

'Renqing' in conducting interviews with Chinese business people: Insights from a returning researcher

ISE blogs.lse.ac.uk/fieldresearch/2014/04/17/renqing-in-conducting-interviews-with-chinese-business-people-insights-from-a-returning-researcher/

Editor

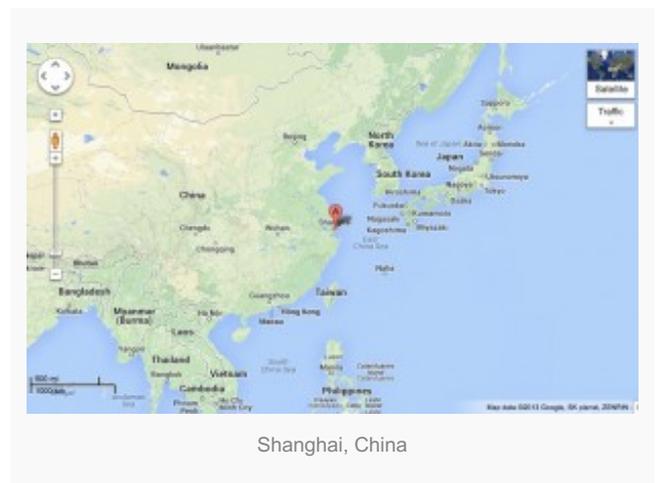
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*This contribution explores the complex impact of 'Renqing' (human feelings) on conducting elite interviews in China. Over 50 intensive semi-structured interviews relating to the procurement shifts by leading retail transnational corporations (TNCs) in the Chinese market had been carried out between 2010 and 2011. As the majority of interviewees were reached by the recommendation of the researcher's social networks, reflections on the relationships among the researcher, researched and recommenders are necessary. As a particular guide of social behaviours in the Chinese society, Renqing is therefore proposed as the theoretical framework to explain the challenges and issues occurred in the fieldwork process, from access to respondents, undertaking interviews to follow-up communications, writes **Yue Wang**.*

When considering undertaking interviews with business people while conducting international business research, most research focuses on two aspects (Harvey, 2010). On the one hand, attention is paid to the techniques of preparing for and conducting interviews. These techniques include how to gain access to interviewees and carry out interviews in particular places as well as instructions about how to handle difficulties and challenges when interviewing elites. On the other hand, keen attention is also paid to the complex and dynamic power relationships between researchers and the researched during the interview process. From this perspective, it is important to examine the interplay of power between researchers and interviewees in different social identities such as gender, class, race and nationality relations. This paper seeks to utilise *Renqing* (human feelings), a very important guide tool for the Chinese people to maintain and enhance their relationships with others, in order to demonstrate and reflect on the cultural implications in carrying out interviews with Chinese business people. This blog begins by introducing the research design for the fieldwork that deals with retailing business people in China. Then it focuses on the complex role of *Renqing* in interview processes, from accessing interviewees and conducting interviews to follow-up contacts after interviews. The final section draws the paper to a close.

Research Design

My research examined how the arrival of retail transnational corporations (TNCs) in China has transformed the supply network and upgraded the local market. The research was conducted during two fieldwork periods in Shanghai, China. During the first period between November 2010 and January 2011, I had brief contacts with retailers and food suppliers in order to gain background information on the Chinese retailing market, as well as to identify the appropriate food cases informing the research. Ten interviews were undertaken and among them eight were with retail representatives. The second period of fieldwork between April and August 2011 focused on the specific procurement shifts adopted by retail TNCs and in turn, the responses made by suppliers/wholesalers and logistics providers across three selected food types. 44 interviews were carried out with academic scholars, business consultants, retailers and, in particular, logistics providers and suppliers. These interviews allowed the researcher to overcome the limitation of interviews largely conducted with retailers in the initial fieldwork, and to derive different accounts by a variety of



actors undergoing the supply network transformations.

The interviews with senior managers, also called 'elite interviews' in most academic research, from these high-profile enterprises posed challenges for the researcher as a young female research student. One of the biggest challenges was the difficulty in getting access to the elites. According to Yeung (1995), access to interviewees depends on various factors ranging from the financial support of the research project to the nature of the organisation and interviewees' role, as well as 'gatekeepers' in these organisations. Therefore, due to the limited official support for this research project, the initial approaches adopted were cold calling and snowballing techniques. I first mapped out the organisation of retailing companies in China and tried to contact directly the informants by open sources. However, the cold-calling approach was largely unproductive and frustrating. In most cases there was either no response or a direct refusal via telephone. This is probably due to the reason that people in the retailing sector are very busy, and they have to give up their spare time if they agree to take part in my research project, but for little I can offer in return. Having largely failed with cold-calling I turned to my personal social networks, from friends, previous colleagues, alumni to families, in an attempt to build up my interviewee list. In a similar vein, McDowell (1998) utilised her college connections in Cambridge University to contact high-status merchant bank workers in the City of London for her interviews. As Yeung (1995) maintained, researchers need to attempt as many different avenues as possible regarding access to interviewees in a polite, yet persistent and opportunistic manner. In many cases my contacts passed on the request to their own social networks; for example, one of the important retail representatives was accessed via one of my alumni contact's husband. This approach was very effective in terms of this particular research as I have lived in the research location for over twenty years and established relatively strong local social networks.

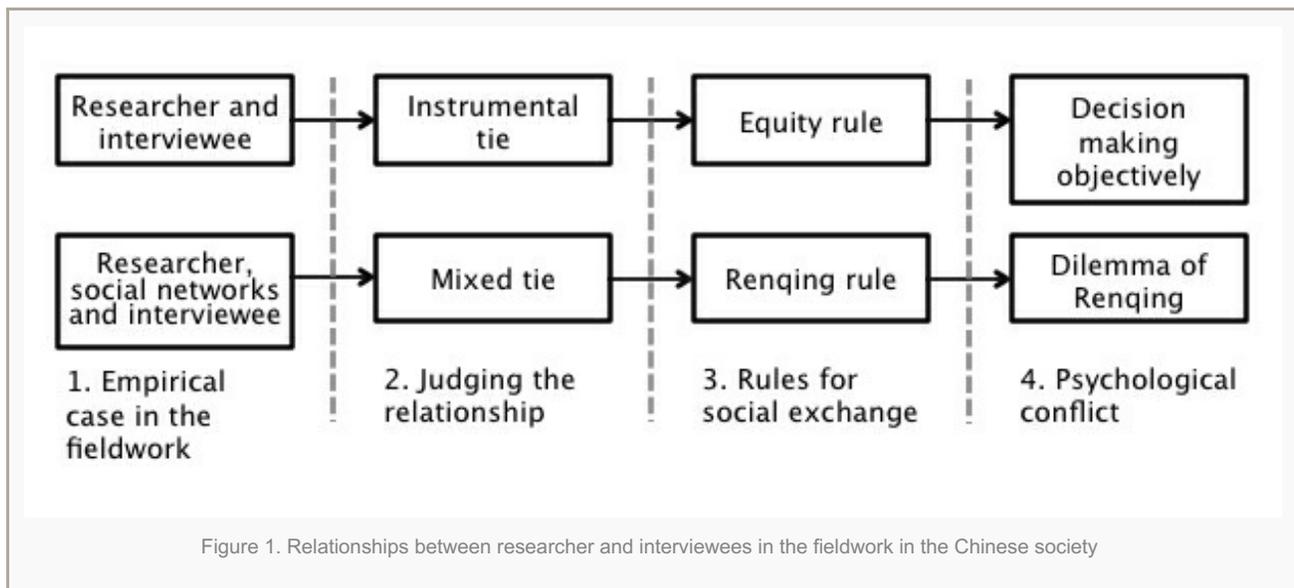
However, using social networks meant that the process of searching for potential interviewees was somewhat out of my control and certainly not random. As some representativeness across my interviewees was still needed, I did give my personal contacts very clear instructions in terms of the kind of attributes that I was looking for from my interviewees. In particular, detailed Participant Information Sheet covering the research aim, the criteria of interviewees, research durations and procedures, and confidentiality of data was provided when accessing the potential research informants. Meanwhile, requests were also made on them to refer informants from different companies wherever possible, thereby avoiding recruiting informants centred around certain organisations and enabling me to talk to a wide range of people with differing experience and specialised knowledge wherever possible. For example, in one of my case products, fresh milk, my personal networks allowed me to reach people from the top three dairy companies. This enabled me to look across the milk sector and not focus on a single company's practices. Therefore, the "follow the network" approach was adopted with caution in order to neither include people who were not able to provide the useful and appropriate explanations, nor narrow down interviewees only coming from a particular company. In total, almost half of my interviewees were reached on the recommendation of my friends and family members. The retail representatives were selected from four foci firms, Carrefour, Metro, Tesco and Wal-Mart, and in turn the majority of the suppliers and logistics providers were referred by the former.

***Renqing* implications in conducting interviews**

Although the technique of recommendations by social networks enabled me to get in touch with a wide range of interview participants, the snowballing technique did not work very well based on these obtained interviewees. The majority of interviewees were reluctant to give further contacts for the subsequent interviews. The similar situation also occurred during Lai's (2007) fieldwork in Shanghai when she undertook personal interviews with the Chinese respondents in order to investigate the relationship between state institutions and global finance capital. She always had to stop after talking with the second or third following interviewees when she adopted the snowballing technique. Lai (2007: 124) argued that it was because that the Chinese respondents "could not personally vouch for [her] credentials or status or whatever criteria were deemed important." Here, I ascribe the 'important criteria' to the terminology of *Renqing* (human feeling) by the Chinese. *Renqing* refers to a set of social forms that the Chinese value highly and which keep good relationships with others (Wang et al., 2008). Its nature is embodied in the

Confucianism that “Do not do unto others that which you would not wish done unto you” and by its converse: “Do unto others as you wish done unto yourself.” The recipient, on the other hand, need to behave according to another social norm: “If you have received a drop of beneficence from other people, you should return to them a fountain of beneficence.”

According to Hwang’s (1987) conceptual framework of social behaviour in a Chinese society, people make decisions in terms of their various relationships or ties (*guan xi*) with others which may be instrumental ties or mixed ties (see Figure 1). People connected to each another in the type of mixed tie tend to perform their social conducts based on the rule of *Renqing*. Both sides of the mixed tie know each other and have something in common with one or two persons; so both would like to make contributions to each other in order to maintain *Renqing*. Thus, in my fieldwork experience, my social networks were willing to help me look for informants as they thought they had obligations to keep *Renqing* with me. Similarly, those informants agreed to share their knowledge and time with me for the sake of their *Renqing* to the people who contacted them, rather than any sense of obligation to me. As a result, they were free to make their own decision to give me an extra ‘gift’ (i.e. further contacts) as they did not owe me an obligation of *Renqing*. This refers to the instrumental tie of the interviewee and me (see Figure 1). People in the instrumental tie may not know each other very well and usually the relationship is unstable and temporary. For example, one of the interviewees declined to give me further contacts by stating that he attended the interview only for the sake of his friend (i.e. the referrer).



Also *Renqing* was highly significant when carrying out interviews because the relationship between the referrer and the interviewee was critical to the whole interview experience. Not surprisingly, if the referrer was in a relatively higher position or had close relations with the interviewee, I could sense more hospitality and cooperation during the interview. For example, I once talked to a Regional Food Director of a leading retailer for around one hour without any interruption from his business work. He also gave me intensive answers to my questions and was glad to elaborate further when I inquired. In fact, he was referred by his supervisor, the Expansion Director in headquarters, although I had no idea of the Expansion Director at all. I presume that his active role in my interview could somewhat show his strong obligations to as well as maintain his *Renqing* with his supervisor.

I would like to give one more example of *Renqing*'s complex impact on my fieldwork. Eight months after my fieldwork I received an email from one of my informants who wanted to refer to my research results for his Master of Business Administration (MBA) thesis. This interviewee was one of the few who had invited me to lunch after my interview and have given me another two contacts for my subsequent interviews. In my heart, I really appreciated his help and also felt that I still owed *Renqing* to him as I had not found a way to repay his help. At that time, I was still in the writing

stages of my research so I sent him my first-year report for his reference and promised to give him the whole draft of my thesis when it was completed. Here *Renqing* had helped me build long-term relationships with my interviewees for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

To sum up, *Renqing* is an extremely important and dynamic factor to be taken into consideration in the Chinese setting. As a native Chinese person I fully understood its role and nuances, particularly in business relationships. On the one hand, *Renqing* was greatly valued, and during most interviews a small gift or some catering were provided to interviewees in order to repay *Renqing* of my social networks. On the other hand, lack of strong *Renqing* with interviewees somewhat prevented me from reaching more informants via their networks. What is more, embarrassment of pushing my informants further for other contacts due to my full understanding of *Renqing* in the Chinese society made the snowballing techniques become unproductive in my fieldwork. Therefore, *Renqing* has a dynamic and complex impact in terms of conducting interviews with Chinese business people, particularly for returning researchers.

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This paper is based on a presentation given at a workshop at LSE in June 2013 and a chapter prepared for the book "[Fieldwork in the Global South: Ethical Challenges and Dilemmas](#)" (Lunn, 2014).

About the Author

Yue Wang is a Research Fellow at the Nanjing Institute of Geography and Limnology, Chinese Academy of Sciences. She received her PhD in Human Geography at the University of Manchester in 2013. Her doctoral research focused on one of the outstanding changes resulting from the procurement activities of leading retail transnational corporations (TNCs): the local supply network transformations and upgrades in China. She was the Research Assistant at the China in Comparative Perspective Network (CCPN), LSE between 2011 and 2012.

Related Publications

Wang, Y. (2014) Restaurants and Renqing: ethical challenges of conducting interviews with business people over dinner. In Lunn, J. (ed.) [Fieldwork in the Global South: Ethical Challenges and Dilemmas](#). London: Routledge

For citation: Wang, Yue (2014) 'Renqing' in conducting interviews with Chinese business people: Insights from a returning researcher. Field Research Method Lab at LSE (17 April 2014) Blog entry. URL: <http://wp.me/p46hMd-5k>

