

Paper session 4: The way of the way Rogerio dePaula, Curator

The Martial Ethnographic Arts

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There is longevity to the ethnographic arts: a report referred back to over years, an image that captures a resiliently fresh insight. In crude words, ethnographic analysis has a longer shelf life than traditional market research. The latter requires tending to keep its categories replete with a fresh cast of characters. The former is distinguished by a methodological practice that keeps it fresh and truthful without the necessity of being, for the moment, a truth. There is a mastery of the ethnographic arts. For twenty years, I have practiced as an academic ethnographer, private sector consultant and now corporate practitioner. I now hire ethnographers. (I have become an armchair anthropologist.) To do so, I must discern what makes some ethnographic practitioners better than others. I compare along three practices: documentary finesse, journeying and discipline (the latter more yogic than Foucaultian). I hire for the longevity and truthfulness of their work.

THE BEGINNING

There is a longevity to the ethnographic arts: a report referred back to over the years, a photo that captures a critical moment and still resiliently fresh truth, a chart of a common practice that renders it momentarily foreign and, as a result, suddenly intelligible. In cruder words, ethnographic analysis has a longer shelf life than, say, traditional market research. The latter requires tending, updating, refreshing to keep the demographic or other categories replete with a fresh cast of characters. The former is distinguished by a methodological discipline that keeps it fresh and truthful without the necessity of being, for only the moment, a truth.

There is a mastery of the ethnographic arts. For the last twenty years, I have practiced on all sides of the ethnographic practice – as a student and academic, as a consultant and now as a corporate practitioner. Now, given the recession, I hire ethnographers to unearth the social practices of the elderly in Turkey or daily lives of farmers in rural China. I have become, I confess, an armchair anthropologist. As a result, I have had the necessity of discerning what makes some ethnographic practice masterful and long lasting and some not. I divide this mastery into three practices: documentary finesse, journeying and discipline (the latter more yogic than Foucaultian).

Documentary finesse is a deceptively simple act of exchange. As ethnographers, we display trappings of our work (research goals, methods and documentary equipment) in exchange for a recordable moment of truthfulness. Not everyone can walk into a tiny Shanghai apartment with two video cameras and in the meager few hours allotted to us as corporate ethnographers make the occupants feel so at ease that they share intimate nuances of their lives. I have seen the flip side, a photo of a field researcher setting up her field recording equipment in front of stunned farming couple in rural

THE WAY OF “THE WAY”

Sichuan. The pair could not see the researcher for her large digital still camera on tripod and glossy laptop. Her report returned only tales of grinding poverty.

Edward Ives in a classic on the ethnographic method insists that the folklorist place his or her recording equipment clearly on the table.¹ He understands the code of ethnographic conduct, that a practice so simple as openly displaying one’s tape recorder can signal a genuine interest in the telling of an almost forgotten tale. Ives worked with a tape-recorder. We are now in the age of Facebook, QQ, Orkut and more – a world of endless self-conscious documentation. Our exchange is that of genuine interest for a genuine performance of self.

Then there is the journeying. Academic anthropologists have long documented the importance of the ethnographic journey. Yet as corporate ethnographers we truncate it and chop it into impossibly short and ideally inexpensive increments. We must squeeze as much experience and insight out of our limited time in the field as possible. I applaud the use of local experts for quick access and analytical entrée into the field. Their mastery comes with rendering the journey into an analytical one and navigating the discomfiting intimacies of field and home. The downfall comes as the line between tour guide and incisive local expert blurs. The journey, for the ethnographer, is a ritualized path. Victor Turner talks about guides who lead through the thicket of symbols. I hire for those who can understand their freshness and vitality.

Here then lies the final call for a discipline of ethnographic practice. This discipline is more yogic than Foucaultian, a call for learning through repetition, re-hashing and re-telling. Over the last five years, I stopped hiring ethnographers for a report. I now hire for the ability to build grounds-up a symbolic and narrative fluency amongst my team and my key stakeholders. The raw field notes, the half-baked field reports and the weekly meetings where we debate the significance of an elderly woman’s loss of eyesight and her memory of reading a favorite novel – these disciplinary practices extend the longevity of the ethnographic project. The tale of the elderly woman’s failing eyesight did not make it into the final report, but our debate shaped how I told and now re-tell the story of the ethnographic project.

A DISCLAIMER

As an ethnographer and perfectionist, I hold my work to a high standard. By no means, however, do I claim mastery. I strive for it (hence the perfectionism) but have yet to achieve.

The inspiration for this paper came from the many excellent ethnographers I have had the good fortune to collaborate with over the last fifteen years. In the following pages, I largely refer to ethnographic work I have funded or conducted over the past five years. In my experience, these last five years mark a turning point in the corporate practice of ethnography. I offer these recent examples of documentary finesse, journeying and discipline to catalyze the larger conversation on what constitutes the mastery of the corporate practice of ethnography.

¹ Edward D. Ives, *The Tape-Recorded Interview: A Manual for Field Workers in Folklore and Oral History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1974).

DOCUMENTARY FINESSE

When Susan Faulkner and Alex Zafiroglu showed a video clip of a Shanghai woman pulling out her third mobile phone from yet another pocket of her impossibly tight jeans at an Intel conference, no one in the audience asked Faulkner and Zafiroglu about their research outcomes or insights.² Instead, we badgered them with questions of how they managed to both see and capture such compelling video footage. We had witnessed documentary finesse and we knew it.

It is not a fluke when we, as ethnographers, succinctly capture a moment in image, photo, video clip or tale. The freshness and vitality of Faulkner and Zafiroglu's video clip, I argue, is evidence of their documentary finesse. It is also evidence of a well-prepared and well-conducted field engagement. Both knew what they were looking for, how best to document it and how to finesse the appropriate social environment in which the woman would remember the third mobile phone, pull it out of her tight back pocket and talk to a team of strangers in an impossibly small Shanghai apartment while Faulkner's camera rolled. All of these, from the preparation to the finessing of the social environment to the tedious documentation comprise the art.

Edward Ives in a classic on the participant observation method insists the interviewer intimately know his documentary equipment, in his case the tape-recorder and in Faulkner's case the video camera.³ This familiarity, he argues, is necessary so that the technology does not get in the way the interviewer's real work, the interview. Nothing new here, documentary technology should be friend not foe.

Yet, Ives goes further to insist on a code of ethnographic conduct. For him, the interview is an intimate affair, closer in spirit to marriage or companionship (but definitely not therapy). It is also a mutual exchange: audience for narration, in his case. The clear research agenda and open display of documentary tools then signal an undivided interest in the person and what they have to offer.

Over the past few years, I have seen that what is exchanged during fieldwork (during observation or interview) goes beyond an audience and tale. Not a simple trade in gifts or cash, the ethnographic exchange deals in a currency on par with Georg Simmel's idea of a higher social unity, sociability.⁴ As

² Internal presentation by Susan Faulkner, Alex Zafiroglu, October 2007.

³ (Ives 1974).

⁴ Donald N. Levine, ed., *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms* (The University of Chicago, Chicago: 1971), 127-140. Ideas similar to Simmel's concept of sociability are emerging in contemporary debates in economics and philosophy. See chapter one of Jeremy Rifkin's new book, *The Empathic Civilization* for an overview. In this chapter, Rifkin joins a number of contemporary economists and philosophers to challenge the idea that humans are individualistic, self-interested actors. These thinkers converge around a common perception that at the core, the fundamental if not ideal human state is one of social connectedness, especially empathic connectedness. Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 47-81.

THE WAY OF “THE WAY”

ethnographers, we give audience to a particular social performance. We initiate the particularity with research plans and goals. Our audience frames, in a Bakhtinian sense, the social possibility of a performance.⁵ The performance that unfolds is a measure of the sociability incurred.

Sociability is an ideal measure of human social engagement. According to Simmel, it is deeply democratic, pleasurable and more about unity than individuality. As a measure of exchange in ethnographic practice, it is evidenced in the light touch, a collaborative engagement that actively downplays the power and presence of the fieldworker and showcases the social performance of those studied. From the ethnographer, it requires more social grace than social presence. We are, after all, a relatively polite audience, not the ones who storm the stage.

I have seen this grace at play in remarkable snowball recruiting. While in Mexico, I watched a frequent research partner and consultant, Luis Arnal of *in/situm*, ease his way into a conversation with a father of two who was paying for his second daughter’s coming-of-age party dress. Even without the benefit of Spanish fluency, I could witness the artful social dance whereby Luis charmed himself into the conversation, shared his and my plight (the study of extended family events), learned that of the father and his two daughters (the upcoming coming-of-age ball), and ultimately got us invited to the younger woman’s upcoming party (conveniently timed within our fieldwork schedule). It looked like magic: it was not. Luis’ congeniality, honesty and enthusiasm opened the possibility whereby the father and his daughters could not only consider inviting us but actually want to invite us to their party. The invitation was extended as part of the moment’s pleasurable sociability.

I have also seen instances where such grace was impossible. I hired a team of sociology graduate students in eastern China for the same project but different context: factory laborers off-duty social lives in metropolitan China. In this case, the socio-economic cards were stacked against the graduate students as they struggled to engage with the young laborers. They did not have the social wherewithal to be able to downplay their obvious advantage. The graduate students’ sympathy was not empathy and the laborers rightfully sensed a veiled disrespect. Their fieldwork and report suffered.

In contrast, for the same project and same site (PRC), I also hired a relatively inexperienced non-Chinese ethnographer, Elisa Oreglia, who had what my colleagues and I dub “the ethnographer’s nose.”⁶ Oreglia’s intuition on who to engage and how, her ability to empathize and, frankly, then middling Mandarin fluency opened the possibilities for deep, evolving social exchanges that continue to this day. I heard evidence of the honesty, openness and resulting richness of her engagements in her voice on our weekly phone calls. I saw it in the photos she gathered and field notes she wrote. She documented not only the lives of these women, but also the rich and genuine playfulness of the

⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by Mikhail Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991(1986)).

⁶ Elisa Oreglia continued on to develop this intuition into a discipline and skill. She now is completing a graduate degree at University of California, Berkeley, that includes ethnographic fieldwork with the same population, female migrant workers in China, we studied together.

women’s – researcher and researched – engagement. She documented a truthful performance of their lives.

Unlike market research, ethnography is less concerned with individualized truths. The exchange occurs in broader social and cultural terms. Our ask is for a truthful social performance, one that enacts social and cultural dynamics not isolatable facts of individual behaviors. As a result, we deal in identities, narratives, symbols and artifacts and seek a truthfulness on this scale.

Oreglia’s work revealed an emerging complexity of our work: the need to document in a cyber rich world of self-documentation. The hotel attendants, masseuses and waitresses she interviewed actively participated in a rich Chinese world of digital social networking. QQ had already formed an empire of online playgrounds, avatars, messaging and more. The women’s mobile phones had more photos of themselves than of others. While they did not know how to email, they deftly navigated the local social currency of digital identities on services such as QQ. Oreglia adeptly engaged on their terms and juggled the digitally exchanged symbols, words and images as both additional means of engagement and self-representation.

This gets us to the last step in documentary finesse – the less romantic work of documentation. If our audience and interest invite the ideally sociable exchange, it is up to us to document and catalogue. The social magic of the interview, as we know, is ephemeral unless captured and made accessible for our and other’s interpretation. Decisions must be made at the outset and along the way as to what counts as “data” – field notes, photographs, observation formats, audio recordings, video tapes, etc. This data becomes the trail of crumbs with which to later reconstruct new insights from the work.

Yet I find we collectively drop the ball here. Best case scenarios are when I receive a clearly labeled and cross-referenced folder of photos, audio recordings and field or interview notes along with the next higher order of abstraction, the field reports.⁷ Depending on how familiar and confident I am with my vendor or collaborator, I want more or less detail. The documentation is a tangible expression of the quality of the research engagement. Its richness should invite further analysis, not shut it down because it was too threadbare. I have had perfectly good field engagements with and reports from vendors, but then not re-hired them because I found I had few photos or interview notes with which to continue to build on their insights.

Documentation gives us as ethnographers the tools to take others alongside for the journey from the familiar to the unknown and back again. The finesse comes in capturing telling social

⁷The work of documentation can detract from the relevant work of analysis. Labeling, transcriptions and transcriptions are tedious and costly. In the field, we make mistakes. Our audio recorder batteries die. We forget our cameras. We lose the opportunity to document. Yet, even then, there is no end to what can be documented as ours is an interpretative craft. A diary entry can replace a lost audio recording or rained on notes. Yes, these all take time and time, as we know, is severely curtailed in current corporate ethnographic work. But my point here is that to bring others along in the analysis, we must leave a trail of crumbs. We must collect and make accessible rich and thoughtful documentation or our research and our analysis extends only as far as our own bodies.

THE WAY OF “THE WAY”

performances so that that journey changes us and our audiences. Without it, we simply record but do not transform. In the corporate environment, this is unforgivable.

JOURNEYING

Several years back, I insisted a friend and I take a ten hour bus ride from central to western Oaxaca, Mexico. I needed to know where we had come from and where we were going, I explained. The bus’s slow pace, the shifting scenery, even the physical discomfort would prepare me for new places and new people. I could arrive less encumbered. The physical journey for me readies my senses and awareness to the unfamiliar. I am not so sure it did so for my friend.

While rarely pleasant, the ethnographic journey from home base to field and back serves a purpose. Our craft is necessarily embodied. The physical transport, the emotional complexities, the infuriating logistics recalibrate our senses. The passage of time and place allows a less violent shedding of the known and smoother transition into the role of the fieldworker. These experiences ground and calibrate our analysis. They also open opportunities for change – our own and our stakeholders. The transition happens in reverse upon return. Long flights allow thoughts to meander. Memories of home remind of preset expectations and a need to resume prior dialogues. Our anxieties coalesce around pre-imposed needs for closure that have yet to be reconciled with what was learned in field.

Victor Turner analyzes similar transitions in his studies of Ndembu “rites de passage.” While he ascribes these rituals to “small-scale, relatively stable and cyclical societies,” I find his description of such rites apt to the relatively standardized corporate practices of research, including ethnography.⁸ Ethnographic journeying for corporations is highly ritualized. Corporate stakeholders expect certain processes and milestones – a plan and mind-boggling preparations, a physical journey to the field, the mystery of fieldwork, the return and the concluding analysis. They hold expectations, set in part by us, and expect returns that ideally orient or even change current practices. While corporate stakeholders may not see the project as a rite of passage, it is, I argue, more powerful when practiced as such.

To Turner’s focus on changes of state, I also add Clifford Geertz’s definition of ritual.⁹ For Geertz, rituals shepherd transition and change. They do not solidify cultures, but invigorate them. As practices, they provide historically agreed upon maps or architectures (for example, a wedding) with which to navigate from pre-established realities (such as not being married) to those afterwards (such as being married). To skimp on any particular phase (for example forgetting to submit the marriage certificate or eloping at the last minute) can place the practitioners in limbo and jeopardize the social recognition of that transition (are they really married?). But Geertz emphasizes that rituals have no clear-cut endings, just posited ones.

⁸ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93.

⁹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

From this perspective, we, as corporate ethnographers, can more powerfully conduct our work if we see it as a ritual. The ethnographic journey, as a ritual, frames the promise and possibility of change, be it new product definition, customer recommendations for future business, or business model options. Crystallized out the outset in the project plan, it lays out an architecture for such change and promises deliverables at the end to catalyze that change, be they concepts for product definition or business development. By embarking on the journey as a ritual, we can chart a tried and true path for achieving such change, even when our deliverables depart from those promised.

It is worth noting here that the corporate value of ethnographic practice is not in validation. Traditional market research better achieves this. Grounds up research, instead, is path-finding. It aims to situate, orient and re-orient. It can be explanatory, but in the corporate environment our work is most valued when it catalyzes strategic change on both small and grand scales. By ritualizing the corporate ethnographic journey, we can borrow from centuries of experience on how to effectively shepherd transition and change.

Unfortunately, in the corporate environment, such journeying is also seen as a luxury. Its financial costs outweigh its analytical returns – the insights do not perceptibly offset the heart stopping travel expenses to inexplicable locations and prolonged absences from the office. Given the economic downturn and general corporate mantra of doing more for less (a favored definition of productivity and promotion), my opportunities to travel to the field and back home have all but evaporated. Even when I hire others to journey on my behalf, I am forced to truncate their efforts. Despite this, my stakeholders still expect the same sense-making and analytical wizardry even though my research partners and I are deprived of the journey as ritual I just romanced.

My guess is that we have all dabbled in what I call the truncated journey. Here the journey is cut into bite-sized pieces and the degree of participation depends on stakeholder status, be it field researcher, project lead (my current role) or higher level decision maker. The truncated journey comes in a variety of flavors, ranging from mini-journeys for busy decision-makers to re-enactments of select elements of the field (demo, prototyped, “day-in-the-life”, etc.). I, as project lead, typically take short dips in the field and then vicariously engage in the ongoing fieldwork and analysis.

How, then, can we squeeze the maximum analytical sense-making, the ethnographic magic, out of the less time in the field? My answer is to redouble the intensity of our fieldwork. To borrow Turner’s terms, this means more time in transition, more time in the limbo of liminality. In our terms, it means more time “in the field.”

To be clear, I am not calling for prolonged fieldwork, but rather an extension of the analytical and even visceral openness that being in the field requires. I achieve this by timing my quick field forays with the first weeks of the project, continuing to participate in the sense-making conversations typical of late night field conversations even after one has left the field, and finally requiring a non-hierarchical collaborative relationship with one’s research compatriots. I learned this from my consultant partners who face the extremes of truncated journeying far more often and far more egregiously than I do.

THE WAY OF “THE WAY”

I have learned to insist on initial shared time in the field in order to build a common, emergent language of the project, one that adds to and also departs from the original project plans. For example, in a wide-ranging project exploring technology and social lives in Mexico, the field team and I spent the first week together dashing from town squares in Veracruz to coming-of-age parties in Puebla. At breakfast, lunch and dinner, we debated how ideas in the office did not suit the practices we witnessed in the field, how the stated project goals presumed too much or too little, how our conversations spanning multiple languages failed to capture what we had experienced thus far. The language we built those first days (from verbal to graphical to gestural) was fundamentally dialogic, to use Mikhail Bakhtin’s sense of the word.¹⁰ It framed the emerging realities, ours, theirs, those we observed and all of ours again. As I returned (and they stayed in Veracruz, Puebla and beyond), we continued to talk. The physical, emotional and analytical disorientation of those first few days helped me digest their ongoing insights from the continuing field work.

These long, frequent conversations, during and after the fieldwork, are yet another way to prolong the liminality of fieldwork. I am not talking about progress updates, but rather meandering deep dives into the analytical backwaters of fieldwork. Sometimes we simply rehashed stories from the field, such as how one young Veracruz dancer was climbing the local dancing hierarchy. Other times we debated whether or those living in Mexican towns dominated by the global drug trade could have public coming-of-age parties for their daughters. Mostly we argued about how to describe, categorize and frame the realities they were seeing in the field. These conversations are typically unsettling, particularly for those no longer in the field. They require that the latter again let go of the very moorings to which he or she returned. They are also nerve-wracking because, for as long as we can, we do not insist on reaching analytical closure.

Finally, I have learned to require a fundamentally democratic collaboration, particularly during the more unsettling field analysis. Turner makes clear that the initiates, the fellow journeyers in our case, are and must be equals. This is a funny dance when I am the client and my partners are paid consultants. But hierarchical relationships can limit the symbolic sense-making of fieldwork. To be valuable contributors to the project, all researchers must be willing to lose their moorings – to not know, to analytically if not physically get lost. We must also do so for long enough to know that the return is true to the field and not our various preconceptions.

In the end, I am calling for an intensified, even prolonged period of analytical mashup so that the team can collectively build a common symbolic and narrative fluency. This can be done in shorter periods of time if one pays attention to how the ethnographic journey as a rite of passage is architected. Preparations and plans are but agreed upon starting points.¹¹ Fieldwork is the time for

¹⁰ (Bakhtin 1991).

¹¹ I prefer to see project plans as early, agreed upon frames of reference, to again borrow Bakhtin’s terminology. (Bakhtin, 1991). As a preparatory artifact, they organizationally justify the project in the corporate language of goals, timelines, budgets and stakeholders. Because our fieldwork takes us far from the office, these plans also frame how our work will both proceed and be evaluated upon our return. Yet, as such a frame, they can be debated. They can be wrong. That in itself is revelatory and worth the investment.

THE WAY OF “THE WAY”

unchartered analysis. Returns are fraught with need to analytically link beginnings, middles and ends, with the anxiety increasing when ends depart farthest from initial expectations. The fluency gained during the fieldwork smoothes this last phase.

To most effectively navigate the analytical disorientation and reorientation of fieldwork, I also prefer to hire experienced ethnographers who are also local to my field sites. Chosen well, they can accelerate the symbolic and narrative sense-making so critical to the journeying. As local experts, they make quicker sense out of my project and its limitations and can more facily point me in the right directions. As fellow ethnographers, they understand the research method and its analytical and bodily demands.

Choosing the right collaborators can be tricky. Sometimes I hit the jackpot and find incisive ethnographers who can take rich field experiences and translate them into actionable, business insights. Often, I compromise. Some trade-offs work better than others. For me, the “ethnographer’s nose,” such as Oreglia’s gut grace and social sensibility, trumps business acumen, in the case of the Chinese market researcher I sent to the wilds of lower Himalayan China. Occasionally, I hire the local expert who spends more time demonstrating his or her expertise rather than exploring the project’s unique possibilities for dialogue. These fieldtrips quickly devolve into a guided tour, at worst replete with clichés and at best an insightful monologue.

The role of the local expert as fellow dialogic journeyman stands out in sharper relief in the case of the executive fieldtrip or “ethnographic tour.” As ethnographers, we are trained in the ritualistic elements of the journey, in particular how to manage the disorientation and reorientation of the liminal experience. The executives we take into the field are not. I have seen remarkably successful executive journeys. In the most successful case, the ethnographer and executive were kindred spirits, both explorers who reveled in the unknown. Both believed in the transformative promise of ethnographic practice, even if unsure how it would unfold at the end. From this case, my group gained an executive champion of corporate ethnography as well as an emerging practice of business innovation that put ethnographic research up front and center.

Not all corporate decision-makers make good candidates for fellow journeyers. Nor do all ethnographers make effective executive guides. My colleagues and I have learned that non-ethnographers must be carefully prepped not only on how the physical journey unfolds but also how the analytical journey progresses. They must become ethnographic initiates. We also learned to take on the role of coach and guide, much like my vendors do with me. However, in the executive journey, the sense-making shifts from cultural to business. The scope of the dialogue broadens, often beyond my comfort zone. Without the chops to fruitfully continue the dialogue, the generative opportunities to disorient and then reorient can diminish. The risk is that prior assumptions remain unquestioned and the return feels flat and time feels wasted.

As ethnographic practitioners, we have additional means of enhancing the journey’s sense-making. In our corporate practice, we do not often talk about them. It is as if they are our dirty secrets. But, frankly, I hear glimmers here and there. A reference to an ongoing diary scribbled late at night, a poem that makes far more sense than an orderly analysis, or a tattoo that marks the body with the residue of

THE WAY OF “THE WAY”

our trials and travels. We talk about extreme exhaustion or jet lag and the trance-like states they bring. Ethnographers have long sketched and meditated to sort symbolic sense out of the worlds surrounding us. Nor are we the only ones who seek to render the culturally unknown known. Carl Jung drew mandalas to anchor himself amidst a shifting, in his case psychological, terrain.¹² Michael Harner symbolically and metaphorically journeys as a shamanic healer.¹³ Both are alternative means of making visible the symbolic semantics of human life. They and others can offer additional tools for rendering tangible the ethnographic experience.

It is a mistake to underestimate the effect of the journey well-taken, even if radically shortened. The process is so powerful, so transformative that we, as humans, have long used it to signal transformation and change. It is woven into the myths of heroism and language of conquest. Shamans use it to justify the powers they bring back from other worlds. Centuries of writers have anchored complex tales of upheaval and change into the literary trope of a path taken (and those not). As ethnographers, we both journey and, upon return, narrate our journeys. Both differentiate our craft from other corporate research practices (even at risk of becoming our Achilles' heel). Wielded carefully, both can act as powerful agents of corporate change.

Corporations require one thing from ethnography: the ability to effect change. If we do not change corporate practice (from product definition to sales and marketing practices), we fail. As consultants, we lose our clients. As in-house researchers, we lose our jobs. It is that simple. A well-crafted ethnographic journey, short or not, shepherds that change.

DISCIPLINE

To master the social sensibility of documentary finesse and the ritualized sense-making of journeying requires discipline, a discipline that is more yogic than Foucaultian.¹⁴ For Foucault, disciplinary practices ensnare us in the workings of power. At their core, they demean. They generate little more than themselves. In contrast, yogic practice associates discipline with enrichment. The repetition of bodily movement opens up possibilities for deepened awareness. To see again and again and from all angles is to more deeply learn. In this way, yoga is about the unending richness of consciousness.

Applied to corporate ethnography, the yogic disciplinary mindset opens up the myriad possibilities of interpretative sense-making. Even beyond the project. Here then lies the longevity of ethnographic practice. Disciplined attention to the social dynamics of documentation and the rituals of journeying allows us review our work and continue to reap insights relevant to the unfolding business matters at hand.

¹² C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. Aniela Jaffe, trans. Clara Winston and Richard Winston (New York: Random House, 1989 (1961, 1962, 1963)).

¹³ Michael Harner, *The Way of the Shaman* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990 (1980)).

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1972).

My former colleague, Lang Xueming, and I continue to refer to research we conducted on Chinese iCafe frequenters in 2006. At the time, the research provided fodder to catalyze a hotly contested about face on upcoming product refresh plans. But the stories Xueming and I debated while he traveled in the field, the photos he took of young men and women chatting, gaming and playing in iCafes and the deeply collaborative process by which we figured out what he was witnessing and what was and was not relevant to the current business questions at hand (the upcoming product refresh) inspired three years of follow-on research on PRC migrant workers, emerging market sociability and global trends in digital publishing. This research continues to fuel our ongoing conversations on the vibrancy of Chinese social media. Although in 2006 Xueming was a novice ethnographer, he was highly disciplined in the yogic sense. His ability to learn and re-learn from his research was infectious and as a result, he both directly (multiple product roadmaps) and indirectly (follow-on research directions), influenced Intel’s corporate practices.

The yogic practice locates creativity and change in repetition. It does not seek out the new. As a practice, it follows centuries of carefully documented and repeated movement of the body through physical and energetic space. Such movements would be prescriptive except the generative possibility of yoga lies in what can be learned by witnessing each repetition. No yogic stance, no matter how prescribed, is ever the same if one can muster an ability to pay attention to all that defines each moment of practice. The practice, because it is architecturally the same, allows the yogic practitioner to also pay attention to the intricacies of his or her awareness.

In this way, yoga, like cultural analysis, is an interpretative science. The significance of each stance evolves with one’s ability to perceive it. Geertz jokes that the interpretation of symbols is turtles all the way down, that there is no end to the possibilities of cultural analysis.¹⁵ It is easy to get lost. Hence, the call for discipline. Geertz calls such discipline the “refinement of debate.”¹⁶ I borrow from yoga the necessity of honing our awareness so that it can deepen and grow. With social grace and ritualized journeying, we can focus on the sense-making of our fieldwork. With rigorous documentation and generative dialogue, we can enrich our interpretation. Add to this an additional element, the yogic call for generative learning through repetition.

After twenty years of practice, I remain most impressed with the ethnographers who attentively (if not relentlessly) explore the interpretative possibilities of their research plans and the field’s rebuttal. These are not ethnographers who rest content with the pleasurable, dialogic flow of ethnographic sense-making or powerful capture of a cultural moment. Instead, they endlessly query the project and unfolding insights from as many perspectives as they can muster. Normal society might call them obsessive compulsive. From a yogic point of view, they would be masters.

¹⁵ To quote Geertz at length, “There is an Indian story – at least I heard it was an Indian story – about an Englishman who, having been told that the world rested on a platform which rested on the back of an elephant which rested on the back of a turtle, asked (perhaps he was an ethnographer; it is the way they behave), what did the turtle rest on? Another turtle. And that turtle? “Ah, Sahib, after that it is turtles all the way down.” (Geertz, 1973), 28-29.

¹⁶ (Geertz, 1973), 29.

THE WAY OF “THE WAY”

The point here is disciplined ethnographers are generative. One study on reading produced not only eloquent narratives of reading as a practice but also a grassroots history of publishing diasporas, taxonomies of different types of readers and finally maps charting their reading practices. That was just nine weeks of work. Another exploration of math teaching and learning knitted together government math curricula with chaos in the classroom to elicit an abstract equation eloquently illustrating how math teaching and learning progressed. The yogic practitioner circles the yogic stance looking for the shift in awareness that allows for a leap in consciousness. These ethnographers, likewise, circled our business questions (what are contemporary reading practices, what constitutes math teaching and learning) from many angles resulting, I argue, in similar analytical leaps.

Practiced attentively, ours can be a disciplined art. Practiced masterfully, our analysis can be intense, immersive, rigorous, deeply collaborative, endlessly curious and profoundly social. Ethnographic masters revel in a detail overturned to reveal yet another. The result is the rendering conscious and ultimately visible the logics and patterns of human social life. This is the Dao, the “doh.”

AN ENDING

I end this article with a second confession that explains my title. I have watched far more martial arts movies and read more than enough martial arts novels than is socially healthy. For better or for worse, I am steeped in the lore of the “Dao” (that is Chinese for “doh” or “the way”). So, I hazard three parallels between the “Dao” of the martial and the ethnographic arts. The first: the Dao is an embodied practice. Think of Jackie Chan or the Shaolin monks. A “pow,” a “thwack” and an “oomph.” Progress typically hurts. Secondly, the “Dao” requires rigorous, repetitive training (although in the movies there is always the promise of a mystical shortcut, or else things get terribly dull). Finally, at the end, there is a righteous transformation: this is the way of the Dao. While the scenes of our work are rarely as lush (or violent) as martial arts lore, the art of our work follows a similarly rich practice – embodied (go to the field), repetitive (go to the field again) and immersive (be the field) – all with the promise of change upon return. Hence the title of this paper. Ours is an art like the martial arts. Both practice the “Dao.”

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THE WAY OF "THE WAY"

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