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Ethnographic construction of a road: Notes on a nodal approach to a more-than-conventional field site

This contribution presents a modest insight into doing fieldwork on a road – the subject of the author’s research – by offering notes on a nodal approach to the road as an interchange of place and non-place. In particular, it concerns the challenge posed by the road as an anthropological subject that is fluid and without definitive boundaries. Such challenge thus prompts the device of a nodal approach that opens up a route in ethnographic practices that require making connections. An anthropological study of a city road reveals not only its multiple facets as an infrastructure, but it also prompts the ethnographic construction of a dynamic field site, writes Ximin Zhou.

Between 2013 and 2014, I conducted fieldwork on a city thoroughfare called Shennan Boulevard/Road in Shenzhen, a city in the Pearl River Delta of southern China, for my PhD project in Social Anthropology. With my interests in urban transit spaces, such as airport, train stations, bus stops, etc., I arrived in the ‘field’ with a question – how I was to conduct ethnographic research on a road in order to make sense of what it means to people. With this question in mind, this blog piece specifically deals with the methodological challenges I encountered when I began doing fieldwork on Shennan Road, and the subsequent device of methodological tactics.

Challenges

The research is set in Shenzhen, China’s first Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and the forerunner of the economic reforms that started at the end of the 1970s. The objective of conducting an anthropological research of a road in this city is to understand ways in which the road impacts upon the city’s development and people’s life through its enabling and disrupting capacities. From studying the time and space of the road in achieving this objective, I encountered methodological challenges that came with the road as an unconventional anthropological site and subject.



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Simply claiming that the road is a site with neither definitive boundaries nor specific communities dwelling within does not automatically make it an unconventional site. The conceptual difference between different field sites is most accentuated by the demonstration of visual difference. A prominent visual distinction would be the shape of road – a longitudinal shape, as opposed to a conventional ‘bounded’ single field site within which community dwells (Figure 1). As a transit space, the road can be understood as consisting of multiple micro-sites of social and asocial interactions, with highly spatial and temporal fluidity. However, as Merriman (2014) rightly points out, instead of devising a radical break from the landmark method of participant observation (which in itself changed somewhat), a challenge emerged out of the temptation to abandon the so-called ‘conventional’ methods (e.g. interviews, archival research, etc.) for the sake of innovative ones in order to capture the mobile subjects on the road. The mobile subjects on the road do not travel in random movements. They are indeed structured by the urban capitalist system within which the road is the pulse. A prominent methodological challenge is how to be part of the road’s fluidity.



Figure 1: Rounded single site to longitudinal strip of micro-sites (created by the author)



Figure 2.: Shennan Road in 2015 – a view from a footbridge (Photo by the author, 2015)

Methodological tactics

Walking, in addition to travelling by public transport, is a way to engage more attentively with the road as well as its surroundings at my own pace. It affords me the experience of being consciously aware of the road through more immersive and tactile interactions (Stewart, 2011). However, this way of establishing a relationship with the road and familiarising myself with the changing environments is not a radically novel way. Studying the road does not mean a complete break from the conventional ways of doing anthropological research. Part of the fieldwork was to observe the passage of time and people at a particular point on the road, as a result of moving along the road with others. The sequence of moving, pausing and moving, alone or with others, is imperative for the research on Shennan Road, at least on the experiential level. The various sites on and along the road become strategic sites that inform me of the particular locality of the road. Hence, researching the road denotes to sequential visit of micro-sites where local and placed-based relations are established.

In the meantime, researching the road makes it necessary for me to establish a mental image of a network of relations enabled and nurtured by the road. Lynch's *The Image of the City* (1960) thus provides the much-needed inspiration for approaching the challenge of 'reigning in' the fluidity of the road as a field site. The book considers "the visual quality of the American city by studying the mental image of the city which is held by its citizens" (ibid., p.2). The making of the mental image of the city, according to Lynch, is far from random and that there are qualities of physical objects that contribute to the making of identity and structure of such mental images of the environment. In defining what city form means, Lynch argues that it must be "somewhat noncommittal, plastic to the purposes and perceptions of its citizens", and that "if the environment is visibly organised and sharply identified, then the citizen can inform it with his [or her] own meanings and connections" (ibid., p.91). Amongst the elements, which Lynch considers as "the building blocks in the process of

making firm, differentiated structures at the urban scale”, there are the nodes. Nodes are “breaks in transportation” – the strategic points from which a person finds directions.

Building on Lynch’s conception of node, moving along the road by means of walking or public transports is productive for the discovery of research nodes. In this piece, I highlight two examples of the nodal points where I carried out a sustained period of fieldwork. Contrary to one of the examples – Italian *palazzo* – given by Lynch, the examples I use here are footbridges and bus stops. These nodes allowed me to orient myself towards establishing relations with the road. They are not only spaces from which people *move on* to different directions but also spaces into and through which people travel *from* different places. They are points that see outbound and inbound journeys. People walk past and through nodal points every day, as if they are Ingold’s (2007) dots on paper, for us to connect.

During fieldwork, I frequented a footbridge over the road where I carried out a sustained period of observation of street vendors and the passing office workers from nearby office buildings. The footbridge appeared dwarfed by the high rise buildings surrounding it. These vendors positioned themselves at the same spots on one side of the footbridge so that pedestrians could use the other side as passageway. Every day, the vendors faced in one direction with the towering skyscrapers above their heads and the road as well as roadside constructions below them. From the viewpoint of the vendors, they spent most of the time looking *ahead* at the immediate demands of customers and *downward* at the job at hands when serving them. For them, the presence of the road was felt through the noise of construction and the vibration of the footbridge caused by the passing traffic beneath.

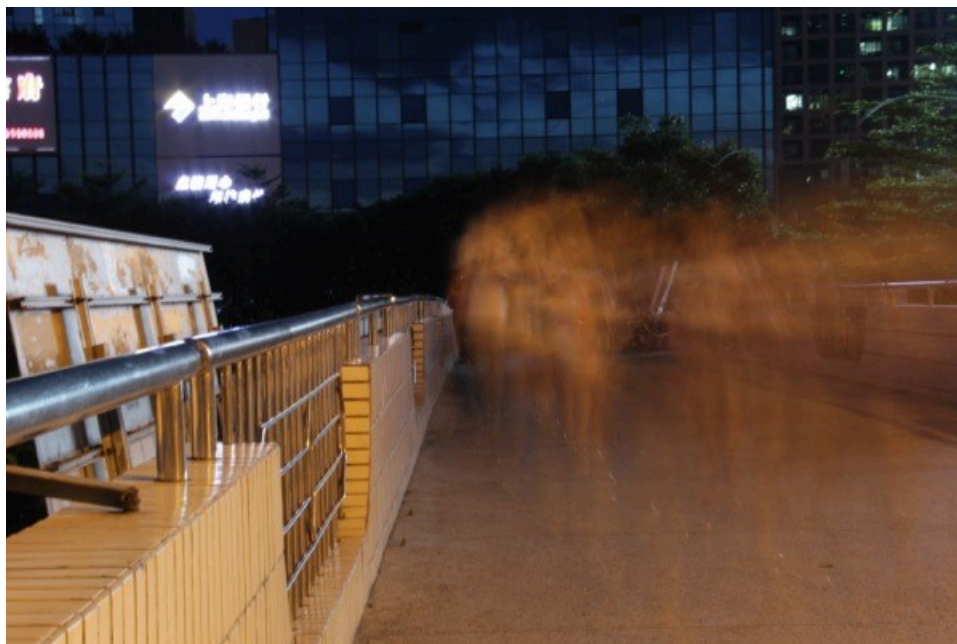


Figure 3: A footbridge over Shennan Road (Photo by the author, 2014)



Figure 4: A vendor on the same footbridge (Photo by the author, 2014)

On the footbridge, I had the perspective of looking at the road reaching into a vanishing point in the distance. I also adopted vendors' perspective of focusing on passers-by. Shennan Road may appear to be irrelevant here, seeing that the activities I observed did not take place directly on it. But the footbridge would not have existed without the road. For the vendors, the footbridge provided an alternative public space which had become increasingly inaccessible, prompting a conceptual reshaping of what public space is/ should be and what they are for.

Locating myself on the footbridge thus allows me to pause and observe a section of urban life and grasp the fluidity of the road. The footbridge would have been irrelevant without the road. Furthermore, it is what makes the road infrastructural in both intended and unexpected ways. It functions as a component of the road facilitate pedestrian movements that run perpendicular to the movements on the road.

In comparison to roads, which represent humans' will over space, Simmel (1997 [1994], p. 66) argues that the construction of bridges "symbolizes the expansion of the sphere of our will over space". Yet a bridge of any kind gives rise to relations that are not part of its technical function. With the use of strangers' interior dialogues, Irving (2013) demonstrates that people's interactions with bridges reveal them as complex sites that go beyond their primary technical functions. My observations of vendors on the footbridge suggest that the bridge becomes a space of refuge for some vendors who have been previously evicted from elsewhere. By tracing the stories of where these vendors had come from and how they ended up on the footbridge, I learnt the production of a different social but time-specific space resulting from their daily interactions with other people.

Another research node I wish to highlight here is bus stops. The people who cross the footbridge are mainly bus and underground railway passengers. Most of the bus stops on Shennan Road serve

over 30 bus routes. Beside regular bus services, there are night buses, sightseeing buses, rush-hour buses and airport shuttles. All of these services connect the stops on Shennan Road to the rest of the city in all directions.

Bus stops are telling sites for they are the places where one grasps the pulses of the city in its everyday life. Through the experience of security guards who are stationed at certain bus stops, they reconfigured into spaces of boredom and daydreaming, or spaces of ad hoc opportunities (for some security guards who do more than the scope of their job specifications allows). These temporary spatial reconfigurations are only detectable by pausing, observing and in the end stationing oneself just like the guards. Yet through following and observing bus passengers, bus stops become the spaces through which strangers crisscross each other repetitively and rendering it at once a space of familiarity and anonymity.



Figure 5: A transport interchange next to Shennan Road (Photo by the author, 2014)

A bus stop is where a journey begins and it introduces the ethnographer to a community of commuters. From a bus stop on the side of the road to a bus on the road, I follow passengers and learn how people of different socio-economic backgrounds 'meet' on the road, through the time and space of traffic. The process itself was a mixture of moving with others, pausing and observing amidst movements going in different directions.

Reflections

A more-than-conventional site for an anthropological inquiry does not automatically render the consequent production of ethnography a radical one. In other words, the practice of conventional

ethnography remains an important reference informing the process of fieldwork. The adaptation of a nodal approach to studying the road anchors the practice of ethnography a long-term engagement through participation and co-habitation as and with commuters on the road, as a whole. The nodal approach helps the researcher to '*reign in*' the fluidity of the road as a field site in two ways.

Firstly, it goes back to the fundamental visual distinction between the longitudinal shape of the road and the boundedness of the conventional type of field site. Researching the road requires the longitudinal distribution of time dedicated for fieldwork across the strip-like space of the road. For a single researcher, dedicating time to researching one section of the road means losing time for the rest of the road at that particular moment. A nodal approach (as demonstrated by the examples of the footbridge and bus stops) then allows the researcher to make connections between the multiple micro-sites of interactions. More importantly, the most basic offering of research nodes along the road is to open up routes for connecting the dots, tracing the systemic pulse according to which urban life operates.

Another implication of a nodal approach to this more-than-conventional site is the dismantling of the "them-us" dualism that frames the conventional ethnography (Marcus, 1995, p. 100). Such an approach is more productive in characterising the road in a non-linear fashion and thus highlighting the dynamic of the road through the practice of ethnographic construction.

The importance of adopting a nodal way of thinking when researching roads and infrastructure at large is reflected by the need to flatten the network of connections and associations within the city in urban research. The aim is not to gain a bird's eye view of the research in a conventional hierarchy of knowledge production. Rather, it enables the flexible expansion of system-thinking beyond the city boundaries, even bypassing the national boundaries, towards the global network of relations.

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About the research

Ximin's doctoral research is an anthropological study of a road in Shenzhen (China). The project explores the contrast between the apparent concreteness of the built environment and the uncertainties of the future brought about by social and material changes. Ethnographic attention focuses on the urbanized population in Shenzhen through their daily interactions with the road and the many different users of the road serving different purposes.

The 12-month fieldwork was carried out between September 2013 and September 2014. After the completion of the dissertation in September 2016, it was defended in March 2017.

Related publications

Ximin Zhou (co-author), Theodoros Kyriakides, Hester Clarke, "Introduction: Anthropology and the Politics of Engagement", *Anthropology Matters*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 2017: *The 5th RAI Postgraduate Conference*, https://www.anthropologymatters.com/index.php/anth_matters/article/view/472, accessed 30 June 2020

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About the author



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Ximin Zhou was awarded a PhD in Social Anthropology with Visual Media from the University of Manchester. Since then, she has engaged in conducting research projects for commercial and non-commercial purposes. Currently she is working as a researcher focusing on issues related to urbanization and spatial justice, at Civic Exchange (<https://civic-exchange.org/>), an independent public policy think tank.

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