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Atreyee Majumder

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**It Can’t Be Revolution: An Interview with Tania Li**

Tania Li is Professor of Anthropology at University of Toronto and Canada Research Chair in the Political Economy and Culture of Asia. Tania Li’s early research in Southeast Asia concerned urban cultural politics in Singapore. Since then she has focused on culture, economy, environment, and development in Indonesia’s upland regions. She has written about the rise of Indonesia’s indigenous peoples’ movement, land reform, rural class formation, struggles over the forests and conservation, community resource management, and state-organized resettlement. Her book *The Will to Improve* (2007) explores a century of interventions by colonial and contemporary officials, missionaries, development experts and activists. *Powers of Exclusion* (2011, with Derek Hall and Philip Hirsch) examines agrarian transition to see what happens to farmers’ access to land in the context of competing land uses (e.g. conservation, urban sprawl, plantation agriculture). Her new book *Land’s End* (2014) tracks the emergence of capitalist relations among indigenous highlanders when they enclosed their common land and is the winner of American Ethnological Society Senior Book Prize (2016). Her current writing project is an ethnography co-authored with Pujo Semedi (of Gadjah Mada University) provisionally titled *Plantation Life*. It explores everyday life in a plantation zone, where it is not just oil palms and infrastructure that are installed, but a rather specific set of economic, political and social relations.

**Atreyee Majumder: Could you tell us a bit about your work as an anthropologist in the field of development practice?**

**Tania Li:*** From 1986 to 1989, just after I received my PhD, I worked full-time for a development project run by Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia. The project was dedicated to improving environmental management in Indonesia. My job was to brief Canadian consultants going to Indonesia, and to place Indonesian students in Canadian graduate programs. The development concepts of the day were knowledge transfer and institution-building.

I became quite uncomfortable with these imperial motifs, and I think that was the beginning of my critical relationship to development practice. Afterwards, I did a couple of consulting assignments on topics where I felt qualified (Indonesia’s resettlement schemes for isolated people, land rights), but I was already wearing two hats as participant and critic. This straddling was productive in some ways, as it gave me access to the world of development practice, but it also has limits: as a consultant, you have to come up with a plausible recommendation. "This, then, is what you should do", and it can’t be revolution.

In *The Will to Improve* (2007), I argued that the positions of programmer and critic are properly distinct, and I still hold to that view. You can occupy the roles on different days of the week, or in different periods of your career, but to carry out critique in the sense of genealogy—why do we engage in development, what is this apparatus of development all about—you can’t simultaneously be coming up with development fixes. If you want to hear more about my take on
AM: You continue to work with NGOs in Indonesia. How has this involvement shaped your work and thinking?

TL: I have been really privileged to work with Indonesian NGOs that are committed to research as well as action. They want to avoid what they call “action in a vacuum,” and make sure that their advocacy responds to processes and struggles emerging in the field. This is not always the case: some activist platforms are quite rigid and they are defended by gatekeepers, making it hard for a researcher to find common ground. In Indonesia, critical research conducted by faculty and students in the universities is still rather limited. Even though a democratic space did open up after the end of Suharto’s New Order in 1998, the critical role of university-based scholarship has not really resumed. So it is usually among activists that I find the most stimulating and challenging interlocutors.

AM: You take activists and others with you on your fieldwork trips. Can you talk a bit about this strategy and its implications?

TL: The strategy evolved organically; it was not something I planned. As I developed relationships with scholar-activists, especially with Arianto Sangadji of the Free Land Foundation (YTM) in Palu, the capital of Central Sulawesi, I would visit them when I arrived in Palu to see what they were up to and talk to them about my research agenda for the season to see if there was a match. They recognized that I have training in research and tools of analysis that are not so readily available to them, so they were generally very keen to work with me. For my part, the joint effort was a boost to my research, as it gave me access to their expertise and their networks; it also meant a significant commitment, as I spent every spare moment while in the field discussing findings with the team and attempting to build up their skills in analysis. I did not treat them as field assistants, but as researchers-in-training who need to develop the skill of making sense of what we found. Anyone who has done this kind of training will recognize the problem: a field assistant collects the data they are asked to collect; a researcher has to synthesize, analyze, and make links, all of which are skills that can be developed, but not easily.

My memory of these research trips is one of constant dialogue, on the road, at night, along the trail—as I shared my emerging analysis and tried to get them to do the same.

The research for *The Will to Improve* was conducted with YTM, as they were deeply involved in challenging park-based conservation, auditing misspent funds from large-scale development projects, supporting the platform of indigenous rights, defending villagers from eviction, and trying to mediate conflicts around the national park. Each of these was, for them, an arena of action, but they also understood the need to research underlying processes. So we worked together to explore the pressures on land that came not just from the imposition of park
boundaries, but also from the influx of migrants seeking land to farm the new boom crop, cacao. A few years later we worked together to understand the dynamics of the oil-palm plantations that were coming into the province. As a member of the national anti-oil palm alliance (Sawit Watch), YTM already had a platform, but the staff agreed that it would be useful to check out the situation on the ground: Did villagers universally oppose plantations, as the national campaign tended to assume, or were experiences more uneven, as some benefited and others lost out? If the latter, then how could YTM reflect that more complex scenario in their advocacy agenda?

Drawing from our joint research, we each did what we had to do: I went home and wrote up the research in academic formats, while they both wrote and acted: mobilizing people, lobbying the government, writing in the media, and bringing results and reflections back to the communities where they were working for further debate. This seemed to me an excellent arrangement: I am a scholar and teacher, not a community organizer, and anyway Indonesia is not my country; it is not my place to mobilize the masses. But I am happy to support the efforts of people who do have that task, by sharing not just the results of my analysis (e.g., by translating my work into Indonesian, or holding seminars and discussions) but also by extending access to the research process.

AM: How can anthropologists productively intervene in the realms of activism and policymaking without compromising on the principles of their disciplinary alignment?

TL: In the work I just outlined, there was really no problem of disciplinary alignment and the compromises were mild: we all contributed to, and got something out of the joint research we conducted. I still work with YTM and other groups when they ask me to offer occasional training sessions or mentoring for research projects. I realize that not all situations lend themselves to this kind of alliance. The difficulty comes where there is limited room for give and take: where a scholar’s research agenda, or an activist’s platform, or indeed a policymaker’s concerns are too rigid to align or don’t match. Then either or both parties become defensive, and not much in the way of useful exchange can take place.

AM: Lastly, any advice for early-career scholars about the ethics of fieldwork?

TL: I distinguish between research ethics, which has important and well-rehearsed standards, and research politics. The latter involves reflecting on why you want to do the research, what you want to accomplish, and who your allies and interlocutors are. Then, you build answers to these questions into your site selection and research design. I can’t imagine spending my energy on research projects that are not important to me politically, so for me that is the right starting point. When that part is solid, the academic part seems to fall into place as well.