

# CULTURE AND BUSINESS

## ANT 2510/UGEC2662 (Term 2, 2025/26)

Instructor: Avron BORETZ [boretz@cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:boretz@cuhk.edu.hk) NAH 411  
RA: TBA  
Lecture: Thursdays 12:30-2:15PM  
Tutorial: Thursdays 2:30-3:15 PM  
Location: UCC 114

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

In this course we examine the current practice and historical development of business from an **anthropological perspective**.

We consider **business as a cultural practice**, including 1) “business culture” — a set of beliefs and styles of interaction that establish and sustain the ‘business world’ as a distinct community of knowledge and experience; 2) the “culture of business”—the ways businesses and corporations have come to broadly influence social values and orientations; and 3) the “business of culture”—how marketing, branding, and advertising have made consumption central to our individual and collective identities. We also examine the intersection of business and culture locally (Hong Kong) and regionally (Asia generally and China specifically).

Using concepts and research methods developed by anthropologists to study diverse cultures helps us to understand different forms of business activity and practice. We focus on the centrality of culture to the evolution and practice of business and aim to make sense of the diversity of business and management practices around the world today. Finally, we take the first steps in learning to apply basic ethnographic skills to real-world business problems.

Class activities include one lecture and one tutorial each week. Lectures and tutorials will be conducted in English. Readings are mostly in the form of articles and book chapters and excerpts. All readings are available online through Blackboard—there is no required textbook. No prior study of anthropology (or business) is expected or required.

This course addresses these Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): *No Poverty* (SDF 1), *Decent Work and Economic Growth* (SDG8), and *Partnerships for the Goals* (SDG 17).

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

1. Understand the cultural dimensions and influences of business in historical and contemporary contexts.
2. Critically appraise the meanings, messages, implications and impacts of business, including major economic and cultural trends both positive and harmful, in our world today.
3. Begin to acquire a set of practical research skills to research and evaluate specific problems and broad issues in the modern marketplace and workplace.
4. Be able to examine critically how SDGs could play in addressing social disparities and injustices.
5. Understand the importance of building a more inclusive, equal, and diverse society.

## COURSE CONTENT

All readings and media are available to view or download from the CU Blackboard course page. Lecture presentations (PPT) will be made available on Blackboard after each respective class meeting.

Readings are required unless otherwise specified.

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND EVALUATION

Class Participation: 20%

Weekly Reading Summaries: 10%

Take-home Midterm Exam: 30% (Due 27 February)

Take-home Final Research Project: 40%

- The Class Participation score is based on active engagement in tutorials.
- Weekly Reading Summaries (Weeks 3-12 inclusive, 10 in total) are brief descriptions (normally no more than 2-3 sentences) of the main points of each reading, to be submitted online no later than 12:30PM on the day of each respective class meeting, beginning in Week 3. Summaries can and should also include questions that occur to you when reading the material—in fact, writing down questions is a good way to prepare for participation in the tutorials. I recommend that you also bring a printed or digital copy of the week's summary for reference during tutorial discussions. **Reading Summaries are credit/no credit and will not be accepted after the deadline.**
- The mid-term exam (due 27 February) will be a take-home exercise requiring students to write short essays in response to questions about material covered to that point in the semester. Writing the exam should take no more than 2 hours, assuming you have stayed up to date with reading assignments and lectures.
- The take-home Final Research Project (due 11:59PM on 9 May) is a flexible, self-directed exercise offering an opportunity to try your own hand at business ethnography. We will explore prospective topics and research processes together, but plan to discuss your topic directly with the instructor for final approval. You will have approximately 2 weeks to complete the exercise.
- You may use AI tools for the take-home assessments (Mid-term Examination and Final Research Project) only if you explicitly acknowledge and notate their use, for the following purposes: 1) Proofreading for style, grammar, usage, and punctuation; and 2) general fact-finding.

**You are responsible for submitting all assignments on or before the published deadlines. Late submissions (midterm and final project) will be discounted the equivalent of one full letter grade for each 24-hour delay per exercise.**

## GRADE DESCRIPTORS

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Criteria for 1) the course and 2) for coursework</i>
A	<p>Outstanding performance on all learning outcomes.</p> <p>The work has creatively synthesized course materials and key ideas in an original way. The argument is logical and cohesive, the discussion is well-organized, and the writing is clear. Concrete evidence corresponds to statements and claims.</p>
A-	<p>Generally outstanding performance on all (or almost all) learning outcomes.</p> <p>The work synthesizes course materials and key ideas in an original way, but there are areas for improvement.</p>
B-range	<p>Substantial performance on all learning outcomes, OR high performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance.</p> <p>The work demonstrates a solid grasp of course materials and key ideas. There are areas for improvement with respect to building a cohesive argument, organizing the discussion, communicating clearly, and/or identifying relevant evidence.</p>
C-range	<p>Satisfactory performance on the majority of learning outcomes, possibly with a few weaknesses.</p> <p>The work shows some effort, but course materials have not been sufficiently engaged. The argument and the writing are not clear, and/or there is no evidence for statements and claims made.</p>
D-range	<p>Barely satisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes.</p> <p>The work shows little effort to engage course materials. There are major problems with clarity of argument and writing.</p>
F	<p>Unsatisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes, OR failure to meet specified assessment requirements.</p> <p>The work has failed to respond to the assignment prompts.</p>

## Schedule and Readings

### **Week 1      8 January** **Course Introduction**

Lecture: Why Culture?

*Recommended reading*

Lyon, S., (2021). Business Anthropology. In: L. Pedersen & L. Cliggett, eds. The SAGE Handbook of Cultural Anthropology. London: SAGE Publications, pp. 364-382.

*No tutorial meeting.*

### **Week 2      15 January** **The Ethnographic Frame**

Nakamaki, H., (2016). Enterprise as Cultural Community. In: H. Nakamaki, K. Hioki, I. Mitsui & Y. Takeuchi, eds. *Enterprise as an Instrument of Civilization: An Anthropological Approach to Business Administration*. Tokyo: Springer, pp. 17-28.

Jordan, B. & Lambert, M., (2009). Working in Corporate Jungles: Reflections on Ethnographic Praxis in Industry. In: M. Cefkin, ed. *Ethnography and the Corporate Encounter: Reflections on Research in and of Corporations*. New York: Berghahn, pp. 95-133.

### **Week 3      22 January** **Cultural Dimensions of Business: Values and Ethics**

Trompenaars, Fons and Charles Hampden-Turner (1997) *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Diversity in Global Business*. London, Nicholas Brealy Publishing. Chapters 4-5, pp. 29-68

### **Week 4      29 January** **Inter- and Intra-Cultural Communication**

Tannen, Deborah (2012) Conversation Style: Talking on the Job. In: J. P. Spradley & D. W. McCurdy, eds. *Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology*. 14th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, pp. 61-68

Wong, H.-W., 2013 (1999). *Japanese Bosses, Chinese Workers: Power and Control in a Hongkong Megastore*. New York: Routledge. Chapter 8, pp. 159-193

*Recommended reading:*

Jordan, Ann T. (2003) *Business Anthropology*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press. Chapter 4, "Seeing Cultural Groupings" pp 39-53

## **Week 5      5 February**

### **Corporations and Corporatization**

Ritzer, George (2004) *The McDonaldization of Society* (Revised New Century Edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Chapter 1, pp. 1-23

Foster, R. J., 2008. *Coca-globalization: Following soft drinks from New York to New Guinea*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Chapter. 2, pp. 33-73

*Recommended reading:*

Ho, K., 2009. *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Chapter 4, pp. 169-212

Chinese translation (简体版): 何柔宛, 2018。《清算: 華爾街的日常生活》(翟宇航等譯)。上海: 華東師範大學出版社。<第四章: 股東價值的敘事起源及其新古典主義經濟學基礎>

## **Week 6      12 February**

### **Efficiency, Evaluation, and Manipulation**

Chong, K. (2018). *Best Practice: Management Consulting and the Ethics of Financialization in China*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Chapter 2, pp. 64-90

*Recommended reading:*

Strathern, Marilyn (2000). Introduction: New Accountabilities. In: M. Strathern, ed. *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability and the Academy*. London: Routledge, pp. 1-18

**19 February: University Holiday, No Class Meeting**

## **Week 7      26 February**

### **The Gig Economy**

Gray, M. & Suri, S. (2019). *Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a new Global Underclass*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; Chapter 3, pp. 67-93

Chinese translation (繁體版): 瑪莉·葛雷、西達爾特·蘇利, 2020。《你不知道的線上零工經濟》。台北: 臉譜。<第三章: 演算法的殘酷及幽靈勞工看不見的成本>

*Recommended reading:*

Bieber, F. & Moggia, J. (2021). Risk Shifts in the Gig Economy: The Normative Case for an Insurance Scheme against the Effects of Precarious Work. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 29(3), pp. 281-304

**Take-home midterm due Friday 27 February at 11:59pm**

## 5 March Reading week, no class meeting

### **Week 8 12 March** **Consuming for Life**

Bosco, Joseph (2001). The McDonalds Snoopy Craze in Hong Kong. Chapter 9 in *Consuming Hong Kong*, Gordon Mathews and Tai-lok Lui, eds. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press pp. 263-285

Robbins, R. H. (2011). *Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism*. 5th ed. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall. Chapter 1, pp. 11-32

### **Week 9 19 March** **Entrepreneurship and Social Enterprise**

Tan, Chee-Beng (2004) *Chinese Overseas*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press. Chapter 7 "Culture and Economic Performance with Special Reference to the Chinese in Southeast Asia" pp. 173-199

Wong, H.W. (2021). It is Not that All Cultures Have Business, but that All Business Has Culture. In R. Mir & A. Fayard, eds. *The Routledge Companion to Anthropology and Business*. New York: Routledge, pp. 453-472

*Media (for tutorial):*

Social Ventures Hong Kong <https://www.sv-hk.org/>

Deloitte, "Five Million Futures" <https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/pages/about-deloitte-uk/articles/five-million-futures.html>

### **Week 10 26 March** **Globalization and Complexity**

Bestor, Theodore C. "How Sushi Went Global." In Spradley and McCurdy, *Conformity and Conflict* 11<sup>th</sup> edition (2003), pp. 201-211. Orig. in *Foreign Policy* no. 121 (2000).

Jordan, Ann T. (2003) *Business Anthropology*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press. Chapter 8, "Understanding Issues of Globalization" pp 39-53

### **Week 11 2 April** **Branding and Advertising**

Moeran, Brian (2003) "Imagining and Imaging the Other: Japanese Advertising International" In T. D. Malefyt, & B. Moeran (Eds.), *Advertising Cultures* (pp. 91-112). Berg Publishers.

*Recommended reading:*

Jordan, Ann T. (2003) Chapter 5 "Marketing and Consumer Behavior."

## **Week 12 9 April**

### **Anthropology of Business, Anthropology for Business**

Lee, S.-P., 2021. Ready for Business: An Anthropology Graduate as Change Management Consultant. *Journal of Business Anthropology*, 10(1), pp. 161-181.

Powell, Elisabeth (2020) "From Ivory Towers to the Board Room: The Development of Anthropologists in Business". *Journal of Business Anthropology* 9(1): 139-154 Spring 2020

McCurdy, D. W., 2012. Using Anthropology. IN J. P. Spradley & D. W. McCurdy, eds. *Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology*. 14th ed. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson, pp. 371-381

#### *Recommended reading:*

Timothy de Waal Malefyt, (2013) "Anthropologists at Work in Advertising and Marketing" in *A Handbook of Practicing Anthropology*. First Edition. Ed. Riall W. Nolan. John Wiley & Sons, Inc

McCurdy, D. W., 2012. Using Anthropology. IN J. P. Spradley & D. W. McCurdy, eds. *Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology*. 14th ed. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson, pp. 371-381

He Xu, "Why Anthropology is Becoming Big Business in China"  
<https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1000300/why-anthropology-is-becoming-big-business-in-china>

## **Week 13 16 April**

### **Course Recap and Final Project Q&A**

**Final Project Due 11:59 PM on 9 May**