2018 Interview: Best International Paper Award

Written by Laura D'Oria
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OMT Interview with Anna Kim (HEC Montreal) winner of the 2018 OMT Best International Paper Award.

Interviewed by Laura D'Oria (Iowa State University).

For the readers who are not familiar with your work, can you please briefly highlight what your paper is about?

My paper is about how firms and stakeholders conveying contested memories manage to work together in their ongoing relationships. I investigate this question through a qualitative study of interactions between a multinational beverage corporation and a tea-growing community in Kenya. My findings suggest that, despite contested memories, the corporation and the community were able to build mutually beneficial partnerships by differentiating local and global narratives – which I call "local remembering" and "global forgetting" in the title of the paper. In other words, the actors continued to disagree, yet were able to work together, by producing distinct historical narratives across spaces.

How did this project come about? (What was the inspiration for this study? How did you connect with the setting? What intrigued you about the context?)

The project started as a part of my dissertation fieldwork in tea-growing communities in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. My previous experience in international development and fair trade helped me connect with the setting (I worked for Oxfam, among others).

While I was planning to visit several Fairtrade-certified tea producer organizations in the region, I stumbled upon information about a three-year corporate social responsibility (CSR) project in Western Kenya (2009-2012) to support over 10,000 small-scale farmers to establish

co-operatives and obtain the Fairtrade certification. When I first visited the community in 2010, I quickly realized that the CSR project was not only a choice of the corporation but also an outcome of ongoing interactions between the corporation and the community, which were deeply rooted in their century-long relationship, since the colonial times. I decided to treat this case as a separate set of data from the rest of the fieldwork and continued to collect data until the end of the CSR project period.

Would you like to share any challenges you faced during the research process (e.g.: data collection, data analysis, etc.)? If so, how did you overcome them?

As I was collecting data from both the corporation and the community, it was important to gain trust from both sides. For the corporate managers, I think it was helpful to present myself as an academic researcher who had experienced the relevant issues in a professional setting (at Oxfam and other development agencies). In order to better connect with tea farmers in the local community, I spoke Swahili (I had undertaken part-time language training for 14 months to prepare for my fieldwork) and always travelled in matatu minibuses [a primary form of local public transportation] just as small-scale farmers would do. Many informants seemed to appreciate such efforts to experience local practices in the closest possible ways.

I was also conscious that I was not entirely fluent in Swahili, even though I was conversational and able to conduct interviews. With the hope of complementing the verbal data, I collected visual data in the form of informants' freehand drawings and videos. I often invited informants to answer my questions in their own drawings before explaining them verbally. This technique seemed to work very well in my research context, in which messages are frequently communicated through images due to low literacy rates. I think the visual data added much value to my research – they often revealed information that was not explicitly described in verbal accounts.

Another challenge I faced (and I'm still facing) is that it's been taking me a long time to develop a paper from this project after finishing my PhD. With a new baby, a new job, and other projects along the way, I was making very slow progress in this dissertation chapter for quite some time. Somewhat paradoxically, I think it was also because the project mattered so much to me. I really wanted to do a good job with the paper, which made me move at an incredibly slow speed. So the recognition from the OMT division meant a lot to me! I'm still working on the manuscript, because I want to improve it further before submitting it to a journal. So it's been a long journey and there's still a long way to go – and I think it was important to present early manuscripts at seminars and conferences so that I could keep receiving constructive comments, as well as the energy to keep going.

Your findings show that there the spatial separation of narratives is an important mechanism that allows organizations and stakeholders conveying contested memories to fruitfully work together. In what ways might your work provide insights on how to manage/improve corporate-community relations in different contexts?

It's easy to see corporate-community relations as either conflictual or collaborative, but I think it's often both at the same time. In my study, the community emphasized the historical responsibility of the corporation (since atrocities of the colonial times) in local interactions, while praising the benevolence of the corporation for the global audience. The corporation partially acknowledged the historical narrative, as long as it was locally confined. As a result, the CSR project was constantly negotiated in the local setting, yet presented as the corporation's generous gift to the community on a global scene – and the arrangement seemed to work for both sides.

Understanding such dynamics might help researchers and practitioners to develop a more realistic view of CSR and corporate-community relations. Corporations want to manage their legitimacy and reputation, often on a global scene, whereas local issues and outcomes might be much more important to communities. In such situations, corporations might be able to protect their global interests by giving up some local fights, and communities might be able to win specific local outcomes by endorsing the corporation to the global audience.

I'm conscious that this arrangement may reflect the power imbalance in corporate-community relations, because I'm talking about the global win of the corporation versus the local win of the communities. Nevertheless, this seems to be one mechanism which can lead to some meaningful outcomes for both, even though it may not be a win-win with equal weights.

What did you enjoy most about this research project?

The fieldwork, definitely. It was a tremendous learning opportunity for me, not just as a researcher but also on a personal level. And I was fortunate to be exposed to a story (or stories) which I found interesting and important. I'm very much looking forward to developing the manuscript further, so that I can (hopefully) tell this story well.

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