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Embedding research in local contexts: local knowledge, stakeholders' participation and fieldwork design

It is not always easy for researchers to explain how and why a research project is important to local people whose interests may be diverse or in conflict. Viewing fieldwork as a process of constructive communication with all the stakeholders for better understanding of local situations with a broader context, this post argues that the balance and interface between research focus and common interests of relevant stakeholders must be found at the beginning of the fieldwork. It raises questions about the nature of fieldwork and roles of local stakeholders in the process: Why do we need the participation from multiple stakeholders? How can they make a contribution to the fieldwork? What attitude, approach and preparation could be helpful for the researcher in order to conduct an effective and successful fieldwork? The aforementioned questions are addressed via a field research experience in Italy, which involved adjusting the research focus and involved wide participation from local people including Chinese migrant workers, writes **Bin Wu**.

A good beginning of fieldwork is largely dependent upon how a researcher explains his/her research aims and relevance to local people, which requires a good understanding and use of local knowledge. Local knowledge is even more important for fieldwork in a complicated or transitional society, such as China or Chinese society to which available academic references or theories may not be appropriate in light of high complexity, low trust, interest conflicts and rapid changeable environments. This raises questions about the roles of local knowledge and stakeholders' participation in the fieldwork design and implementation, a vital condition for an effective and successful fieldwork.

Local knowledge here is broadly defined as a sum of facts, concepts, beliefs and perceptions used by local people to reflect or interpret the world around them. Different from abstract or general knowledge which has been widely adopted or circulated within academic circles, local knowledge

are created by and accumulated within local people. It may not be necessarily limited to a specific location or group but normally unfamiliar to scholars. Essentially, it reflects the way local people observe, measure and reflect on their surroundings, their solutions or coping strategies as well as how they validate new information. Local knowledge is different from 'traditional knowledge' or 'indigenous knowledge', used in a negative way to reflect local people who live in areas isolated from the rest of the world or their knowledge systems which are static and do not interact with other knowledge systems.

Based upon the broad definition of local knowledge highlighted above, the two extremes of fieldwork strategies can be distinguished from each other: academic-driven and community-based. The former treats a fieldwork as a process of information collection from "samples" or sampled population for the purpose of theoretical testing in which local people have nothing to do but provide genuine information/data requested by the researcher. The latter refers to a mutual process of learning, communication and interaction between the researcher and local people for common interests. The differences of two approaches can be illustrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Role of local knowledge in fieldwork: contrast of two approaches:

Features Fieldwork	Academic-driven	Community-based
Definition	Fieldwork without local knowledge	Fieldwork based upon local knowledge
Motivation of fieldwork	Testing theory or hypotheses	Developing/improving theory
Process of fieldwork	One-way information collection	Two-way communication
Whose interests?	Researcher and sponsor	Researcher and all stakeholders
Role of researcher in field	Observer and recorder	Learner, editor, intermediates
Role of local people	Information providers	Observers and innovators
Stakeholders participation	Limited, random or passive	Part of research team
Outcomes of fieldwork	Partial picture with great details	Whole picture with some details
Who are beneficial	Researcher or academia directly	Both researchers and local people
Request for researcher	Robust procedure, proper methods	Wide knowledge, learning attitude
Time consumption	Shorter but high risk in failure	Longer but high successful rate

Application potential	Limited or unclear implications	Strong policy implications

Source: created by author.

A number of hypotheses can be drawn from Table 1 for the purposes of observing or comparing two types of fieldwork design and practices.

- *The role of local knowledge in the development of relevant theories*. For the academic-driven fieldwork, there is almost no space for local knowledge to play except the sampling process. By contrast, the local knowledge in the community-based fieldwork plays an important role, similar to, if not more important than, literature review. In other words, the researcher in the latter prepares to amend, revise or even resign the fieldwork in order to interface with local knowledge

- *The scope and role of stakeholders.* For the academic-driven one, there is a clear division between the researcher and researched. One more to be added is the presence of the gatekeeper who allows the researcher to access the field. Differently, community-based fieldwork requires the participation of all stakeholders to ensure the balance of all groups' voices to be heard. No rejection to a research focus in the former, the latter gives an emphasis on a big picture before narrowly concentrating on a specific group.

- *The nature of research process*. The differences of two approaches are rooted in a different understanding about the nature and sources of theoretical development. Instead of one-way research hypotheses and information collection in the convenient approach, local people and practitioners in the second approach are treated as important members to advise or join the research team to ensure local knowledge be properly accounted.

- *The ends of fieldwork are unsurprisingly different*. The academic-driven fieldwork ends at reliable and accurate data for academic purposes, which may not necessarily have clear implications for policy makers in general and local stakeholders in particular. Differently, the community-based fieldwork has distinguished advantages in terms of significance to local community, a pre-condition to attract the participation of local people, which does not necessarily lose the rigour in data collection and verification.

It is worth noting that the community-based fieldwork does not totally conflict with the academic-driven fieldwork. Furthermore, there is no clear division between the two fieldworks but more likely, a range of variations between the two ends. Depending upon many factors such as geographic, economic, social and political environments as well as research themes and aims. Moreover, different approaches may have both advantages and disadvantages, and it is a good idea to combine the two approaches in fieldwork practices. For the case of fieldwork in China or Chinese society, generally, an emphasis should be given to the community-based fieldwork due to the lack of a big picture as well as many factors such as extreme complexity and diversity, rapid development

and transition, an increasing degree of tension and conflicts, segmentation, segregation and fragmentation, as well as vulnerability and no voices of migrant workers.

The necessity and feasibility of the community-based fieldwork in the Chinese context can be illustrated and analysed via a genuine field research experience on the working conditions of Chinese owned factories in Veneto, Italy.

Background

In relation with frequent "amnesties" of irregular immigrants, Italy has become an attractive destination for Chinese entrepreneurs and migrant workers since the 1990s. It has resulted in a rapid growth of Chinese-owned family businesses, especially factories in textile, garment and leather industries in which all employees are new Chinese immigrants who are isolated from the local society. To understand the working conditions of Chinese owned factories and impact on Chinese migrant workers, a collaborative research project was proposed and funded by Padova University in 2006 for conducting an empirical study in Veneto, an industrial cluster of Italy.

As a principle researcher from Cardiff University, I faced a number of challenges in designing the fieldwork. Firstly, I did not have any experience in either international migration or overseas Chinese studies before as my expertise was in global labour market for seafarers. Secondly, Chinese sweatshops abroad is a new phenomenon with little English literature available except Chinese entrepreneurship or forced labour studies. Thirdly, I knew nothing about local language and culture of Wenzhou, the predominant sending source of new Chinese owners and entrepreneurs in Italy. Finally, I tried to get the access to Chinese factories via local Chinese community organisations, which were actually social clubs of Wenzhounese businessmen. But it did not work effectively.

Adjustment

Following measures were taken to cope with the above challenges: (1) a short visit to the sending community (Qiaoxiang) in Wenzhou City to familiarise the migratory culture and society and gain support from local government agencies in Qiaoxiang; (2) a pilot observation was arranged in a Chinese factory afterwards via a home stay for two nights in a local Chinese community leader's family who lived with more than 10 Chinese migrant workers, a common pattern for local Chinese family factories (3) social network building via a local Chinese Bar to familiarise and search for an access to the local Chinese society; (4) an access to Chinese business registration information stored in Italian authority for the purpose of the sampling process to select the targeted Chinese factories in Veneto.

The above measures, however, were not enough to make a significant break-through in field design until an opportunity appeared. During the period of the preparation, I learnt that local police closed down three traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) shops in the downtown area because they involved medical treatments to Chinese migrants without proper licenses. However, no alternative services were provided for Chinese patients who were unable to speak Italian. Given the fact that access to

local medical services is not only an urgent need for many Chinese migrant workers but also a common concern by all Chinese groups, I decided to adjust the focus of fieldwork research from the working conditions of Chinese factories to the needs and access of Chinese migrants to local medical services. Compared with the original theme, the new direction seemed neutral, which was acceptable by all groups, both Chinese business owners and migrant workers.

Key Elements

Under a new direction and research focus, a strategy for the fieldwork implementation emerged which contained following elements:

• An "advisory board" was established which included: an Italian academic partner and experts in occupation health and safety, an Italian trade union officer, an Italian banker for international trade and supply chain, Chinese community leaders, Chinese TCM doctors, Chinese property developer, and Chinese migrant worker representatives. The roles of those members included advice or comments on draft questionnaires, strategy and methods in information collection, workplace observation, and interpretation of field observation.

• Two-tier survey. workplace observation and questionnaire or group discussion. A sample of 25 Chinese factories was randomly selected based upon official enterprise registration information. It would be impossible to get the access via random sampling if the theme of research was focused on the working conditions themselves. A team of 3-4 persons who were "advisory board" members conducted the workplace observation. Depending upon the situation, questionnaire and/or group discussion were taken place for migrant workers to be involved in the project voluntarily.

• Comparative perspective. Geographic information of Chinese registered factories, however, cannot be treated as a sampling frame for workplace observation as a large number of new or small Chinese businesses may not have been properly registered. Nonetheless, the geographic information was used to select a sampling zone in which all Chinese enterprises nearby regardless of registration were observed and compared. So were a few Italian enterprises nearby which recruited Chinese migrant workers to produce similar products but with different working conditions.

• Publicity to mobilise Chinese community participation via both Italian and Chinese media. A public press meeting was held in Padova in the early stage of the fieldwork for the purposes of disseminating survey messages and encouraging the participants and voices of different groups from the local Chinese community, including Chinese entrepreneurs who saw the potential benefits for their businesses.

• Encouraging the participation and contribution from local students whose parents were owners/entrepreneurs of Chinese factories in Veneto. Once learnt about the background and theme

of this research, according to our observation, most of them were interested and keen to offer their support by encouraging their parents or migrant workers to participate.

Outcomes

Within one month of the fieldwork (including one week pilot study) in the Veneto region, we managed to visit 28 factories including 3 Italian factories. Only one Chinese factory refused our entry. Our workplace observation involved a total of 279 Chinese migrant workers with a different degree of contribution: some filled in the questionnaires while others joined group discussions. We managed to conduct 76 in-depth interviews or focus group meetings, of which over half were occupied by migrant workers. The rest consisted of the representatives from other groups, including traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) doctors, Chinese business owners, and community leaders who were also businessmen with a title of chair or vice-chairs of local Chinese community associations.

Concluding remarks

The narrative of my fieldwork experience in Veneto, Italy provides a hard evidence to illustrate the necessity and feasibility of the community-based fieldwork, which brings local knowledge into the process of fieldwork design and implementation. It is vital for a researcher to identify a common theme that is shared by all stakeholders, or establish clear interfaces with different groups of interests so that local people can participate in and contribute to it. Such theme or research focus cannot be clearly defined unless the researcher becomes familiar with the local situation, resources and constraints from different angles or perspectives of different interest groups. The more complicated and diverse the field, the more important is the need for community-based fieldwork design and implementation. So in addition to convenient fieldwork design and practices, this paper calls for more attention to practising community-based fieldworks when researching in a Chinese context.

Related Publications

Wu, B. and Zanin, V. (2009) Healthcare needs of Chinese migrant workers in Italy: A survey report on Chinese-owned workshops in Veneto. CPI China Discussion Paper No.48. Available online at: http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/cpi/documents/discussion-papers/discussion-paper-48-healthcare-chinese-migrants-italy.pdf

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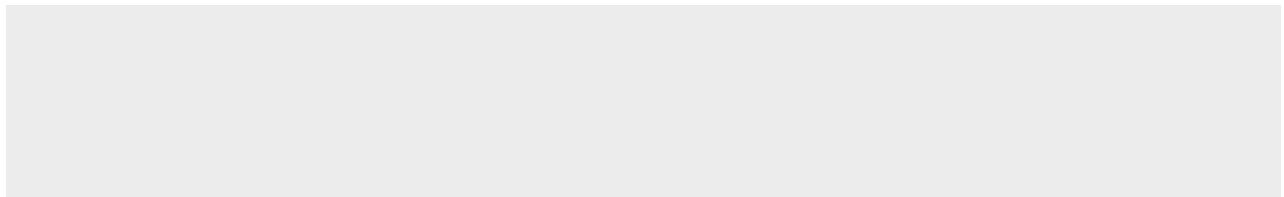

About the author

Dr. Bin Wu is a Senior Research Fellow and founder of a newly established Centre for Chinese Migrant Studies (CCMS), in School of Contemporary Chinese Studies, University of Nottingham. His research interests and expertise include rural sustainability and farmer innovation; Chinese migration and integration in China and abroad; Chinese student mobility, global citizenship and higher education reform.

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