



CONSORTIUM of SOCIAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATIONS

Setting the Record Straight on “Wasteful Research”

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Why Study China’s Dairy Industry? A Conversation with Dr. Megan Tracy

Support for fundamental, basic research has been an essential function of the federal government for decades. The National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, and other federal agencies invest in scientific research that has led to some of our country’s most important innovations. Support for basic research has the potential to change the way we live, create new knowledge, solve societal challenges, and help us to better understand our world.

Still, some policy makers routinely dismiss projects as “wasteful” without attempting to fully understand their potential benefits to society or the progress of science. Through this series, COSSA is providing an opportunity for researchers to set the record straight about the value and potential of their work, and confronting misconceptions about social science research funded by the federal government.

THE PROJECT:

Regulating Accountability and Transparency in China’s Dairy Industry¹ (2012)

FUNDING AGENCY:

National Science Foundation

AWARD AMOUNT: \$152,464

FIELD(S) OF STUDY:

Anthropology

SOURCE OF ATTACK:

House Science Committee Hearing (2013); House Science Committee Request for Records (2014)

“Anthropology, and the social sciences more generally, are best able to study the construction of human behavior as both the cause and solution to food safety and other global challenges.”

- Dr. Megan Tracy

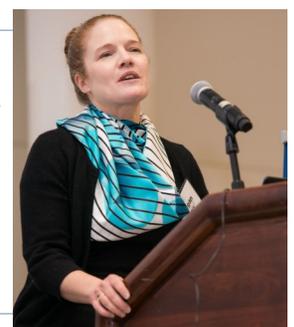
COSSA: Describe your research project in your own words.

MEGAN TRACY: The project analyzed how regulatory practices continue to be negotiated, modeled and reproduced long after an initial food safety scandal, focusing on the post-2008 melamine adulteration scandal in China’s domestic dairy industry. Specifically, we documented how transparency demands are located within global regulatory processes and technoscientific systems and examined how food safety regulations and best practices, motivated by global scandals and pressure to prevent future incidents, move through various technical practices. Modeled after the extensive food chains that create global networks for the production and distribution of our food, food safety regulations and best practices were traced across the chain of actors involved in producing and monitoring food safety.

COSSA: How did you first learn that your project had been singled out?

TRACY: I was initially contacted via email by one of the writers for *Science Magazine* who let me know that my grant had been singled out (as one of five) during the House Science Committee hearings on the 2014 budget request for science and on NSF’s budget. I was in China at the time, conducting the research under question. I initially assumed it was a fake request but received confirmation from NSF’s program officers that it was true.

Megan Tracy, James Madison University, is an Associate Professor of Anthropology in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. She has conducted research on the governance of food and health risks and the role of state and non-state actors in the development and implementation of food standards. With her undergraduates, she has also conducted research on social relations in farmers markets and on terroir (the socio-natural heritage of a place) in craft vineyards and breweries in Central Virginia. She has also published on technoscientific notions of quality, the application of transduction to anthropological work, and a multimodal approach to transparency.



COSSA: What are some of the potential benefits, impacts, and/or applications of the project (keeping in mind, Reader, that this is basic research)?

TRACY: Food scandals often lead to regulatory reform, the reworking of relationships between regulatory and other actors, and ethical debates within society about the role, limits, and possibilities of regulation. Both government and industry develop techniques to create transparency in an effort to combat future disasters. However, research has shown that while these efforts often provide an appearance of greater transparency and regulation, not only is there not necessarily increased transparency, these measures also often fail to prevent future crises. Part of the challenge is that regulations and policies are implemented across diverse sets of actors, and it is critical to understand how these actors can take the same information yet interpret and implement it in quite different ways. Another key piece that we need to understand better are the knowledge gaps created in the transplant process not only as regulations are transformed into best practices on farms and production facilities, but also in their movement from global regulatory bodies to local contexts. The project addresses fundamental questions about whether or not demands for accountability embedded in now-global standards are actually implemented and if this does make our food safer.

COSSA: How could your project contribute to further progress of science?

TRACY: We sought to broaden the understanding of how global transparency norms are incorporated, beyond a straightforward examination of how regulations and standards are translated, to examine how the actual work of this translation process occurs across different sites and an extensive range of actions. Thus, the research has the potential to increase our knowledge on the transformative effects of food safety standards, especially the long-term effects on regulatory practices following crises identified as a failure of regulatory and technological systems. Methodologically, much of the research on China’s dairy industry is predominantly quantitative, relying heavily on survey methods. This project sought to bridge this gap by adding qualitative data to the existing literature on China’s dairy industry and through working with Chinese researchers and their students across qualitative and quantitative disciplines.

COSSA: What did the critics get wrong/right about your research?

TRACY: At the time and, indeed even today, it has been difficult to decipher what the actual criticism of the research project was. The news media summarized the problem as an inability to see if or where there would be a “direct benefit” to the U.S. public. To be honest, I was quite surprised by this criticism because the project examined China’s evolving food regulatory system. Given the volume of agricultural imports and exports between the U.S. and China, the project and its results had direct and continuing relevance for America’s food safety and security in addition to economic opportunities. The critics likely failed to understand

why anthropological research on this topic is necessary. Anthropology, and the social sciences more generally, are best able to study the construction of human behavior as both the cause and solution to food safety and other global challenges.

COSSA: Was any effort made to contact you to gain clarity about the project prior to publicly singling it out?

TRACY: No, neither time was I contacted by any of the individuals who criticized the project.

COSSA: What impact, if any, has this attack had on you, your research, your collaborators or this project?

TRACY: The attack had no impact on the manner in which the research was conducted. Where it has had an impact is in my own reevaluation of the potential vulnerability that researchers may have in the face of these kinds of attacks. In my case, during the first attack (the 2013 House Committee Hearings), I was in China doing the fieldwork for the project and had to consider if there would be any impact in conducting the project. In the second case (the 2014 documentation request), I was submitting documents for tenure right as the request came through. My university is an undergraduate-focused institution and rarely sees this specific kind of inquiry and attention. Thus, although it did not happen, I was concerned that negative attention from the House could have an impact on my tenure case.

COSSA: Is there anything else about this experience you wish to share?

TRACY: Overall, the experience strengthened my resolve to speak out publicly about not only the quality of research done that is supported by public monies but also about the excellence of the process by which research is selected for funding. Additionally, I now have an even greater commitment to communicating the results of scientific research in ways that are accessible to the public (who, after all, ultimately fund us). Finally, I want to stress that these kinds of attacks often appear quite suddenly to researchers, and we together with our institutions may be ill-prepared to counter them. Thus, I believe it is critical for institutions and associations to provide support strategies for scholars at all levels of their careers and at different kinds of universities.

¹ https://nsf.gov/awardsearch/showAward?AWD_ID=1157551



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