

Uncovering subjective perceptions of Chinese economic development through ethnographic research – A business anthropologist's notes from the field.



Eliot Salandy Brown, 2004 Destin Alum

Economic change in China will move hundreds of millions of households from poverty to prosperity. But what does everyday life look like for a Chinese family living through Chinese economic

development? As a consultant and ethnographer working for ReD Associates I'd like to share some intimate experiences from my research with a middle-class man who has lived through the country's transformation.

It was on my fourth attempt to find out what Wei Bao thought of the changes tearing through his neighborhood that I realized I 'wasn't going to get an answer. Not like this.

The ethnography had started well. After I took off my shoes and presented a small gift of Danish biscuits, Wei Bao welcomed me into his sparsely furnished living room. Minutes later, sipping tiny thimbles of rich, earthy 'Pu'er tea his bright eyes darting between me and his wife, Wei Bao excitedly told the story of the day he was finally promoted to chief engineer at a small mine 20 kilometers west of Fuzhou.

"It was my discipline that made the difference," he explained, his wife nodding knowingly next to him. "I'm a predictable man, and my bosses always knew they could depend on me to be steady."

It was on the day of that promotion 30 years ago that Wei Bao was given the apartment we sat in now. Constructed in the early 1970s, the apartment was more or less identical to the 250 others surrounding it. Peering past his washing hanging on the balcony, I could make out men of Wei Bao's age playing mah-jongg in the dusty courtyard, the clatter of the plastic pieces drifting up on the still autumn air.



Wei Bao's old apartment block

"We are proud to live here because it means you have been recognized by the government. It is an honor, in a way." An hour earlier, walking up the dim stairwell with its discolored concrete and broken

lights, I would not have guessed at the symbolic value of this address.

But on reflection, I realized it was not only the condition of the building that had led me to assume that this was a rather standard piece of real estate. It was the contrast with what surrounded it. Because Wei Bao's worn-out housing complex now stands like a solitary gray pebble in an otherwise shimmering pool of blue glass. Fueled by Taiwanese investment, towering apartment complexes, neon-fronted restaurants, high-ceilinged European car dealerships, and mobile-phone shops have invaded Wei Bao's neighborhood, bringing with them a new generation of Chinese consumers who shop for leisure, not just out of necessity, and like coffee as much as tea.

And what I now wanted to understand was how Wei Bao felt about all this. Was this progress or destruction? What was his common ground with the younger generations? Was Fuzhou westernizing or giving birth to a whole new interpretation of China? How did all of this make him feel about China's future trajectory?



Nothing. Four attempts to get subjective perspectives had got me four pages of objective statistics. Wei Bao used his almost encyclopedic knowledge of population growth, urban migration rates, investment sources, and bank-loan rates to studiously avoid giving me the faintest idea of how he felt. And I was starting to panic. I get paid to find out what people feel, fear, regret, admire, desire, and I was about to go home with nothing but numbers.

As though perceiving my horrific visions of returning to my bosses without knowing anything more interesting than his tea preferences ('Pu'er every time), Wei Bao made a suggestion. "Why don't we go and see my new apartment?"

Five minutes later he was confidently whisking me through traffic on the back of his electric scooter, clearly enjoying the challenge presented by Fuzhou's unpredictable traffic, and 10 minutes later we stood with our heads as far back as they would go, staring up at a sparkling 49-story apartment building cutting into the low gray sky.

"It's an investment together with my son. He's having his first child soon, and this is where they will live. Come, let me show you around." The "steady", quiet man I had met in his government apartment disappeared as Wei Bao sprang around the unfinished apartment explaining where the dishwasher, washing machine, microwave, and TV ("of course, plasma") would sit. He showed me the designs he'd been working on for the glass-and-steel kitchen, the recessed lighting, and his proudest contribution—the walk-in shower. And on his balcony, overlooking dozens of new buildings in which thousands of new Chinese dreams just like his were being constructed, Wei Bao finally opened up.

"I often stand here and think about how China has progressed. I imagine the life my grandson will have and compare it with mine—there's no doubt things are better. Young people have an energy now that we didn't have. It's like they have a light on inside them that we had to switch off and aren't brave enough to switch on again." I ask him what it was about his life that was difficult, and after a long



Wei Bao's new apartment block

gaze out over the buildings he says, "It was restrictive. Limited. My son thinks he can be who he wants to be, professionally and as a person, and that is a very fortunate situation." Wei Bao tells me that the Chinese way isn't always best and it's good to be inspired by what other countries do. That he would like to travel and see the world, especially Italy. That perhaps his old apartment building and the men playing mah-jongg will one day disappear, and that's not such a shame.

As we left the apartment after three hours on the balcony, I realized what had allowed this quiet man to begin telling me what he really thought and felt. The answer was simple—we had moved to a social and physical context in which it was appropriate. Sitting with his faithful wife by his side, in the home given to him by the government, surrounded by proud artifacts from his younger days, it was not an option for Wei Bao to speak his mind. His wife would have lost face, he would have been indirectly criticizing his peers in the surrounding apartments, he would have seemed ungrateful, and he would have made any Chinese guest very uncomfortable.

I have taken Wei Bao's lesson with me, and when I'm in China now I always present people with a range of social and physical contexts that allow the various facets of their personality and perspectives to be expressed and explored. For this lesson I am very grateful to Wei Bao. Indeed, to thank him for such an enlightening day, I invited Wei Bao to dinner. "Where would you like to go?" I asked him. "There's that famous Chinese restaurant near your bus stop." "No," he replied. "You see that one over there on the corner? They do the best cheeseburger and fries in all of Fuzhou."

Eliot Salandy Brown is a Destin alum from 2004. For ReD Associates he now manages innovation strategy projects for companies such as Intel, Coke, Samsung, and Adidas. Often these companies are hoping to expand in emerging markets and they use ReD's staff of anthropologists,

sociologists and development studies alumni to study consumers in these markets and produce recommendations on new product development and marketing.

November 13th, 2013 | [Department Alumni, Fieldwork and Travel](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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