

Editor's Two Cents

Greg Urban and Nancy Ameen

Continuity and change, long at the heart of anthropological research, loom especially large in business anthropology. How could they not? For a business to survive, it must find a niche, do something different, innovate. At the same time, it must ensure its ability to persist, to reproduce itself, to maintain its niche. This is what William James so many years ago dubbed “plasticity” — “the possession of a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once” (*Principles of Psychology*). Culture is plastic in this sense.

The themes of change and continuity also loom large in this issue of the *Journal of Business Anthropology*, featuring a set of themed papers orchestrated by Professor Heung Wah (Dixon) Wong of Hong Kong University. As Wong tells us in his introduction, the papers challenge mainline management literature on family businesses: “Management scientists generally do not consider cultural contexts as important in studying family business.” His goal: bring business anthropology into dialogue with management researchers. Many of the latter view the family as the same everywhere. Anthropologists, by way of contrast, emphasize the plasticity of the family, including its differing formulations within larger cultural constellations (Chinese versus Japanese, for example), and also by virtue of developing internal cultures capable of differentiating, through micro-processes and macro-impacts, one local grouping from another.

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Wong, in his own single-authored contribution, explores the intricacies of Chinese kinship terms, values, and expectations, stressing their “impacts on family firms.” His account seeks to discover why and under what conditions “Chinese family firms ... tend to break down into several companies headed by each of the father’s sons.” In a different paper in this themed set, Wong teams up with Karin Ling-Fung Chau to explore the professionalization of management in family firms. They analyze succession processes in a Hong Kong family business, founded in 1971, that struggled to survive a crisis by bringing in a professional management team from the outside the family. Would this change prove uni-directional? Chau and Wong argue that in management literature professionalization reflects an inevitable move towards rationality, as Max Weber had posited for bureaucracy generally. In their case study, however, professionalization proved to be a phase. The family character of the business reasserted itself once the crisis had passed. Chau and Wong underscore the point that professionalisation is “a process [of continuity and change] shaped by the contingencies of events and circumstances enacted by the agency of individual actors and their interpersonal interactions.”

In yet another case study in this themed set, centered on a Hong Kong family restaurant, Samuel Dic Sum LAI argues that the traditional concept of Tongju Gongcai can be detected up to the present day. The Tongju Gongcai concept brings “the family” into focus as a grouping characterized by living together and sharing a common budget. The family is corporate in this sense: operating through the pooling of resources to ensure communal well-being. LAI concludes that “the family trumps the business when the business can no longer provide.” In this case, the Rainbow Café closed its doors when it could no longer support the family economically. The final paper in this themed set, by Hoi-yan Yau, makes the opposite point regarding Japanese family firms. In the case studied by Yau, “family heads were seen to bypass their sons and incorporate [by adoption into the family] nonfamily members,” who would take over the business in order to ensure the business’s (and the family’s) survival. Taken together, the papers in this themed set offer striking evidence for the role of culture in the processes of continuity and change in family businesses.

In addition to the themed set, we include in this issue two other broadly related articles. In one, we travel with Percy Arrosquipa to northern Peru, where we take an in-depth look at a central issue in business research today: Can for-profit corporations (a mining company, in this case) work with local communities as stakeholders towards the goal of long-term mutual sustainability? And what does sustainable even mean? The short answer given by Arrosquipa is that the future success of a for-profit corporation is linked to the future prosperity of the communities in which it operates. It is possible, he suggests, for corporate

leaders and their stakeholders to work together. Moreover, working together, in this case, at least, is a way to ensure mutual survival.

The second of the non-themed articles finds Michael Schönhuth reflecting on his three decades of research in organizational anthropology. What is his goal in doing so? To pass on, he tells us, what he has learned to anthropology graduates who may be wondering “what they can do with and how they could ‘sell’ their professional skills outside the academy.” In his view, the business anthropologist is “a professional stranger at the interface of the corporate world.” His colorful metaphor for the business anthropologist is the “free-flying witch.” To find out why this image, read his fascinating account.

To cap off this issue, we have a fourth installment in the wildly popular series: Millennial and Post-Millennial Perspectives. In this installment, entitled “Fieldwork in a Foreign Culture: Business,” Elisabeth Powell focuses on the transitions of academically-trained anthropologists “into their new cultural contexts of business.” Strangers in a strange land? Read and find out.

With that, one final item. After five years as editors of the *Journal of Business Anthropology*, it is time for us to step down. As Brian Moeran, the journal’s founding father, passed it on to us, so we now pass it on to a new leadership team, one headed by Kasper Tang Vangkilde of the University of Copenhagen. The journal came to the University of Pennsylvania from Copenhagen, and fittingly it returns now to its home city. Yet whereas Brian Moeran was a professor at the Copenhagen Business School (on whose servers this online journal still resides), Kasper and his team are based at the University of Copenhagen. The journal will be entering a new and exciting phase. May it possess the plasticity it needs to prosper, preserving characteristics from its founding, while remaining malleable enough to adapt.

And now, without further ado, we present to you the Autumn 2021 issue of the *Journal of Business Anthropology*. Read and enjoy!

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