

From Anthropologist to Adman Anthropology as Preparation for a Business Career

**John McCreery
Wordworkers, Inc.**

An anthropologist who became an adman and worked as a copywriter for a large Japanese agency describes what he learned by pursuing a non-academic career in advertising. He then applies what he learned to a comparative analysis of three approaches to promoting business anthropology in China: the Southern School's latest-thing, import-oriented approach, the Northern School's locally grounded domesticated approach, and the globalized, creative approach of Rhizome, a Shanghai-based research firm with transnational clients.

Keywords: Anthropologist, Adman, Applied Autoethnography, business Anthropology, China

I am an anthropologist. In the fall of 1980, when our family moved to Japan, I was an unemployed anthropologist. Sorely lacking in what my daughter, a pilot, would teach me to call "situational awareness," I had failed to get tenure in my first and only full-time academic position. I needed a job. Being an anthropologist did not get me one. It did, however, I believe, contribute substantially to success as an editor, copywriter, and later "International Creative Director" (a salesman selling advertising campaigns created in Japan to non-Japanese clients) working for one of Japan's largest advertising agencies.

Part I of this paper is autoethnography, described by Wikipedia as "a form of qualitative research in which an author uses self-reflection and writing to explore anecdotal and personal experience and connect this autobiographical story to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings." In this first part of the paper I describe lessons learned during anthropological training and ethnographic fieldwork, the mentors who, with no small difficulty, transformed an anthropologist into an adman, and the trade press that covers the industry in which I was working.

In Part II, I draw on those lessons to evaluate three approaches to promoting business anthropology in China. Then, in my closing remarks, I offer advice and encouragement to young anthropologists who are likely to find themselves pursuing non-academic careers. Before I begin, however, I would like to say a few words about style.

The "I" Form

I write in the first person. I am not rejecting the demands of academic style. Instead, I follow the lead of the distinguished French business anthropologist Dominique Desjeux, who argues persuasively that the "I" form is, in fact, the most rigorous manner in which to report ethnographic research. It reminds us, he

writes, that in our work both the subject and object of observation are human beings. Our research involves “a subtle interplay between subjectivity and observations of daily life.” (2015:14)

Desjeux goes on to say that having conducted several thousand interviews and observations has, he believes, transformed his personality. He has become a “sorcerer,” by which he means someone who sees what others do not see. To see what others do not see. That is the science and, yes, the magic of anthropology in business.

Part I: Autoethnography

As my wife Ruth and I were preparing to move to Japan, where Ruth, a student of Japanese literature, had a grant to spend a year at the Inter-University Center for Japanese Language Study, her colleague Robert Danly invited us to dinner. As the evening drew to a close, Danly asked me, “John, what are you going to do in Japan?” I replied that I had heard it was easy to find work teaching English. Danly said, “John, teaching English is bo-o-o-ring.” When I asked what he would suggest instead, Danly, who had spent a year working for a small advertising agency in Tokyo, gave me a list of names and telephone numbers.

The second name on that list was Robert Cutts, the vice-president of a small (20-plus person) corporate communications company called Dynaword. When Cutts and the company’s founder Tom Eliot interviewed me, they were not impressed by my advanced degree in anthropology or limited ability to speak and read Chinese. What they were looking for was someone to edit a daily translation of Japanese industry news stories produced for IBM. As someone who had just spent a year as a research assistant in the Yale Computer Science Department’s AI project, a job whose perks included a year of sophomore-level computer science, I knew what terms like “operating system,” “check-sum,” “ASCII” and “hard disk storage” meant. I was, in 1980, a one-eyed man in the country of the blind when it came to digital technology. I was just what they needed.

Three years later, when I had lunch with Wick Smith, a friend made through a shared interest in personal computing, I had added to my responsibilities at Dynaword writing and editing for *The SONY Marketing Hotline*, an in-house magazine in which SONY introduced new products and innovative marketing concepts to distributors around the world. When Wick told me that he had been head-hunted by Nippon Design Center, was leaving Hakuhodo, Japan’s second largest advertising agency, and been requested to find a replacement, I asked him to tell me about his job as an English-language copywriter. It sounded more interesting than what I was doing at Dynaword and paid much better. He arranged the interview. I wound up spending thirteen years working for Hakuhodo.

Macro, Meso, Micro

It would take a long book to record my experiences at Hakuhodo. Instead, I want to stop here and consider what I have written so far using the analytic framework that structures the doctoral program in professional anthropology that Dominique Desjeux founded at Université Paris Descartes. This program is designed for anthropologists who, as researchers, entrepreneurs, or research managers, will be engaged in research on demand (ROD), typically short-term projects with specific business or policy goals. Success depends on understanding social and cultural phenomena on macro, meso, and micro-social scales (Desjeux, 2014).

My story so far is micro-scale. It involves individual actors whose encounters present opportunities the protagonist seizes. We could stay at micro-scale and ask questions about personal backgrounds and motivations. We might notice the protagonist’s opportunism, his lack of strategy and willingness to take risks. Instead, I switch to the macro-scale, where massive trends are indifferent to individual desires. Three deserve particular notice.

This first is the post-World War II baby boom that drove rapid economic growth in both the USA and Japan. In the USA, the baby boom lasted from 1946 to 1964. It fuelled a rapid expansion in higher education that made an academic career seem like an easy route to a comfortable middle-class life for a kid who had done well in school. By the mid-1970s, however, the rapid expansion was over.

Retrenchment was beginning. Those like myself, who failed to pay attention to what was going on were in for a hard reckoning.

The second trend was the rise of computers. Fortunately for me, as the academic job market began to shrink, advances in digital technology were driving a revolution in consumer electronics. Japan, whose rapid economic growth in the 1960s had been hailed as an economic miracle, was quick to seize the new opportunities this revolution opened up. In 1980, when we moved to Japan, new Japanese technology in electronic typewriters, word processors, personal computers, printers, copiers, Walkman cassette recorders and Trinitron TV sets was the envy of the world. Having already recovered from the Oil and Nixon shocks of the early 1970s, Japan's economy was on the verge of an economic bubble. Our arrival in Japan was perfectly timed.

Our moving to Japan was made possible by a third macro-scale trend, globalization. Transnational companies were creating the financial, marketing and supply chain networks that dominate today's world, the intersection of this trend with Japan's bubbling economy created a surge in demand for English-language communication. For our family, in which father became an English-language copywriter and mother a renowned Japanese-English translator, these were good times, indeed.

Between the micro and macro lies the meso-scale. Here is where institutions, governments, companies, NPOs, buffer the effects of macro trends on micro decisions. Even in the 1980s, only a minority of Japanese were life-time employees of large corporations (Sugimoto 2010). Large companies depended on networks of small-to-medium size firms to supply the goods, marketing channels, and services their businesses required. In the advertising world, two very large companies, Dentsu and Hakuhodo accounted for the lion's share of the advertising industry. Even they, however, depended on smaller suppliers called "production companies." To avoid the overhead charges accrued by working through the major agencies, cost-conscious clients would often do business directly with production companies instead. That created a niche for companies like Dynaword, where I found my first job. When later I was able to start a new career at Japan's second (and the world's ninth) largest advertising agency that opened the door to a wealth of new opportunities. I still had a lot to learn.

Three months after I joined Hakuhodo, Kazuhiko Kimoto, the senior creative director who had hired me was swearing that he would never again hire an academic. What I wrote was too *rikkutsuppoi* (too academic, logical but boring). I wasn't looking for a new angle. I didn't know how to grab a reader's attention and write a short compelling story. There was no magic in what I was writing. But, being an anthropologist, I learned what I had to do. Three months later, I won the gold prize in a local English-language advertising contest. The ad was for Canon typewriters, the headline, "We put our reputation on every line." I could have been talking about my new job.

Entering the Field

Joining a new company and starting a new career, I was entering a new space, meeting new people, finding out how I would need to behave to work productively with them. It seemed a lot like ethnographic fieldwork.

Moving from the "below the line" production world in which Dynaword operated to the "above the line" creative world at Hakuhodo involved serious culture shock. In the advertising world, "below the line," referred to sales tools (flyers, brochures, point of sale displays, for example) budgeted and produced on a cost-plus basis. Below-the-line writing was piece-work. A valuable writer was one able to produce at high speed large quantities of error-free text "good enough" to satisfy client demands. Originality was appreciated but not a rigorous requirement.

"Above the line" referred to mass media advertising, where agency profit was taken from the commission paid for buying the media in which the advertising was placed. In Japan, when I joined Hakuhodo in 1983, the standard commission was 15%. In this world a twenty million US dollar media buy would earn the agency three million dollars. Originality was imperative. Nothing ruled out an idea more quickly than someone noticing "It's already been done," especially by a client's competitor (McCreery, 1995).

At Dynaword, I was “grinding it out.” At Hakuodo, I had to become “creative.” The Manchester Extended Case Study model I learned from Victor Turner provided useful guidelines as I thought about what I had to do.

Step number one was to map social structure. I found myself working with three categories of people. Account executives were “suits.” They wore suits and ties and spent most of each day working or socializing with clients. They were sales people, closely attuned to what their clients were looking for and making sure that budgets included profit for the agency. Marketing strategists and media planners dressed more casually. They frequently wore sports jackets and only put on their ties when it was time to meet a client. There was a world of numbers and charts, boxes and arrows, slides filled with data to support the strategies they recommended. A very academic world, or so it felt to me. Creatives dressed in jeans and T-shirts, wore their hair in ponytails. Designers were frequently seen wearing exotic footwear.

Step number two was social dramas, recurring conflicts that reveal competing values. Agency meetings were filled with social dramas. Account executives’ primary interest was keeping their clients happy. Planners were all about data and logic. The creatives were intuitive, emotional, given to stubbornly pushing ideas that challenged client expectations or data-based strategies. In creative team meetings copywriters clashed with art directors. Creative directors had to manage these internal quarrels. Great creative directors were like the control rods in nuclear reactors, pulling back to let the energy flow, pushing in to prevent explosions. My training as an anthropologist was very useful, indeed, in sorting out these differences and learning to work with and around them.

Step number three was cultural analysis, evaluating creative concepts. Anthropological theory sometimes turned out to be useful. Clifford Geertz’s “thick description” and advice to substitute complex for too simplistic models while retaining the apparent clarity that makes simplistic models attractive prepared me to understand why so much of our time was invested in arguing about details used to enrich and add nuance to simple-sounding messages. Familiarity with Claude Lévi-Strauss’ “logic in tangible qualities” made it easier to understand how art directors used contrast in color or form to add balance or tension to visual imagery. Victor Turner’s analysis of dominant symbols provided a useful framework for understanding brands (Geertz, 2000; Lévi-Strauss, 1969; Turner, 1967).

At the end of the day, however, the most important thing about my anthropological training was perhaps the breadth of material it covered, biology, linguistics, archeology and material culture as well as sociocultural analysis. Advertising icon Carl Ally wrote,

The creative person wants to be a know-it-all. He wants to know about all kinds of things: ancient history, nineteenth century mathematics, current manufacturing techniques, flower arranging, and hog futures. Because he never knows when these ideas might come together to form a new idea. It may happen six minutes later or six years down the road. But he has faith that it will happen (Van Oech, 1990:6).

That sounds like an anthropologist to me.

My Mentors

Much of what anthropologists learn during fieldwork comes from “key informants,” individuals with whom the anthropologist develops a special rapport, who are willing to spend time answering the anthropologist’s questions. In a business context, mentors play a similar role. In this section I offer three examples of lessons learned from two of my most important mentors.

Before I was hired by Hakuodo, I was interviewed by Alice Buzzarte, then the dean of English-language copywriters in Tokyo, and Senior Creative Director Kazuhiko Kimoto, the leader of the creative team to which I was assigned.

Buzzarte had joined the agency in the 1950s during Japan’s post-WWII economic recovery. She had made many close friends who became senior executives. Most important for me, she had established the precedent that would allow me to work for the agency for thirteen years. The usual practice at other agencies was to treat foreign writers like young, single female employees, expected to leave after three or four years.

Kimoto was was a classic salaryman. Someone told me that he had a family, but he seemed to live at the office. His life was cigarettes, whiskey, occasional games of go, and work, work, work. When we made presentations, he had invested so much time in studying the product and the client that he was, inevitably, the most knowledgeable person in the room.

Kimoto was also a tough boss, with very low tolerance for those he considered fools. His Japanese colleagues respected and endured him. They called him *urusai*, a term variously translated as noisy, loud, annoying, troublesome, tiresome, persistent, importunate, fussy, finicky, picky, particular, nagging, fastidious, bossy. He could be all of the above. As a Tokyo University graduate who had majored in American Literature, he was also suspected of favouring foreign writers. That was why he wound up as the Senior Creative Director in the International Division instead of in charge of one of the agency's large domestic accounts.

Shortly after I joined Hakuhodo, Buzzarte took me aside and said, "John, to succeed in this business you will have to develop a thick skin. You have to realize that at least three out of four of your brilliant ideas are going straight into the trash can." That was an optimistic estimate. Foreign agencies might present a client with a single idea. In Japan, however, *okyakusama ha kamisama* (the customer is a god). Gods must be allowed to choose from multiple offerings, and dozens of ideas might be proposed and rejected before a decision was reached on which to show the clients. Years later I was told about a training exercise for new employees from which as a foreigner and mid-career hire I had been excused. It was called *hitoban hyakuan* (one night, one hundred proposals). Young copywriter wannabes would be assigned a product for which they had to come up with catch phrases. They had a single night to produce a hundred proposals, writing each one on a separate piece of paper that would then be taped to a wall for evaluation. Only rarely did one of those proposals be marked with the triangle that indicated "work on it some more." To receive a circle, indicating, "Great, let's use it" was almost unheard of.

It was, however, in two conversations with Kimoto, that I got the best business advice I have ever received. The topic of the first conversation was rules. Agency management was going through one of its periodic attempts to get its employees to come in and leave work on time, instead of drifting in around noon, staying past midnight, then taking taxis home at company expense. When I asked Kimoto what he thought of this push, he replied, "In our business, there is only one rule. If the clients give the agency work because you are here, you can ignore the other rules." Implicit was the message that if you were only doing a job, what other people told you to do, you had to follow the rules.

Kimoto's second bit of advice concerned responsibility. During the economic bubble of the late 1980s, many MBAs from famous business schools were looking for jobs in Japan. Their first question on being hired was, "What am I responsible for?" When I asked Kimoto if foreigners would ever be given responsibility, he said,

Look around you. This is a big company. There is a lot more responsibility to be taken than people willing to take it. Find something that needs doing and just do it. I guarantee that within a few months you will be in charge of it.

Then, however, he added a warning, "Do not choose something that someone else is already doing. That belongs to them." It was following that advice that, a few years later, I noticed that Japanese colleagues were having trouble selling their ideas to foreign executives. I offered to lend a hand. That is how I became an "International Creative Director" and got to participate in pitches to companies like BMW, Coca-Cola, and Disney movie distributor Buena Vista Japan. An important part of that job was knowing what was going on in Japanese advertising and Japanese popular culture.

Reading Trade Press

As Marcus and Fischer have written,

Anthropology no longer operates under the ideal of discovering new worlds like explorers of the fifteenth century. Rather we step into a stream of already existing representations produced by journalists, prior anthropologists, historians, creative writers, and of course the subjects of study themselves(1999:xx).

In the new worlds entered by anthropologists pursuing business careers today, literacy is assumed, numeracy expected, knowledge of data analytics is a plus already becoming commonplace. Except for data analytics, that was already true when I joined Hakuhodo in 1983,

Working at Hakuhodo in the 1980s and 90s, I discovered an industry trade press that had covered the latest trends and developments in advertising and marketing ever since the early 1950s. New magazines appeared on highly visible racks in every office I visited, and the agency library's collection included complete runs of previous issues.

I still vividly recall the day I was exploring the stacks and discovered the 40th anniversary issue of *Senden Kaigi* (宣伝会議, Publicity Forum), whose first issue was published in 1954. On one of the facing pages reprinted from that first issue I found a discussion of a new branding program at Asahi Beer. I was intrigued to discover that the issues being debated, how to describe the taste, body, mouth feel and drinkability of the beer were identical with those that I had encountered at a beer branding meeting for Budweiser the previous day. On the other facing page I discovered something stunning — a debate about whether this new technology, television, just introduced to Japan in 1954, would ever become an important advertising medium. The 1980s and 90s, the period when I was working at Hakuhodo, were the golden age of TV advertising in Japan.

Besides the magazines there were books by and about famous advertising creatives. In a collection of articles titled *Watashi no Kôkoku Jutsu* (私の広告術, My Advertising Craft), I found a piece by renowned art director Takuya Ohnuki in which he described the “Five Hurdles” that great advertising must overcome.

1. **It must be eye-catching.** In a world where people are bombarded everyday with hundreds and thousands of advertising messages, advertising that fails to attract their attention is no good at all.
2. **It must be instantly understandable.** Consumers are busy people. If they don't get the point instantly, they move on to the next thing.
3. **It must be news.** Consumers must learn something fresh and unexpected.
4. **It must be memorable.** If they get it but forget it, that's not good advertising.
5. **It must add value to the client's brand.** Too much advertising is eye-catching, instantly understandable, and shouts “News!” The gimmicks are memorable, but consumers don't remember the sponsor or the brand. What, then, are clients paying for? (Ohnuki 2000: 9-10)

It is with these five hurdles in mind that I turn to Part II of this paper.

Part II: Business Anthropology in China

Guo Jing's review of the history of business anthropology in China begins in a way familiar to this American reader. It begins with a definition: "Business anthropology is a science that utilizes anthropological theory and method to investigate and solve practical problems in business management" (Guo 2018:43). It goes on to trace the history of business anthropology in America, starting with the Hawthorne Experiment in the 1930s and the Human Relations school in the 1940s and 50s. The sixties see the emergence of interest in corporate cultures, which blossoms following the economic recovery of Europe and Japan and reaches a fever pitch in the seventies, spurred by interest in the enormous success of Japanese corporations in global markets. The 2003 publication of Anne T. Jordan's *Business Anthropology* marks the transformation of business anthropology into a fully fledged academic field.

To this American reader, two omissions stand out in this account. First, while the publication of Jordan's *Business Anthropology* defined a new academic field, it was the first Ethnographic Praxis in Corporations (EPIC) conference, organized by Ken Anderson and Tracey Lovejoy and sponsored by Microsoft and Intel, that marked the full acceptance of anthropological methods by major corporations. The second omission is the absence of any mention of the ethical debates, arising out of U.S. military ventures in Vietnam and Latin America, that during the 1970s led the American Anthropological Association to ban all proprietary research and made business anthropology doubly a pariah, polluted

both as applied anthropology and, especially, as anthropology in support of business interests. Why this omission?

Local Roots

The reason, I suggest, is found in the second section of Guo's review, which describes the field's local genealogy, starting with the magisterial presence of Fei Xiaotong. Both Fei's own research and that of his students, who studied labor relations in industrial firms reestablished in Western China to escape the advancing Japanese armies during the Anti-Japanese War was consciously and proudly not only applied anthropology but also a contribution to the war effort.

According to Guo, business anthropology in China has, since 2003, developed in two directions. There are two major schools, what I will call the Southern School, led by Shantou University Professor Tian Guang and Zhongshan University Professor Da Zhouming, and what I will call the Northern School, led Professor Zhang Jijiao at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. For the Southern School, business anthropology is *Gongshangrenleixue*(工商人類學), a phrase that could be literally translated as "the anthropology of industry and trade." For the Northern School, business anthropology is *Qiyerenleixue*(企業人類學), which can be literally translated as "enterprise anthropology." As Guo sees it, these two versions of business anthropology overlap but differ in research emphases. Northern School research focuses on famous old brands, relations between government and business, and ethnic minority businesses and entrepreneurs. Southern School research focuses on cross-cultural management, consumer behavior and marketing.

As an anthropologist, I want to explore these differences in greater detail. Here, however, I turn to the adman's perspective. I examine three approaches to promoting business anthropology in China: the Southern School approach, the Northern School approach, and, then, the approach used by Rhizome, a Shanghai based consultancy, whose clients include many large transnational corporations.

The Adman's Perspective

Like Anthropology, advertising calls itself a discipline. From an advertising creative's perspective, every job should, ideally at least, start with a creative brief. The brief has four key components: the Target, who are we trying to persuade; the Objective, what do we want from them; the Proposition, the takeaway message, the one thing we want the Target to remember, even if they forget everything else; the Rationale, a theory that explains why communicating this Proposition to that Target will achieve our Objective. For my purposes here, I will assume that a Proposition that overcomes Ohnuki's Five Hurdles (described above) will achieve its objective. The creative brief and the Five Hurdles provide the conceptual framework for evaluating the three approaches mentioned above: Southern School, Northern School, Rhizome. For each approach, I infer the Target and Objective. My primary focus of attention are words that seem to me to summarize the Proposition at the heart of each approach.

Reader beware. I am not Chinese. When I read Chinese texts, I may miss important nuances. I may misunderstand completely. The analyses presented here are thus necessarily tentative.

The Southern School

To me the words that best express the Southern School's proposition can be found in the first and last sentences of the opening paragraph of Tian Guang and Dai Qingin's "Anthropology and Business Management: Probing the Pathway of Localization in China" (2013).

- Research and practical applications employing anthropological theory and method are a new trend in International Management Studies.
- Anthropology's qualitative analysis and observational research offer insights difficult to obtain using quantitative methods (2013;788).

Since this article is published in *The Chinese Journal of Management*, I infer that its primary target is professors employed by business schools. Its objective is to legitimate business anthropology as a subfield of management studies and promote its inclusion in business school offerings. Turning to the proposition,

I see two familiar approaches, "Here's a new trend" and "We can solve problems that others can't." That there are two propositions is already problematic. In advertising we look for the Unique Selling Point (USP), one big idea. Both propositions are, moreover, problematic in themselves.

The new trend is an import, a trend that began outside of China. Could this weaken its appeal in what is becoming an increasingly powerful and self-confident China, promoting its own ideas? And was it really new, even five years ago?

When I turn to the second proposition, it seems old-fashioned. I recall John Sherry remarking (personal communication) that during the 1980s, the quantitative research models taken from sociology and social psychology were running out of steam. As the information economy took shape, companies were forced to innovate, and these old models were not producing any new ideas. The idea that anthropologists, who travel to places other people don't and notice things that other people miss, had valuable insights to offer was a fresh, new idea. It had a lot of appeal. But that was in the 1980s. In 2013? In China? And what about now? Recent EPIC proceedings and the advertising and marketing trade press are full of articles about "Big Data" and the threat it poses to ethnographic research. A recent (April 2, 2019) post on the Qualitative Research Consultants Association (QRCA) website is titled "When Ethnography Becomes a Joke"

(<https://www.qrca.org/blogpost/1488356/321141/When-Ethnography-Becomes-a-Joke>).

Evaluation: Are these propositions eye-catching, easy to understand, memorable, news? Do they add value for this audience, at this point in time?

The Adman's conclusion: We need some fresh ideas.

The Northern School

Part 1 of Zhang Jijiao's four-part report published in Innovation(创新) in 2015 has no authorized English title. My translation reads, "Enterprise Anthropology, A Pathbreaking Perspective: The Current State of Research on Famous Old Brands, Practical Significance and Scholarly Value."

The adman in me likes this title. Yes, it still has an academic flavour: the style would not be right for soft drinks or fast cars; but the key words and benefits pop off the page: "Enterprise Anthropology," "Famous Old Brands," "Pathbreaking Perspective," "Practical Significance," "Scholarly Value." The adman also likes the way in which "Scholarly Value" is placed after "Pathbreaking Perspective" and "Practical Significance." This title speaks to a broader audience than business school academics. It outlines a story and draws the reader in.

Next, I read the lead paragraph.

Since reform and opening to the outside world, China's strength has grown rapidly, making many of us more confident in China's capabilities. Many Chinese, however, still feel inferior to Americans and even Japanese. Research on famous old brands reveals that China possesses a wealth of business tradition and wisdom that can help to overcome this feeling of inferiority. (2015:11)

Because the author has spelled out the key points in his story in the title, there is no need to repeat them in this first paragraph. Instead, he adds value by evoking national pride and purpose, framing his research as a contribution to China's national project. The academic argument is reserved for the following page, summed up in the following passage.

Enterprise anthropology differs from management studies, economics, and law by combining profitability with social responsibility to form a new, comprehensive, interdisciplinary perspective that takes into account both the economic and the social nature of business. (2015:12)

This statement asserts academic value, but that value does not depend on scholarly debate about qualitative versus quantitative methods. Instead, it clearly separates enterprise anthropology from management studies, economics, and law. While those fields are portrayed as focused on companies as purely profit-driven, economic entities, enterprise anthropology adds recognition that business is social as well as economic in nature and properly concerned with social responsibility as well as profitability. This argument resonates with the social and political vision announced on the previous page.

Rhizome

Point your browser to <http://rhizome.com.cn>, and the first words you see are

在日常生活中炼金

解读行为、解码文化、洞察趋势

Switch languages to English and the Chinese is replaced by

“Alchemy” in Daily Life

Interpreting behaviours, Decoding cultures, Uncovering trends

Below these catch phrases we see a button. The Chinese label is 聯繫我們, literally “Contact Us.” The English label is “Let’s Talk.”

This adman, who reads Chinese but lacks a native sense of nuance, wonders which was written first, the Chinese or the English. To me, the English version seems punchier, friendlier, more compelling. “Alchemy” is the first word that strikes the eye. A word with magical overtones, it is eye-catching and intriguing. The phrases that describe key concepts and benefits are easy to understand. “Daily life,” “Interpreting behaviours,” “Decoding cultures,” “Uncovering trends”: these words are carefully crafted to appeal to clients searching for new opportunities. “Let’s talk” is a friendly invitation. The majority of the client logos displayed when I scroll down the page appear to be transnational firms.

I also notice the clever wordplay in the company's name. In English the botanical meaning of “rhizome” refers to a subterranean plant stem by which a plant spread. The French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari use the terms “rhizome” and “rhizomatic” to describe research that allows for multiple, non-hierarchical entry and exit points in data representation and interpretation. Both senses are potentially meaningful to transnational corporations aiming to take root in the Chinese market. My Pleco electronic dictionary tells me that in the Chinese version of the company's name 睿丛, the first character means farsighted, perspicacious, astute, while the second means “crowd.” My translation would be “Smart Crowd.” The company's description of its services, a combination of ethnography and data analysis looks very smart, indeed.

Points to Ponder

Reviewing what I have written here and asking myself what advice I can offer to young anthropologists pursuing non-academic careers, I recall a marketing anecdote. I can no longer identify the source, but its message is clear.

Once there was a company that made the world’s best drill bits. They invested heavily in new materials and manufacturing technologies, determined to make the world’s best drill bits even better. They were put out of business by a company that manufactured lasers. Why? Because what their customers wanted was not better drill bits. What their customers wanted was better holes.

That word “holes” is intriguing. It reminds me of what my Hakuodo colleagues called “vacuum zones,” brief windows of opportunity where something can be inserted that changes the world; the Apple iPhone is a famous example in the product development space. It reminds me of fellow creatives looking for “gaps” between copy and visual, spaces to be filled by the advertising target’s wants and desires. It reminds me of Kazuhiko Kimoto observing that there is more responsibility to be taken than people

willing to take it. When I found my first job in Japan, the hole was a lack of people who understood the basics of digital technology. The gap I filled when Hakuhodo hired me was the one created when my predecessor was head-hunted by another company. Those particular opportunities have come and gone.

How, then, do you find your own hole, your own gap, your own vacuum zone in which you can build a career and maybe change the world? You may, like the founders of Rhizome, find a way to present yourself as an anthropologist with something special to offer. If you can't find a job labeled "anthropologist," don't worry about the label. Be the kind of anthropologist that Tom Kelley describes in *The Ten Faces of Innovation*:

The Anthropologist is rarely stationary. Rather, this is the person who ventures into the field to observe how people interact with products, services, and experiences in order to come up with new innovations. The Anthropologist is extremely good at reframing a problem in a new way, humanizing the scientific method to apply it to daily life. Anthropologists share such distinguishing characteristics as the wisdom to observe with a truly open mind; empathy; intuition; the ability to "see" things that have gone unnoticed; a tendency to keep running lists of innovative concepts worth emulating and problems that need solving; and a way of seeking inspiration in unusual places. (Kelley, 2005)

If you are that kind of anthropologist, you will, I predict, succeed at whatever career you pursue.

REFERENCES

- Desjeux, D. (2015). *The anthropological perspective of the world: the inductive method illustrated*. Peter Lang.
- Desjeux, D. 2016 "Professional Anthropology and Training in France." In *Handbook of Anthropology in Business*. Edited by R. Denny and P. Sutherland, 100-115. New York: Routledge.
- Geertz, C. (2000). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books Classics.
- Guang, T., and Qinjin, D. (2013). "Anthropology and Business Management: Probing the Pathway of Localization in China." *Chinese Journal of Management*. 10 (6), 785-795.
- Guo, J. (2018). "Zhongguo Gongshangrenleixue Yanjiu de Huigu yu Zhanwang" [The Past and Future of Business Anthropology in China]. *Journal of Hubei University of Nationalities (Philosophy and Humanities)*. 1(36), 43-47.
- Kelley, T., and Littman, J. (2005). *The Ten Faces for Innovation*. Crown Business.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1969). *The Raw and The Cooked*. Jonathan Cape.
- Marcus, G. E., and Fischer, Michael M. J. (1999). *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- McCreery, J. (1995). "Malinowski, Magic and Advertising: On Choosing Metaphors." In *Contemporary Marketing and Consumer Behavior: An Anthropological Sourcebook*. Edited by John Sherry. Sage Publications.
- Sugimoto, Y. (2010). *An Introduction to Japanese Society*. Cambridge University Press.
- Takuya, O. (2000). "Omoshiroi dake ja kôkoku shinai" [Interesting isn't advertising]. In *Watashi no Kôkoku Jutsu* [My Advertising Craft]. Madura Publishing.
- Turner, V. (1967). *The Forest of Symbols*. Cornell University Press.
- Van Oech, R. (1990). *A Whack on the Side of the Head: How You Can Be More Creative*. Warner Books
- Zhang Jijiao. (2015). "Qiyerenleixue de Chuangxinshijiao: Laozihao de Yanjiu Xiangzhuang,Xianshi Yiyi, he Xueshu Jiazhi" ["Enterprise Anthropology, A Pathbreaking Perspective: The Current State of Research on Famous Old Brands, Practical Significance and Scholarly Value."] *Innovation*. 1(9), 11-16