

Challenges and Opportunities for Chinese Enterprises in Southeast Asia: A Case Study in Business Anthropology

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KEYWORDS Business Anthropology. Chinese Corporations. Laos. Southeast Asia

ABSTRACT Chinese enterprises, both private and state-owned, have been noticed to invest increasingly in Southeast Asia, attracting both positive and negative comments in the world. How are the Chinese enterprises doing in Southeast Asia? What challenges and opportunities have they had in Southeast Asia? This paper provides a case study of such a Chinese enterprise located in the north of Lao People's Democratic Republic in Southeast Asia from the perspective of business anthropology. It discusses the development process of this company, economic and socio-cultural problems it has faced, measures it has taken for development, and impacts it has had on the local livelihood. It points out that in the context of globalization, the success of a transnational corporation in a foreign country depends on whether it can communicate efficiently with the employees from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. It concludes that the unique methodology developed by anthropologists can make particular contributions to the business world today.

INTRODUCTION

As a result of the globalization process, China has become the world's manufacturing center. It has pushed China to look for resources and markets in the world. In the recent years, Chinese enterprises, private and state-owned, have been noticed to invest increasingly in Southeast Asia, attracting both positive and negative comments in the world (Goto 2011; Kodaka 2016; Song 2015; Weinland 2016). Lately, the Chinese central government has launched a "One Belt and One Road" strategy to promote international cooperation (Du and Ma 2015), which foretells more investment in Southeast Asia. All these indicate that the regional integration between China and Southeast Asia has been further intensified. How are the Chinese enterprises doing in Southeast Asia? What are their goals and the development process? What problems have they run into in their development? How do they interact with the local shareholders? What impacts have they made on the local people's livelihood? What measures have they taken to ensure development? How do the local people think about these Chinese enterprises? How do local social, political, economic, cultural and ecological factors affect the Chi-

nese enterprises? These are questions that this research will focus on by providing a case study of a Chinese company in Northern Laos.

Though the name of business anthropology was first used in the 1980s, the application of anthropology in business can be traced back to the 1930s. So far, the development of business anthropology can be divided into four phases. The first phase is situated in the early 1930s when the American anthropologist Lloyd Warner conducted research at the Western Electric's Hawthorne Works manufacturing plant to study the behavior of the employees. The second phase concentrates on the period after World War II when interests emerged in the organizational culture. The first consultancy firm using anthropological methods started in this period. The third period named is the era including the 1960s and the 1970s when traditional anthropological fieldwork in 'exotic' conflict areas, such as Vietnam and Latin America, flourished again due to governmental financial support. The fourth and the most recent epoch started in the early 1980s when business organizations and anthropologists regained interests in each other (Marrewijk 2010). In the recent years, business anthropology as a sub-field of anthropology and a sub-field of business studies has experienced great

development and progress. Its contribution to the business world has been widely documented (Tian and Chen 2016).

Today, business anthropology can be effectively divided into three fields: 1) organizational anthropology (the study of complex organizations to include their cultures, work processes, and change directives), 2) anthropology of marketing and consumer behavior, and 3) design anthropology (product and services design). These fields rely on the basic anthropological methodology and theory and involve studying different types of problems in the business world, such as work process, group behaviors, organizational change, consumer behavior, product design, and Globalization and Diversity (Jordan 2010). This paper is based on the study of a Chinese state-owned company in Laos, on its development process, problems it has met and strategies it has used to tackle the problems. It is a case study in the field of organizational anthropology.

METHODOLOGY

The research site for this paper is a company (named Yun Company by the researchers) set up in Northern Laos by a state-owned Yunnan Agricultural Reclamation Corporation engaged in rubber production and processing. It was first registered at Luang Namtha Province of Laos in 2006. By the end of 2014, this company established branch companies in Luang Namtha, Bokeo, Louangphrabang, and Xaignabouri provinces. It now has 18 rubber tree farms in 9 counties in these four provinces with 4613 ha land and a nursery farm with 71 ha land. It has also helped local Lao people plant rubber trees on 7333 ha land. In 2009, the company built a rubber processing plant at the industry park in Luang Namtha province with the capacity to produce 20,000 ton rubber a year.

The research for this paper was conducted between 2010 and 2014 by the ethnographic approach in anthropology including participant observation, open-ended interview, and collecting written documents and profiles related to the historical development of the company in Laos. The researchers visited the company 6 times and interviewed managers, technicians, interpreters, workers of the company, and villagers and the village directors who have cooperation or business with the company. Questions for open-ended interviews were: How long you have worked

in Laos? What you do in the company? What problems you have met while working and living in Laos? What problems the company has met in Laos and what measures has the company has taken to solve them? What challenges and opportunities do you think the company is facing in Laos? How long you have done business with the company? And what business? How do you like doing business with the company? What impact the company has on you and your family?

In the business research, ethnography distinguishes anthropology from other social and management sciences. Anthropologists attempt to collect first-hand data by interview, observation and other technological means in order to provide suggestions and advices for the business and enterprise development, whereas researchers in the management science mainly apply quantitative approaches (Tian 2012). Anthropological fieldwork methods are increasingly becoming popular with the management and the business (Marrewijk 2014). Business researchers in the recent years have embraced the ethnographic method and used it for practical purposes including exploring the product design, consumer response, and workplace behavior (Walle 2016). Ethnographic approach in anthropology can reveal cultural and social modes in the human economic activities which can hardly be measured quantitatively. It has two advantages: researchers can understand independent cultural connotations in a specific environment; researchers can identify marginalized people in a specific environment (Tian et al. 2015). Business anthropologists can combine micro-and macro-level approaches and thereby take into account the complexity of the everyday life (Krawinkler 2016).

RESULTS

Development Process of the Company in Laos

In the early 2000s, Chinese government launched a "Go Global" strategy to encourage the Chinese enterprises to make an investment overseas for resources and markets. To answer the central government's call, Yunnan Agricultural Reclamation Corporation started its own "Go Global" strategy on November 11 2005 by going to Laos to negotiate with the Lao government for investment in Laos. On March 20, 2006, Yun Company was officially set up at the capital city

of Luang Namtha Province in Northern Laos. The first five years were the initial stages for the company during which it focused on breeding and transplanting rubber trees, reclaiming land in hills, caring rubber tree forests, building a rubber processing plant, office buildings and other infrastructure. In 2010, the processing plant was completed. Since 2013, the plant has processed rubber latex purchased from local rubber plantation owners. So far, the company has built a water treatment facility, employee dormitory buildings and a residential area, and an office compound. At this initial stage, the company successfully set up an operation model for developing rubber industry in Laos that suits local conditions. This model includes three approaches: 1) the company pays local people to reclaim land for rubber trees and later gives a part of the rubber tree land to the local people for cultivation without any charge; 2) local Lao people reclaim land to grow rubber trees and the company provides free rubber tree seedlings and the technical support, and later the company controls 65 percent and the local people and 35 percent of the rubber plantation land; 3) the company rents land directly from Laos to grow rubber trees and manage its production completely by itself.

In 2010, the Yun Company adjusted its development strategy after reclaiming land for a few years. As required by the Yunnan Agricultural Reclamation Corporation which was reformed by the government, the company stopped all land reclaiming activities. Yunnan Agricultural Reclamation Corporation gave the company new orders based on the situation of the rubber industry in the world and the demand of the corporation. The corporation asked the company to raise the standard of rubber tree cultivation and protection; to improve its work in the rubber trade; to improve employees' welfare so as to stabilize its working force; and to concentrate on the management of the rubber plantation farms in production. From 2010 to 2014, the company focused on these tasks. In addition to the work related to its management and development, the company has also made the following two major achievements:

Firstly, in October 2008, Yun Company was rectified by the Department of Commerce of the Yunnan Province to participate in the Chinese state-sponsored Poppy Control Alternative Planting Program. Yun Company then worked closely with the relevant Laos and Chinese government offices in this program and provided

funds to support anti-drug propaganda programs and to set up a drug rehabilitation center in a village located on the company's cultivation land and to provide free medicines to help the addicts to overcome drug addiction. Meanwhile, the company provided free technical and vocational training to the poppy smokers to improve their skills in planting poppy substitute crops so that they can have long-term benefits of a healthy living, thus stopping poppy growing and smoking. The company has also built medical clinics, roads, electricity facilities, and water cellars in alternative planting areas. This has improved the local living conditions.

Secondly, as a practice of "Go Global" strategy, Yun Company made full use of the advantages of "two markets and two resources" (domestic and foreign markets and resources) and participated in competition and cooperation in the rubber industry in the world by making a direct investment in Laos. So far it has made significant achievements and has been well received by the Lao government and by the local people as well. In an interview with the director of the Department of Agriculture of Luang Namtha Province, he told us that there are many Chinese enterprises investing in Laos, but this company is the most outstanding. It is a legally-established company and has abided by Lao laws and regulations. It has fulfilled its duties as an enterprise in the poppy control alternative planting program and has made important contributions to drug control work in Laos. It has put environmental protection ahead of its rubber tree cultivation. It has motivated the local people to plant rubber trees to increase their income. It has performed its social duties well by providing free technical training, anti-drug propaganda, drug rehabilitation center, roads, water and electricity facilities to the local people.

At present, the Yun Company has started its plan to build a model village for its workers who have moved from the remote mountain areas in Laos. As a part of the poppy control alternative planting program, the model village has a few functions. It will construct road, water and electricity facilities, school, medical clinic and other living infrastructures and then relocate the people in the plantation area into the village. This will not only improve their living standard, but also benefit the drug control programs by providing collective management. It can provide training to the people who will move into the

village to teach them rubber tree cultivation skills as a long term living skill. It will hire the people in the village as the company's employees with a stable income, which can also meet the company's demand for labor. The company will set up a specific factory to buy raw rubber latex from the people in the village so as to ensure that the villagers have a channel to sell their products and to satisfy the company's need for raw materials. This model village will change the local people's ways of thinking by showing them that they can improve their living standard and increase their income without planting poppy, thus realizing the goal of the drug control program in Laos. This model village can also provide more revenues to the government with the development of the company's business. "All shareholders win" is what the general manager liked to say to the visitors. By all shareholders, he meant the company, local people, Lao and the Chinese government.

As it can be seen, the Yun Company has made a good start in its pioneering work in Laos. Though the competition pressure is high since rubber enterprises from other countries have come to invest in Laos and the way the world rubber market fluctuated in the recent years, the company managers believe that it has a bright future in Laos as it has paved a solid foundation for its business development.

Problems Encountered by the Company

Since its official registration at the Luang Namtha Province in Northern Laos in 2006, Yun Company has encountered various problems coming from both the sides of the border between China and Laos. According to the researchers' informants who are the managers of the company, there are three major kinds of problems:

1. **Policy Problem:** Poppy Control Alternative Planting Program was launched by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the World Health Organization and other international agencies in the early 1990s as a comprehensive drug control strategy and a development oriented drug control approach to reduce drug supply from its production source. Since then, the Chinese government has provided a large amount of capital and technical support to this program. Yunnan Province has been highly involved to develop alternative cultivation in Northern Laos and Northern My-

anmar (Chen and Yang 2007). Though both the Chinese and the Lao governments have issued laws and regulations related to the alternative cultivation, they are still insufficient to protect the alternative development program. In Laos, the government issued only two laws relevant to the rubber cultivation which are "Law of Environmental Protection" and "Law of Water and Water Resources". The Lao government has no clear support or service to develop the rubber cultivation. Its policies, from the central to the local governments, may change at any time. For example, the company has signed land rental contract with the Lao government. The Lao government constantly raises rental fee despite the contract. The Lao government provides no legal support to the company's contracts with the local Lao farmers to sell their raw rubber latex to the company which are often broken. The Lao government charges the company's workers from China a high visa fee, about 3000 yuan a year per person. It increases the company's operation cost in Laos. On the side of China, the biggest policy issue as the company managers told us is the quota system for their products. The Chinese government gives a duty-free quota to the products of the enterprises engaged in the alternative cultivation program. When entering China, those products within the limit of the quota do not pay customs duty and vat (value added tax). However, the quota assigned to the company is not enough. In 2014, the company yielded 6000 tons of rubber. But the quota the company had for 2014 was just 3000 tons of natural rubber, just half of its production. As the company's production increases, they need more quota from the Chinese government. Another issue is the complicated customs procedure. The alternative planting program involves transnational management, supply of materials, exit and entry of the employees, and the sales of products back to China. Going through customs on both sides of the border is time consuming and costly.

2. **Management Problems:** According to the company managers, the major management problem for a transnational enterprise in a

foreign country is dealing with *the* people, firstly with laborers. Labor is a bottleneck problem that affects the company's development. Rubber industry is labor-intensive, which needs lots of workers. Laos has a population of about 6.5 million people. There are fewer people in *the* northern mountain areas than in the south. More and more Chinese companies are now looking for local employees, which makes it difficult for the company to find and keep local workers willing to work on *the* rubber plantation farms to manage and tap rubber trees. The company cannot hire workers from China to solve the labor shortage problem, because by Laos law, a foreign company has to hire 85 percent of its workers from Lao. Besides, the high cost of labor visa fees prevents the company from hiring more workers from China. The company's rubber farm at Luang Namtha now has over 533 ha of rubber land, which needs over 300 workers just to tap trees once the farm comes into full production. Workers are also needed to measure, transport, and examine latex. In 2014, there were only 50 rubber tree cutters on the farm. The village located on the farm has 196 people including old people and little children. So the labor force of the company cannot satisfy its demand. Besides, the efficiency of the local workers is quite low. It is common that a local Lao employee quits when he or she does not like the work or does not show up when they have received their salaries and come back again when they have used up their money. Overtime work or work on weekends is not accepted by many Lao workers. These have created disputes between managers and *the* local employees. Another major management problem comes from doing business with *the* Lao government officials at all levels who often ask the company to give them money or material goods for their services. This increases the company's management costs. The third major problem is competition from *the* investors from Vietnam and from owners of private Chinese companies. Historically, Laos has had good relationship with Vietnam. Compared with Chinese companies, Vietnamese companies receive much more benefits and less

interference from *the* Lao government. Private Chinese companies are more flexible in their management and often bribe Lao government officials for better benefits, whereas state-owned companies are supervised by government offices in China. All these put the company at a less favorable situation when competing with Vietnamese and private Chinese investors, making its management more difficult.

3. **Cultural Problems:** Laos is an underdeveloped agricultural country. Most of its people believe in Theravada Buddhism. At Luang Namtha, local Lao people have their own way of life. Their ambition for wealth is relatively low. They prefer a quiet and easy life. They can enjoy a day simply by drinking Lao beer and listening to Lao folk music in their front or back yards. They usually don't like overtime work. Their way of life is very different from that of Chinese workers who leave their homes and come to a foreign land looking for a chance to make a fortune. These Chinese workers usually work hard every day to make more money. They prefer an active and busy life. The two ways of life are contradictory. Yun Company was set up by Yunnan Agricultural Reclamation Corporation whose core corporate cultural values are: self-reliance, working hard and selfless devotion (Lu 2015). The company's managers have been promoting the corporation's cultural values in Laos. Yet they found it difficult to complete time-pressing projects by convincing local Lao workers for more hours to make more money. They often found that some Lao workers did not come to work the following day without informing them and later came back asking to work. Different ways of life and cultural values make it difficult for the managers to run the company as they used to in China.

Company's Strategies to Tackle the Problems

Since its founding in 2006, *the* Yun Company has developed ways to deal with *the* problems it encounters. For policy problems, the managers have tried to lobby both Lao and *the* Chinese government departments at the central and provincial levels and visiting officials to give them better policies related to tax, land rent, and quota

system. They have participated actively in *the* Lao government's anti-drug and poverty-relief programs in order to win the support of the Lao government. They have made full use of Chinese government's subsidizing policies to opium/poppy control alternative cultivation program.

For management problems, the Yun Company has encouraged Chinese workers to learn Lao language so as to communicate efficiently with the Lao workers for mutual understanding and eliminating misunderstanding at work, and to adjust to the life in a foreign country. From the participant observation, it was found that many Chinese workers can use Lao language to certain degrees in their daily work or living routine activities. Some of the managers can speak Lao fluently. To solve labor problems, the company adopts a very flexible salary system. Local Lao workers can be paid monthly, weekly or even daily, depending on their skills and wishes. The manager of the rubber processing plant even told the researchers that every day the production lines need certain number of workers, and when someone does not show up, he just calls someone else in a village nearby or simply just drives to the village and grabs someone who is willing to work that day. For a long perspective, the company has signed agreement with the Lao government and the Chinese government who will provide funds and bank loans to set up a model village first in Luang Namtha Province and then in other three northern provinces on the company's farms to relocate poverty-stricken people who live in the remote mountain areas. The company will build infrastructures in the village, including water, electricity, road, school and medical clinic. The migrants will be trained to tap and care for the rubber trees of the company.

For cultural problems, the managers of the Yun Company highly emphasize the importance of establishing a rapport with the Lao workers, local rubber farmers, and government officials. Apart from learning the Lao language, the company's managers also encourage Chinese workers to make local friends, to participate in local birthday, marriage or other sorts of celebration so as to know their cultural traditions. Yun Company makes donations of money or clothes to local charity or to the families that suffer from fire or other disasters so as to accomplish the company's local social obligations. To win the trust and respect of the local rubber farmers, they provide them free technical support, seedling

trees and even interest-free loans to those farmers who have signed contracts to sell their rubber latex to the company. They pay farmers cash directly and fully when purchasing rubber latex. The company even pays local villagers to keep guard against fire, theft and cows and goats from entering rubber forests. The company has received many awards from Lao government offices at all levels for their social services. The researchers interviewed a few local farmers who have business with the company. They all told us that the company has a good reputation and is worth trusting, and they are willing to sell their rubber products first to the company.

DISCUSSION

The researchers have discussed the historical development process of the Yun Company in Laos, problems it has met since its registration in Laos in 2006, and approaches it has used to solve those problems. From an anthropological perspective, most of its problems are related to the cultural differences and resulted from the fact that its managers are unfamiliar with the local cultures, just as some scholars found what has happened to the Chinese enterprises in Africa. When Chinese enterprises first went to Africa, they paid little attention to the cultures, and made no "cultural preparation". So many of them, suffered from mal-adjustment to local cultures that caused trouble or disturbance to their development (Shi 2013).

In the context of globalization, the regional economic cooperation among countries that are connected geographically is becoming more and more common. New skills are needed to understand, to stimulate, and to empower employees with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The world is composed of different ethnic groups. The success of a transnational enterprise depends on whether it can communicate efficiently with every ethnic group in the labor force of the enterprise by using its own language (Tian 2010).

Anthropologist Susan Wright points out that problems between culture and management of business organization can be understood from four perspectives: 1) They are problems that arise from the production process of the management company or from the service networks across the world that have different ethnic cultures; 2) They are management problems in organizing

workers from different racial groups; 3) They refer to non-formal concepts, attitudes and values of labor force; 4) They are corporate cultures that management people use formal corporate values and practices as cohesion forces to maintain workers' unity, and to make enterprises as a whole to adjust to rapid transformation and global competition (Wright 1994; Tian 2013).

Problems of labor shortage and labor low-efficiency that the rubber company have in Laos are related to the corporate cultural problems as Wright illustrates. The plantation farms owned by the company are located in four provinces in Northern Laos. They have employees from various ethnic groups in Laos and have different cultural values and outlook. How to manage them? From the researchers interviews with the company managers, the researchers learned that after the initial "cultural shock" in Laos, the managers settled down to develop their business and to learn the local languages, folk customs, and laws at the same time. Gradually, they have adjusted to the local socio-cultural environment. The use of daily salary and monthly wages to pay the local workers is a creative way for them to adapt to the local culture and the labor market. It is a typical case of "cultural different management" model advocated by some scholars as a way to dealing with different cultural backgrounds of the employees in a company in order to build up a core corporate cultural value on the basis of their common grounds and eventually accepted by all the employees that can promote sustainable development of the company (Tian 2013).

From a long-term perspective, Yun Company will continue to encounter cultural problems in Laos. From the researchers observation and interviews with the company's Chinese employees, the researchers noticed that the Chinese employees generally look down upon the Laotians and have prejudice against the Lao people and their culture due to the cultural and educational differences. So far, at the top management level of the company, there are no Lao employees. When some enterprises from the West came to invest in China, such as CMA CGM (a French shipping company), they hired Chinese people to work at the management level in China. They used them to look at the Chinese market and to build efficient Chinese models of management and communication channels so as to promote their business growth and corporate cultural construction in China, and they succeeded in China. From a small unknown branch-line ship-

ping company in France, CMA CGM has now become the Top 3 worldwide shipping company due to its success in China (Qi 2011).

So Yun Company should learn lessons from the success stories of those Western enterprises in China. It should hire more Laotians to work at the management level and to participate in decision making process of the company. It should build a corporate culture that includes the culture of its Chinese employees and "local knowledge" of the Laotians. Corporate organizational culture can reinforce internal integration and increase management efficiency of the enterprise by helping to build and maintain efficient working relationship among corporate employees (Tian and Wang 2014). Only enterprises with such a corporate culture can make a long-term and sustainable development in a foreign country.

CONCLUSION

Yun Company was invested by a state-owned corporate group in Yunnan in Northern Laos in the early 2000s as the world globalization process pushed its parent company looking for more land outside Yunnan to cultivate rubber trees. About 10 years later, despite the problems it still has, Yun Company has survived and has been recognized by both Chinese and Lao governments as a model enterprise in Opium/Poppy Control Alternative Planting Program and in the regional economic cooperation between the two countries. Yun Company has set up a good example for doing business in the foreign countries with diverse peoples and cultures. This research on challenges and opportunities of a Chinese enterprise in Southeast Asia is a case study in business anthropology. Anthropological skills and methods were used to identify and help to solve problems the company has met in a foreign country, which included analyzing its history and corporate culture, cross-cultural competences, diversity management, power structures, conflict solutions, group and organizational behaviors, and management processes. The results of this research have been accepted by the company managers and used to improve their business performance in Laos. This case study demonstrates that the unique methodology developed by anthropologists can make particular contributions to the business world. Therefore, we can expect that business anthropologists will become much-in-demand professionals in the real world as the globalization process goes on in the world.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Business anthropology is a subfield of applied anthropology that applies anthropological theories and methods, particularly ethnographic methods such as participant observation, open-ended interviews, focus group study and questionnaires, to identify and solve real problems in the business world. Today, the fast globalization process has increased economic cooperation and interdependence of countries in the world that have led to the rise of transnational and multinational corporations. Cross-cultural communication is essential to the success of those corporations. This paper has just shown that most of the problems a Chinese company has encountered in Laos are related to cultural differences. Anthropologists are trained to be cultural brokers who help culturally diversified groups understand each other. They can help corporations to develop culturally appropriate ways of running business in a world with globalized and diverse workforce. This provides a bright future to anthropologists in general and business anthropologists in particular. However, it also challenges anthropology students being trained in the academic world to learn the basic economics of international business apart from anthropological knowledge and skills so as to be qualified to work in an international business with cultural sensitivity.

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Paper received for publication on March 2016
 Paper accepted for publication on November 2016