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Let's Not Go There: Coping with (Pre-) Selection Bias in Collaborative Field Research

Christian GÖBEL

Abstract: Field research in China often requires the researcher to cooperate with two kinds of actors: research collaborators, such as those at universities or official think tanks, and local officials. These actors facilitate or enhance field access, but such access comes at the price of a potential "pre-selection bias" in data collection. Some scholars have argued that dependence on these "gatekeepers" introduces a significant bias into research outcomes. I argue, however, that the constraints faced by China scholars in their field studies are not absolute, but function by degree. The CCP is monolithic neither in its organization nor in the thoughts of its agents, and close collaboration with local partners can help remove normative bias rather than necessarily introducing it. Most importantly, an argument built exclusively on the power of structural constraints discounts China scholars' most crucial abilities: to learn, to think critically and to research holistically.

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Keywords: China, field research, case selection, interviews, data collection

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Introduction

When conducting fieldwork, we form impressions, collect data and conduct interviews. Needless to say, it is an essential part of many research projects. Fieldwork serves China scholars not only in acquiring the information that is needed to test, refine or even formulate our theories, but also on an individual level in accumulating the experience that is needed to intuitively pre-judge the "probability of a given explanation being correct in a certain kind of setting" (McKeown 2010: 159). The more experience a researcher has, the better he or she will be able to assign that probability, and therefore to formulate theories that are both relevant and robust. A good example of this "folk Bayesian" approach (McKeown 2010: 158) is Kevin O'Brien's (2006) "staying open to unforeseen ideas (and even new topics of enquiry)", described in the volume *Doing Fieldwork in China* edited by Maria Heimer and Stig Thøgersen (2006a). Experience is the key to judging if a particular event or insight merits a change in research design or not – for inexperienced researchers, most ideas will be unforeseen and most topics new. Hence, fieldwork plays an essential role not only in how we explain a particular phenomenon, but also in forming what I like to call our "research personality". This encompasses the topics we consider as relevant (O'Brien 2006), our interview strategy (Solinger 2006) and even how we speak (Thøgersen 2006).

It is therefore relevant to consider the potential impact of the particular nature of the Chinese one-party regime on our findings and perceptions. The "guidance" (导向, *daoxiang*) of public opinion is an integral part of the ruling strategy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the production of information is tightly regulated. Foreign researchers who conduct "independent" – that is, not officially sanctioned – research are breaking the law (Heimer and Thøgersen 2006b). Such breaches of law are common and often tolerated (see, for example, Hansen 2006), and while "guerrilla interviewing" (Gold 1989) might work well with social actors, it quickly reaches its limits when the focus is on politics. Because of this, many researchers, especially those who study Chinese politics, seek the partnership of an official local collaborator such as a university or a government think tank (Smith 2013). An official partnership enhances access to political circles but comes at the price of a potential pre-selection bias that is introduced into the data collection process. Official organizations function as gatekeepers: They ultimately decide where foreign researchers can travel and to whom they can speak, and, by threatening to withdraw their cooperation in the future, they even influence what the foreign researcher can and cannot publish. For those who study Chinese local politics, such as the author of this research note, the danger of making inferences based on biased information is even greater, as not only the collaborators but also the local politicians are constituent parts of an authoritarian regime that is very sensitive as regards domestic and foreign public opinion.

The presence of these potential biases can easily lead to the assumption that, perhaps without knowing it, field researchers are "walking in the footsteps of the Chinese Communist Party" (Hansen 2006). Carsten Holz even suggests that "China scholars [have] all been bought" (Holz 2007). In light of the constraints outlined above, the assertion that publications based on field research are biased towards CCP norms is logically compelling, as is, by extension, the assertion that our accumulated experiences have made us favourably disposed towards the CCP and its rule. Because of the huge implications of these assumptions for what we know about China, how we study China and how we evaluate political, social and economic developments in China, these assumptions deserve to be closely scrutinized. While confirming that there are indeed structural constraints particular to field research in China, and that these constraints can influence what is published and how, I contend that this relationship is far from deterministic, that the "pre-selection bias" induced by our research collaboration is less of a problem than these statements suggest, and that the quality of our data can in fact be improved through these connections.

The article[1] develops as follows: First, I will argue that the assertion that field research inevitably draws China scholars toward presenting an overly positive picture of China is built on flawed premises. It presupposes a monolithic CCP, CCP agents who inevitably espouse CCP narratives, collaborators who willingly introduce bias

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into our research, and field researchers who are unable to change their predispositions when faced with new evidence. While I do not deny that the circumstances under which we conduct research can influence what we discover, this influence is not absolute, but a matter of degree. In fact, there is an important "intervening variable" that can prevent aforementioned structural constraints from translating into scholarly publications with a CCP bias: the researcher. An argument built exclusively on the power of structural constraints neglects the power of methodological standards that can help us both identify and address ideological and selection biases. In addition, the personality, experience and skills of a researcher influence the data collection process, as the various contributions in Heimer and Thøgersen's edited volume lucidly illustrate. The present contribution draws on examples from the author's research on local politics. Hence, when referring to "cases", I usually mean territorial units such as different counties, townships or villages.

Flawed Premises

At first sight, the argument that various constraints inevitably introduce a pro-CCP bias into scholarship based on field research in China is convincing: First, official gatekeepers ensure that scholars gain access only to cases that reflect positively on the CCP; second, interviewees praise the party and its policies; third, because future field access is blocked if the CCP does not deem research outcomes acceptable, China scholars "habitually please the Chinese Communist Party" (Holz 2007: 36). Four implicit premises underlie this argument:

- First, CCP agents always behave in conformance with the standards set by the CCP.
- Second, CCP agents always repeat the authoritative narratives set by the CCP.
- Third, research collaborators introduce a normative bias into researchers' data.
- Fourth, the field researchers integrate this bias into their output.

In the following sections, I will show that these premises are flawed.

The first premise is that our research partners or the cadres we interview always do what the party wants. Indeed, sometimes it is in their best interest to do what the party (whoever it may be that represents it) wants them to do. Yet, as research on central–local relations in China amply demonstrates, party policies have been a bad predictor of the behaviour of local officials. This also applies to dealing with foreign researchers. During the ten years I have now conducted fieldwork on and off, I did experience encounters like those described by Holz (2007: 38). I was picked up by an official car, wined and dined, and the questions I asked at interviews were answered with quotes from official policies. However, these were individual occurrences early in my career, and less the result of conscious design than of my insistence on visiting certain locations where officials trusted neither my collaborators nor me. Far more often, I obtained information that was very critical of central government policies. Eventually this information led me to publish a book that illustrates how

> the central government skilfully obfuscated its own role in generating the [peasant] burden problem and instead played peasants and local cadres […] against each other (Göbel 2010: 11).

Being frustrated with what they perceived as unrealistic expectations from the central government, these officials seemed to derive satisfaction from complaining about their superiors. Critical accounts that portray the central government as manipulative, driven by short-term interests and not very efficient could not have been what the party wanted, yet many such accounts exist. One reviewer of this article put it very nicely:

> Virtually all research on local politics belies the fact that the regime is a single, monolithic entity that speaks with one voice. Local officials literally complain all the time about their superiors, and subordinates and researchers, foreign or otherwise, merely have to listen and write down what they say.

The second premise is that cadres always assert the party line. Although this premise has already been refuted by the examples above, the sections that will follow necessitate a discussion of this issue in greater detail. In my experience, being fed propaganda is less of a problem than is the fact that certain topics are not being discussed at all, which to a large degree falls into the responsibility of the researcher. The plausibility of what one is told can be probed by means of comparison and additional evidence, but the failure to ask the "right" questions leaves us with "unknown unknowns". By contrast, asking the "right" question but not receiving an answer yields "known unknowns" that can be addressed at a later stage or by looking at additional cases (Silver 2012). Very often, such "known unknowns" pertain to issues that interviewees do not wish to discuss for one reason or another, which should motivate us to look for different ways to fill that space on the map. As will be subsequently outlined, written sources, further interviews (with different persons or the same individual at a later point in time) or reasoned deductions with encouragement for further research can serve this purpose.

The third premise pertains to Chinese collaborators in the fieldwork process. Because they can pre-select research sites and might participate in the field research, it is possible that they introduce a bias into our research. However, collaborators can also be an asset and help reduce bias: They can suggest cases where the information sought is likely to be found, point out the peculiarities of a research location, cooperate in interviews and identify unexpected findings. In addition, they can help address the foreign scholar's normative bias by pointing out where facts are stretched to accommodate the researcher's ideological position. Whether a collaborator proves to be an asset or not very likely depends on the terms of collaboration. If the collaborators have a stake in the project – for instance, if they have the chance to co-author articles that further their own political or academic careers or the opportunity to cooperate in future projects, or if the threat of a project's cancellation would mean losing research funds – they are more likely to contribute to its success. In contrast, treating collaborators as data slaves and denying them co-ownership of the results incentivizes them to minimize their risks, reduce their commitment and exploit the project for short-term benefits. That we cannot completely overcome the problem of working with a truncated sample is often not the fault of our collaborators, who need to rely on personal contacts themselves to gain access to research locations. Every single Chinese researcher whom I asked about sampling procedures in topics where access to or cooperation with local governments is required told me that personal connections were indispensable in gaining access to field sites. In such cases, truncated samples are not the result of a pre-selection bias introduced by our collaborators, but rather come about because the government in China is at once authoritarian and fragmented (Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988).

The fourth premise is that field researchers cannot influence the situation they are in. In fact, the notions of being "bought" or being a "tool" (Holz 2007) deny them the most important facility that a scientist should have: critical thinking. It is true that if data is collected in cooperation with an official partner, researchers often walk "in the footsteps" of the party: Especially if their own funds are not significant enough to pay salaries, foreign researcher might become add-ons to existing research projects. These are frequently opaque internal games that involve Chinese politicians, scientists and researchers and that are played for money, influence and reputation. These processes are doubtlessly relevant, interesting and deserve to be studied, but they should not distract researchers from the purpose of their field visit: to gather the information needed to answer a particular research question. Instead of brooding too much on the implications of the political nature of research in China, researchers should focus on only two issues: the representativeness of the cases being explored, and the availability and quality of the information obtained. It is extremely important to be aware of how the circumstances of access to the field might bias the results, but the primary concern should not be how this bias is produced but, rather, where it points and how it can be reduced.

Representativeness

Although "pre-selection bias" denotes that local collaborators impose limits on the selection of field research locations, the term is, strictly speaking, incorrect in the context of small-N research (Gerring 2007). As small samples can never be representative for a very large population of cases, the problem of selection bias does not exist there. In case-study research, the danger instead lies in misjudging the significance of a particular case. What is perceived by the researcher as a "typical" performer in a particular policy field, such as environmental regulation, political reform or policy implementation, might indeed be a case where a policy is working extremely well. Another example of misjudgement is the assumption that one's sample contains bad, intermediate and good performers, when indeed all cases are "models" that perform extremely well when compared to the rest of China. However, not being able to tell how a few cases perform when compared to the whole population is not a problem of selection bias but, rather, of ignorance about how the totality of cases is distributed along a particular feature. This might be due to a lack of information or an underspecified research design. If a research design is not well specified – that is, if it is unclear what factors will be singled out for an explanation – then it is difficult to assess the performance of a case when compared with other cases. Most China scholars are probably aware that small-N research drawn from a truncated sample is useful for proving that a certain phenomenon can exist in China and for generating hypotheses that can later be tested in large-N studies. However, it does not tell us anything about how common an observed phenomenon really is, and what the alternative outcomes may be.

Having a clearly specified research design does not mean being inflexible: When an assumption proves incorrect, or when a more interesting or relevant puzzle presents itself during fieldwork, the research design can, and perhaps should, be adjusted or changed. However, being flexible is different from being unprepared. As stated above, it is the researcher's experience and prior assumptions about a phenomenon that enables her/ him to make informed judgements about the relevance of a particular phenomenon.

Innovative research topics often present themselves when initial assumptions about how certain processes work are proven wrong in the field. In my experience, confronting interviewees with theoretical assumptions almost always leads to animated discussions about their validity in a particular context. The alternative explanations that surface in such discussions are extremely useful for refining one's hypotheses. The better that one is prepared, and the clearer that one's research aims are, the more substantial those discussions will be. For example, when conducting research on the rural tax and fee reform, I hypothesized that the abolition of the agricultural tax would render village elections meaningless. With county- and township-level governments basically deciding on and financing village-level projects, the elected villager's committee would become nearly obsolete. The official I interviewed retorted that elections would become, in fact, more important. He foresaw the selling of village land and other communal property by the committee and argued that the election and recall rights specified in the Organic Law of Village Committees might prove formidable weapons in the resistance of such measures. The Wukan incident proved him right.

It follows from all of the above that the probability of getting meaningful results is higher if field research is thoroughly prepared. Especially if research funds are scarce, it often pays to spend more time on refining the research design before setting out to conduct field research. If hypotheses are clearly specified, and if it is clear what the purpose of the project is, then it is also easier to identify the localities that will be most useful to visit. Ideally, the value distribution of the phenomenon that is to be explained should be visualized and/ or juxtaposed with likely explanatory factors on a scatterplot. When conducting research on the rural tax and fee reform, I drew GIS (geographic information system) maps to visualize the effect of the reform on county-level expenditures in Anhui Province (Göbel 2010: Chapter 7). This enabled me to identify clusters of counties where the impact of the reform was more or less severe, and thus to try to get access to one county in each cluster.

Not only was case selection made easier through the techniques described above, but this and descriptive statistics also made it possible for me to specify whether the cases I had already studied were typical, deviant or diverse with respect to the impacts of the tax reform on local finances in China. A wealth of data on various subjects for provinces, cities and counties is easily obtainable from statistical yearbooks. Although the reliability of this data is doubtful, it at least allows the researcher to roughly grasp the differences between localities. For example, it is likely that the actual revenue of a particular county is considerably higher or lower than the official statistics indicate, but it is unlikely that a poor county ends up in the middle of the revenue distribution. Statistical data is only one way to fathom distributions. Another way is to mine pre-existing case studies. Chinese colleagues have already explored many of the topics non-Chinese researchers are working on, and often case studies for several locations are already available. By the time articles on China's rural tax and fee reform started to be published in Western languages, a lot of research had already been published in Chinese. Newspapers and the Internet are other valuable sources of information about developments in China. Such data also allows researchers to assess, for example, how the implementation of a certain policy varies across China. On this basis, what kind of case is needed can be specified, and the location that is eventually chosen can be compared to other localities that existing research already covers (Hurst 2010). The local partners are usually better informed about developments in the Chinese scientific community than the foreign researchers, which is another reason why the need to collaborate should be seen as an opportunity instead of a burden (Alpermann 2009).

Availability and Quality of Data

Two main concerns of field researchers are the availability and quality of data. While the quality of the quantitative and qualitative data one collects is often problematic, the "unknown unknowns" are the bigger challenge. As for quality, numerical data is indicative of a locality's place in relation to other localities, but is nevertheless seldom accurate. Statistics serve political purposes, so there is an incentive to "correct" data either upwards or downwards, depending on the specifics. However, the collection of statistical data, useful as it may be, is usually not the main purpose of field research. Much of the information sought is non-numerical – for example, regarding decision-making structures and processes, communication networks and the actions of relevant actors. Arguably, judging and improving the quality of this kind of information is more feasible than getting correct numbers, because it is easier to forge data than to make up a narrative that survives close scrutiny. When probing for details, cross-referencing different narratives, probing counterfactuals and asking for evidence, contradictions often surface in a made-up story, especially if the interviewee does not know the questions in advance, and if several people involved in the same story are questioned separately from each other. In my experience, officials do say things like "the situation has vastly improved since we implemented policy X", but when they are probed for how they define "improvement" and asked for evidence of tangible changes, doubtful assertions reveal themselves very quickly, and these doubts are usually confirmed when other officials or members of the general public are interviewed (for excellent detective work in this respect, see Smith 2009).

Once more, this kind of scrutiny is possible only when one is well prepared. The better informed the researcher is about a location and the phenomena s/he is interested in, the more targeted her/ his questions can be and the easier it is for her/ him to evaluate the truthfulness of the narrative. I should add at this point that I have never had to hand in my list of questions in advance. Also, despite the fact that we might be "walking in the footsteps of the Chinese Communist Party", routines can be changed. Officials might prefer group interviews, but my collaborator and I usually ask to speak to our interviewees one after another. So far, we have never been refused this request.

It is my impression that acquiring accurate information is a bigger problem than the danger of being told a carefully crafted fairy tale. Rather than fabricating a story, officials will simply refuse to yield information. They might remain silent, smile knowingly, excuse themselves for not being able to talk about a sensitive issue, claim to not remember, promise to tell later, or change the subject. On the one hand, this is unfortunate, but on the other hand, answers like these turn an "unknown unknown" into a "known unknown". Conducting field research is like drawing maps: When testing an assumption by tracing the chain of events that unfolded in a particular place, it is important to first establish the boundaries of a particular story. By means of thorough preparation, careful observation, and many interviews and conversations, the number of "unknown unknowns" within that map can be reduced. Needless to say, one can never be sure of knowing everything – this is the nature of "unknown unknowns". However, the broader and deeper the information about a phenomenon or process, the fewer "unknown unknowns" will remain. With each answer and observation, the picture becomes clearer. Information that is not revealed corresponds to blank spots on the map that often mark sensitive territory which interviewees try to avoid. These blank spots need to be clearly identified as such, and additional probing should be undertaken in an attempt to subsequently "fill them in". The better researchers are prepared, and the more obstinate they are, the better their map will be. The following strategies should help to reduce uncertainty.

Strategies

First, know what you want. As elaborated above, it is important to have a carefully specified research design. It should be clear what the research question is, if and how others have already answered it, and how the project will contribute to a better understanding of a certain phenomenon or process. Specifying working hypotheses helps to clarify not only the purpose of the project but also what kind of information or data is needed to answer the research question and what kind of cases should be examined (George and Bennett 2005: 67–88). Setting out with very clear objectives is a constraint only if ideas are held onto even after they prove incorrect, uninteresting or unfeasible. As explained above, a set of clear hypotheses allows us to not only use our precious time in the field more effectively but also elicit responses from our interviewees. If being turned into a propaganda tool is indeed such a danger, then we should come well prepared. When conducting research on online complaints in China, I was shown GIS-based visualizations of complaint frequencies in one locality. My immediate assumption was that such maps are used to identify places where certain problems are especially pertinent in order to implement targeted measures to prevent social unrest. In a second visit to that location, I brought up this assumption, but was told that the maps' mere purpose was to impress official visitors. When I insisted that these maps could be used to maintain stability, it was explained to me that this was impractical. In the course of a long discussion, I came to realize that the employees knew the places they were assigned to supervise so well and communicated with one another so often that they did not need any maps to highlight problem areas. This discussion yielded the new hypotheses about the relationship between technology and agency in China's stability maintenance policies that inform my present research project.

Second, be informed. Unwittingly becoming a "victim of propaganda" is a danger not only if we do not know what we want but also if we are uninformed. This pertains, first, to existing research. What we discover in the places we visit should be evaluated in light of what we already know. Is it likely that, for example, county X is performing so much better with respect to environmental protection than other counties? Are the institutional or ideal constraints that scholars found in other locations not at play here? Why not? Are the explanations that officials give when confronted with these questions convincing? Related to that, being well informed about the research location that is being visited and aware of the backgrounds of the political leaders in question enables a researcher to ask pointed questions, and makes interviews more interesting for both parties. If the interviewer is prepared and interested, interviewees engage more deeply in the conversation and sometimes even reveal things they were previously unwilling to. In a recent interview conducted by myself and a collaborator, an official was visibly annoyed at our visit. He decided to use the opportunity to practise his English with me. We chatted a bit about China and the US, where he had worked prior to becoming an official. At one point, I asked him why he came back, claiming that he was obviously overqualified for this job. As soon as I said this, he jerked upright and asked me how I got that impression. This led to a heated discussion between the three of us about the requirements and perks of being an official and about the need for personal initiative in "getting things done", which had been our topic at the time. As both my collaborator and I were intimately familiar with the design, subject matter and current progress of the project, we were able to complement each other's questions and comments. When we parted ways, our interviewee even commented that we had been able to get him interested in the interview, which would not have been possible if we had not been very familiar with the subject matter.

Third, be intimately familiar with the topic under study. It has seldom been the case that a discussion in which we were well informed about a particular policy, the specifics of a research location and the rank and duties of our interviewee did not lead to a good discussion. Having such knowledge allowed us to ask, for example, rather detailed questions about how a specific target was to be achieved in a given locality. Very often, this was the very puzzle the official also had to solve, and the discussion revealed the enabling and constraining factors we were also interested in. One example was the case of tax and fee reduction and the financing of public services; another, more recent one was the question of how the powerful public security bureaus' resistance to being included in a public performance evaluation programme could be overcome. In this case, we learned much about persuasion, lobbying and alliance formation within the government. Familiarity also entails the ability to translate academic concepts into the ideological categories or "codes" Chinese officials use to speak about sensitive topics. For example, questions about social unrest might be introduced by first referring to challenges to achieving a "harmonious society" or the implementation of "social management" policies and then asking for details.

The reason I am making these points, which are self-evident for seasoned researchers, is that inexperienced researchers are often unaware of the "personal" factors that influence research outcomes and insecure when first conducting field research (see Sæther 2006). As I pointed out above, the purpose of field research is not only to collect data but also to build up research experience. I can be so adamant regarding the "rules" I am formulating here because I violated them myself when I conducted my first field study a decade ago. An experience I am unlikely to forget is a conversation with an official of a provincial tax department: After I had asked two questions, he gave me a stack of regulations and an official work report and asked me if I had read this material. When I admitted I had not, he showed me the door and asked me to come back the next day – prepared! Since then, I have made it a point to be as well informed as I can be on the issue I am examining, which makes interviews so much more pleasant for both sides (a similar point is made by Solinger 2006). I have found that officials enjoy talking to a foreign researcher who has at least a rough understanding of the regulatory environment they are operating under. I do not always live up to my own high standards, and these are usually the field trips that do not go well.

Fourth, be inquisitive. Anyone who has ever read a government work report knows the phrases that claim that a particular service has been "greatly" improved, another "perfected", and that the relationship between cadres and the masses is now so much better. As mentioned above, officials are conditioned to use certain codes when discussing sensitive issues or trying to conceal that nothing at all has been done, and they tend to use these phrases extensively in interviews. Hence, it is important to follow up and ask for evidence. When, for example, a township official claimed that her visits to peasant households had improved the local political climate, my collaborator and I not only asked for the location and names of recently visited households but also enquired about the exact nature of such visits. Where did the conversation take place, what kind of snacks or drinks was she offered, and what were the subjects of the conversation? Were all visits similar, or were there differences? What kind of differences? What stories did she recall, and who told them? When tracing decision-making processes, we follow the same strategy. We ask very detailed questions such as who came up when and where with a certain idea, what the immediate reactions were, and who was involved in formalizing a policy based on it. Where possible, we ask the same questions of all people who were involved in this process. We express our doubt openly if we think that things do not match up, and the explanations that follow sometimes corroborate a story and sometimes reveal that we did not fully understand a particular process. Where possible, we ask for figures, numbers and names. In one Anhui township, I asked so many questions about revenues and expenditures that the accountant fetched a large file that contained all of the previous year's revenues and expenditures, put it on the table, and told me that he and his colleagues would now leave to attend to important matters. I could "rest for a while" in his office if I wanted. More often than not, being inquisitive helps in reducing the blank spots on the map. As a rule of thumb, however, the more illegal or irregular behaviour involved, the more difficult it is to fill the blank spots.

Fifth, be patient. Some pieces of information are easier to come by than others. However, being unable to obtain information during one research visit does not mean that the information is unobtainable. Sometimes it takes several visits, or even a long-term stay in one location, to arrive at a clear picture about a process or an event. Time can work in favour of a researcher in at least two ways: First, information that is deemed sensitive at one time might not be considered sensitive at a later date; second, repeated contacts between interviewer and interviewee can serve to build up trust. There is often considerable risk involved for interviewees who talk to foreign researchers, especially if the interviewees are officials, the topics sensitive, and the interviews conducted unofficially. Getting to know each other better helps to alleviate worries that the information that is volunteered will fall into the wrong hands and ultimately hurt the interviewee. On the one hand, the researcher can take the time to assure the interviewee that her/his information will be stored safely, and that her/ his identity will not be revealed in publications resulting from the project. On the other hand, repeated interactions in which the researcher reveals some information about the research project and her/ his underlying motivations go far towards assuring the interviewee that the researcher has no ulterior motives. Fortunately, communication by e-mail or voicemail now allows us to exchange information or follow up on unanswered questions. Where the interviewee is generally willing to help the researcher, but does not dare to reveal information to a foreign person, the collaborator might conduct a second interview alone. Here, a trusted local collaborator can once more prove to be an asset in a research project that involves fieldwork.

Sixth, be open. In my experience, being clear about my research objectives and sharing my insights with interviewees goes a long way towards building the trust needed for them to volunteer information. Collaborators, and more so our interviewees, take risks in cooperating with us, and for that they deserve to be respected. While respect should define the interaction between interviewer and interviewee from the beginning, trust needs to be built up. Researchers might suspect that an interviewee has not told them everything they want to know, and interviewees might suspect that researchers will misrepresent what they are being told or accidentally reveal sensitive information. Thomas Heberer and Gunter Schubert regard local officials as a "strategic group" (Heberer and Schubert 2012), which in my experience entails that they are careful about discussing sensitive issues and sharing data with any person who is not "one of them" (自己人, *zijiren*). Getting to know each other often helps to ensure the interviewee that the researcher can be trusted to keep information secret, and the interviewee might feel safe in revealing more information than was initially planned. Besides building trust, credibly assuring an interviewee that information will be treated confidentially and knowing some of the codes and phrases used to speak about certain topics, creating an artificial divide between the official and private capacities of the interviewee sometimes helps interviewees feel at ease. For example, it is important to stress that the meeting's purpose is not to "conduct an interview" (访问, *fangwen*), which is an official act, but rather to "chat" (聊天, *liaotian*), which is a private act. Sometimes, issues are only revealed when we explicitly ask about a respondent's "personal opinion" (个人的意见, *geren de yijian*). Hence, part of the trust-building seems to entail demonstrating that the interviewer knows the political environment – and the associated risks of operating in such an environment – well enough to be able to communicate in this fashion. Needless to say, mastering this skill is yet another issue where the help of a committed collaborator is invaluable.

Not treating interviewees like data machines, but respecting the risk they are taking, taking the time to answer questions about the purpose of one's research project, and sharing the insights gained through literary reviews, interviews and data analysis not only alleviates the worries outlined above but also satisfies the curiosity of the interviewees. Officials, in particular, are curious about how things are done in other locations, how policies could be improved in their locality and how certain issues are discussed in non-Chinese scholarly publications. In my case, basing interactions on respect and taking the time to build trust has resulted in re-invitations to certain research locations, and those repeated visits have enabled me to deepen my understanding about these places. This has benefitted not only current research projects but also my general understanding of administrative processes in China. In addition, those locations are good candidates for field sites in future projects.

It needs to be pointed out that such an approach does not entail being uncritical or overly accommodating or mean that sensitive issues are being avoided. On the contrary, my experience has shown that this kind of sensitivity is a necessary precondition for such topics to be discussed at all.

Conclusion

Field research in China, as everywhere else, is challenging. Several factors affect the quality and quantity of data that is collected in the field, and it is the responsibility of the researcher and his or her peers in the scientific community to judge the validity of the inferences that are made from this data. A lot can go wrong, but I believe that the choices field researchers face are far more complex than whether to conduct field research at the cost of losing one's integrity or whether to ensure one's integrity at the expense of depending on potentially unreliable statistics, documents and secondary sources. In my opinion, there are three variables that impact the outcome of field research activities: first, the experience, preparedness and personality of the researcher; second, the relationship between the researcher and the interviewee; and, third, the nature of the topic that is being investigated.

As for the research topic, it goes without saying that topics considered sensitive by the Chinese central government are both more difficult to research and riskier to publish. Collaborators are more likely to refuse to participate in such a project, interview partners will be harder to find, and places more difficult to visit (Thunø 2006). The publication of the results is riskier, as well – a collaborator might urge caution, and a researcher might refrain from publishing the results for fear of being denied a visa in the future. Although these circumstances also apply to topics that are extremely relevant for understanding contemporary China, such as the student demonstrations of the late 1980s, the crackdown at Tiananmen Square or the relations between minorities and Han Chinese, such topics constitute a minority. As numerous examples show, research on topics that are locally considered sensitive or which might reflect negatively on the central government – such as social unrest, land grabs, corruption or the soundness of China's financial sector – can be both researched and published without fear of having to sell oneself out. In fact, the number of non-Chinese scholars who have been denied visas to China because of what they have published is small (Redden 2008).

The second factor, discussed in great detail above, pertains to the researcher him- or herself. The more knowledgeable and prepared a researcher is, the better he or she will be able to contextualize new information and to reduce the blank spots on the imaginary research map. Success in probing for "hidden" information depends on another actor-specific factor: social and interview skills. This relates to the third factor: If researcher and interviewee can create an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust, and if the interviewee is comfortable with or even enjoys the situation, then it is likely that he or she will make an effort to help the researcher. That said, I have experienced situations where it became quickly obvious that such an atmosphere could not be created, simply because, for whatever reason, the interviewee and the interviewer did not strike a chord, or even disliked each other. In such situations, I find it fairest to terminate the interview as quickly as possible, but without being rude or impolite. A similar issue pertains to the collaborator. Mutual respect and trust are necessary conditions for collaborative research to succeed, as is sharing a common objective: If both parties can reap the spoils of successful collaborative research, then the likelihood that biases resulting from case pre-selection can be addressed increases significantly. To avoid disappointment, the terms of engagement must be spelled out clearly and agreed upon before collaborative research commences.

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