

Traditional Economies and Mainstream Alternatives: Business Anthropology Looks at Dong Tree Farming

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ABSTRACT Business anthropology typically deals with the modern world. -In an era when economic intrusions from outsiders are increasingly impacting rural areas and indigenous people, however, a focus upon small scale societies is increasingly needed. -As an example of this issue, social and economic aspects of tree farming among the Dong (an ethnic minority of China) are discussed. In an era when many rural and indigenous peoples are being impacted by the outside business strategies, this type of example points to an important role for business anthropology.

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly the impact of culture upon economic strategies and tactics is being recognized. As a result, fields such as business anthropology are arising as important sources of information regarding customers, partners, and regions. This paper discusses a representative example of this emerging reality, focusing upon the Dong of Western China. Long known as rice farmers, some members of this *ethnic minority* (the Chinese word for an indigenous people) reorganised their economic life around tree farming within a cash economy. This economic shift allowed the Dong to take advantage of a unique economic and ecological niche.

Based upon the advice of mainstream economic planners in the mid-20th century, however, the Dong were forced to comply with a range of governmental mandates that failed to take their adaptations and economic strategies into account. These mandates undercut the Dong way of life and means of production, resulting in unintended and unanticipated hardship. These events are discussed as an example of problems that business anthropologists can help prevent.

BUSINESS ANTHROPOLOGY

Business anthropology, increasingly accepted as an established business discipline (Jordan 2003; Malefyt 2009; Tian et al. 2013), provides strategic insights as well as advice regarding

demographic variations, ethnic differences, and cultural distinctiveness (Schwartz 1991; Walle 2013.) Most of the work of business anthropology, thus far, has concentrated upon people who are functioning within a mainstream environment. Gwynne (2003), for example, emphasizes that business anthropology is typically employed by private sector organizations that are pursuing the profit motive.

In an era when business increasingly deals with indigenous peoples and rural ethnic enclaves, however, the need to deal with a wider range of subjects and situations is growing. Because business anthropologists already focus upon the fact that people are typically linked by traditions, beliefs, world views, and so forth, analyzing distinctive cultural patterns is a mainstay of the field (Kotter 1991; Reeves-Ellington 1999). In general, business anthropologists deal with business organizations as somewhat (but not completely) analogous to a “culture” and they embrace and adjust anthropological methods to deal with them.

The need to employ the full range of anthropological methods within the sphere of economic development is increasingly recognized by business anthropologists (Tian 2011). A recent call to do so is found within Alf Walle’s *Rethinking Business Anthropology: Cultural Strategies in Marketing and Management* (2013) that includes a four chapter segment regarding business anthropology and the developing world.

Walle observes that business anthropologists possess the tools and perspectives that

are needed to help rural groups and indigenous people (such as the ethnic minorities of China) to more effectively interact with the outside world in situations involving economic development and, perhaps, the introduction of a market economy.

Those who deal with distinctive populations need to remember that the models provided by neoclassical economics and mainstream business strategies may not be appropriate when evaluating and providing advice to those who live in small scale, non-industrial societies. The economic life of many such people, for example, tends to be intimately connected to webs of obligation and sentiment that are created by their cultural heritage. Their economic behaviour needs to be interpreted from within such a context (Walle 2013: 169-180.)

On many occasions, governments and outside organizations seek to develop and implement policies and strategies involving these traditional populations. When proper understanding and care is not exhibited, hurtful, adversarial relationships and counterproductive tactics can easily result. An alternative is for governments and other outsiders to collaborate with local communities as partners in culturally sensitive ways. Business anthropologists have a role in helping to facilitate these positive relationships.

As a result, the broader range of tools offered by anthropology can be of great service when equitable and effective strategies regarding economic development especially when these options require local people to give up long established methods that have evolved over many years and might be usefully nested within the ecological and economic environments.

Perhaps by examining the situations faced by the Dong, business anthropologists can gain useful perspectives regarding how to help decision makers avoid counterproductive economic and social decisions. This example is based, in large part, upon the work of Chinese economic anthropologist Kanglong Luo and is reworked here with reference aspects of the work of Chinese economic anthropologist Tingshuo Yang.

WHO ARE THE DONG?

The Dong people (currently numbering approximately 3 million) are a recognized ethnic minority of China, primarily living the Guizhou section in the Western region of the country. Some widely known facts about the Dong are

presented below: Historically, the Dong people were organized around the clan system with village elders serving as community leaders (although from 1911 until 1949, the elders were replaced by village heads). As is also the case of another Chinese ethnic minority (the Mosou), the Dong once embraced a matrilineal kinship system (in which recognized relationships pass through the mother.)

As with many indigenous people throughout the world, many Dong have migrated to urban areas, often intermarrying with other groups, and, in the process, diluting their culture. Paralleling numerous other indigenous peoples in similar situations, the Dong are actively working to preserve and strengthen their traditional language and heritage. These initiatives have met with a degree of success. Increasingly, tourism is emerging as an industry that supplements the income of many Dong. The people are widely known for their colorful festivals and bull fighting performances that attract outside visitors and help to maintain the heritage of the Dong while simultaneously earning tourism revenues.

Historically, the Dong were primarily rice farmers pursuing a subsistence way of life. Many are still involved with the form of agriculture. Eventually some Dong began tree farms (an agricultural activity requiring years for a crop to mature.) This paper deals with these Dong tree farmers and their economic life.

The Tree Farm Strategy

As indicated above, the Dong were originally rice farmers who lived in the richer low lands and primarily grew rice in a subsistence manner. (Today, many Dong communities continue to be known for the strains of rice they grow.) Eventually, however, some Dong moved into the less fertile hill country and began tree farming.

This economic activity is distinctive from rice farming in several ways including:

1. *The long period of growth.*
2. *Large farming area required*
3. *A "closed" system of land management*
4. *The need for market exchange*

Each of these issues will be briefly discussed.

Long Period of Growth

In rice farming, at least one crop is grown a year. Growing 2 crops of rice is often possible,

but allowing the fields to sit idle for part of the year facilitates the livestock industry and, as a result, the one crop option is often more advantageous than the two crop alternative. In either case, harvests and the resulting economic infusion occur frequently (on an annual or biannual basis). Ten years of growth, in contrast, are typically required for trees to mature although selective breeding has established some species that can be harvested in 8 years. As a result of the slowness of production, the farmers have much land, effort, and capital tied up in trees, many of which have a harvest date far in the future.

By carefully staggering the planting time, however, it is possible to have multiple stands of trees allowing some to mature and be harvested every year. Doing so can provide an annual cash crop of trees as long as no stands have been destroyed by fire, disease, or have been harvested early. Of course, new trees need to be planted each year in order to maintain this endless cycle. If replanting occurs, an annual harvest can continue indefinitely in a sustainable fashion. Over the years of trial and error, the Dong evolved an economic system that was effective, productive, and efficient.

Large Farming Area Required

In order for tree farming to be viable, a large area must be put under cultivation and it must be systematically controlled by those involved with the industry. Rice farming, in contrast, can be pursued by individuals who maintain their own small plots of land and farm them in an idiosyncratic manner. As a result, rice farming does not require collective coordination and cooperation. When the Dong began tree farming, however, they had to establish a means of farming large areas. As a result, mechanisms and traditions arose that achieve these goals. This can be viewed as an adaptation to the new economic system and as an adjustment from the old rice-growing era.

A "Closed System" of Land Management

Because tree farming requires large stretches of land, efforts had to be taken to insure that nothing disrupts this system of collective land management. As a result of these needs, tree farming emerged as a collective clan activity. If plots

of land could be sold to outsiders on the open market, for example, the ability of the clan to conduct efficient tree farming could be placed in jeopardy because a "checkerboard" of ownership could result. As a result of this hurtful potential, methods were needed to prevent the land from falling outside of clan control. This was facilitated by mores regulations, and traditions regarding land use, tenure, and ownership that served to maintain clan control.

Although the full range of mechanisms used to maintain large tracts of land as tree farming areas is complicated and will not be fully discussed, in general they were facilitated by the clan system using the leadership of the clan elders. As a result, all clan members worked collectively in their tree farming efforts for their mutual benefit. Because of these cultural norms and requirements, the land remained as an economic unit capable of supporting tree farming.

Other indigenous peoples throughout the world also see the benefit of maintaining the control of the land within the tribe or other social group (such as a clan) as well as limiting the ability of outsiders to own or control the land. Various American Indian tribes, for example, seek to accomplish such goals in order to protect their culture and traditions. The specific details of Dong land usage and regulation may be unique but the principle of maintaining some kind of collective control over the land is a commonplace strategy.

The Need for Market Exchange

When rice farming dominated, the need to cater to outside markets was less important because the people tended to be largely self-sufficient. In that earlier era, people grew and produced what was consumed. This method of production reduced the importance of trading relationships so they were not as significant as they otherwise would have been. When tree farming became an important feature of Dong economic life, in contrast, the people became active participants in a cash economy. Not only did the Dong sell trees for cash, they began buying commodities and products from outsiders instead of relying upon themselves by pursuing a more complete subsistence lifestyle.

To insure a steady supply of money, the Dong maintained various stands of trees that were harvested in rotation on a scheduled basis. After a

field was harvested, furthermore, it was left without trees for 4 years and used to grow agricultural products for subsistence use. As a result, the Dong had an ongoing cash crop of trees coupled with subsistence agricultural activities that included plant-crops coupled with livestock production. This resulted in a complex system consisting of subsistence farming, supplemented by cash from tree farming. In addition, many Dong men developed skills as home builders, tool makers, etc. These activities were exchanged with neighboring peoples according to a system of reciprocity. The women had their own crafts that were used to earn money and/or for barter purposes.

The Dong economy as a whole can be viewed as an example of a "mixed economy" composed of (1) subsistence activities, (2) producing marketable products that are sold for cash, and (3) coupled with reciprocal arrangements with other peoples. Using multiple means of production, both the subsistence products and the cash needed for products not produced internally were acquired.

In summary, over a period of generations, the Dong tree farmers developed an extremely efficient method of production that is sustainable and provided people with a prosperous life. A distinct economy emerged in a specific place and it was uniquely able to provide for people in a productive manner.

This tendency towards the evolution and development of indigenous methods of agriculture (that are efficient and effective) can be observed in other parts of the world: the "milpa farming" tradition practiced by the Maya Indians of Central America is a particular example. Milpa farming is a form of slash and burn agriculture in which three crops (corn, beans, and squash) are grown in mounds that are scattered throughout the agricultural fields. The Maya refer to these three plants as the "Three Sisters" in their mythology. Religious tales and legends encourage planting the three crops together.

For many years, this method was criticized as being primitive and not productive. Detractors complained that it was only followed because of superstitions and the survival of archaic religions. As a result, the Maya were encouraged to adopt the Western method of one crop per field.

Milpa farming, however, is ideally suited for Central America because growing the three plants together in mounds has significant bene-

fits: First the corn sends up tall stalks. After that, the vines of the beans climb up the corn. The ground cover provided by the broad squash leaves completely covers the ground, keeping the water from evaporating and inhibiting weed growth. Once the squash is established, little weeding by hand is needed and no watering is required for the remainder of the growing season. As a result, the crops grow without being maintained by the farmers, who are free to pursue other tasks (such as performing wage labor away from home during the growing season.) The farmers return to the fields at harvest time. These three crops, furthermore provide an excellent balanced diet, leading to a healthy life. The result is a highly efficient method of farming with a high ratio of yield to the human effort that must be expended. This system also meets human dietary needs

In addition, milpa farming is sustainable, does not need expensive fertilizer or fossil fuel, and by periodically letting the fields "rest", their fertility can be renewed without cost. Today we recognize that milpa farming, once viewed as archaic and inefficient, is ideally suited for some environments and it can be a good strategic choice.

What about Dong tree farming methods? Are these traditions old and archaic? Or are these traditional methods of production (that evolved over many years) appropriate and ideally suited to the environment in which they are practiced?

In general, the development of Dong culture and its relationship to tree farming was a slow, gradual, and cumulative process. These adaptations helped reduce economic uncertainty and reduced the vulnerability of the people. As a result, the Dong experienced economic prosperity.

Outside Intervention

Just as economic development specialists encouraged the Maya to adopt strategies that meshed with mainstream perspectives but were counterproductive by local standards, outside experts also gave inappropriate advice to the Dong. After 1949, for example, a centralized economic plan was implemented that was responsible for increasing the amount of food grown in China. Like many other economic consultants with a limited understanding of some of the regions they managed, these decision makers sometimes provided general or generic plans that were

not adequately tailored to local conditions. Although the policies recommended were presumably based upon what had worked elsewhere, they proved to be inappropriate for the Dong tree farmers. Because they did not reflect local conditions, the results of implementing these plans were hurtful. The tree farming industry was left in shambles while food production by the Dong did not adequately improve to compensate for the resulting shortfall of economic activity in the declining tree farming industry.

In specific, being mandated to grow additional food resulted in a curtailing of the tree farming industry. As a result, the endless cycle of having a cash crop mature every year was broken. In addition, attempts at increasing the agricultural production of food led to significant erosion of the land that had not occurred when the roots of trees kept the dirt in place and the fertility of the soil returned when trees were being grown. As a result, the economic foundation of Dong life was almost totally destroyed.

The example of the Dong provides a specific case of outside planners who made poor decisions because of a lack of cultural knowledge. A more effective strategy would have been to implement changes in ways that recognize cultural differences and respond to them in an appropriate and tailored manner. Although outside economic planners often provide useful advice, local knowledge and priorities also need to be consulted.

The Perspective of Tingshuo Yang

Tingshuo Yang is one of the most prominent economic anthropologists in China (Tian and Luo 2013) and the author of *The Principles of the Xiangji [Interphase] Economic Mode*, which was first published in 1996 in its Chinese edition. By Xiangji (that is, “interphase”), Yang is referring to the process or fate of being caught between two different phenomenon or conditions of life (such as modern vs. traditional economies, a national vs. a local orientation, industrialization vs. rustic means of production, and so forth.) The point Yang is making is that during eras of social and economic change people tend to experience multiple challenges and they must make hard choices that simultaneously impact their lives in multiple and synergistic ways. He emphasizes that an important role for economic anthropology (and by extension business anthro-

pology) is to evaluate the full effects of these multiple pressures. To do so, he advocates a complex model of economic development that considers the cumulative and synergistic influence of economic development and growth. He also emphasizes that when a people forge economic solutions over many hundreds of years, these strategies are often very efficient, even if they appear to be naïve to outside economic development experts (Tian 2014).

Yang complains that well-meaning central planners working for the government in Beijing have a habit of proposing economic development plans that do not work in the Western part of China. He observes that the vast majority of people in the East are of Han descent. Western China, in contrast, is heavily populated by ethnic minorities that have developed unique economic strategies that are uniquely adapted to the local environment. Because mainstream economic planners have not recognized and/or accommodated the differences between Eastern and Western China, economic development schemes have often failed. Yang complains about this situation and states that economic development initiatives need to take the local culture and ecology into account. As a result of not doing so, universal strategies applied nationwide are often not effective in some regions (Yang 1996).

Yang observes that the efficient methods that local people have evolved, unfortunately, often appear to be wasteful and inefficient when viewed by “modern” economic planners who are unfamiliar with the subtleties of ethnic life. All too often, inappropriate yardsticks of evaluation are used when evaluating these folk methods, prompting alternative strategies to be recommended that might not be appropriate.

Using Yang’s perspectives, it is useful to examine alternatives to tree farming that were proposed and implemented by the central government. Over a period of many years, the Dong developed a unique mixed economy composed of tree farming for cash, coupled with subsistence farming for edible crops on land that was cultivated for 4 years after trees had been harvested before being replanted with young trees. Additional economic activities took place as part of a reciprocal system involving neighboring communities and to earn additional money. This multi-pronged economic system leads to prosperity for the Dong.

Economic planners from outside the region, however, failed to see this unique economic sys-

tem in all its complexity. Relying upon models of economic development that had been established elsewhere, strategies of food production were mandated that ultimately dismantled this complicated and efficient means of production. The Dong and China, in general, suffered as a result. These events concerning the Dong provide a classic example of how top-down economic planning can possess hurtful blind spots that could have been avoided if local knowledge was sought, considered in a meaningful way, and worked into the process of economic planning.

CONCLUSION

Business anthropology largely evolved as a specialized sub-discipline that provides research, analysis, and advice regarding the mainstream world and strategies that will work within them. Although this role is important, focusing upon it has encouraged business anthropology to drift away from the culture/society-wide perspectives of mainstream anthropology in order to concentrate upon more micro aspects of organizational and economic life.

In an era when business relationships and strategies of economic development are influencing indigenous people and rural regions, however, the profession can provide a useful service by expanding its focus and its toolkit. One way to do so involves returning to the full range of methods provided by anthropology and using them to analyze how business and economic decisions impact small scale cultures in ways that might not be intended or anticipated. Business anthropology can also help mitigate negative impacts that do arise.

The economic adaptations of the Dong, an ethnic minority of Western China, was presented as an example of the contributions that business anthropologists might have been able to make in this regard. Over many years, the Dong developed strategies regarding the tree farming industry that were efficient and sustainable. Unfortunately, mainstream economic planners failed to see the benefits of these indigenous solutions and mandated policies that undercut them. The result was economic and ecological calamity. If business anthropologists with culturally sensitive and holistic view had provided input and suggestions, tragic results might have been prevented. This example mirrors various other situations.

Business anthropology needs to envision itself as a specialized branch of applied anthropology that, in part, deals with business decisions from within a broad culture and society perspective. Because business anthropologists have one foot in business and the other in social analysis, they are uniquely qualified to do so.

As the Dong example (as well as other examples such as Maya milpa farming) emphasizes, social and economic planners often make decisions without reference to local conditions, efficient economic strategies that already exist, and what is the most appropriate solution given the cultural and ecological environments. Not pursuing perspectives that are tailored to the situation, mainstream decision makers have often embraced what can be labeled as generic or "one size fits all" solutions. In the case of China, methods developed in Eastern part of the country (and possibly appropriate there) have often been introduced into Western China where they have proved to be harmful and counterproductive.

Business anthropologists that perform analyses that consider both the economy and the culture can provide the advice needed by both outside economic planners and local indigenous leaders. This type of work has often been performed by applied anthropologists, and on many occasions their efforts have been effective. General applied anthropologists, however, are likely to lack the perspectives needed to help business decision makers forge actionable business and economic plans.

Business anthropologists, in contrast, are more likely to possess these skills. The distinctiveness of true business anthropologists is that they have mastery of both the social sciences and the business/strategic disciplines. This dual focus provides orientations and perspectives that simultaneously (1) deal the people being examined by (2) providing decision makers with the specific and tailored information that they need.

The example of the Dong demonstrates the need for business anthropologists to have a seat at the decision-making table. It is hoped that business anthropologists will be allowed to function in this role so future missteps can be avoided through the development of broader cultural understanding.

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