



Editor

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## Where should a researcher posit her scholarly position in the field? A note on reflexivity

*This blog is about ethical reflexivity that drew upon my field research in Xi'an, China. I ask how a researcher should posit her scholarly position when processing communications with research participants, and avoid establishing any hierarchical relationship between the participant and the researcher. As Bourdieu illustrates, researcher's pre-formed academic training in the educational cultural field endows the researcher a cultural disposition when she tries to access the field and contact research participants. However, it does not mean that the researcher is able to access the research field in a 'taken for granted' way without considering the complexity of the field. Rather, critical judgment is required from the researcher throughout the whole study period to 'assess what kind of access you have' (Mason, 2002: 91), and such critical judgment demands the researcher to employ 'reflexivity' while conducting qualitative research, write **Chao Yuan**.*

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Before entering a field study site and making a connection with gatekeepers and research participants, one of the crucial issues for researchers is how they are to manage their own identities in a way that does not make them appear threatening. To resolve this, researchers should familiarise with the new environment and adapt to the local culture to meet 'cultural expectance' (Mulhall, 2003). It is also necessary to objectify their own position when entering an unfamiliar field site, thus minimizing the researcher's sense of alienation from research participants. Obviously, these are not straightforward for researchers, and cannot be completed on a single occasion either. Rather, the entire process of familiarisation and adaptation runs through the whole research process and impacts the kind of questions to be asked and what kind of people to meet in the field. Therefore, critical judgment is required throughout the whole study to 'assess what kind of access you have' (Mason, 2002: 91). Moreover, such critical judgements demand the researcher's 'reflexivity' when they conduct qualitative research.

Reflexivity helps researchers to 'de-familiarise one's view of the world' to increase researchers' awareness that their 'taken-for-granted' judgements/prejudices and domination may exert on their participants (Webb, et al., 2002: 75-76). That requires researchers in the social field must be reflexive practitioners who have empirical experience and learn to pursue 'participant objectivation' (Bourdieu, 2003). Participant objectivation does not mean that the researcher has to withdraw from themselves nor from their work, because the pre-reflexive social world is always formed in certain social historical conditions made up not only of the researcher's life trajectory and origins but also position in social space. Participant objectivation is mostly relying on the researchers' observational view that locates their position when they process their work in diverse research sites and it runs through the whole research process and impacts what kind of questions to ask and what kind of people to meet.

In this context, reflexivity demands that I acknowledge my training in a higher education institution, which helped me acquire certain 'legitimated' cultural tastes. At the outset of my doctoral field research in Xi'an, China, this 'taken for granted' cultural disposition made me choose a newly opened café located next to the northern residential neighbourhood of *A Chang*, [1] to have my first formal meeting and interview with a research participant, Wu (anonymised name), who was a laid-off worker of *A Chang*. I chose this place partly because it was near to where Wu lived so that she could get home without have to walk far, but also because, haunted by my already formed cultural habitus, I almost unconsciously considered cafés and some kinds of tea houses as the most suitable places to meet people and have casual conversations.

This 'taken for granted' recognition of space and prejudice based on my existing knowledge created an unequal power balance in the relationship between myself and Wu. I found that Wu presented some disturbances and anxieties about the meeting place we had agreed in advance. Her anxieties came to a head when she looked at the price on the drink menu and started to calculated the expenses she might pay afterwards in the first five minutes after taking her seat. This finally drove us to escape that café (although I had claimed I would pay the bill for both of us). After we left, I asked Wu why she could not tell me beforehand if she felt uncomfortable with this place, but she said shyly that she did not want to embarrass me with so picky on the location choosing and bother to change to another cheap place where she knew. I asked her why she thought that and she gave as a reason that she believed in me because I was a scholar, and scholars in the university must like those kinds of places, which she thought of as having 'atmosphere', the place I chose was *always right*. She finally told me that the prices there were too expensive for her: 'that place was not for me', she said to me, 'maybe better for people like you or the rich people who live in the high-end neighbourhood around here'.



*A Chang neighbourhood where Wu lives (on the right side) and the new-built high-end commercial apartment (on the left hand). Photographed by the author in the summer of 2015*

Figure 1. A Chang neighbourhood where Wu lives (on the right side) and the new-built high-end commercial apartment (on the left hand). Photographed by the author in the summer of 2015.

Then following Wu's suggestion, we went to a small and dim snack food restaurant where she said she was familiar with the owner. The restaurant owner was a nice woman, offering us two chairs and two cups of free hot water. Because there was no table, I had to find a coaster and placed it

underneath my notebook to enable me to write notes. This interview experience pushed me to do some reflexive thinking and uncover the power relations behind it. On the one hand, the dominant force comes from the state and market-led commercial housing development. As more and more lands are taken by the state and developers to build high-grade apartments and related cultural and economic places which meet the expectations of the gentrified rich and middle class, this symbolic force triggers deeper spatial and social class divisions resulting in the behaviour of poor laid-off workers such as Wu, who lacks economic and cultural capital. She always 'sets boundaries' between the places she usually goes to and those newly developed places for the rich. She is also vigilant about places beyond her class disposition (which is formed from her long-term spatial living experience).



*The general dwelling environment of A Chang or most of Chinese former SOE work units (Danwei).  
Photographed by the author in the summer of 2015*

On the other hand, more importantly, it also reminded me of the power relations hidden in the bodily habitus of the researcher and the research participant. Wu did not refuse my suggestion to meet in the coffee shop at first because of the unequal power relation between us: she thought my decision was 'always right' and she treated me as her intellectual superior, as someone who controlled dominant cultural capital (a PhD student from a major UK university) and probably economic capital (studying and living there was never cheap). Thus, she thought of me as someone with higher social

standing than her and somehow displayed her respect when we communicated. In the café, even if I suggested I would like to cover her expenses, the very suggestion made things worse because it made her aware of her embarrassing lack of economic capital and her dominated social position. Then she had to persuade me to change to a different place to continue our conversation.

In this way, I was easily influenced by my pre-existing knowledge and habitus but ignored Wu's feelings. I imposed my spatial understanding on my research participant unconsciously, but as a social researcher, I should have maintained 'epistemological vigilance' about the social world (Bourdieu, 1991). The social researcher should practice reflexivity to clearly distinguish habitus or 'unconscious' knowledge in everyday life. Such reflexivity forces the researcher to acknowledge his/her presence and position in the field by understanding the rules and the common cultural norms he/she is working among, and to probe the structure behind the various social phenomenon and the trajectory and historical reasons underlying structures. Therefore, Bourdieu requires the social researcher to cultivate the 'craft of sociology' which 'affords one to enter the life of others' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 205). He also emphasizes that only with such 'craft' is the researcher able to tackle the various circumstances that arise in the research site, and to help the interviewees to speak about their true situation and ideas by asking the proper questions that related to their life.

To be fully aware of this, 'participant objectivation' requires the researcher to be aware that the relationship between themselves and their research participants may exert influence on the research result. The researcher will, therefore, build relationships with the interviewees by asking questions in an objective way, avoiding power relations between him/her and the participants during field work. Moreover, the researcher should be conscious of her position (such as a listener, or conversation participant) and not try to control the conversation from his/her perspective during their communications with their participants. As well as this she should avoid using some professional or academic terms during the research, mixed with scholastic "presuppositions" and epistemic *doxa* (Bourdieu, 1997), to minimize her dominance over the conversation.

## Note

[1] *A Chang* is the one of researcher's field work sites in Xi'an, China. It was a former military supplement manufacturing factory before its broke down during the SOE reform in 1990s to 2000s, which left thousands of poor laid-off workers who still lived in *A Chang's* family areas.

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### About the Author

**Chao Yuan** is graduated from the school of Sociology, Politics and International Study (SPAIS), University of Bristol, UK. Using Bourdieu's social space theory, her research mainly focuses on urbanisation, internal migration, urban inequality, and everyday life experiences of urban residents in contemporary China.

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### About the Research

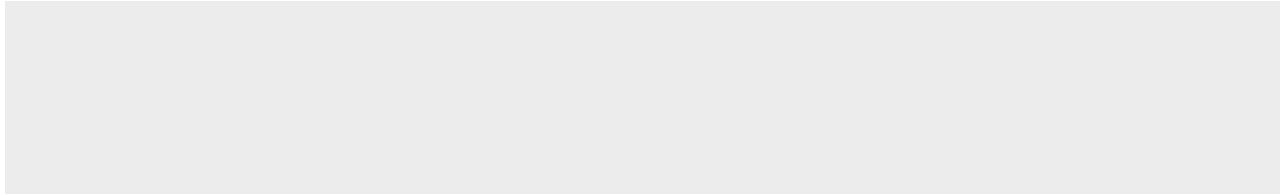
This blog comes from the author's PhD research thesis 'The Everyday 'Spatial Struggle' of Three Categories of Urban Residents in Two Typical Poor Neighbourhoods in the Chinese City of Xi'an during Urbanisation and the Transition to a Market Economy—a Bourdieusian Explanation'. The doctoral research first examines how the state's market-oriented housing development has helped to speed-up the spatial segregation of rich and poor, and the formation of typically poor urban neighbourhoods, both in family areas owned by State Owned Enterprise (SOE) work-units, and in urban villages. It then investigates the everyday life of three typical categories of urban resident: poor laid-off SOE workers, migrant workers and low-income college graduates who live in the decayed family areas and urban villages. In examining the interaction between state-led symbolic power and individual urban social agents from a bottom-up 'lifeworld' perspective, this research reveals the way that symbolic power has operated during this rapid state-led spatial change, illustrating the processes that have led to the division of the external environment into high/low, luxury/low-end, bright/dark and rich/poor physical spatial order in the state-led urban spatial redevelopment. It also unpacks how it is reproduced in the everyday lives of urban residents through their economic activities, consumption, leisure and social networking via their bodily movements and their spatial recognition of both their own neighbourhoods and those adjacent to it.

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## About the author

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