China give rise to a genuine civil society?" There are several factors working on behalf of the growth of NGOs and civil society building in China. There are many holes in the Chinese social support system and as one result there are demands for workers' rights, consumers' rights, and environmental protections.

The chapter distinguishes Western and Chinese civil society organizations by noting for example that many Western NGOs were in founded by religious organizations and that there was less need for Chinese NGOs under Mao's "iron rice bowl" in which state-owned enterprises and collectives offered complete care for those who worked for them. Different types of current Chinese NGOs are described, from those that serve common interests like qigong meditation to the many earthquake relief organizations that sprang up following the Wenchuan earthquake just before the 2008 Beijing summer Olympics.

In Chapter 9 Chen and Tian return to a full ethnography with a highly insightful study of a failed attempt to create a Sino-African glass factory in Botswana. They attribute the failure in large part to the different temporal orientations of the two countries. Time is a precious commodity in East Asia and is not something to be wasted. People are early for appointments and are proud to meet deadlines and even finish ahead of time. Not so in sub-Saharan Africa where "African time" means a much more seemingly casual approach to life and, arguably, a "better" work-life balance.

The ethnography is also a reality check on how China's Belt and Road initiative is going in Africa where China has made huge investments. Besides a clash of work cultures there were other important differences between the Botswanan and Chinese sides of the business. They include different technological infrastructures, different political models, different levels of "corruption," and differences in state-ownership versus privately owned business ventures. Disruptions in funding and timing problems also led to a stop-and-go construction schedule. Ultimately the project was aborted, and the assets of the glass factory were auctioned off. All of this occurred amidst a swirl of rumors, as there was no media investigation in Botswana. The chapter provides an excellent cultural deconstruction of this failed bi-cultural construction project.

Chapter 10 finishes the book with an ethnographic account of the commercialization of Tibetan “Klu-Nang Stone Pot Chicken” in the city of Ninychi, Tibet. The resulting restaurants serve not only locals, but an increasing number of tourists who are drawn by the fame of the city’s stone pot chicken. In the authors’ analysis this case is a microcosm of “Tibet’s economic modernization.” As such, it serves as a fitting conclusion for the book. It allows a comparison of the costs and benefits of replacing indigenous culture with a commodified tourist culture and of integrating Tibetan and Han cultures. Hopefully the reader will ask what is gained and what is lost in such commercialization, cultural dilution, and touristification (e.g., see Bruner 2005; Chaudhuri and Belk 2020; Davis and Monk 2007; Desmond 1999; Llamas and Belk 2011; MacCannell 1976; Sheller and Urry 2004).

The stone pots for stone pot chicken were carved from relatively soft steatite found in area mountains. The pots allow cooking at altitude at high temperatures which would otherwise require a pressure cooker. The Tibetan chickens are a special breed that can endure the altitude and winter cold. Tibetan herbs are also used to give a special flavor to stone pot chicken and the rock transfers minerals that are good for health. The covered pot idea borrowed from hot pot cooking in Chongqing. The once-handmade pots are now produced by machines, chicken farming has been corporatized, and there is a chicken abattoir to supply chickens to the 30 restaurants and hundreds of hotels and inns in Ninychi that serve stone pot chicken. The success of these ventures has also spawned the breeding of Tibetan pigs, forest crops, and organic vegetables. Agricultural technology has also become more sophisticated, and acres of greenhouses extend the growing season. In July of 2019 when the ethnography was conducted there were 124 stone pot chicken stores in the urban area of Ninychi. The added tourist accommodations and attractions added jobs and injected money into the local economy. While all of this sounds good, the new jobs may be lower level while Han Chinese, both local and distant, own the in facilities and likely extract larger profits and enjoy more senior executive positions. Ownership structure and revenue extraction were not examined in this ethnography however, so this is a guess based on research elsewhere in Tibet and Yunnan (Llamas and Belk 2011).

The ethnography does detail that Yellow Sect Buddhist’s have had to make some concessions to allow killing and eating of meat during the holy month of April (Tibetan calendar) since they previously were not allowed to kill or eat meat nor to sell stone pot chicken during this time. This is not the first time or place where religious practices have changed to accommodate commercial interests; consider European business openings on weekends for example.

The final chapter also touches on the experience of eating Klu-Nang stone pot chicken. It recognizes that memory is embodied, and that food and fragrance memories are powerful in evoking broader experiences as Proust (1996) found with petit Madelines and lime blossom tea and as others have found more broadly (e.g., Banerji 2006; Falk1994; Holtzman 2009; Howes 2005; Lupton 1996). Chen and Tian echo that “food [itself is] a kind of memory.

CONCLUSION

If there was a need to demonstrate the fruits of business anthropology, while also contributing to the small but growing literature of this small but growing discipline, this if the volume that will serve that need. The hope is that these fruits will now plant their seeds throughout the world, especially among those interested in Chinese consumer and producer interaction. I hope that this book is translated into Chinese as well and can serve as a bridge between Chinese- and English-speaking researchers.

As a pan-cultural book focusing on Southwest China, this volume provides a tantalizing glimpse into a controversial economic development plan for minorities by the Chinese government. The plan is demonstrably lifting people out of what appears to be poverty by some common metric. But this same development has provoked concerns, especially concerning once-isolated minorities and their strong religious practices and beliefs. This book goes some way in evaluating the results of this drive for harmony. Furthermore, it demonstrates the power of business anthropology to take on broader concerns regarding minority representation, harmonization processes, the Belt and Road initiative, touristification, and more. To me and I hope to you as well, it is an excellent provocation.

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